

VENICE TO AVALON

JAMES CASS ROGERS



MONAD BOOKS
HOLLYWOOD

1

The rain exploded on the cab roof with such vengeance it took her breath away. In that instant, the lighted Hollywood sign, which loomed above them like a surreal set piece, vanished behind a torrent of water. The cabbie switched on the windshield wipers and slowed to a crawl. In the back seat, Katharine lunged forward at the waist. "Please, I'll be late."

At every window, rain slashed against the glass as if desperate to get inside. She glanced at her mother's Hamilton. Seven minutes to get there. Beatrice had explicitly warned her not to be late. Of all the rotten luck. A freak storm in the middle of an L.A. drought. It reminded her of the rain of frogs from Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*. Biblical in proportions, ripe with interpretations and a bloody damned impediment. She tried to catch the driver's eyes in the rear view mirror but he was avoiding her. She raised her voice above the din on the roof, "I'll double the fare if you hurry."

He grunted something unintelligible and continued his maddeningly slow pace up the steep canyon, the rain smashing on the window inches from his face. She fumbled in her evening bag and pulled out two twenties, more than twice the fare. She shoved the bills at him. "It's vital I'm on time. Do you understand?"

The shoulders of the driver stiffened, as if to shut her off, while the cab continued inching up the hill like a turtle in a typhoon. She felt like screaming, raising her voice to shriek over the loud hammering above her head. Perched tensely on the edge of the seat, she strained to see anything familiar. Up ahead a faint yellow glow emerged out of the blurry gloom. It had to be Villa Norr. From her visit two days ago, she recalled that the legendary estate sat isolated high in the hills just below the famed Hollywood sign. The yellow light looked so close, yet so far. She glanced at her watch again. Five minutes. In the feeble beam of the headlights, she could see the street filling with rushing water, cascading down the canyon at an alarming rate.

The noise on the roof rose to near deafening. She stuffed fingers in her ears, closed her eyes and vowed not to open them until she had counted silently a slow sixty seconds. Two more times, she was forced to count to that number in that manner before the cab lurched to a stop in front of the estate's entrance. The cabbie reached around, grinning in relief and took one of her bills. "Sorry, no umbrella."

She barely heard him so intent was her concentration on the towering oak doors bathed in the warm glow from the yellow-glass lantern. She had two choices. She could wait out the rains and miss the most glamorous party she had ever been invited to - which surely meant going back to New York without a job, something she had vowed she would not do. Or she could arrive on time, but dripping wet. Was there really a choice? Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. That had been her mom's favorite Joplin song and the words now had direct relevance. She had little to lose.

Her portfolio of costume designs, presented on her first visit to Villa Norr to apply as his assistant, had not impressed the Maestro. And now her elegant silk dinner

suit would be a soggy rag, instead of the chic calling card she had hoped it would be. Was she really going to miss a dinner hosted by the most famous costume designer in the world at one of Hollywood's legendary residences because of a little rain? She'd been raised on pennies and schooled on scholarships. She wouldn't miss this glamorous evening under any circumstances. Whether she looked like hammered pig shit or landed the desperately desired job, she could dine out on the story the rest of her life. She would be on time even if it meant sitting in a corner all night wrapped in a rug. *Carpe diem*.

Katharine slipped off her decade old Charles Jourdan pumps and tugged off her jacket, folding it carefully over her favorite thrift-shop shoes. Holding the bundle to her chest, she waited for a lull in the frenetic drumming on the metal roof. It did not come as prayed for. She counted to ten and opened the door. The rain lashed in at her, cold and sharp on her bare arms.

"This won't last long," came the startled response from the front seat. "We can wait."

"I can't," she replied through clenched teeth. The dirty brown water in the high gutter swirled close to the doorsill. Hiking up her long skirt, she stepped out in her stocking feet, stretching for the curb. She misjudged the distance and stepped directly into the water.

Icy current rushed up to her calves, a freezing shock to her whole system. Furious at all the hindrances, she slammed the door and turned for her goal, the top of the stairs. Pebbles and stones slammed into her shins, tearing at her panty hose. A white Styrofoam cup, caught in the beam of the headlights, rushed past her down the hill.

