



THE PRAIRIE DANCERS

A novel

JONATHAN WESLEY BELL

The
PRAIRIE
DANCERS

Jonathan Wesley Bell

· DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION ·

That July is famous now for its drought. Creeks and water holes vanished. The days were dark at noon with blowing dust. In the heat the Kansas earth shrivelled and peeled. Farmers dehydrated in the fields and witnessed extraordinary sights through the smoke and haze over their tractor hoods.

Also, the following notice was printed on page four of the *Possom Trot Record*.

TO MY BELOVED AND ONLY CHILD, POSSIE VICTORIA VANDERMARK, I, LOUIS MATHEW VANDERMARK, BEQUEATHE THE DEEDS TO MY HOUSE AND PROPERTY AT 508 COMMERCIAL STREET, POSSOM TROT, KANSAS. I FURTHERMORE LEAVE HER IN FULL POSSESSION OF THE FOLLOWING: THE THIRD AND FOURTH BLOCKS OF COMMERCIAL STREET IN POSSOM TROT, KNOWN AS THE VANDERMARK BLOCKS; THE LAND, BUILDINGS AND BUSINESS HOLDINGS OF THE POSSOM TROT MILLING CO., THE PRAIRIE DOG COUNTY STOCK AND FEED CO., THE DOUBLE CROWN RANCH, AND THE VANDERMARK OIL CO., AS WELL AS THE PROPERTIES AND STOCK HOLDINGS OF THE TRI-STATE INVESTMENT CORP. OF KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI. SAID ESTATE, INCLUDING DIRECTORSHIP IN THE FARMERS AND DROVERS STATE BANK, IS TO BE ADMINISTERED FOR POSSIE VICTORIA VANDERMARK BY MR JOHN BLAKE OF TOPEKA, KANSAS.

Then the sparrows fell dead, parched little creatures, in the streets. August came and there were grass fires in the hills. On the Saturday night before Labor Day it did rain, at last, but in miserable, steamy gusts.

That very afternoon, a classified ad appeared in bold type in the *Record*. It was a boxed item placed below a larger advertisement for USDA prime cut—a meat counter bargain at Haggerman's Market in Possom Trot. The same copy also ran in Kansas City, San Francisco and New York newspapers. It was to be found among the usual cries for work, companionship and help in the back pages of *National Dance*, *Variety*, *After Dark* and *Art Forms*.

The advertisement read:

ATTENTION—YOUNG WOMAN SEEKS PRIVATE DANCING INSTRUCTOR. BALLET, INTERPRETIVE. MUST HAVE PERFORMING EXPERIENCE WITH NATIONAL CO. MUST HAVE STUDIED WITH TOP-TEN RESIDENT TROUPE. POSITION IS FOR LONG TERM EMPLOYMENT. SALARY OPEN. GENEROUS BENEFITS. MUST BE WILLING TO RELOCATE. SEND PROFESSIONAL HISTORY, REFERENCES AND RECENT PHOTO TO MR JOHN BLAKE, C/O WILLIAMS, BLAKE AND BERNSTEIN, ASSOCIATES AT LAW, 2808 STATE AVENUE, TOPEKA, KANSAS.

• *The Princess of the Prairie* •

‘Her ass alone must weigh 50 pounds,’ guessed Uncle Willy, as he stood spying in on her from the studio doorway. He blinked, bedazzled by the sight of her amid so much electric light. It was a rare moment for anyone to see this young woman unperplexed, tossing her head as innocently as a little girl.

The men of Prairie Dog County agreed that there wasn’t another female anywhere like Possie Victoria Vandermark.

Of course there was the money, the house, and especially the land, to make her desirable. But it was much more than that, more even than her red hair, her fabulous green eyes, her pink skin. The men were amazed by her carriage, smell and tone. They were in awe of her proportions and size.

They knew she was twenty-four years old. They figured her height at five feet and eleven inches (carrying herself very straight and therefore as tall as her slouching father). About her weight there was controversy. They’d taken bets on it. Willy himself wagered her at a conservative 185 pounds.

