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Praise for *A CAGE OF BONES*

“I really enjoyed *A Cage of Bones*. It hits British culture and speech beautifully.”

DM Thomas, author of *The White Hotel* and *Lady With a Laptop*

“You can gauge the depth of my admiration when I tell you that my reaction to *A Cage of Bones* was simply envy.”

Douglas LePan, author of *The Deserter* and *Macalister or Dying in the Dark*

“Sexy and intelligent novel mixing fashion with politics. *A Cage of Bones* is *A Room with a View* for the gay 90s. It is hilariously funny but its social and political philosophy is astute.”

Kamal Al-Solaylee, *Toronto Star Online*

“Good bone structure!”

Kate Barker, *Xtra!*

Jeffrey Round is the author of *The P-Town Murders*, *Death in Key West*, *The Honey Locust* and *Vanished In Vallarta*. He worked briefly in the fashion industry and was the artistic director of *Be Boys Productions*, an independent theatre company. He was also the founding editor of *The Church Wellesley Review*, Canada’s first annual journal for LGBT creative writing. His short film, *My Head Belongs To Daddy*, won awards for Best Director and Best Use of Music.

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A CAGE OF BONES

Jeffrey Round

Rounder Publications

A Cage of Bones

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This book is a work of fiction. In the interest of verisimilitude a number of actual organizations, periodicals and public figures have been mentioned. All have been used fictionally throughout. Any statements or situations ascribed to such are purely works of the imagination.

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I. TITLE.

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In memoriam: Gianni Versace
1946-1997

For John James Davison, who showed
me that love is a gift, on his 33rd birthday

Here is my secret. It is very simple: only
with the heart can you see well. That which
is essential is invisible to the eye.

The Little Prince — Saint-Exupéry

A foreword by the author

As with many writers, the call to rewrite has always been strong in me. It's the urge to perfect that haunts us and keeps us up at hours—what Michael Chabon calls “the midnight disease.” When you think of it, though, are there any really perfect novels? Possibly not. While there are many great books and writers, the candidates for perfection—like sainthood—are few.

What is it about this sprawling, essentially rule-less genre that defies perfection? Perhaps it has less to do with the writing and more with how we as readers change over time. What we love today can just as easily bore us tomorrow. And while that should change their “perfect-ness,” if they possess such a thing, a book that doesn't engage us fully can't really be called perfect even if everything about it is technically right.

Having said that, I've never thought *A Cage of Bones* was anywhere close to being perfect, but on its initial publication by Tor Gay Men's Press in 1997, I was pleased with a great deal of it. And then I changed, as I am wont to do.

When I wrote (and lived) much of the book, I was in my twenties going on thirties. At the time, I was smitten with two writers: Marcel Proust, whose long-winded sentences dazzle with their construction, and Sylvia Plath, a pithy wordsmith whose poetry affected me more profoundly than any other poet except Shakespeare. Heady company—and in my youthful ambition I tried hard to measure up.

Reading *A Cage of Bones* now, more than ten years after its publication, proved illuminating. In the space of seconds I might pass from pride at what I'd accomplished to utter embarrassment at the book's stylistic excess, not to mention the rigidity of its moral outlook.

You can't erase the past, as my youthful protagonist Warden Fields discovers on his journey from pop icon through social pariah to liberated spirit. You can, however, edit books to conform to a greater sense of stylistic rigour, which is what I've attempted here.

On re-reading the book, two things were clear—my initial vision of the characters and their story still held a certain charm, and the basic writing was essentially sound, if a trifle flowery.

Nevertheless, I resolved not to edit so much that the book lost its appeal. It's a story about young love, and I didn't want it to lose its simplicity and directness. If the book was flawed, the flaws lay in its overly descriptive passages and a tendency to editorialize on the writer's part. A description of a landscape is only valid inasmuch as it relates to the story. A moral note is only going to ring true when it's dramatized effectively, not presented as a platitude.

Thus this descriptive passage from the first chapter of the novel's original version:

Jagged peaks brooded in the distance among broken patches of cloud, resurrected out of their gothic existence. Sun glinted on powdery peaks in the thin air as the plane's shadow rolled across a great sea of silver and black.

becomes this in the second edition:

Jagged peaks brooded among broken clouds, resurrected out of a gothic existence. Sun glinted on powdery crests as the plane's shadow rolled across a sea of silver and black.

Thirty-nine words are reduced to twenty-nine words in the new version—roughly three-quarters of the original length—that's probably still too much poetry for some people.

When I got to the final chapter, I had a moment where I thought I might not be able to re-publish the book without substantial rewriting. It just seemed *too* flowery and I couldn't see any way around it. For comparison, I re-read the ending of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, another book about the liberation of the spirit. To my surprise, I discovered Joyce's ending was *far* more flowery than mine! With that in mind I pruned the last chapter but left it mostly as it was, hoping future readers would be more tolerant than me.

Apart from the stylistic trimming, the only major change in text concerns an event in the final chapter. In the book's first edition the character Rebekah Wentworth dies in a car accident (she's noted as a risk-taking driver early on.) I included this at the urging of a well-meaning story editor who felt it would add emotional heft to the story, but it now reads to me as maudlin and melodramatic. The event as it occurs in this version is the one I wrote all those years ago and am happy to reinstate. It makes far more sense dramatically to me.

The only other change I made for the new edition was the cover. I was never happy with the GMP cover—not because the book wasn't sexy or attractive—he's certainly that. My discontent lay in the fact that he didn't look anything like the Warden I'd described in the book. An author's qualms, of course. No one else seemed to mind.

And if the new cover raises cries of narcissism or egotism, I remind myself that those very qualities have made a career for more than one pop star. For that reason, I'm happy to use a photograph from my modeling days. And if I could edit myself to look like that now, I would.

July 2008

A CAGE OF BONES

PART I

From the windows of the plane he watched the coast of Europe spread below like a patchwork quilt—this region here, that mountain range over there. Blue mists and silver waters covered the earth. Warden checked his watch. Seven hours out of Toronto. The mid-Atlantic at dawn had been a lonely place. Now, craning his neck, he could make out hilltops and towns cradled in valley basins newly crowned by daylight. It was all fitting together piece by piece.

Up and down the aisles, passengers stretched tentative limbs as though unsure of the bodies they'd just awakened to. A bevy of blue-capped stewardesses dispensed steaming trays to anyone able enough to want breakfast. It was remarkable to think he was on the other side of the Atlantic. He had never left home before and suddenly he was halfway across the world. It occurred to him that life as he'd lived it—quiet, ordered and safe—no longer existed.

The previous summer Warden had been snagged from a beach full of rowdy volleyball players to portray the all-Canadian boy in a TV commercial. At the time, he'd had vague moral qualms over the superficiality of the pursuit. Still he went ahead, scoffing at the idea anything would come of it.