Drenched to the skin, her hair plastered against her cheeks, she bent into the rain, hiked her skirt further and hopped up to a flagstone pathway leading to the steps. On both sides of the doors, ancient growths of bougainvillea covered most of the dark wall of the estate, which had been built in 1921 by eccentric silent film star, Nedra Norr. Only the golden light from the coach lantern looked inviting.

Katharine ran up the wet stone steps, taking refuge under the tiled canopy. She jabbed the doorbell next to the tall, double doors. In the glow of the overhead light, she checked her watch. Two minutes! Behind her, the current in the steep street roared like whitewater.

Hurriedly she put on her heels, swept back her short, dark hair, and wiped her face and arms. She shook out her suit jacket. The crepe de chine was limp, lifeless and stretched out of proportion. Dismayed, she struggled into it and adjusted the slit of her long skirt to the proper place on her hip. She glanced at her mother's watch. It had to be accurate. It hadn't failed her yet.

A sharp sound of the iron bolt being thrown open inside jolted her. The tall door on the right inched open slowly. The same grim faced, elderly woman peered out, as if expecting home-invaders. She had greeted Katharine in a similar manner on the disastrous first visit.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bundt," Katharine said loudly, recalling the housekeeper's poor hearing. "Remember me? From Wednesday's interview with the Maestro?"

Like a punctured balloon, Katharine's resolve suddenly vanished. She glanced back down the steps. The cab was still there. She turned to the stone-face. "Would you please tell the Maestro that I made it on time but got drenched in the process. Please thank him, but I can't come in like this."

The short, stocky woman turned abruptly and headed back through the glassed-in pergola leading into the villa. Katharine hesitated. In dismay, she heard the muffled sounds of the cab pulling away and caught a glimpse of the headlights disappearing into the night like a departing life raft.

“Close the door behind you,” came the gruff command from the black-attired woman disappearing into the dark. Katharine took a wary step inside. The heavy door clicked shut behind her with a resounding finality. She had no other choice but to move rapidly across the tiles and enter the grand gallery. In the shadowy, towering space, she questioned her sanity. Her mother’s repeated career advice came automatically to mind - nothing ventured, nothing gained, nothing ventured, nothing gained...

Across from the sweeping staircase, an open arch glimmered with a flickering warm light. They were heading directly for it. She could hear voices and laughter. She caught up to the little woman, touching her arm, startling her, but not slowing her. Hurrying to keep pace, Katharine spoke firmly, “I’d like to use a ladies’ room first.”

The elderly housekeeper marched ahead into the lighted archway. At once, she announced in a surprisingly stentorian tone, “Maestro, your missing guest has arrived.”

Out of Katharine’s sight, the master of the villa proclaimed, “Well, show her in, Mrs. Bundt, show her in.”

The housekeeper turned to Katharine and impassively waited for her to come forward. Katharine sucked in air, stepped into the light and froze, dazzled by the candles, crystal, silver and startled guests in evening attire. Waiting to be seated at the exquisitely set table, a dozen wrinkled faces scrutinized her with varying expressions of alarm.

Her host’s distinctively bass voice boomed from the far end, “*Mon Dieu*, a drowned pussy cat on my doorstep. My poor, poor dear, you look absolutely wretched.”

Katharine blinked in the light of flickering candles set high above the table on silver candelabra. Water dripped from her sodden hem and puddled on the tiles. She struggled for breath and addressed him by his preferred title, “Maestro, I had no idea your party would include a free shower.” She thought her voice sounded weak, insecure. She longed to vanish like a ghost.

A few of the guests smiled a welcome, but their tall, lean host remained expressionless. Etienne Jean-Marie Adorno, elegantly fashioned in a black velvet dinner suit, shook his signature mane of white hair, sighing. “My dear, the gods clearly have other plans for you tonight.” He turned to Mrs. Bundt, speaking loudly, “Please take this poor dear to be appropriately attired. Then find Beatrice. I believe she’s on the phone in the library. Inform her that her missing friend has arrived.” He paused with a gentlemanly bow in Katharine’s direction. “Welcome, my dear, to Villa Norr. So delighted to see you again. Please join us when you’ve had an opportunity to...repair yourself.”