Possom Trot men, including Uncle Willy, dreamed of Possie. She was made for that—Venus hips and tits, more than a fellow’s hand, mouth or imagination could cover.

And here she lay, spread out flat on the floor with her supper plate. She’d flopped down in her lime-green bikini. She was straight up from the pool, still flushed from running on the stairs, from the swimming. She was disturbingly juicy for such a thirsty night.

Uncle Willy swallowed hard and rapped his knuckles on the back of the studio door. One giant thigh rolled, a patch of tummy peeked forth, half a breast ballooned in his direction.

‘Hey there!’ She acknowledged him loudly in a sweet soprano voice. ‘Come on in, the tuna salad’s great!’

The coats of make-up had melted in the swimming and her face was a rotund and cheerful watercolour. Rainbows streaked her cheeks.

‘Your aunt sent me over,’ Willy coughed out the words, and the air was too hot, too heavy to stir. ‘I’m supposed to have another “man-to-man” with you. It’s about that ad you put in today’s paper ... about that dancing thing.’

He stood apologetically, as far away from her as he could. She made him feel like Commercial Street, hard and dry. He thought vaguely of her touching him, making him young again, supple enough to bend and join her on the floor.

Possie’s middle finger, covered with Miracle Whip, vanished into her mouth. In a grand, quick movement, she lolled back from her supper. It made Uncle Willy flinch, as if he were naked before her.

Now she struggled to her feet, those big legs gaping wide.

He wondered if she was going to do callisthenics—the way her body stretched. It was a prophecy. In the rows of mirrors on the studio walls there were ten more Possies in motion.

Suddenly, inexplicably, her eyes took deeper shades, solemn, the green waters pulling back, strange shapes trembling in them.

He could tell she'd forgotten who he was.

'My God,' she gazed up at her own ceiling, rife with cupids and unbelievable foliage. 'Did you ever think that Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel with the same fingers he used to wipe his ...'

In his dread he croaked to her. 'Aunt Bertha says she won't stand for it this time. She says to tell you "enough is enough".' All too clearly he recalled the ugly little woman puckering up over 'enough!'

'Yea, I knew she'd be pissed off.' For a moment Possie pulled back—eyes going as empty as Bertha's refrigerator.

He nodded, heart racing, thinking that the two women together were more menacing by far than the storm that was about to begin.

'She says for you to go up to Hays and take lessons at the college. She says for you to get out of town if you want to dance.'

'It's really too bad the way we get tangled up in the wrong ways.' Word by word the girl in the voice receded, tougher tones replacing her. 'But I won't do what Aunt Bertha tells me to. I never have! She may be the intellectual, but I'm the artist!'

'Well, then, maybe she has a point.' He gave her a shy smile. 'There are better places for doing that than here. Go to Mexico. I been there. I remember ... You could dance all you wanted to down there.'

'But this is the centre! The beginning is here. The rest is dying, cluttered up.' The red in her flared. She stood on her toes.

'Daddy knew I wasn't made for ribbons and silk. I'm for feathers and ... and for blood! Tell her that!'

They paused, on the verge of the storm. Lightning lit the night. The wind came up, brushing at them through the open windows.

'Aunt Bertha's the other half.' Possie cocked her head against the music she was hearing in the wind. 'She orbits us in the dark. She's always moving into darkness.'

Watching and listening, Willy thought for the first time in some twenty years of the female characters in those school-book stories about Ulysses—the ones who held men captive or drove them crazy. Edging another step in his dust towards the door, he yearned to be out in the storm rather than trapped inside with the girl.

'Guess I got to be goin'. Fight it out for yourselves. It ain't a man's anyhow ...'

'Tell her I won't be circumscribed. I won't have fences around me. I'm open-range!' The sadness in her voice stopped him.

She loomed rougher and larger. The bikini slipped down like a rubber band about her hips. At the first roll of thunder she gave a burping cry and skipped towards the windows.

Uncle Willy couldn't help eyeing the crack of her ass where it showed above the bottom of the swimming suit.