When the advertisement aired, he was amazed how his image took on an identity of its own, like an alien twin peering back from another dimension. Along with a rise in requests for dates, he also received offers from several established model agencies. One, Toronto Male, arranged a photography session for him, but school had started by then and he didn't pursue it beyond that.

A few weeks later someone called to say his photographs were being sent to an affiliate group in Italy. The Italian agency contacted them to ask about his availability. He wrote to the head of the Italian group, a Sr. Calvino, thanking him for his interest and explaining he'd just started his second year at university and wasn't available.

There was no reply. Then at Christmas Sr. Calvino telephoned him personally, urging him to come to Italy to work with his agency, Maura's Models. Warden snickered at the name, thinking of someone's awkward attempt at North American-casual. He refused, thanking Calvino again for the offer.

"But, darling—I want to make you rich and famous," the voice oozed from the phone.

Warden laughed. The man's accent was strange.

"Why do you laugh when I say that? Don't you want to be rich and famous?" the voice asked petulantly.

"Right now, Sr. Calvino, I have to think about school."

"But you have your whole life to read and study. Come to Italy. You would do so well here. Your face is very European."

Warden wasn't sure what he meant.

"You could have the entire continent at your feet!"

"I'm not sure I'd have room for it," Warden joked.

The voice on the other end didn't seem to catch the humour.

Warden relented. "I might have time in the summer," he said, "but I'll probably be working to make my tuition for next year."

The voice exploded. "But, darling—work here! That's what I'm telling you! You could be so rich

Why are you playing these games?"

"I'm not playing games, Sr. Calvino."

"Well, then come by February at the very latest so we can work you in. In the summer it's r good here—everyone goes to the seaside. Lazy, lazy," he chided.

"I'll be writing my mid-term exams in February," Warden replied.

The voice sounded as though it had been stung. "Darling, you're making things very difficult f me. Call me when you are ready to talk. I'll be waiting." Italy clicked off at the other end.

Warden went to the hallway and stood before the mirror. He turned his face this way and tha examining his features as though they belonged to someone else—sandy hair, high cheekbones an deep-set almond eyes. He could see nothing that would make anyone want him to travel all the way Italy. Or anywhere else for that matter.

At supper he mentioned the call to his parents. It was one of the rare evenings his mother ha come down to join them for supper. Beatrice looked hesitantly at her husband. Warden's fath thought it frivolous and said so. His sister, Lisa, however, declared it "most excellent" that someon from so far away should actually phone to ask him to join an agency.

"That's so cool!" she said, her adolescent eyes flashing defiance. "Let geography be your destin Ward. Or you'll always wish you'd done it when you had the chance."

January passed. At reading week Warden came home with a bewildering pile of books. Anothe set of exams and papers and two more months of school lay ahead. Then another two years starting the fall. He'd spent the last year and a half trying to convince himself the career path he'd chose under his father's tutelage had been a good one. He was no longer sure.

He tried studying at the dining table, but found it impossible to concentrate. Meaningless wor danced on the page in front of his face. He closed his book and went for a walk. It was a typic February day, the ubiquitous greyness stretching on forever. The land and sky hovered between wint and spring, a dry rattling time of great opposition wearing through the winter-weary heart like ti tracks across fresh snow. People hurried by, clutching coats and hats to keep out the slicing cold. bus tottered along with a cargo of pale discontented faces returning from the workday world lil conscripts in a battle.

Warden cut across the park. Dead leaves hopped about in the wind like mischievous drunken bir where the snow had lain recently. He crossed a patch of brown matted grass and felt a twinge of los A chance forsaken. With the money left over from his commercial, he mused, he could probably go Italy for a few weeks in summer. He might be able to afford it.

He thought of returning to school the following week, going back to his cramped dormitory roo and the over-crowded lecture halls. He pictured the uneventful days that stretched ahead while a ch wind blew him across the field. A leaf fluttered in the air.

Warden looked over his shoulder. The sky lay in tattered rags along a dark horizon. Clouds wer mounting over the lake, closing in with the night. Here and there daylight leaked through at the seam small flashes of light at the edge of the sky like phantom gunfire.

Something moved inside him, looking for a face, a name. What was he yearning for? Whatever was, he longed to grasp it and wrestle it to earth, far more than attending school or staying safe an secure within the confines of this, his home and native land.

He felt a shifting of forces, the tectonic plates of his being coming into play. Something had bee calling him and at last he understood—it was life itself, that faceless, nameless desire urging him n to wait in hope or anticipation of a tomorrow that lay forever out of reach. He looked up and laughe He would go to Italy. He'd have been a fool to miss it.

He ran all the way home, tearing into the house and bounding up the stairs to the room at the to It had once been his room, a secret place where space invaders left blue powder stains on his pillow

night as evidence of their earthly visits, sustaining him through hours of fantasy. But when he moved into the dormitory, his mother had begun to spend more and more time there until they came to think of it as her room. He knew she'd be there.

Beatrice wasn't sure precisely when she began to feel the pangs of fear and doubt that led her to withdraw from the world. They'd crept up on her gradually. At first it was only a desire to remain at home when the others went out. She liked the strong silence that invaded the house when she was alone—a silence replaced by a jumble of sounds from outside when the others returned from their skating rinks and movies and the million other worlds people belonged to momentarily when they left their homes and went out of doors. To prolong it when they returned, she retreated to the attic room under the eaves. Eventually the space between each succeeding trip to the outside—for that's what they'd become, no longer did Beatrice take simple walks to the post office or supermarket—became wider and wider. Sometimes the family didn't see her for days at a time. They knew she was behind the door at the top of the stairs.

Warden knocked and went in. A canopied bed occupied the space along with a desk, a bookshelf, and a bearskin rug spread across the floor. His mother stood by the window overlooking the city skyline. What had she been watching? The lights scattered across the valley, perhaps, or the lines of cars snaking over the bridge in the twilight or possibly her own reflection pressed like a cloud upon a pane of these things.

"I've come to tell you I'm leaving, Mom."

"You're going back to school tonight?"

Neat hair framed her oval face. Though still beautiful, her youthfulness had long since vanished, the features becoming more distinguished and isolated with time.

"I'm going to Italy." He said it quietly.

She stood very still, as though inwardly folding and unfolding a fan. "But dear...when did you decide this?"

"Today. I mean, I think I've known it all along, but I made up my mind just now."

The look she gave him wasn't one of disapproval or objection, but simply concern that her child—or anyone's child—might make a rash decision and live to regret it.

"Don't you think you might take more time to decide, if you really want to go?" That wasn't what she'd meant to say. Of all children, this one knew his mind before he spoke it. And once spoken, it was made up. "What about school? Have you given it proper consideration? I know you're not happy with it..."

Warden put his hand on hers. "I have thought about it. It's what I need to do. I know that."

"How long will you be gone? A week? A month?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Will you be back in time for school next fall? Maybe if you take a break now you'll be ready to settle down and study when you come back."

"Maybe."