“Thank you,” Katharine murmured and slipped out of the room. She caught up with Mrs. Bundt, swiftly striding like a general entering battle. Several cold, gloomy halls later, Katharine was ushered into a darkened dressing room lined with mirrored closets.

Mrs. Bundt switched on a light to an adjoining powder room and waved a small, chubby hand at the mirrored doors. “Choose something in there,” she uttered, then departed.

Inside the powder room, Katharine blanched at her image in the mirror. Mascara streaked her cheeks giving her an appearance like a Goth version of Courtney Love. Her dark hair hung like wet sheepdog ears. And her evening suit, which she had designed and sewn especially for this evening, as a showcase of her talents, looked like wet bed linens hanging on a bony hat-rack. “You look like shit,” she said grimly.

Debating with herself, she tore off her jacket and sheer shell, stepped out of the long skirt and stripped off her torn pantyhose. In panties and bra, she grabbed a towel and rubbed herself down before hanging everything over a towel rack. How could she ever recover her footing after such a disastrous entrance? Damned if she were going to let this opportunity go to waste. She hadn’t had a paying design job in eighteen months and her mother’s long illness had drained all of her financial and emotional reserves. She needed this job – even if she had to wear a monkey suit to get it.

She heard a tap at the door and in swept a metallic flash of classic glamour. Beatrice Boyd Howell, her friend and benefactress, froze in the doorway, swathed in bronze taffeta, smelling faintly of Channel #5. Instantly Katharine recognized the floor length gown. It was from Adorno’s 60’s haute couture line, after the studios had shied away from hiring the temperamental genius. The tapered skirt emphasized Beatrice’s long legs and showgirl height. Well over seventy, into her third act as she liked to call it, Beatrice’s blonde glamour and non-surgical beauty had never diminished. “Kip, darling,” she exclaimed, “I’ve been trying to track you down! Oh my god, did you swim here?!”

Katharine turned on the faucet. “Almost. The rain came out of nowhere. But I’m here. Humiliated beyond belief. But I’m here. Nothing to wear. But I’m here, damnit, I’m here.”

“You sound like a Sondheim song. What on god’s earth happened?”

Katharine wet the end of the towel and attacked the black marks on her face. “There were no cabs at the hotel. Or anywhere on Sunset. The doorman said there was an awards show at the Shrine. Forty minutes I waited. I almost hitch hiked.”

“Well, you got here by eight. That’s in your favor. Once he locked out Princess Margaret and George Cukor for arriving after eight.”

Katharine surveyed her face without makeup and murmured, “Beatrice, was I a fool for ringing the bell? Shouldn’t I have just accepted the rains as fate and turned around and gone back to the hotel?”

“Absolutely not,” Beatrice said with a broad smile. “You can’t win the race if you don’t get to the track. My bets are on you, Kip. That’s why I recommended you. He’d be a fool not to see your talents and take you on. And I’ve told him so, a dozen times.”

Katharine felt a rush of tears threatening. “Beatrice, you’re the best. Really you are.” She fished out her dark red lipstick from her bag. “Why do you think I’m here tonight? He gave me no indication that he liked anything I designed.”

“He asked me to invite you, so he must have something in mind.”

“Did he say anything about a new project?”

Beatrice scrutinized Katharine’s repairs, leaning close to the mirror beside her. “No, not yet. But he will. He only gives a dinner party when he has something new to promote. He loathes entertaining anymore.”

“Any hint what the film is?”

“Darling, he won’t give me a clue. But I’m sure as with everything else of his, it’s all planned down to the roll of the drums and the light cues. What a cute figure you have, Kip.”

“Me?” Katharine snapped closed the tube of lipstick. “I’m flat as a pancake and have Texas-sized hips.”