'Aunt Bertha's mad because she's got ingrown toenails and calluses and stubby legs and can't dance at all!'

Rain came. It streaked the windows with hot, semen-like drops.

In wonder, Uncle Willy looked from the girl to the first rain they'd had for a month, then back again.

A violent explosion broke over the house, crackled down through its walls. Lightning in the mirrors. Thunder around the girl. The air broke like glass.

She began to dance.

• *Bertha* •

Meanwhile, across the street, in the bungalow, in the living room, the little woman waited. She chewed on a pencil, surrogate for her fingernails where nothing at all remained to bite. A brooding eye rolled slowly up to the window screen, roving the dark mass of the Vandermark house that was framed there like a fairy queen's castle.

The Vandermark house stood tempting her; in particular, tonight, the three brilliant windows of Possie's studio. Bertha thought of huge pink feet mauling the floors and winced. She imagined the girl wrapped in a dragon-red dressing gown, net stockings, and trailing herself like smoke.

No cars passed, no one to wave to—no need to ape pleasantness. The rain came, although she didn't care. Elms thrashed above the bungalow. A limb plummeted to the lawn. Even the lightning meant nothing to her—she who hadn't cringed before anything in years.

Aunt Bertha hunched closer, gripping the pencil between aching teeth.

The girl was too bright and big to flow easily with Will. He was an inconsequential messenger, the Kansan hoarse and craggy. Bertha tried to picture them dancing together, tried to think of how they might accomplish it. She heard herself laughing.

Revelation of light across the street. The front door popped open like a treasure lid. Her husband was returning through the storm.

Bertha braced herself, not for him—for the girl. He would be bringing back an aura of Possie. Such was inescapable, the creature spread like pollen, the creature clung. Bertha waited with squeezed toes, admitting how much she craved it. The knowledge made her snarl.

Bertha predicted how the conversation would go. 'What was she doing? What was she wearing? How did she look? What did she say?'

And desiccated, old-bug Willy would grunt—she could swear to it — 'She was just eatin', and she didn't exactly say "yes" and she didn't say "no" neither.' And then he would herd himself to the television.

'How was her youth? Have her breasts begun to sag yet? Were her hips and tummy as bloated as ever? Were her eyes as stupidly large, as vegetable green? Was her hair as absurdly red as yesterday? How was her mind? Her soul?' Those were the questions she yearned to stick him with.

Amusement again, grudgingly permitted, at the thought of such inquisition and of the shock it would cause—Will's slow face working towards a frown.

Because it seemed very important, the message he would bring back this evening, she allowed a sense of excitement. The feeling hovered about as unusual as a child, and there had never been one of those around, ever.

Pulled hangnails were bitter. Silent bowels were worse. And her back caught from its position in the window sill. She'd sickened of trekking through her small house, wearied of her vulture-like wait.

The light from the kitchen doorway was of no use to her. She needed almost none to write, her notorious eyes still sharp. 'Eyes like Bertha Flatbottom' they had said in high school.

Small black eyes, slivers of animal life trapped in tight skin.

Tonight she'd been writing on a 'Bishops' Appeal Fund' envelope. It lay in her lap, already covered with doodles. Similar envelopes and their crabbed scribbles had accumulated around her through the years like a library. To others they would have meant nothing. They might have frightened children, being like spells in their alien signs.

Her envelopes were sombre artefacts. The lines dark, aggressive, as if she'd made them with all her strength. Around the sketches she wrote out lists, ideas shaped in single words—things to do, ends to be gained, means of improving herself.

The envelope of the Moment read:

Fierce
hold proud
CONTROL
terror

These alluded to a lesson she planned for her seventh-grade Sunday School class. Bertha detested children, of any kind, and they her, but to be a Sunday School teacher meant she could eventually seat herself on the Official Board—and that was something else.

When, as was often the case, Bertha felt cross or depressed, or when suffering her monthly, the envelopes reflected the condition and might carry drawings of young men with unruly tails; then the lists would damn enemies and allies alike. Then her envelopes pleaded for help in odd, distraught lines: 'Straighten me!' 'Make me happy!' 'Find me!' 'Give me a chance!'

