



PART I



HIS PORTRAITIST



He came every two months for a sitting. Always early in the day, usually on a Friday, when he still had something vital in his face from the week's effort, but a mellowness in his eyes from the knowledge it was almost over. In the late spring, the fallen jacaranda blossoms lay luminous on the pavement outside at that time of day, and his assistant would scoop them up by the handful and strew them over the couch where he sat, or lay, or lounged for each portrait. Regal purple petals. Made him feel like a king.

I always mixed my palette before he arrived. I knew the shade of his skin, the hue of his hair, the pinkness of the half-moons in his nails. After he'd arrived, and was seated, I'd adjust the colors slightly, according to his mood: if it had been a bad week, his skin tone needed more yellow; if he was feeling benevolent, I added a daub of blue to the white for his eyes. He said having his picture painted was his only therapy.

I would start with a charcoal sketch of his face. I was ruthless about detail, and documented each new wrinkle or discoloration or sausage spot, but this is what he wanted—in his very first sitting, I flattered him on the canvas, and he threatened never to return, so the next time I painted him as he was, and it pleased

4 him. You would be surprised what can happen to a face in two months. One day I'll bind together all the surviving charcoal sketches and make a flip book that jolts single frames into action when thumbed quickly. The flip book's action will be the aging of the President.

The oil portraits used to take me exactly six hours. He would decide on his pose, and when he had settled into it his assistant blotted his face oil with foundation and, on days when the President looked particularly tired, added some authority to his eyes with eyeliner. He had an uncanny ability to sit still for hours. At the end of each session, before the paint had even dried, his assistant collected the portrait to hang next to the flag in Parliament, so that the portrait in Parliament was always the most current, and the outdated ones were distributed to dignitaries to hang in their homes.



The President's favorite meal was Sunday brunch, when I would do a fresh seafood platter for him and serve it in the private dining room in his city apartment; not even his family joined him for this meal. We established a comfortable routine over the years. The guard would let me into the apartment at 9 A.M. I brought all the ingredients, uncooked, with me, and prepared the meal in his own kitchen, as quietly as I could, so as not to wake him. I had equipped the kitchen to meet my needs and did tasks there that I had long abandoned doing in the main Presidential Residence kitchens, things like disemboweling crayfish using their own feelers, destoppering sea snails, beheading prawns. These are normally jobs for lowly kitchen boys, but in his quiet kitchen on a Sunday I grew fond of doing my own dirty work—I communed with an earlier self that way, remembered my own humble beginnings; it reminded me of my respect for processes, the satisfaction of peeling and chopping and mincing and grating, all the myriad ways one can put a culinary world in order. I can't deny the pride I felt knowing that each item I prepared in that kitchen would nourish the President.

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As soon as I arrived, I would place the live abalone on the floor of the pantry. They were always tense from being transported

and had to calm down before I could kill them, otherwise the
flesh would be tough. I would leave them there until everything
6 else was almost ready, then creep up on them and hit them
on their soft underbellies with the end of a rolling pin. If they
sensed me coming they contracted like a heart muscle and
were wasted.



The President was meticulous about his facial hair, same with his ear and nostril hair. He insisted that I use tweezers to dig deep into his orifices to root out the hair at its source, which inevitably inflicted pain, and he swore and threw things against the wall to cope, and afterward panted like a dog in heat (I secretly suspected he liked it). He had a daily late-afternoon appointment with me in preparation for evening functions. His hair grew fast and blue and by the end of each day his stubble showed its color, but the ear and nostril ritual I performed only weekly. Like all men, the President's favorite part of the session was the lathering—the brush I used was soft but firm, and the shaving soap lathered easily with moisture, needing little encouragement. I made small circles on his lower face until the soap foamed. I know it felt good.

For me, the satisfaction was in delathering. I would sharpen my knife in front of the President, and he would wince from the sound, but he never opened his eyes to look, which could be interpreted as a sign of either cowardice or bravery. Then I would take his head firmly between my hands and tilt it backward. This was the moment I waited for each day: with a brisk twist of my hands, I could have snapped his neck, slit his throat with a knife

8 flick, but I did neither. I would start at the bottom of his neck with the blade and glide it slowly upward, watching the stubble mingle with the foam.

Every evening the floor of my shop would be covered with hair. Hair is an extension of self—I believe it has power. When I looked at the hair of so many people lying tangled on the floor, it was like seeing earlier selves and discarded personality tics made manifest, so I never threw it away; my assistant swept it into a heap then bottled it to keep on shelves in the back room.