“Rounded, sensual hips, darling. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re adorable. But you won’t admit it. And why? Because if you did, you’d have to agree that you’re attractive to men. Then you’d have to come to grips with your stubborn insistence on remaining unattached. Let’s find you something sexy to please the young man Adorno invited especially for you tonight. I told him you were single and available.”

“Yikes, even more pressure,” Katharine groaned, half in jest and stepped into the mirrored dressing room. When she opened the nearest set of closet doors, automatic lights went on inside. “Oh my god!”

The long closet was crammed with transparent garment bags. An exquisite array of shimmering, one of a kind Adorno originals hung on padded satin hangers. Katharine recognized several at once, designed for a specific star in a specific role. Others had been designed for personal wardrobes. Many she recognized from movie stills or period fashion magazines. It was a designer’s dream, as well as an archeological and historical find.

She felt giddy with discovery. She pushed back the hangers to view still more fabulous creations, along with some ornate costume pieces. “Are these copies? Or originals? Did he steal them all back?”

“Copies. He always made copies. Here’s one.” Beatrice pulled out a strapless cocktail dress of black tulle covering layers of white organza. Definitely an early ‘50s design.

Katharine shook her head, demurring, “Are you kidding? Liz Taylor wore that when she announced her engagement to Michael Wilding. I’d look like a fool. I don’t have the bosom.”

“How about this?” Beatrice offered a long, slinky gown with black jet over nude lace.

“Dietrich’s Paris show gown? That’s one of his most famous designs. I’d faint with embarrassment. I was an idiot for ringing the doorbell tonight. Foiled by my own ambition.”

Beatrice spoke from inside one of the closets, “You go for the job you want. That’s admirable. Too bad you can’t do it with men. Waiting for them to come to you, never works. You have to chase them – but make them think they’ve caught you.”

Katharine was not listening. She had heard it all before. Beatrice always preached the gospel of love, having been married four times, each marriage more successful than the last. She always pressed Katharine to pursue love, despite Katharine’s lack luster track record in the romance department. Katharine adored her and respected her advice, but right now, her mind was reeling from all the creations in front of her. The more she searched, the more desperate she felt. She opened the next closet. Jammed with more garments, glistening like rare jewels in a display case. She felt overwhelmed.

Beatrice, growing even more urgent, opened closet after closet in search of the perfect dress. “You have to choose something, Kip. He won’t wait much longer. Just grab anything, darling. Any one will do.”

Katharine opened the final door and found shelves holding bolts of material, along with random odds and ends. She quickly pawed through the cut velvets and thick brocades, mixed with sequined taffetas and printed chiffons. Something glittering and silver caught her eye. Stuffed far in the back, she discovered a small bolt of shiny material that glowed like solid silver.

Grabbing hold, she hauled the heavy bolt out into the light and unfurled it across the Persian rug. A gorgeous silk lame⁶ that shimmered like molten metal. Its weight seemed surprisingly heavy, yet it looked soft as silk chiffon. Five yards and a little more. A rich rivulet of liquid silver. Devastatingly luxurious. In all her years of studying fabrics, she had never seen anything so magnificent or rare. It had to be over a hundred years old. It was almost impossible to find such material anymore. Holding it close, she moved to the mirrors. The silver sheen showcased her dark hair and eyes.

Beatrice watched, incredulity pinching her finely arched brows. “Ye gods, darling, I hope you’re not doing what I think you’re doing.”

Katharine concentrated on the mirror’s reflection. “Go tell him I’ll be there soon.”

“Kip, darling, I think he prefers all his lady guests to wear his designs.”

“Go. Tell him two minutes max.”

2

Katharine hesitated outside the archway to the dining room, adjusting the arrangement of the heavy metallic bias, falling from her shoulder. She knew she was stalling to quell her nerves. Standing unobserved in the partial darkness, she again felt awash in doubts. Nervously, she re-draped the waist material.