Willy did not come! Her anger returned, keener impatience. Did she hear him fumbling in the garage?

'What in hell are you doing!' she yelled through the window, out into the storming night.

The grate of his tool box. Shuffling steps to where he kept his guns. Muffled noises; that dry cough of his.

Boxes were being dragged over the grit of the garage floor.

She snorted in disgust. He was loading his truck, she realized, with those male things, his possessions in metal and bulk that were meant to intimidate her.

The garage light flicked off. Bertha sniffed the change as a wild predator would its game, checking in the distance to listen and quiz.

Then it came. What she was half expecting. He started the truck.

'She was dancing, that's the truth!' shouted Bertha.

It was important too that she never even considered crying 'come back'.

'All right then!' Bertha nursed her lip with the tip of her tongue. It was a lip she gnawed like a bone. It tasted of Old Testament brimstone, not of tears.

As the pick-up turned with a squeal of tyres at the corner, she gouged 'FREE' into the envelope, underscoring it three times.

Lightning ripped above. A clap of thunder followed. Applause shaking the night.

'Shut up!' she hissed, thinking how windows in the Vandermark house were too proud to rattle.

Beneath a sketch of a monstrous Victorian mansion, Bertha wrote:

Revenge
She was dancing
This time it's my turn!

· *The Dancing Master* ·

On the last day of that summer, a letter arrived at the Vandermark house from Mr John Blake of Topeka, Kansas. It was addressed to Possie, and even its envelope looked auspicious.

Mrs Plaget, the decrepit housekeeper, handed the letter over just as Possie rushed in the front door, ready to dash upstairs, jeans already unbuttoned and the zipper down (showing her green panties with the little-yellow-duck embroidery).

Possie tore into the envelope wiggling with impatience. ‘This better be worth stopping for!’ she announced. ‘I really got to tinkle!’

She hopped about in the entrance hall, wind-blown from her afternoon drive. Car keys jangled like bells and long scarves trailed below her knees.

The old housekeeper put a hand on Possie’s rump to steady herself. The girl was hot to the touch.

‘Easy now!’ But Mrs Plaget was excited too. Vandermark mail could sometimes be historic. She leaned over the top of her aluminium walker, as far as safety permitted, and peeped around the girl’s broad back.

‘Oh, Jesus!’ Possie fished up a photograph. ‘It’s him! It really is!’

She waved the photograph like an icon over the old woman’s head. ‘Take one goddam look and tell me if that isn’t perfect. Daddy couldn’t have given me anything better!’

Possie pushed the photo at the old woman. ‘Look at those legs! Positively mythical!’

‘Stop it!’ Mrs Plaget managed at last to focus her bi-focals, scrutinizing the future with a disparaging frown.

The old lips dropped. It was a passionate young man posed against a painted backdrop—eyes seductively fierce, curly locks, a nose striking enough for two Romans. Mrs Plaget also took in the elegant little costume, too little for her, and the naked legs, the likes of which indeed she’d never seen on a man before, being both muscular and delicate.

‘Oh, sugar!’ Possie snatched back the prize. She bounced furiously up and down on her toes (an exercise from the ‘How-To’ book).

‘It’s him. There really is a Dancing Master!’ She flitted about the entrance hall stumbling on the ends of the long scarves. Images of her face whirled in the sombre mahogany and cut glass of the entrance hall.

‘What’s his name?’ Possie slid to a halt, off balance. ‘I won’t look, Mamu. Let’s guess. Look at him hard and make a guess. A man like that will have a name like a church.’

An old woman is proud of her second sight—Mrs Plaget did her best to get a squint at the photo.

‘Hunk Lubacek?’ she drawled.

‘Oh, I hope not ...’ Possie gave her amazed-horse shake and galloped back, still pumping up and down.

‘Actually that was a polka dancer I use to know up in Grand Island.’