HIS PORTRAITIST

I was forbidden by the President to paint any other person's portrait. This was the condition on which I was initially commissioned—he said my eye was always to be fresh for his face—and I agreed because the fee I received meant I needed to do no other paying work and could paint as I used to, when I was a student: only for myself and anybody who chose to be my audience.

My wife was the first to choose to be my audience. I had painted furiously for several months at university and hired out an industrial basement to exhibit my work. I was proud and believed good art speaks for itself, so I didn't advertise or print flyers or put an announcement in the student newspaper about the exhibition. But I hadn't seen friends during my painterly hibernation and my professors weren't sure that I still existed. Nobody came. I sat in the basement and drank the beer I'd bought alone. She appeared at the door (looking for a toilet, she told me years later) toward midnight—her shoulders narrower than her hips, her hair undyed, her collarbones drawing my eyes like magnets. I opened her a beer and let her browse my work while she sipped. She took a long time over my drawings, paying them attention they weren't used to in a room of oil paintings,

slinking in and out of the pools of light thrown on each one, cocooned in her sequined slip. Eventually she went to the toilet at the back of the basement.

"It's not flushing," she said. "The handle is broken."

At least, I thought, something of her will be left when she leaves. Later, after I'd fallen in love, everything about her—clipped nails she'd left in a jagged pile on the floor, her morning breath, her week-old underwear in the laundry basket—became a clue to her chemistry, and I began to believe that I could possess it, could possess her, if I were vigilant enough to collect all the clues. When she'd left the basement I stood above the toilet bowl and inhaled like a dog. I wet my finger and lifted a sequin from the floor.

My wife was also in the business of aesthetics—she was a food stylist, her specialty: hamburgers. She told me that they only ever film the front half of a burger; the back half looks like a construction site. She painted soft wax onto buns, placed individual sesame seeds strategically, and once sifted through two hundred lettuces to find the perfect frilled salad leaf to spray with silicon. The worst part about it, she always said, was watching an actor bite into the burger, having to smile fullmouthed with the wax starting to congeal on the roof of his mouth. She kept a special bucket for them to spit out what they'd chewed as soon as the camera stopped rolling.

One evening, dressing for dinner, she held up a photograph on a cardboard box from a pair of sheer stockings she'd just opened; a picture of a pair of legs in tights, the limbs long and beautiful.

"Do you think she has nice legs?" she asked me, and before I could respond said, "You know that she is a he. All stocking models are men."

She always warned me that things are not what they seem.

Now she is eight months pregnant and it kills me that I can't see her. Her hair had mushroomed thickly, her tummy was so taut that her belly button left an indent on anything she wore, and her nipples had spread like a pink stain across her breasts, claiming space. When they took her she only had time to put on her dressing gown. Her hair was still wet.

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I should have known, at the last sitting, that something was wrong. The President had changed color—every fiber of him was a tone I hadn't mixed on my palette before—and he scratched around on the settee like a fussy poodle making its nest for the night and wouldn't sit still. He brought his bodyguards up to the studio when normally they waited in the foyer of my apartment building, and his assistant even forgot to collect the petals.

My wife was in the bath, the first ritual of her day, lying dead still, with just her belly protruding, and watching the baby's movements ripple the water. She could lie there for hours, transfixed.

The bodyguards were shot with silenced guns. They simply crumpled where they stood, like puppets a child has lost interest in. The President's assistant, without a word, opened my wardrobe, stepped into it, and closed the mirrored door behind him quietly. It was only then that I saw them: two masked gunmen, slick as spiders, with their weapons trained on the President. I dropped my palette and raised my hands in supplication. I could hear my wife murmuring in the bathroom.

They motioned for me to move to the President's side. I sat next to him on the couch, our shoulders touching, with one gunman behind us, while the other moved toward the bathroom door.

“Please.” I only realized later that I whispered this. “Please. Not her.”

12 He opened the door and for a few seconds stood watching her. I could see into the room from the couch. She didn’t turn her head; she thought it was me. The gunman lifted her roughly from the bath in one movement and she stood naked, barefoot on the bathroom floor, screaming my name.

“Put on your dressing gown,” I whispered. “Behind the door. Put it on.”

The silk clung to her and darkened around her breasts and stomach as she clutched the gown strings around her waist. The gunman forced her to walk in front of him, and as she approached me and the President sitting on the settee she dropped to her knees. He pulled her up again just as she was reaching out her arms to me. I strained for hers, but she only managed to grasp the President’s hand. She screamed my name but clutched his hand, then she was gone, forced down the stairs and out of the foyer. The assistant wasn’t discovered. I wonder if he is still hiding in my closet.