Was she ready for this? In a way, her life-long love of movies had prepared her for tonight. At the age of thirty-four, she longed to branch out from stage to film and re-launch her stalled career, which had been on partial hold for nearly two years. Earlier that day, she had felt ready for the challenge, even eager for it. Now, she was uncertain if she could carry it off. She knew she didn’t have a star’s poise or sizzle to “sell” the gown she had concocted, in a quasi-Grecian, sari style. She was not tall enough, or busty enough, or pretty enough to wear a gown like this. She instantly castigated herself. *Hey, compared to mom’s dying, this is a piece of cake. Carpe diem. Carpe diem.*

Adorno said something that induced laughter around the table. Katharine took a deep breath and strode as confidently as possible into the room. She headed toward the only empty chair at the far end of the table, away from her host. Beatrice, seated near Adorno, caught sight of her and exclaimed, “Brava, Kip!”

Faces turned to Katharine, who stood rooted by the empty chair. The entire table fell silent.

With a soft rustle, Beatrice rose, her dress flashing bronze in the candlelight. “Everyone, this is my dear friend, Katharine Irene Parrish. ‘Kip’ to her friends. An extremely gifted designer, as you can see by the delightful creation she has whipped up in two minutes from some fabric she found. *Brava*, Katharine. It’s brilliant!” Beatrice raised her champagne glass in a toast. Others around the table did the same, some even offered a polite applause.

Katharine glanced towards their host. One look and she knew she had made a horrible, horrible mistake. Slowly, like an aging stork rising from his nest, Adorno emerged from his chair and stared in astonishment for a long moment, before gasping, “*Mon Dieu*, my Garbo lame’!” He sounded stricken, as if she had desecrated a holy relic.

The sputtering logs burning in the large fireplace behind him emphasized the embarrassed silence.

Katharine spoke up, her voice surprisingly strong. “I used no pins. And I certainly would never cut anything so beautiful. Look, it’s simply wrapped and tucked.” She took the end of the rich silver swath which hung over one shoulder, held it out and unwrapped a small portion of the bound bodice. “I’ve been doing this since I was three. I love draping fabric. Especially such exquisite material as this.”

Heads turned to Adorno, waiting tensely for his response, as everyone knew his reputation for volatility. He held the moment, building the tension like a stage magician. Finally, he waved a weary hand and sighed, “*Prego*, sit, sit, child. You’ve already drawn too much attention to yourself.” With that, he sank into his chair like an appalled parent and ignored her for the rest of the dinner.

Slowly, she began to unwind and took her time surveying everything, wanting to remember every detail of the dinner. On the table, several silver buckets held large cabbage roses cascading in a white profusion to the damask cloth. Giant silver candelabra marched down the center on heavy, claw-footed pedestals. The damask napkins were large enough to diaper babies. As far as the guests, she recognized only Beatrice. All the women wore exquisite Adorno’s from a wide variety of his artistic periods, from austere minimalism of the fifties, to flamboyant outrageousness of the seventies.

“I think he likes you,” said the voice on her left.

She turned to the bespectacled young man. “Adorno?”

engaging smile read part come-on and part natural charm. He said in a deep baritone, “See how he avoids looking at you. Don’t you always ignore the people you’re most attracted to?”

Katharine glanced down the table at Adorno. “Oh, yes, he’s absolutely smitten with me. I have that affect on all geniuses.”

The young man’s gray-green eyes lit up with amusement. She got lost in their unusual color, almost failing to catch his name when he leaned closer to introduce himself. “Hi, welcome to L.A. I’m Douglas Brennan.”

The tortoise shell glasses gave him a studious appearance, but on further examination he appeared fit and tan. The ends of his sandy colored hair were bleached gold by the sun. Like a tennis pro. Very California, she thought. Suddenly, the evening did not seem such a total disaster.

Throughout the multi-courses of the dinner, Adorno tightly controlled the topic of the entire table’s conversation. Katharine noted he would initiate a subject, pass it around

as if it were a plate of hors' d'oeuvres, letting everyone take their pick off the platter. Then, just when the talk was getting interesting, he would pronounce his judgment and whisk the subject away only to produce another topic.