Possie pursed her lips and tapped her red hair. ‘Oh, use a little imagination! Think about ruins and aristocrats. I bet he isn’t from Nebraska at all.’

Tired of the game, the housekeeper snatched the letter as it fluttered by. ‘Blake says his name’s ... Lothar ... and what’s more: Lord help us! He’s an Eytalian!’

Lothar!’ Possie leaped into the air and gave the Possom Trot High School Victory Yell. It was a struggle not to fall on the slick marble.

‘Bring out the champagne, Mamu. And how about a plate heaping with food! Cook us something incredible ... Lothar!’

The big girl slapped her thighs and neighed joyously at the vaulted ceiling.

In the heart of the exhibition, Mrs Plaget waited, solid as a column. ‘I’ll say this much, he looks like a pervert to me. At least Franklin Lacey is a man, dancer or no.’

She smote the photo with a withering glance. ‘I’ll also say it’ll be a waste of your daddy’s champagne, and that from a woman who’s never taken a drop of drink since the WCTU sign-up of 1929!’

But Possie ignored Mamu’s voice. Instead she thought of visitations, whisper in the car, a shower of gold, a violated lap.

Light ran with the girl. Late-afternoon green and mauve shot up in darts along the contours of her body, blazed like treasure in her red hair.

Light affirmed what she already knew—that the god Dance would be reborn in her, on the sudden, blissfully. That she would blossom movement, the beautiful, the graceful.

The old woman retreated from harm’s way, walker going like a load of chains. One foot dragged after the other, lopsided. The knees were crooked. The feet went turning in helpless directions, deformed in broken-down slippers.

‘You ought to be having babies,’ grumbled Mrs Plaget as she pulled herself through the living room. ‘Not weird notions that no one else understands.’

‘My Dancing Master ...’ boomed Possie. ‘He’s going to fill this place with dancing. He’ll get you too, Mamu! We’ll all be dancing with him!’

‘Fudge, that photograph’s older than you are!’ wailed the old woman. And, under her breath, ‘... poor dancin’ fool.’

· *Beginning the Béguine* ·

As folks understood later, when it was discussed at length, those first Indian-yellow days of autumn were the beginning.

In the Vandermark house, books lay everywhere, broken-spined, torn, half read, completely forgotten. They were all from the Hays Public Library, since Daddy's books were about law and real estate.

The great composers warped in the sun by the swimming pool. An entire collection of 'Lives'—choreographers, ballerinas and dancers spread on the floor around Possie's bed. She crushed them lovingly underfoot.

Her daily path lay strewn with books (enough to make even Mrs Plaget curse, who occasionally caught one between the rubber tips of her walker, dragging it halfway through the house).

Studies of musical theory, staging and costumes littered the living room furniture. One massive tome, with lots of scores and scenarios, rested at the foot of the toilet bowl in her upstairs bathroom. Two volumes, *Famous Ballet Moments*, wedged open the door to the studio.

Even when eating, Possie propped a book up beside her plate, to chew contemplatively and smear streamers of saliva on the pages. Her favourite lunchtime reading was the 'How-To' book, with its 101 blue illustrations for positioning the hands and feet.

The books, of course, were all overdue. A fortune in library slips piled up unheeded.

During this period the Degas prints arrived from New York. She hung them in the studio. They retorted in the mirrors so that the room suddenly chilled with cool pastels, the harsh sweep of sweating ballerinas, their flying legs and bare china arms, the hint of a brutal audience on the other side of the footlights. Degas' ballerinas, like sacrificial offerings, filled her with pity.

Often during the day she found herself drawn to the studio. Turning from print to print, mirror to mirror, she saw herself framed there too. Degas had captured her as well.

Sometimes Possie wept at the sight.

'Shit,' she sobbed. 'It's really me.'

When the sluggish afternoons wearied her, she stretched out in the sunroom with her scrapbook. Time and again she thumbed through the pages, mooning over the old clippings of Fonteyn, Nureyev, Baryshnikov.