Now we are being held prisoner in one of the guestrooms of the President’s Summer Residence—me, his chef, and his barber—in a room too high above the ground to contemplate escape. We each have a bed with virgin linen so white I feel guilty sleeping in it, and there is an en suite bathroom with silver fittings. A man brings bread, water, cheese, and tomatoes to our door in the mornings and soup in the evenings. I haven’t seen my wife since the day they took us, almost a week ago.

I was the first prisoner to be left in the room. They blindfolded me and the President in my apartment, forced us into a vehicle, and drove into the mountains—I know those spiraling roads too

well to be fooled; the air thins and you start to drive faster from light-headedness, to overtake and stay for longer than you need to on the wrong side of the road. Those roads bring out the death wish in people. The President and I leaned into each other as the driver took the corners; his body is more pliable than I imagined.

We were separated at the Summer Residence—our blindfolds were removed and he was led away into the building, which I recognized immediately from postcards and magazine spreads; it was declared a national monument last year. I was led up many flights of stairs to the bedroom and left alone. The chef was brought in the afternoon, straight from the President's kitchens, where they were in the middle of making zabaglione for lunchtime dessert. His sous-chef was shot because he tried to sneak out of the delivery entrance, and the kitchen boys had stood gaping as the masked gunman bound the chef's wrists and blindfolded him. He still had dried egg on his hands when he arrived, and immediately ran himself a bath and sat in the bathroom with the door closed for a long time. The barber only arrived at dusk. He's taken the whole thing quite badly, and eventually talked himself to sleep.

From where I stand on the small balcony, I can see the valley below dimly in the moonlight, the only fertile ground in the country. It must be a new agricultural trend, to farm in circles—the fields are separated into massive green polka dots with a slice of yellow cut out of them, which makes them look like they are devouring each other. My wife and I came wine-tasting in the valley for her birthday, years ago. There were only two vineyards and the wine was close to awful, but once we were in the valley basin we felt newly created. It was summer and the hot air had

collected at the bottom, and as we descended the mountain road to the valley base we peeled off layers of clothing; another layer for each drop in altitude, until we were almost naked and sweating and even the bad wine was soothing. The vineyard owner took us on a tour of the cellars and told us the monks had used underground caves to store their wine for hundreds of years, but gradually the caves were forgotten until a farmer out with a pack of hunting dogs stumbled upon one of the openings. He grandly revealed cobwebbed caskets of the original monks' wine, rendered undrinkable by years of imprisonment within glass; my wife persuaded him to let us smell it and it seemed to burn the hairs within my nostrils.

The chef is snoring like a stalling motorboat. Something else is bothering me, though, some noise of distress beneath the night sounds from the room, men's voices playing hide-and-seek. I trace them to the air vent above my bed, and stand on the mattress with my ear against the cold metal mesh.

"Did you . . . hundreds of . . . list them . . . their names?"

I pull on the mesh cover. It comes out of the wall, leaving the vent gaping in the darkness. The voices seem to be traveling upward from the room beneath me.

"List each order . . . spare . . . burden . . . is my condition."

Another man's voice disguised with pain rises to me and dissolves into grunts to ward off new blows to his stomach—or so I imagine, from his breathing. A door slams and a man heaves, his solar plexus in spasm.

I have avoided thinking about why I am here. I have never paid attention to politics; if I am exempt from one thing as an artist, surely it is knowing what my government is doing. Much more interesting to me than the puny stirrings of student

revolutionaries was how to transform a thought into an image, how to paint the sky without using blue, how to get perspective wrong on purpose. My wife and I made it a rule never to listen to the news. "It's all relative anyway," she would say, imagining that politicians do to their actions what fast-food advertisers do to their burgers. It seemed purer to know nothing than to glean bits of information thrown to us like chum to sharks. We didn't even own a television set.

Perhaps that is not quite true. I was interested in politics long ago, growing up in a small family in the heart of the city's Presidential District. My parents paid attention to the news the way most people notice the weather, absentmindedly, and I used to try to shake them out of their apathy. But after I'd met my wife my world seemed to shrink wonderfully, so that I needed nothing more than to see her immersed in a bathtub, her body refracted by the water, or to watch her lift a screaming kettle from the stove in one graceful arc, to be deliriously happy. She is the kind of woman you can never get tired of, for she is secretive and has a vivid internal life that is opaque to me. To observe her while she was concentrating on something else—a book, packing a suitcase, tying her shoelaces—was to ache with wonder.