She shook her head at the unknown chasms opening before him, preoccupied by bewildering thoughts and mothers' worries. "I knew you'd go one day. I always knew it."

Her emotions turned quickly. She stepped outside of her anxiety. Somehow she'd got beyond those minor peaks, like new snow blanketing old, covering the emotions with a fresh layer of hope for this son with the flush of excitement spreading across his face.

"Does your father know?"

"Not yet."

“He’ll be upset when he finds out you want to leave school. It was his highest hope for you. You really didn’t like it very much, did you?”

Didn’t. It was already of the past.

“There’s still plenty of time to be an engineer, Mom.” He hugged her. “Or anything else you choose.”

Warden’s father sat next to the gas fire in his den. He put down a book as Warden entered, folding his hands across his belly. A cat padded around the room looking for a place to sleep, settling in a corner away from them.

“Hello, Ward. How’s the schoolwork going?” the deep voice asked.

Warden stood in the doorway. “Fine, thanks, Dad. Do you have a minute?”

“Of course—come in.” His father indicated a decanter on the sideboard near the shelves of books extending along the wall. “Would you like some sherry?”

“No, thanks.”

“This looks like it’s going to be a father-son talk. Well, have a seat. What have I done?”

Warden stayed standing.

The older man regarded his son, waiting for him to speak. Suspended from the ceiling behind the desk was a set of model airplanes he and Warden had carefully constructed when Warden was eight. They spoke of hours of cautious deliberate labour, Walter guiding his son each crucial step of the way.

“I’ve...come to ask your permission to leave school and go to Italy.”

Walter studied his son’s face. “I don’t really know what to tell you,” he said at last. The voice was brusque, but not off-putting. “You want permission to leave school—since you paid for it, I can’t tell you not to.”

He paused, balancing his thoughts with what he might have hoped to hear in such a situation.

“Do you think you’ll find things easier or better in another country? Or are you simply going in search of excitement? I think on the contrary you’ll find it more treacherous in a land other than your own.”

Warden tried to explain how he felt about school and how the offer from Sr. Calvino had made him aware of the opportunity he might be passing up.

“I feel there’s something out there for me and I’ve got to find out what it is.” He was aware how pitifully naïve that would sound to his father.

“For you to leave school and go off in search of adventure is the last thing I’d wish for you. My own father, who you never met, was a drunkard and a petty criminal. I spent every ounce of energy I could to educate myself so I would lead a decent life and not turn out like him.” He paused for a moment, as though a memory had unsettled his thoughts. “Education is the one thing that will lead you up in this life, Ward. It’s the thing that will bring you what you want.”

They remained—the father sitting and the son standing—like Phoebus and Phaëton, the boy asking for the one thing he must have, the older man wishing he would ask for anything but the freedom to choose that one thing.

“What if my happiness depends on it, Dad? If I stay through another two-and-a-half years of school and became an engineer I still might not be happy.”

“Happiness isn’t everything you think it is right now. You won’t find that out till late unfortunately. I just hope it’s not too late.”

Walter looked at his son. What did he know of this boy, barely a man, standing before him asking for his freedom? No more than his own father had once known of him, thinking that to beat a boy in submission would obscure the corners of the unknown from his personality, driving the shadows from the face of fact.

“Don’t think I don’t have your happiness at heart, Ward. The proof is in my fear for you. Look

around you. Whatever is most precious is to be found right here, at home. You have everything you could possibly need in front of you.”

Warden looked at the smooth walnut bookshelves extending floor to ceiling. He thought of the thick banisters running along the stairwell and the staid Palladian design of the house itself—adding an air of peace and security to the family home.

“I won’t say ‘no’ to you,” his father said, “but I ask you to choose carefully. The years go fast enough of their own accord; the trick is to hold them in.”

Walter thought the conversation was over. He hoped his son would go away and think about what he’d said and, if he were truly wise, change his mind. Warden remained standing before his father whose life was solid and secure. He belonged there in the home he’d created for himself. Warden’s course was just begun.

“I want your permission, Dad.”

Walter looked at the young man standing before him. The bough had broken.

“Even when you were a boy you always did exactly what you wanted, no matter what you were told...and sometimes it turned out to be the right thing. All right—I’ll leave you to your choice and hope your plans work out for you.”

Warden sprang to the door, pouring out his thanks and delight to his father before flying off. Walter looked after him for a moment, then reached for his book and settled back into the chair by the fire.

Despite Warden’s maturity, his parents’ concerns weren’t altogether unfounded. Both Walter and Beatrice were aware their children had been raised in a gilded cage, albeit one of modest proportions. Warden’s social experience was average for a boy just turned twenty, raised on MuchMusic, Letterman and the generic wisdom of Macintosh computers. His sexual score card, though, even self-admittedly, was somewhat less impressive.

In high school he’d been the first love of a dozen adoring schoolgirls. At university he was popular with his classmates and within a week everyone knew him by name in the dormitory where he lived. Other boys sought his advice on love matters as much as on the tedium of schoolwork, though they seemed to Warden more capable than him. Girls flirted with him openly during class lectures, hinting they were willing to be intimate with him, though he never took up their transparent offers.

Except for the odd bit of inquisitive kissing in junior high school, he’d never been intimate with anyone. The only time he experienced anything like it was with another boy in his first year chemistry class. From the first, there was an undeclared attraction between the two boys, though neither ever spoke to the other.

Warden and the other boy—John—always sat in close proximity during class. To anyone watching, the pairing would have seemed almost accidental, like the casual attraction of sympathetic elements. Occasionally, Warden would glance up at the blonde seated languidly at a nearby desk. At the same time, as though bored with the lecture, John might turn and catch Warden’s eye, lingering for just an instant before looking elsewhere. That was all.

One night Warden dreamed he stayed late after class and he and John were the only ones there. They talked and laughed openly together as they’d never done in real life. When it came time to leave they walked up the street arm-in-arm until they reached a large dark building. John stopped and looked about.

“Where are we?” Warden demanded.

“African Studies,” John replied in a mysterious undertone, as if that told all. He smiled. “We can go in back.”

Warden looked up at the building, unsure of what it held.

~~“It’s safe,” John added in a conspiratorial whisper.~~

Warden wasn’t sure why they were going behind the African Studies building or what it was safe for, but he followed like a puppy on a leash. In the dream, it was nearly dusk. The other buildings were hidden behind tall trees. A thick carpet of leaves covered the ground. John turned to face him. Warden could hear his soft breathing in the liquid darkness.

Warden reached out to John, who lifted his hands at the same instant as though in a mirror. The palms touched and Warden felt a jolt of energy. His body expanded, streaming outwards as it divulged secrets of exquisite pleasures: of beautiful birds nesting on white cliff tops, the arcane knowledge of moonbeams and blizzards, and the joy of swimming naked at midnight. Warden fell headfirst onto a leaf-blanketed lawn, oblivious to everything. He lay there a long time watching the planets whirl and their mysterious circular configurations to the sound of tinkling glass and dying leaves.