Most of the conversation was about the death of Hollywood, or the dearth of its glamour. He decried how tacky and unappealing most stars were today, deriding Julia Roberts as a graceless horse, and Cameran Diaz as a cheap looking tart. Every name that came up Adorno trashed. His tone was ironic at times, at others merely acerbic. Often his words were cruel and vicious.

When Beatrice pressured him to say something nice about someone, he took a long time before replying, "I liked Harry Cohn's testicles."

Silence greeted him. As if relishing his guest's discomfort, Adorno sipped his wine, eyeing them over the rim of the glass.

Beatrice protested, "Etienne, you've told me dozens of times, when designing for Rita Hayworth, you hated Harry Cohn because he stood for everything you loathed about America. That he was venal, crude, uneducated and lacked taste to even choose a tie."

"Yes, but he was afraid of no one," Adorno intoned. "I admire that in others, as I, too, am fearless."

Most of the ensemble rushed to endorse his assessment, offering up examples of his self-willed fearlessness, which, from what Katharine knew about his career, had gotten him fired more often than hired. It must be hell working for such an eccentric curmudgeon. She should be so lucky, she thought and smiled at Douglas.

After coffee and dessert, a rich chocolate mousse with a delicious raspberry sauce, Adorno stood. "I have an after-dinner *divertissement* for us all. A *petit amusement*," he announced in impeccable French.

"Oh, lord," an elderly man groaned. "It's not charades or some silly parlor game, is it?"

Adorno grabbed the nearest candelabrum. "I am certain it will be quite illuminating and most amusing. For what more could we ask?"

"A three picture deal at Dreamworks," Douglas whispered. Katharine laughed. Adorno frowned at her, then swept out of the room holding the candles aloft, like a guide from a Fellini movie. Towering shadows danced after him along the tapestry-covered walls of the entrance gallery.

She noted that the guests scrambled after him, as though his displeasure might bring them painful censure. Adorno led them into the cavernous living room. A lone spotlight illuminated his huge self-portrait above the mantel. In spite of the logs blazing in the mammoth fireplace, the high-ceilinged room was gloomy and full of shadows. And a draft of cold air blew from somewhere. She could feel it cooling the metal threads of her improvised gown.

Like a symphony conductor, Adorno arranged his guests on various large, silk-velvet covered couches in front of the fireplace. He placed Katharine with Douglas off to one side. Douglas started speaking softly to the tightly coiffed, French woman on the next couch, so Katharine took time to study the oil portrait.

Lit by a white-hot spotlight high in the wood beams, the large painting was a detailed image of the Maestro in his mid-fifties. All sharp angles and elegance, he sat languidly in a chair, his long legs, clad in white flannels, crossed at the knee. A white ascot and blue velvet blazer completed his ensemble. The painting had served as the

cover art for his autobiography, *AN ORIGINAL ADORNO*, which had come out in the late '70s. It had traced his meteoric rise from a poor Corsican childhood to his being discovered by ballet impresario Diaghilev (who had suggested he shorten the family name, Adornodeleoni) and the subsequent international acclaim by his twentieth birthday. The book had been gossipy and malicious enough to become a huge, international bestseller. Like the painting, the book was self-serving and egocentric. It underscored why Katharine did not feel comfortable with him in the flesh. Adorno was too imperious.

Like an emperor, Adorno stood before the expectant assemblage and addressed them in his theatrical voice with its highly cultured, English accent. "As some of you may know, I have had a long abiding interest in the metaphysical, especially the hereafter, ever since the passing of my dear mother so many, many years ago. She was a close friend of Jung's mother, and both women were firm believers in the transcendental arts, especially in multiple lifetimes on earth. My own extensive explorations into that area have led me directly to tonight's special guest. I feel greatly privileged and honored to have him in my home this evening. Ladies and Gentlemen, straight from the University of Vienna for a rare visit to the States, one of the world's most renowned masters of past life hypnotism, Doctor Theodore von Hern. Professor von Hern, please come in! Welcome to Villa Norr!"