She had her own reasons for choosing ignorance. Her father is a prominent farmer who owns the biggest prawn farm in the country and breeds sleek horses as abundantly as rabbits. He was wooed into politics just before we got married and became famous for using fire hoses instead of bullets to remove protesting students from a government building. People put his compassion down to his love of animals. His position meant the paparazzi attended our wedding as invited guests, and it was at

his insistence that I got the job as presidential portraitist. The President had never been painted before, only photographed.

16 My wife's father, quietly horrified at her choice of husband, organized for me to spend a weekend with the President at his coastal villa, painting his wife and his children, who were old enough to sit still for a watercolor. His wife had the same ability as he did to withstand an artist's scrutiny for hours, but she smelled like a fallen woman. The President sat in on part of her session and she became pert under his gaze, making me feel like a voyeur. Then she insisted I paint her husband too.

The voice from the air vent moans a name: my wife's name. It must be the President—his wife and mine share the same name although they are generations apart. I didn't recognize his voice at first, but trauma will do that to a man.



Morning has broken. I throw aside the curtains and look out at the valley below, my wrists still faintly ringed from rope burn, and slice the tomatoes, cheese, and bread that have been left just inside the doorway, using the sill as a table. The tomatoes are the kind that smell of sugar, valley tomatoes; in the city they arrive bruised and insolent. I wonder if the supermarkets have anything left on the shelves—on my blindfolded drive to the mountains I could hear the sounds of rioting in the streets around me, and somebody punched a fist through the rear window of the car; the driver swerved onto the pavement to escape, and hit somebody, or something, but didn't stop. Once we were out of the city, I could smell that the guards in the car were eating large chunks of matured cheese that should have been consumed in small and savored doses.

I tear the loaf into three and close my eyes to conjure the smell of coffee. I open them to find the portraitist looking directly at me, his face harrowed. I saw him last night standing on his bed in the dark, fiddling with the air vent; I suspect he's planning some kind of elaborate escape that will get him killed.

"Do you know," he says quietly, "why you're here?"

The barber and I look at him sharply. These are the first words he's uttered this morning.

"Regime change," I respond. "We just got caught in the middle of it, that's all."

Maybe I shouldn't have said that so flippantly—he looks like he's taken it personally. The barber fidgets as if he has an unbearable itch, then stands, takes his share of the bread, and eats it quickly.

"They're only leaving us alone because they don't know what to do with us," I continue. "They can't figure out where we fit in."

The barber closes the bathroom door and I hear him lower the toilet seat. My own bowels start to move in response. The portraitist has moved to the window and surprises me when he speaks again.

"Why would they take my wife, then? How does she fit in?"

"Pollution through association."

He turns to look at me, hurt. "But not my child. Not my unborn child."

That would be too far even for me to go, so I leave him to stare out at the fields below. There is nothing to do but get back into bed and wait for the barber to leave the bathroom.

A key scrapes at the door and it opens to reveal a man standing in the corridor, dressed as if he's about to be taken sailing, in leather slippers that have become soft and oily at the places that rub against his heels, casual slacks, a dress shirt with the top four buttons undone. He is beautiful and I feel suddenly shy, but relieved to see the portraitist is also gaping. The barber chooses this moment to emerge from the bathroom, the toilet flushing noisily behind him. The man smiles, walks

into the room, and sits with his legs crossed on the couch facing the windows.

“Gentlemen,” he says.

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He looks at us as if waiting for approval. I only manage to clear my throat and throw the bed covers to one side.

“Your wife is safe,” he says to the portraitist. “You needn’t worry about her, but you cannot see her until the child is born.”

The portraitist’s face collapses with relief and fury and he swallows his tears.

“I apologize for the unintended similarity of your situation to the children’s rhyme. What is it, butcher, baker, candlestick maker? Let me make it up to you by saying you can call me Commander. Equally ridiculous.”

He laughs with his eyes only.

I chanted that rhyme to my daughter when she was small, and it scared her witless. She couldn’t bear the thought of those men bound together, stranded. She came home from school a few weeks later and told me they’d read about how a long time ago men were punished for doing bad things: a man would be tied in a sack with a monkey and a poisonous snake, then dropped overboard, and the three creatures would kill each other before they drowned. She said it reminded her of that rhyme I used to sing, the one about the three men stuck in a tub at sea.