The day he left, it was cold and clear. It had snowed lightly during the night. Beatrice came downstairs in her nightgown and slippers. She sat perched on the front step, as though that were the farthest bounds of safety of her world. She watched as they took his luggage to the car.

She hugged him. “Please be careful, Warden,” she said. “We’ll miss you, so write. Have you got everything?”

“Yes.”

“Money?”

“Yes.”

“Have you packed enough clothing?”

“I think so.”

She released him. He moved to the car door.

“Warden...”

He turned to her.

She wanted to say something—to warn him against something—but what? The nebulous, unformed dangers that haunted a mother’s mind. And life itself, she imagined. She smiled at the handsome young man standing patiently before her. It seemed as though he were someone else now.

“Bye, Mom—see you sometime. Try to get out a bit.”

“Goodbye, Warden—send us some pictures of you when they show up in the magazines.”

Unknown countries floated below him now. He tried to imagine what they were. He was waking with the taste of rich hot coffee and a somewhat premature celebratory glass of champagne he’d ordered to the surprise of a sleepy-eyed stewardess. This was followed by a piece of bitter chocolate, affecting him with the collision of competing substances in his bloodstream. At that altitude he felt an enviable freedom.

It was in this state that he caught his first glimpse of the Alps. Jagged peaks brooded among broken clouds, resurrected out of their gothic existence. Sun glinted on powdery crests as the plane’s shadow rolled across a sea of silver and black. It was as though the rag ends of creation had been dispersed over a staggering emptiness, ringing the horizon in a colossal granite disguise.

A stewardess wandered down the aisle picking up empty trays and discarded napkins. Outside, the sky seemed to be lowering.

“Where are we right now?” Warden asked as she picked up his tray.

“We are almost in Milano,” she said. “*Ciao, bello*. Welcome to Italia!”

At customs, the lethargic guard didn't bother to feign interest when Warden offered his passport. He asked the duration of Warden's stay and whether he intended to work while in Italy. Warden was about to say "yes" then thought he might require a work permit. Perhaps the agency had arranged one. Was his name on a list somewhere? If so, Calvino hadn't mentioned it. In any case, he didn't want to have to explain all this to the guard whose recalcitrant cap had crept down over his forehead and whose accent was barely decipherable. Warden hesitated then finally said, "No." He heard a quiet *thunk* as his passport was stamped and returned.

The airport lobby was nearly empty. He purchased a city map at a kiosk then picked up his bags and walked to a bus stop where others were waiting. The bus arrived and they all climbed aboard. As it pulled onto the highway, Warden turned to watch the tail end of the Alps go by, the sky blue and seamless beyond.

The bus driver was a garrulous man given to shouting the names of landmarks in a tortured though not unrhythmic English. He turned the radio up full to provide a background for his animated narration. Outside the window the landscape was full of light, imbued with a magical richness common to foreign lands.

Across the aisle, a dark-haired girl smiled at Warden. "Hi! Where're you from?"

"Toronto."

She sighed. "I'm from Boston. It's been so long since I've been home."

The pack under her seat bulged. She wanted to know what was happening "back home." He told her what he could recall of current North American domestic affairs. She seemed lost in nostalgia. When the ride ended outside a massive stone fortress in the middle of the city, he said goodbye and debarked with his bags.

From the station, a driver took him to the address scribbled in his date book. The cab pulled up outside a four-story stone building. Warden paid and got out. He heard voices coming from inside. American voices. Footsteps pounded down the stairs.

"What's happenin', dude?"

Six or seven energetic young men in sweaters and jeans bounded past him through the doorway and scattered like minnows. Warden shouldered his bags and climbed the flight of stairs. A small boy crouched on the landing with a plastic truck, zooming it back and forth while making sounds appropriate to small boys playing with trucks.

"*Ciao*," said the boy, looking up briefly.

"*Ciao*," Warden said, and continued upwards.

On the next landing he came to a desk sporting a rack with dozens of pigeon hole slots. The wall behind it was covered in a collage of four-by-six cards featuring the eager faces of dozens of young men like the ones he'd just passed. Warden set his bags down and rang a bell. A dark-haired woman emerged from a doorway, drying her hands on a towel. She scrutinized him without coming to any conclusion as to his presence before her.

"*Ciao*."

"*Ciao*," he said. "Do you speak English?"

"Yes. How may I help you?"

“Is this the Albergo Sirtori?”

“Yes.”

“I’m from Maura’s Models. Sr. Calvino sent me.”

Her face registered scepticism as she flipped through a register in search of something that might verify his statement. She looked up.

“You are Sr. Fields?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes,” he said.

“May I see your passport, please?”

He handed over the document.

“We were expecting you tomorrow,” she said, frowning as she studied it. “Sr. Calvino is not very precise about his arrivals.”

Warden shifted nervously. He wondered what he would do if she told him to come back in the morning.

She looked up. “Never mind. It cannot be helped,” she said, her voice softening. She offered him her hand. “I am Irena. Come—I will show you your room.”

She scooped a key off its hook and led him down the hallway past rows of numbered doors. He heard music coming from some of the rooms.

“I have put you in with another American boy. You will have to share for now. His name is Jimmy. He has gone to Firenze for a show, but he will be back tomorrow.” She clucked her tongue and looked him in the eye. “There are no girls allowed after 10 o’clock in the rooms.”

She opened a door and switched on the light. The room was small and unadorned, but clean. Two twin beds took up most of the space. A set of wooden doors opened onto a balcony. Warden thanked her and put down his bags.

“I hope you enjoy your stay,” she said simply, and went out.

Warden examined the room. A night table divided the beds. At the far end, a sink and portable wardrobe took up most of the space. A suitcase peeked out from under a collection of shirts hurriedly placed hastily beside an assortment of dress pants. A pair of worn running shoes waited expectantly at the foot of one of the beds. Discarded T-shirts were draped everywhere.

On the table sat an inexpensive lamp. A book of Italian phrases, a Bible and a romance novel leaned against it. A handful of pop music cassettes lay scattered nearby, some of his favourites among them, he noted, while an ashtray on a lower shelf contained a smattering of unusual coins. Beside this a stack of modelling cards presented a freckled face with a friendly grin. The name “Jimmy Caitlin” ran across the top and the logo of a famous New York agency on the bottom. Real American stock. Warden mused.

Following his absent roommate’s example, he unpacked and stored his deflated bags in the wardrobe. He stepped out onto the small balcony overlooking a courtyard in the low light of afternoon. Rooftops connected to neighbouring buildings with courtyards of their own. By summer they would offer an abundant greenness. Right now the branches were barely in bud, red tips of hope.

He stared at the view, wondering what lay concealed behind it waiting to reveal itself. He wanted something to offer a hint of why he’d travelled so far. It had all happened so fast. It wasn’t hard for him to believe he was there. What was hard to believe was that this place was any different from the one he’d just left.