A door just beyond the fireplace opened and a short, rotund man in an old-fashioned waistcoat and vest stepped into the room. With a broad smile, he briskly approached Adorno. Balding, with a ring of bushy white hair and wire-frame spectacles, he appeared to be in his late seventies. Katharine thought he looked straight out of old Central Casting. Send me a Viennese shrink and *voila*, this guy would appear. Professor von Hern stood next to Adorno and beamed at the guests, especially at those who applauded.

The Professor, in a thick Austrian accent, offered a brief introduction, explaining his fifty years of research into the phenomenon of reincarnation and the amazing results he had demonstrated time and again by the use of regressive past life therapy through hypnosis. The enthusiasm for his subject was evident. The examples he relayed of successful transformations through such therapy, if true, were undeniably impressive, even to a skeptic such as Katharine. The Professor soon asked for four volunteers willing and eager to explore their former identities. There was some good-natured grumbling from the first row of couches. Beatrice could be heard teasing, "Etienne, who were you in a former life?"

"Napoleon," came his immediate reply. "We were both born and raised on Corsica. My mother was descended directly from his mother. And I was born on the day he died, several decades later. But the question now is, which of you are daring enough to encounter *your* past life?"

Katharine swore that he had deliberately directed the question at her. So she raised her hand. Normally, it would be the last thing in the world for which she would volunteer since she hated being the center of attention for any reason. Surprise birthday parties floored her with embarrassment - waiters in restaurants singing Happy Birthday made her run and hide. Even as a child she never liked being on stage. Backstage, yes. But not out in the lights. Now, however, she found herself volunteering, primarily because with so many strikes against her, she wanted to please her host. To prove that she was a good sport, that she could laugh at herself and be at ease in his world. But also,

she knew she was volunteering because Douglas, the nice looking young man next to her, nudged her playfully when his hand shot into the air a fraction before hers.

The four volunteers - she, Douglas, and the elderly French couple - were escorted through that same door near the fireplace. She found herself in the library where she'd been first interviewed by the Maestro. Leather couches nestled before the fire in the carved marble fireplace. Four straight back chairs faced away from the long library table. At this table, Adorno had so summarily dismissed her portfolio of designs. The lighting had been harsh then, from the glare of the hanging lamps. Now, however, those lights weren't on, so the overall effect was more subdued. The Professor seated the volunteers in the four chairs, asking them in a soft, gentle voice to close their eyes, breathe deeply and relax.

She knew what to expect from all the movie and talk show representations of hypnosis. His set up followed the usual pattern for creating the mood for even the most recalcitrant. The Professor first cadenced their breathing slower and slower, all the while mentioning they were slipping deeper and deeper into a tranquil, peaceful state of "sleepful awakesness." He asked them to imagine being in an elevator on the hundredth floor and hitting the Lobby button. He intoned calmly, "The doors close and the elevator starts descending. Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven..." Floor by floor, he counted off the numbers while the elevator descended, telling them now and then that they were falling deeper and deeper into "an active state of suspended animation."

Katharine was wondering what that meant and was certainly not expecting any results. At about floor eighty-seven, she noticed that her head was getting heavy, almost too heavy to hold up.

That was the last thing she remembered until hearing his voice again. "You can open your eyes now, Miss, and follow me."

She opened her eyes to see the Professor smiling at the open door to the living room. She didn't notice that she was alone with him, that the other volunteers had left the room. But she was conscious of standing, moving towards him, then following him into the darkened living room. She knew she was awake because she saw the flame-lit faces of the curious guests who followed her every move. She was aware that she was the center of attention, but this time it did not affect her. She had the odd sensation of watching herself as she stepped to the chair near the Professor and the fireplace. She could feel the flames warming the metallic threads of her gown when she sat down. He moved next to her. She looked up at him and he looked back, in a benevolent, monk-like manner. She felt relaxed and comfortable.

He asked her to close her eyes. He told her she was back in the elevator again, descending floor by floor. "Sixty-six, sixty-five, sixty..." Within moments, her breathing deepened and her head drooped to her chest. She could hear his every word and was also conscious of listening to him.