The sunroom had been designed for reverie—built for lying stunned and dreaming. Possie's were of Misha's haunches battering her like pistons. She daydreamed of him leaping with her in his arms, twirling her like a baton, one of his supporting hands clamped tightly into the crotch of her silk panties.

And, in the bedroom, her temple of dreams, over her barge of a bed, she taped the photo of the divine Dancing Master.

Yet at least once a week the house became too small for her. Then she felt the overpowering urge to roam.

Taking the red Jaguar out of the garage she revved the motor so that the car darted out, blasting gravel. She rumbled down Commercial Street ignoring the stop signs.

For driving she put the top down and the three long scarves fluttered from her neck like pennants, Isadora-Duncan style.

But driving also made her think of dancing. As the Jaguar raced down the backroads she hummed tunes to the land. Sometimes her feet moved. Sometimes her hands too, so that the car itself lurched and swerved.

Possie roared past and the farmers stood watching in the fields like scarecrows. The cattle turned in surprise. Farmboys crawled up on the windmills or swung from hayloft doors to catch a glimpse of her, a funnel of dust behind her.

A buxom girl with crimson hair in a crimson sports car, a face painted like an Indian's, white scarves as long as bullsnakes whipping and coiling: some of the young men prayed she'd pull up and shout for them to hop in—she'd done so other summers, other hot afternoons.

George Dalrymple, Huey Linqvist, Sam Panzer, Frank Lacey—they re-lived in technicolour the long drives ending naked and soothed in the waters of the Vandermark pool, aquamarine memories of Possie as a whale of a girl struggling and laughing with the water.

They recalled her that vividly, erection clear, but none of them except Franklin knew her well enough to call to her. They looked, remembered, were left behind.

Franklin she'd named 'Stallion'. In the past she'd kept him in bed for days, stripped down and ready to go. She'd almost used him up.

Now Possie left even him in her dust. Left him with the others. It wasn't a conscious decision for her, not at all a resignation of lust. She had too much flesh for that. Actually, she was too tired now, and preoccupied. She'd merely forgotten them, the young men standing by like the bulls in Daddy's fields, looking at her, heavy and forlorn in the heat, genitals hanging.

Only Franklin made an effort to break the spell. He'd come to the house several times since Daddy's funeral, trying to evade Mrs Plaget.

At last, Mamu had told him the truth—'No use, Mr Lacey. Your time's up with her. Now scat!'

Franklin had retreated in misery, backing off from death and art and the changes such things cause.

But the weighty concepts caught up with the young man, the very afternoon Possie flashed by him without even a wave. She left him in a daze, standing in his father's pasture, wire-cutters in one gloved hand, roll of wire at his heels.

'Well, anyway, they haven't read the "How-To" book, remarked Possie when a little guilt touched her. 'They just wiggle their butts and lift their boots a couple of inches. And they have to get drunk to do that. And they have to go to the Moose Lodge on Saturday nights to do it ...'

Although the blustery, warm October days were sensual and tempting, the more marvellous world of dancers and dances had claimed Possie.

Never for long could she be away from the mysterious Lothar, the incomparable Dancing Master—from the figure of him who would carry her to the feet of Degas' ballerinas.

• *The Overture* •

Possie would have sneaked in the back door if she'd known Aunt Bertha would be nervously standing watch at the kerb, an arm raised in a fascist salute. The ugly little woman was the last one, the last living contact with what she'd once been.

Possie felt like stalking on blindly into the house. But she didn't. Even after growing yet taller and smarter, Possie couldn't be rude to these older ones—this diminutive giant she'd once feared.

'She doesn't like music. She obviously doesn't care for dancing. She hated Daddy. She's mean and miserable.' Possie stumbled in agitation over an end of one of the scarves.

'But she is Mother's sister. She is Aunt Bertha. She and Daddy played tennis every summer. Plaget says Uncle Will has run off to Mexico ...'

The girl raised a hand in acknowledgement, feeling helpless and very awkward—as always before Aunt Bertha.