Warden stepped back in and closed the doors. He washed his face and hands at the sink then lay on the bed, staring up at the cracked ceiling and trying to recall the events that led him there. His eyes closed. When he opened them again the light at the window was almost gone.

The air was cool where it drifted in from an open window. He got up and put on a sweater then went out into the empty hallway. The aroma of fried garlic and onions met his nostrils. He heard

children's voices as he approached the reception desk. Inside a well-lit room, he saw the boy who greeted him on the landing earlier, now sitting at a table beside another boy and a girl. They waited expectantly as Irena ladled a steamy broth into bowls. He passed the simple gathering and continued down the stairs.

In the streets he listened to voices murmuring in the falling darkness. The words were unfamiliar yet they held a comforting rhythm. Twilight overtook him as he drank in the sights of the city, its newness engraving on his consciousness more deeply than the half-habitual memory by which he knew his own home.

He wandered a while, arriving eventually at a crowded piazza at the city's heart. The space opened before a giant cathedral. Warden gazed up at the massive shape dominating the square. A greenish glow illuminated the stiletto spires of its stonework. Across the piazza, contrasting the old world with the new, a neon billboard gleamed with electric intensity. It struck him as he stood there that in the whole country there wasn't a single person who knew him. Loneliness touched him with its cool hand.

Back at the *albergo*, which had been empty when he left, he found a gathering of young men surrounding the parlour TV, their figures draped and folded over sofas and chairs. He wondered if they all spoke Italian well enough to understand it, but it turned out to be a program of English music videos.

Other young men wandered in and out of doorways he passed on the way to his room. Heads nodded in greeting. Warden lay on his bed. It was just 10 o'clock. He wondered what to do. Too early for sleep, he thought. With the time change and the excitement, he'd lie awake for hours. He went and sat at the edge of the room where the faces crowded listlessly around the TV, too tired or too vacant to turn their gaze away.

Not all of them were American, he soon discovered, though most spoke English. There was a Norwegian boy named Jörn and a French boy named Jean-Luc, as well as boys of other nationalities. They were all varied and all good looking. Warden felt as though he'd landed in a roomful of specimens of the prototypic male. He watched their wan faces in the light of the TV screen. They accepted him freely, without curiosity as to his presence among them.

Someone conquered inertia long enough to change the channel. Warden chatted a bit, then said good night and went back to his room. He put on his sweater and took paper and pen out onto the balcony. He sat with his arms pulled inside his sleeves, so that the pen point protruded in the cool air and began to write his mother a letter. A low, salty moon hung on the horizon like a stepping stone into the galaxy.

3

He woke from a sleep that was deep beyond any remembrance. The *albergo* was empty except for a maid going from room to room, cleaning and changing the linen.

Warden showered and shaved, then dressed to meet Sr. Calvino. His roommate still hadn't returned. He left a note on the bed opposite: "Howdy, neighbour. I hope you like company, because you've got some." He signed his name on the bottom.

He tried phoning the agency to find out when they expected him. Once he made his travel arrangements, there'd been little communication except for an odd exchange with Calvino urging him

to “Come soon, baby,” though he couldn’t have come any sooner. He tried calling several times from the room phone but the line was busy. He was getting restless. At the reception desk, Irena told him there was a payphone in the café downstairs. He could also get breakfast there.

The café was filled with morning sunlight. A handful of customers sat around drinking coffee. Warden chose a seat near a window and stared at a menu written in Italian. At the far end of the room a jukebox spewed current American love songs. When the waiter came he asked for “un cappuccino” and hoped he was getting some variant of a cappuccino.

He found the phone and attempted to call again. Still busy. He dialled the other two numbers he had written in his daybook with the same result. He kept trying until the waiter arrived with a steaming cup piled high with stiff white foam. A pungent whiff of coffee hit his nose.

“*Grazie*,” he said, one of a handful of words he’d memorized from the phrase book the night before.

“*Prego*,” the boy said, and wandered back over to the counter.

Warden drank his coffee and listened to the music. In a few minutes he tried the phone again. The time it rang. A woman answered.

“Maura’s Models. Can I help you?”

“May I speak to Sr. Calvino, please?”

“But he is on another line. You will please have to call again very soon. Thank you. *Grazie*.”

The voice hung up. Warden tried several more times in the next half hour. Busy again. He ordered another cappuccino and managed to indicate to the waiter to bring him some pastry. When he finished eating, he tried calling again. Finally, it rang. A different voice answered.

“Maura’s Models. Hold, please.”

The line clicked to a hollow hum. He could hear ghost voices talking faintly over the wires. Over the jukebox, a country singer was drawling something about a lost dog. The waiter wandered among the tables, clearing up. The voice returned.

“How may I help you?”

“I’d like to speak to Sr. Calvino, please.”

“He is very busy. Can you call back?”

“No!” Warden shouted before he realized the voice wasn’t going to hang up on him. “I’ve been calling for nearly an hour,” he said, trying not to whine.

“He’s very busy right now,” the woman insisted.

“Would you please tell him Warden Fields from Toronto is calling and I’d like to speak to him before I have a caffeine attack.”

“One moment.”

The line clicked off. In seconds it was picked up again.

“But, darling...you should have told me it was you!” gurgled the warm salty voice he’d first heard over the line at Christmas. It sounded much closer, no longer drowned under an ocean of water.

“I’ve been trying,” Warden said. He visualized an overweight middle-aged man sinking into a plush office chair in a spacious boardroom in the middle of the city.

“Where are you right now?”

“I’m downstairs at the hotel you sent me to.”

“You’re not at the American Hotel?” Calvino asked suspiciously.

“No, why?”

“Never mind—it’s not a good place for you.”

An odd answer. Warden didn’t pursue it. “I’m at the Albergo Sirtori.”

“Well, get here as quickly as you can.”

“Where?” Warden interjected, still afraid of being disconnected.

Calvino gave him the agency address along with a command to appear soon. "*Ciao, baby. Arrivederci.*" He took a streetcar—the taxis will take you the long way around and charge you too much."

He hung up abruptly before Warden had a chance to say anything more. Italians were a hurried race, he thought, as he left the booth.

He looked around for a streetcar, wondering how he'd know which one to catch. He wandered for several minutes, aware he was incapable of asking even the most basic directions in Italian. He couldn't even see a taxi. Finally, he recognized a face from the *albergo* walking toward him. He asked how to get to the agency.

"Turn left here and take the number five streetcar at the end of the street," the boy said, pointing.

"Thanks."

"No problem, dude."

At the stop a small crowd stood waiting as a car rolled up. Warden boarded last and asked the price of a fare in English. The driver scowled and said something in Italian. Warden pulled out a thousand-lira note and offered it to him.

"This much?"

The driver scowled again and threw his hands in the air.

Warden pulled out two more bills. "This much?" he asked, thinking the cost was quickly becoming exorbitant or else he was being taken advantage of because of his inability to communicate.