“You won’t be harmed. Each of you has spent many years perfecting a skill; we want you to make yourselves useful.” The Commander pauses, then looks directly at me. “I want you to prepare dinner for me, starting tonight. You can make a list of ingredients you need.”

I am, despite myself, flattered, and my mind begins to whirl thinking of what I'll need. The barber looks at me in surprise, then with something like wry recognition; the portraitist is still struggling with his tears. The Commander stands and leaves the room, walking like a man who has had many women.

This week I will make for him what I learned to create first: pastry. My grandmother taught me. She would only come to stay with us in the hot months of the year and I loved her so much I would sneak into her room and sniff the dresses she left in the cupboard between stays—even now a wet facecloth reminds me of the smell of her stockings drying on the clothing rack. When I was about to get into trouble with my mother, I would run screaming to my grandmother, who would give me sweets instead of hidings. Pastry-making had to happen so early in the morning the summer sun hadn't yet risen. The night before we would fill glass bottles with water and stack them in the icebox and the dough would be left to rise under a dishcloth in the pantry. She would wake me just before dawn. She'd knead the dough and then begin to flatten it using a frozen glass bottle as a rolling pin, keeping the dough cool so the butter didn't melt too easily as it was rolled onto each layer. My task was to add new ice blocks to a bowl of water she dipped her hands into when they became warm and began to make the dough sticky.

In the town where I grew up there was a chocolate factory, and when different winds blew I could smell different chocolates being made. The northeasterly carried the smell of peppermint. In my second year of school my class went on an excursion to the factory and we were allowed to descend on the hexagonal cardboard bins at the end of each conveyor belt carrying finished chocolates to their wrappers. These bins were brimful with

rejects—warped chocolate bars that had grown tumors or blistered or become stunted—but we swore this only made them taste more delicious, and the primal allure of all things deformed induced us to dig into the bin up to our armpits. Before we left, one of the boys somehow stuck his hand in a chocolate blender—a large machine that looked like it could mix concrete—and lost his pinkie. The floor manager could barely disguise his contempt for the child for ruining the batch. I was fascinated with the image of his blood mixing with the chocolate, and with the knowledge that our small class was the only keeper of the horrible secret. For months afterward I was convinced that brand of chocolate bar had taken on a rusty tinge.

Tonight I will make the Commander paella. Paella only needs scraps of creatures, and I assume that is all that's going since the coup. I am interested in poor people's food: pizza, paella, minestrone, potato salad—these were all desperate creations, the end product of a search to make dregs of food palatable. One week when my father was unemployed we ate potato salad for every meal. Now it's acceptable to serve it at official functions, spruced up with capers or cured ham. I once called in an order for a thousand servings of the stuff for the President's summer banquet—a local potato farmer had his workers make it on the farm and the farmer drove it into the city in two trucks.



I called my home the glass box. It meant I could never throw stones, just like the proverb warned. I designed containers for everything so that things could be neatly tucked away and not clutter the surfaces. In my bathroom drawer, I had customized compartments for my toothbrush, floss, face wash, deodorant, razor. In my bedroom cupboard I kept my caps and glasses color-coded and had small hollows for each belt to fit into, once rolled. I've never liked lying down on my bed in my street clothes, even with my shoes off (I believe it pollutes my sleep), I always leave a window open at night, no matter how cold it is, and I can't bear leaving my home for a long trip if there is any dirty linen or clothing in it. If I know I have to go away somewhere for a while, I lay out the clothes I'm going to wear, take off the clothes I'm wearing, put them in the washing machine with my sheets, and walk around naked until it's almost time to leave. That's why I was naked when they took me: ready for my trip, about to put on my clean traveling clothes, and next thing there was a man in my laundry pointing a gun at me.

22

The chef has given me the task of washing a bucketful of mussels; I have to check that each one is firmly shut—if it has opened in the bucket it is dangerous to eat and I'm supposed to

throw it out. The portraitist is deboning fish. We are the chef's kitchen boys for the night and the chef is transformed; he has completely lost himself in the logistics of preparing a meal and is cackling like a smug housewife over a pot of rice. The kitchen is as large as one would expect in a summer residence used primarily to entertain. We were escorted here by two men—armed, but dressed like they had just gotten back from the office. The chef couldn't resist telling them the menu for the evening, but they didn't respond. Somebody had managed to find fresh seafood and every other item on the chef's ingredient wish list, and it was waiting for us in the kitchen in paper bags. He was like a small child on his birthday, going through the bags gleefully; then he did a quick spot-check of the kitchen equipment and found it all to his satisfaction. The two armed men have stayed in the kitchen, perched on kitchen stools with their backs against the wall, watching that we don't poison the food.