He told her she was going backwards in time, growing younger by the second. That she was graduating from high school, now middle school, now entering first grade. Now she was going back beyond her first memory, even beyond her own birth. "You are in spirit form now, pure energy, alive yet formless. Back through clouds of time, back to your former life, the lifetime before your present existence. At the count of three, you will be in the body of your former earth experience. You will be that other life and you will tell us where you are, what you see and who you are. Ready? One...two...three!"

Suddenly she was shaking with cold, her arms covered with goosebumps. A man asked out of the blackness, “Why are you shivering?”

Her voice came out harsh, with a husky twang she did not recognize. “Cold enough to freeze the balls off a pawn shop.”

“Where are you?” the man asked, far, far away.

“How the hell should I know? It’s too dark to see anything. I hear music. Coming from behind me. A big band swinging away. Tisket a tasket, a green and yellow...Christ, it’s cold out here. Dark water everywhere.” She shivered again. “I hate dark water. Spooky.”

“Are you alone?”

“Not for long. My baby’s coming. Oh, too much bubbly, not too steady on my feet. Wait. I hear somebody. It’s gotta be him...”

...I turn around in the blackness. I see him coming from the lighted end of the empty dock. The big birthday cake of a building behind him is so brightly lit up I can’t see his face, just the outline of his body, but I know it’s him. I can tell by the way he walks. Kind of a swagger, like George Raft. My heart races. He’s come back. After all these months. My Nicky’s come back. I run to him. He opens his arms.

And slugs me. Hard! Across the jaw. Hurting like hell, I stagger back, stunned, confused. Before I can recover, he rushes me, clamps a hand over my mouth and slams me against the railing. Why’s he doing this?! Why?! The wood digs into my back and —My god, he’s lifting me, pushing me up on the railing. Now I’m hanging upside down. Far below I see inky water. He knows I can’t swim! I grab his lapels and try to hold on. He shoves me hard over the railing. I scream, but I’m falling backwards, down, down towards the black water.

I hit the cold water on my back. It’s like hitting a sidewalk. It knocks the wind out of me. I gulp in part air, part seawater. The water is salty and cold and dark. It closes in over me. I try to kick upward, but my legs are tangled. I sink into the blackness, the weight of my skirt pulling me down, deeper and deeper. I try to tear the dress off, but my fingers are numb. My lungs are bursting, my heart pounding, roaring in my ears like a locomotive. Oh my god, I am going to drown. Please God, please save me. I promise to be good, honest I do. Are you listening, God? Deeper and deeper I sink, my ears are roaring, my lungs ready to explode, I can’t hold my breath any longer...I give in. My mouth opens and I cough, a desperate, brief relief. Salt water rushes in. I choke. And then all is silence. The darkness is complete...

The whiff of acrid ammonia burned her nostrils and forced her eyes open. She awoke back in the library, choking and gasping for air. She pushed herself to one elbow, trying to get air in her lungs. They felt like they had collapsed as she seemed unable to inhale. Even before the blurred, hovering faces coalesced into focus, she remembered the drowning. It returned so vividly, distinct in such horrendous detail, she bolted up into a sitting position, despite Mrs. Bundt’s attempt to restrain her. Her head vibrated with aftershocks. She felt dizzy and disoriented. Her throat felt coated with salt. All she wanted to do was get out of there. In spite of Beatrice’s urgings, Katharine got to her feet and wobbled towards the front door. She could hear the other talking in the living room. Beatrice’s voice came to her, “Darling, are you all right?”

“I’d just like to...could someone call me a cab?”

“I’ll drive you.” Douglas appeared beside her.

“Thank you,” she said hoarsely, looking around for her host. But Adorno was nowhere to be seen. Nor the Professor. She said goodnight to a worried Beatrice, adding, “Tell Adorno I’ll return his fabric tomorrow.”

Still dazed, she kissed the air near Beatrice’s cheek and stumbled out into the tiled courtyard. The rains had stopped. The glistening tiles were slippery. Douglas opened the door to a black sports car with a closed convertible top. Not really aware of him or the car, or the crisp night air on her bare shoulders, she slipped into the deep leather seat. All she could think was, she had to get away. As far away as quickly as possible.