'I want to talk to you!' roared Bertha, her voice in furious competition with the lawnmower. The Atkins boy stared at the two women. He hadn't moved since the confrontation began, letting the motor run in the shade of the Russian olives.

Bertha swung her hips in a friendly, girlish way and skipped across Commercial Street. White halter top and slacks, white sandals to match. She put up a scorched smile, which seemed to come with the outfit.

She wiggled up playfully.

'My, but we look swell! Not that you shouldn't. Good blood tells.' Aunt Bertha smacked her lips. 'Mat would be proud of you. No matter what I do with myself I just can't catch your style. Not that I had any to begin with ...'

The brain-damaged grin played. Slit-eyes mocked merriment, opening as wide as they could, black holes sucking up matter.

'You know, your uncle married me because I told him to. He left me for the same reason ... No, no. It's all right. No regrets for what's done. And, besides, now I have time for all sorts of things—like an apology to you for meddling!'

Bertha paused for the words and the lawnmower to medley.

Possie felt hypnotized by those awful eyes. She knew her mouth was hanging open.

'How you've been burning that midnight oil,' sang Bertha. 'We can all see the change in you. It shows all over!'

The collective 'we'—Possie wondered at that, a sense of companionship mingling in her confusion.

'I've been exercising ...' blurted Possie.

‘Child! You’ve been DANCING! Aunt B knows all about it. The whole county talks of nothing else. And I agree, it’s perfectly divine. For sure I had my silly reservations at first. You know me—and you have been naughty in the past! Ah well, I’ll admit I’ve failed to have as much faith in you as you deserve. What an aunt I’ve been!’

Aunt Bertha stopped to catch her breath. It was perfect timing, with the girl trembling before her. Bertha gave a stage sigh and then shot for the heart.

‘But when am I to meet this great man?’ she asked. ‘Your very own instructor! When is he coming, dear?’

Yes, oh yes. She hit the mark bull’s-eye.

The mower roared *Te Deum* as it chewed up a tin can.

A few minutes later and the two women were sharing the photograph of the Dancing Master. They were upstairs, standing side by side at the studio windows.

Possie handled the photo reverently; Bertha memorized it with steeled intensity.

A wave of reassurance washed over the girl. The Dancing Master was real. Daddy and the others could go away, laugh at her, be faithless, but this remained intact, untouched, still beautiful.

‘I’m getting better and better,’ she whispered. ‘Every day I am.’

‘You gifted thing!’ enthused Bertha. ‘You’re going to be our very own ballerina!’

Caution faded from the girl’s heart. She did yearn for at least one companion. It didn’t matter who, she supposed. But Aunt Bertha was strong. Aunt Bertha would help her. It was going to be so hard. Already it was so lonely.

‘I think it really is beginning ...’ Possie trailed off into a daydream.

Bertha slipped both arms around the girl.

‘We’ll start planning now.’ Bertha was so short the top of her head didn’t even come up to Possie’s armpit. ‘We’ll need a piano up here. I’ll play for you. Won’t that be nice? We’ll put balancing rails along those walls ... and you must have a new floor. Of course, we’ll have to go to Kansas City for your costumes!’

But Possie was gone. Her eyes became green seas too deep to fathom, and her face glowed with a queer light that no painter had yet caught on canvas.

The view from the windows entranced her. How high and open the day was. She felt as if she were seeing everything in the world. She was a creature with a hundred eyes.

Possie’s soul moved at the sight of open country coming directly to the edge of town in long strips of black turned soil. She was pulled even further, the land tugging her along, to the bare purple hills. In the distance, the untouched prairie earth rolled like the grass-grown humps of dinosaurs.

Possie shivered, a spiritual uproar at the sight. It meant so much to her that she couldn’t blink before it. It snapped her freedom.

For her part, Aunt Bertha merely glanced down at the roof of her own bungalow. She gave it an agonized sneer.

Her bungalow was a dwelling for dwarfs with a patched roof and clogged gutters and elms dying around it. The neighbours' were the same—postage stamp identities.

In disgust, Bertha turned back to the Vandermark house, which had always been her one and only inspiration. She sneaked the opportunity to peer under the girl's left tit and again scrutinize the photograph of the Dancing Master.