"I've worked here before," the chef says, stirring the rice. "Many years ago. I came with my wife at the time, and we spent a month living in one of the suites. I experimented on the President—pushed his tastes, fed him wild meats, foreign fruit. He liked that I pushed him. Most people around him wouldn't dare."

He takes the knife from the portraitist and fillets a fish effortlessly.

I find three mussels, still in a hoary clump, that have opened in the bucket, and throw them aside. The odor of raw fish reminds me of my brother, of what he would come home stinking of at lunchtime. He was older than me by ten years, and, sitting at the round table in the kitchen with my mother, eating

crustless sandwiches and telling her about my morning at school, I would smell him coming before I heard the door slam. He would wash off stray fish scales from his hands at the tap outside and rinse and remove his boots, and come into the kitchen in wet socks. My mother would hover about him like an anxious bee about the queen, ladle out a hot lunch she had cooked, ask about his catch. He left so early in the mornings the gulls weren't even awake and went out on a borrowed trawler for the nine hours it took to catch enough fish to make a living. If we were lucky he would bring a bunch of small fish for our supper, but my mother never asked him outright, we just waited to see if he would volunteer them from his canvas bag once he had eaten lunch. At school in the afternoon I could still smell him on my pencil case and sometimes on my hands if he had agreed to play airplanes.

It broke my mother when he disappeared. I was older then, and not paying anybody but myself much attention. I hadn't even really registered his absence. It was only when she sat down one lunchtime and put her head on the table and wouldn't eat anything that I realized he hadn't eaten meals with us in over two weeks. For a long time we thought he had eloped with his fiancée—she disappeared with him—but I couldn't understand why none of his crew had come to tell us. They avoided us at the market and at the dock. My mother stopped getting dressed in the mornings.

It was on my birthday that the letter arrived. It was from him, but had been posted almost a year before, and he had written only one sentence: "Taken captive political prisoner we'll be fine." That letter lit a fire beneath my mother and she went visiting—old friends, close family, vague family, ex-girlfriends—until she

had pieced together a patchwork of possibilities. It turned out he and his fiancée had been active in some kind of underground resistance movement. His fishing crew had never approved, said he was asking for trouble. The second letter arrived two months later. It wasn't from my brother. The writer, anonymous, told us that my brother's body had been buried in the mountains. The writer said he—or she—was sorry.

The chef has put on full serving gear that he found in the pantry, even the hat, which makes him look like he has dough rising slowly on his head. My task during the meal is to pour the water and wine for the Commander, but the portraitist refuses to serve him and says he'll wait in the kitchen. The chef alone will serve the food. He uses his shoulder to bump the swinging doors into the dining room and walks ceremoniously toward the Commander, who is seated at a small, square table in the center of the room. The long dining table has been moved aside and a single place is set. The Commander smiles at the chef and smirks at me dutifully carrying a bottle of wine in a bucket of ice. The cork is so stubborn I am tempted to put the bottle between my legs and pull on it, but instead I put it under my arm and tug. The chef places a napkin on the Commander's lap with flair. My job is done; I leave the room.

The portraitist is standing at the kitchen window, staring down into the courtyard. He is in agony: I have never seen an emotion made so manifest.

"My wife," he says. "She's here. She's being kept here. I saw her in the courtyard."

I place my hand on his shoulder gently. "Is this not a good thing? You know she is being looked after. You know where she is."

He turns to me and, before I can move away, has put his head against my chest. His grief spreads across my shirt, heating it.

"I called to her from up here. I opened the window and called down to her. She was alone, sitting on that bench. She looked up at me like a stranger, then she stood and walked away."

I imagine I know why she did this, something about the pollution thing the chef said to him this morning. I pat his head awkwardly, but I am no good at consoling. When he shifts his head I move away toward the swinging doors to listen to what the Commander is saying to the chef. His fork makes scratchy music against his plate.

"You have excelled yourself."

The chef murmurs deferentially. The scraping stops, the plate has been licked clean.

"And do you have a wife?" The Commander asks this the way one would speak to a small child, with bored patience and no expectation of a reply.

If the chef is surprised, his voice doesn't betray him. "Ex-wife. Haven't seen her for months." He stops, uncertain how much the Commander is willing to listen to.

"Ah. Why did you divorce?"

The chef pauses. "She went crazy," he says, his tone ironic. "Became obsessed with energy flow. Made me knock down three walls in our house because she said they were blocking peace lines."

The Commander laughs loudly.