The driver turned to the carload of passengers. Warden heard him use the word "Americano" in a surly tone. People were laughing. A young boy came toward the front.

"He say you have to buy a ticket," the boy informed him.

"How much is it?"

"You cannot buy here. You must buy it in a..." the boy hesitated. "You must buy it in a store!" he finished proudly.

"In a store?" Warden asked.

"Yes, in a store!"

The driver barked something at the boy.

"Come!" he said, taking Warden by the hand and pulling him off the streetcar. "I show you."

The car rolled away from them.

"He doesn't like for you to make stop the streetcar," the boy explained.

Warden followed him to a corner store. The boy paid for a ticket with the money he offered. It cost less than he expected.

"Now we go back," the boy informed him.

They waited for another streetcar. When it came, the boy showed him how to use the punch clock in the middle of the car.

"Now you can ride for this much of minutes," he said, showing Warden the number 75 stamped on his ticket.

Warden thanked him, complimenting his English as they rode along. The boy blushed.

"I am learning in school," he explained.

Warden showed him the agency address written in his book.

"Do you know where this is?"

"Yes," the boy said. "It is three stops ago."

Warden got off and walked back till he found the street. He saw the number 17 in brass figures on a new stucco building and entered a lobby filled with elaborate iron filigree. A grey-haired woman sat knitting at a desk. She glared at him over her glasses, raising a finger to her lips as though he might break into a racket at any moment.

"*Due piano,*" she said, pointing above. "Second floor."

“Grazie.”

Warden climbed the stairs to a nondescript door with an opaque window. A small sign read “Maura’s Models—Avanti.” He opened it and found himself in the middle of a busy room. Faces moved in every direction, hands clutching portfolios, envelopes and photographs.

In an office across the way three women sat speaking rapidly into telephones, banging the receivers down then answering them again almost immediately. As they spoke they scribbled notes on large desk calendars, hardly noticing the swarms of young people parading in and out of the room. One of the women waved a sandwich in the air as she exclaimed into the mouthpiece.

A face that looked oddly familiar went by in the chaos. It belonged to a tall gangly youth clad in jeans and a sweatshirt.

“Excuse me, are you Jimmy Caitlin?” Warden asked.

A straw-coloured head of hair turned toward him. “You bet!”

“Hi. I’m Ward Fields. I’m your new roommate.”

The boy’s face metamorphosed into a grin, scattering his freckles.

“Good to meet you, Ward,” he said. “I was wondering if they’d turfed me out yet. I haven’t been home in three days.”

“I just got here yesterday,” Warden explained over the noise. “I haven’t even met Sr. Calvin yet.”

“He’s not here. Talk to Maura,” Jimmy said, pointing to the woman with the sandwich. “She’ll help you out. Hey, Maura!” he yelled.

The woman looked up. Jimmy pointed at Warden.

“Gotta go. I’m late for a go-see,” he said. “Catch you later, Ward.”

Warden watched Jimmy’s wide shoulders move through the crowd and out the door. Maura screamed one last phrase in Italian and slammed the phone onto its cradle.

“I tell them always not to call at lunch time and they call always at lunch time!” She looked up at Warden and smiled. “Yes, how can I help you?” she asked, her voice suddenly pleasant and courteous.

“I’m looking for Sr. Calvino.”

The phone rang and she picked it up, answering in Italian. A woman approached and placed an envelope in front of her. Three photographs of a girl in jeans and a skimpy blouse slipped out. Maura flipped through them and pointed to the middle one, all three coming perilously close to being speared with mustard from the omnipresent sandwich.

“Questo—this one,” she said.

The envelope vanished from under her nose as she nodded into the phone. “*Si, si—ciao!*”

She hung up and looked back at Warden. “Sr. Calvino is not here now,” she said.

The phone rang again. She picked it up. “*Ciao*. Maura’s Models...” Her eyes flamed. “Why do you call me now?” The hand with the sandwich went up in the air. “I told you never to call me when it’s busy!”

She slammed the phone down and looked back up. “Sr. Calvino has gone for lunch. He leaves me when it’s busiest and expects me to look after everything!” she complained, as though the two women answering phones beside her didn’t exist.

“I’m Warden Fields,” he said. “From Toronto.”

“Warden? Oh, yes, I remember. You’re late. One moment,” she said, as she answered the phone again. The caller was put on hold. “We were expecting you much sooner.”

“I had some difficulty getting here.”

“Sr. Calvino was hungry—he couldn’t wait. I am Maura,” she said, extending a hand over the desk. Her face bore a smile that could have killed a cat. Both hand and smile vanished in the same instant, retreating somewhere behind the desk. “Sr. Calvino went next door to buy a panino,” she said.

indicating the rolled-up sandwich. "He will be back in fifteen minutes. In the next doorway is his office. You can wait there."

She pointed the way. The phone was ringing again. Warden went out through the lobby to the next room. It looked identical to the one he'd just left except it was empty. The walls were cluttered with photographs and calendars. A wooden rack displayed a collection of faces on four-by-six composition cards like a catalogue covering the spectrum of human features. Warden wondered if they'd all been summoned by the salty voice offering to lay continents at their feet.

He sat and leaned his head against the coolness of the wall. Everything seemed to slow for a moment.

Shadows passed over the opaque windows. He expected any one of them to walk up to the door, open it, and he would finally find himself in the presence of the plump middle-aged man who belonged to the gushing voice that had beckoned him across continents. He could hear Maura on the phone in the next room. More shadows. Noises. His watch ticked.

"He's waiting in your office," he heard Maura say.

Footsteps. A single, thin shadow approached. The door opened to admit a slim young black man with his head completely shaved.

"Man, I thought you got lost," he said, coming over to shake Warden's hand.

"Sr. Calvino?" Warden asked in surprise.

"Yes, baby—*ciao!*"

Behind him a crowd of six or seven heads had formed and stood at the door to his office. Calvino turned to them.

"Out, out, out!" he shouted, waving them away. "I have to talk to the new boy from Canada."

"I need to know where the M Agency is," a young man shouted from the doorway, as if afraid of being hung up on.

"The M Agency! What's that?" asked Calvino, stiffening at the continued affront.

"You told me yesterday I had an appointment there at noon today," the face explained. "I can't find it on the map."

"I told you before to ask Maura these things," he said, taking hold of the door.

"She told me to ask you!" protested the boy.

"Well, ask her again," he said, closing the door, shutting out the offending face. The noise and confusion settled like dust in the room. Calvino turned his attention to Warden. "What took you so long?" he asked.

"I had some difficulty getting here."

"Well, never mind that now, darling. Let me see your card."

Warden hesitated. "I—I don't have a card."

Calvino looked shocked. "You have to have a card, baby. Who told you you could come here without a card?"

"You did."

"I told you you could come without a card?" he asked, incredulous that anyone should suggest such a thing. "Well, you can't," he said, flatly contradicting his own authority. "You must have a card. We will send you to a photographer tomorrow. You will have a card by next week. Now, stand up."

Warden stood while Calvino looked him over.

"You're too skinny," he said.

"I'm sorry, I..." Warden began.

"I want you to go out and eat. You have money for food?"

"Yes."

"Good. And get some sun, too. You're too pale. You look sick."

He ran a hand through Warden's hair.

~~"Very fine. We will have to see how it holds up. Remind me to send you for a haircut."~~

He walked back to his desk. As he did so the door opened a crack. A perky face peered in.

"Hiya, Mr. C! How's it goin'?" said the face. "Hi," he said, nodding to Warden.

"Hi," Warden replied.

"I need to talk to you for about five minutes, Mr. C," the boy said in a thick Brooklyn accent.

"Not now, Joseph," said Calvino. "I'll talk to you in a minute when I'm finished."

"I'll be waiting."

He disappeared out the door. Calvino turned back to Warden.

"Now, darling, what do you know about modelling?"

"Not a lot."

"Then we will have to begin at the beginning. Now, watch me."

He began an elegant ballooning stride with shoulders held back, carrying him gracefully across the room. He stopped just short of Warden, turned with a whirl and wafted back to his desk.

"That," he said, "is how you walk when I send you to a go-see appointment."

The shoulders slumped. He sighed and sat facing Warden in the desk chair.

"Basically, darling, they don't care. You've got the face. That's all that matters. Just say 'yes' to everything and if anybody asks, say your cards were held up at customs. It happens sometimes if they think you're trying to come into the country to work illegally."

Warden remembered the guard who'd questioned him at customs.

"You mean I'm working here illegally?"

"Of course, darling. Don't worry—nobody cares," Calvino said, waving away the question. "It's only a problem if the Mafia get involved," he said cryptically. "But that hasn't happened for a while."

Calvino had him fill out a form of body measurements and particulars. He proffered a small booklet across the desk.

"This is your list of regular clients," he explained. "You have a map of the city?"

Warden nodded.

"And a day book?"

"Yes."

"Good—take these down."

Calvino rhymed off a short list of names and addresses of designers. Most of them meant nothing to him.

"They are all in the book. Try to see as many as you can this afternoon, the rest you can see tomorrow. Call in at least three times a day for your appointments." He grimaced. "Not at lunch—it's too busy and Maura gets upset. Tomorrow when you come I will tell you where your photograph appointment is. If you need to know anything else ask the other models. They will tell you."

Calvino stopped and frowned in a way that reminded Warden of the concierge at the desk downstairs, as though the two practised making facial expressions together.

"You're not staying at the American Hotel, are you?"

"No—I'm at the Albergo Sirtori."

"That's good. And remind me you need to get a haircut."

Calvino stood. Warden understood the interview was over. He was now among the ranks of fashion hopefuls. Calvino went to the door, opening it for him.

"Just remember, always be polite. Improper behaviour will make you known in this business, but it won't get you work."

Calvino looked him up and down and clucked his tongue.

"Please eat, darling—and get some sun," he admonished like a world-weary mother.

Half the lobby seemed to be trying to get into his office at once. “One at a time!” he heard Calvin scream.

Out in the lobby, Joe sat grinning in a chair near the door. He looked about eighteen.

“First day?” he asked, as Warden approached.

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t get any better, but you’ll get used to it,” he assured.

“Do you think so?”

“You might even come to like it.”

Around them, the lobby walls featured enlarged photographs of some of Maura’s models, past and present, an agency hall of fame. They stared down from the frames.

“That’s where everybody wants to be in this place,” Joe said. “If you’re up on the wall, you know you’ve made it.”

Warden looked over a few of the faces.

“What’s the American Hotel?” he asked.

“Bad news, dude. It’s where all the party animals stay. It’s one big celebration from dusk to dawn every night. Are you into drugs?”

“Not really.”

“Then you’re not missing a thing.”

“Joseph!” Calvin’s voice screamed from the office.

“Gotta go,” he said, jumping up. “Good luck.”

Downstairs the concierge was still knitting at her desk, glaring suspiciously as if people were trying to sneak past her constant vigil.

4

Warden located his first appointment and found himself in the foyer of an ordinary office that looked like his father’s back home, nothing of the glamour or prestige of the fashion business suggested in its appearance. After a few minutes, a door opened and a young man much like himself came out, nodded at Warden and left.

He was ushered into a room laid out with tables covered in the soft uncut folds of cloth. A dozen or more expensive-looking dress suits hung on large mobile racks. Warden stood quietly as his measurements were taken by a thin man making hurried markings on a card. They were watched over by a bearded man with a worried expression.

“You are from Maura’s Models?” the bearded man asked, consulting his appointment sheet first.

“Yes.”

“And do you have a card, please?”

“It was held up at customs,” Warden said, as he had been told. “I should have a new one out next week.”

“Yes, yes—very good. Make sure I get one,” said the man, apparently satisfied. “And you have done shows before?”

“Yes,” said Warden, remembering Calvin’s words.

The bearded man watched intently as the thin man placed a large hat on Warden’s head, adjusting it, standing back and then adjusting it again before taking it off.

“Write your name here for me,” the man said, pointing to the card with his measurement scribbled across it.

He did so.

“Thank you—*grazie*. That is all,” the man concluded.

Warden thanked them and left. Two young men just like him sat where he'd been waiting, and though some mass-reproductive principle were secretly at work. Warden nodded and went out.

At his next appointment the clients spoke a guttural Italian directing the models. Among themselves they spoke German or possibly Dutch. No one spoke any English. When his turn came Warden stood before a video camera as the lights were turned on full. The entire room was soon laughing at his inability to understand what was required of him until an impatient young woman came up and physically directed his movements. First one profile, then the other. Finally a full front shot with a smile, which she indicated by pulling her mouth into a wide grin with her fingers.

“Thank you,” she said, when he had finished. “Grazie.”

Warden left, embarrassed and glad to be done.

At his final appointment, he found himself in a long line of people winding up a flight of stairs. He heard sudden enthusiastic greetings from friends inquiring of one another where they'd been and where they were staying. He saw now what the camaraderie around the television at day's end was about. Like him, they were transplanted from other lands with natural and social barriers all around. For this they substituted what they could of friendship as casually and quickly as it came.

As the line moved up the stairs, Warden heard a shout from below. “What's happenin' here, dudes?” a voice with a heavy Texan accent inquired.

“Gucci casting,” someone yelled back.

“Oh, no! Not that shit again!” the voice bemoaned. Footsteps tromped back down the stairs.

“Plenty more where that came from,” someone quipped, followed by laughter.

The line moved quickly. They entered a long narrow room and were hurriedly arranged in rows of seven abreast. Each row walked the length of floor to a pounding beat. As one line advanced, another was already being formed to take its place. Occasionally, someone was taken aside while the others were sent on their way. A table near the door was littered with discarded composite cards.

When Warden's turn came he marched in step across the room. The boy beside him was asked to walk again and then taken aside to try on a jacket. No one asked Warden his name, nor did they ask him for his card. He hadn't seen anybody walk like a balloon either, he mused.

Outside, he headed back toward the *albergo*. It was already 4 o'clock. He felt weary and tense with the excitement. This was a whole other and amazingly active world he'd just entered. He'd had enough adventure and newness for one day and wanted to rest.

As he walked up a narrow one-way street, a white sports car slowed and stopped. The driver rolled down his window. The man wore sunglasses and a white cap. His mouth formed a practiced smile and he offered his hand.

“*Ciao!*” he said. “I am Mario.”

“*Ciao*, Mario. How's it going?” Warden asked, taking the hand.

One of the assistants at the Gucci casting had been named Mario. He wondered if this were the man. Still shaking his hand, the driver motioned for Warden to get in the car.

“No, thanks, I'm just going around the corner.”

“Would you like a cigarette?”

Traffic began to pile up behind him. A horn beeped.

“Thanks, I don't smoke.”

Warden tried to pull his hand free but the man hung on tightly. “Your eyes are the colour of the sea,” he said. Three more horns joined in the chorus protesting the slowdown. “I love you,” Mario

said, inexplicably.

Warden tugged his hand free of the grasp.

“Ciao, Mario—gotta go!” he said, and ran in the opposite direction.

The flood abated. Warden’s blood was pounding by the time he reached the *albergo*.

Warden joined Jimmy at a neighbourhood *trattoria* that evening. He told him about his experience with the driver of the sports car. Jimmy laughed.

“It doesn’t mean a thing,” he said. “He was just saying he likes you. Things like that happen every day. Everyone’s a little crazy in Italy. ‘Poco loco’ as they say. Once you’ve been here a while nothing seems too far out any more.”

Jimmy ordered for Warden in broken Italian when the owner came to the table.

“You don’t always know what you’re getting, but the food here is awesome,” Jimmy said.

“‘Awesome.’ That’s American for ‘good’, isn’t it?” he joked.

“Awesome means it’s pretty great,” Jimmy agreed. He smiled. “Where are you from, Ward?”

“Toronto.”

“That’s a city, isn’t it?”

Warden laughed. He’d heard of the geocentric attitude of Americans. “It’s trying to be,” he answered.

“Isn’t that where the Blue Jays are from?”

“There’s a little more to it than baseball, but you’re right. How about you?”

“Marion, Indiana,” he said. “It’s a great place to be *from*, if you know what I mean. You know the scene—small town America with a main street, a movie theatre, a couple of schools and a few churches for democratic choice. All the kids hang out after school practising their rim shots on the basketball court and everyone grows up to marry his childhood sweetheart and work at the same place as his dad.”

“I get the picture.”

“At the age of ten I was rescued when my family moved to New Jersey. That’s home now, guess.”

“Jimmy from Jersey.”

“That’s me. Haven’t seen it for a while, though.”

“When was the last time you were home?”

Jimmy looked regretful. “I was home for two days at Christmas. Not for a while before that. When you get caught up in this business it keeps you pretty busy. I’m planning to go back for the whole month of August, if I make it.”

“Do you miss it?”

“I miss it like crazy when I have the time to stop and think about it. And that’s one thing you should never let yourself do because then you miss it too much.”

Jimmy had a girlfriend, Corrine, who was also a model, Warden learned. They’d met on a show the previous summer, but hadn’t seen each other since December because of conflicting schedules. What was just occurring to Warden that people lived this sort of life for months on end. Friends greeted one another on the steps of client offices or during chance meetings in studio and agency lobbies, while lovers met on the fly between location sets.

After supper they walked down Corso Buenos Aires, a wide main strip with a centre meridian. The air was cool. Shop doors were closing as lights came on in the dusk.

“Now what do we do?”

“Now we’re free till morning. There’s a movie house where they show films in English. If you

want a drink there's Bar Magenta. It's a model hang-out."

~~They turned down a side alley where the buildings appeared drenched in the glowing darkness.~~ The city seemed suffused with a quiet vitality. The streets were narrow, the pace slow, as though life was lived here on a more intimate scale than the broad spectrum of North America.

Outside the *albergo*, Jimmy took out his cigarettes and offered one to Warden.

"I guess you really have to enjoy this life to keep it up for so long," Warden said, shaking his head at the offer.

A match flared. "I used to think I liked it," Jimmy mused, lighting his cigarette. "But it's true what they say—it chews you up and spits you out when it's done with you. I've seen it. And there'll be no one there to wave goodbye when you leave. Remember that, if you remember anything."

They leaned against the building. Others passed in and out through the door as they stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"You're lucky to be starting out so early," Jimmy said. "I've been at it for two years now. I figure I'm good for another four at most. By then I'll be thirty and ready to go home, settle down and forget this crazy existence. You've got a few solid years ahead. Make the most of the time you've got, Warden. You won't be able to later on."

It hadn't occurred to Warden that he might be doing this beyond the summer he was spending here on what seemed like a lark and had never thought of in any way seriously. Upstairs, they passed the lobby where a crowd had already gathered around the TV screen like a bedtime ritual.

"Hey! What's happenin', dudes?" a voice rang out.

There were new faces in the room. They'd flown, bussed or taken trains from various other places and sat trading stories of jobs, countries and personal encounters—the lingua franca of fellow travellers spoken brusquely in a world of hurried effects and blurred edges.

According to Jimmy, the season's migration had yet to begin in earnest. When it did, the faces changed daily in a shuffleboard game of fashion shows and hotel rooms. Little wonder it was no big deal when he arrived. New faces were routine—you met and forgot them as quickly as they came and left again. There was always a retinue of suitcases and bags at the door. It would amount to a great deal to be enthusiastic about every new face that came and went through it.

In the morning, Warden watched the others skidding in and out of the shower wrapped in towels as he waited his turn. They had the flawless faces and bodies to match the ideals of the ancients. He felt like a pretender, a fraud who'd passed in unnoticed and was holding his breath lest someone spot him and point out his illegitimacy to their rank. He let the cool water splash over his head, waking him and tingling on his skin.

Back in the room, Jimmy watched him struggle with his hair, trying to coax it into place.

"Here—try this," he said, tossing him a tube of gel.

"Natural style support," Warden read from the label. He squeezed some onto his hands.

"Just think of it as a bra for your hair," Jimmy said, pulling on a sweater.

Warden grinned. "Thanks—I think. If you have any more tips, pass them along. I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"Nothing to it. Study the magazines. Check out the poses. Take the ones you like and reproduce them for the clients. You'll catch on. You've got what it takes, so don't worry. The rest you can fake."

"That's what everybody keeps telling me."

"You'll learn. It's a crazy business and we're in one of the craziest agencies around. They don't call it 'Maura's Noodles' for nothing. Just keep your head on straight and you'll be okay."

Jimmy picked up his portfolio. "Ciao," he said. "Catch you later."

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