The disdainful lilt to the man's posture, the lips too thin for smiling—as Bertha studied him she experienced a tickling claw of recognition. At last, Lady Fortune, the Queen of Darkness, was sending her a gift.

Aunt Bertha clucked her tongue in anticipation and clutched the dreaming Possie tighter.

It was a trio of players in the beautiful sunshine.

· *Veni, Vidi, Vici* ·

‘This is called Post Rock Country,’ explained the lawyer, pointing to the scene they raced through, to the far-flung rows of rough-cut stone posts, mile after mile of them laced with barbed wire.

‘Listen ...’ Blake pushed his control and all the windows sank together, exposing them to a blast of air. The Cadillac slowed, black and shiny as a hearse.

Lothar heard the wind for the first time. The wind strummed a thousand miles of barbed wire, the land like a giant guitar.

He turned in his seat, empty hills and sky behind. Ahead, they were plunging on into more of the same, interminably on and on the same. The picture promised him an eternity of desolate, sweeping grassland.

The Dancing Master checked the air with a sniff. He analysed it with a raised eyebrow. The overpowering aroma of earth he found to be as disagreeable as the odour of a labourer.

‘*Per favore!* I do not choose to catch a cold!’ Lothar hugged himself, rejecting the wind song with the rest of the landscape, all of it incomprehensible and inconsequential.

The lawyer sealed them again safely behind glass.

Without drama, Lothar was thinking, there is no poetry. Without poetry there is no feeling, no real intelligence. This land was too repetitive. His mind withdrew from it. He also felt vaguely menaced.

Here you are the star, Lothar reassured himself. Proceed *appassionato!* Hands flourished, lordly nostrils flared, Byronic curls tossed.

To be sociable, he said out loud, ‘I would rather step on a snake than ever set foot on such ground!’

Blake chuckled. ‘Yes, indeed, watch out for the rattlesnakes, particularly in the spring. Sometimes they come out early and catch people unawares. Possie’s own grandfather once stepped on a nest of early rattlers. The babies bit him half a dozen times. He was a tough old rascal, though. Instead of going into the Doc’s he drove across the county warning folks that the rattlers were out. Too angry about it to die.’

Lothar recoiled from the nonchalant discourse of his driver. He couldn’t respect what lacked the tonic chords of Beethoven—shadows, crags, lakes, forests.

He resumed his familiar gloom and let his eye follow the countryside. He surveyed it with his imperious, indolent, weary eye.

This place looked only half created to him, as if God had despaired here and quit. The hills were blank. The sky was blank.

Scanning the horizon, dwindling into haze in the distance, Lothar thought instead of the heaven over southern Italy, a painted, cherished sky that showed its brush strokes, that was pretty despite its age. He thought too of the turbulent sky over northern Europe, the soul of Rembrandt. Only a few hours ago he had himself been under what remained of the New York sky, a line drawn for glass and steel.

But this was a firmament, undefined, untouched, as if no man had yet breathed it. He did not like it at all. It made him feel small—he who had spent a life defeating things that made him feel small.

Nothing here covered him, other than the padded carpet of a Cadillac roof. No other place for him here but beside this chatterbox lawyer; should he venture beyond such security the land might spit him off like a seed, the sky might suck him up into itself.

‘Ridiculous!’ erupted the Dancing Master in a fit of temper. ‘It is much too far away! This is not in my contract!’

West, West, West. They did nothing but drive West. He thought they would eventually run into the sun.

‘*Speriamo che conviene!*’ muttered the little man (loosely: ‘This’d better be worth it!’).

The lawyer nodded sympathetically.

They topped the crest of another ridge, identical to the last hundred. But now the lawyer braked sharply, the road degenerating into a cracked thread of asphalt. The Cadillac shuddered like a frightened horse. At any moment it seemed the road would end, sputtering out into a dead end of grass.

Instead, below them lay the Smoky Hill River Valley. In the middle of the scene, planted among farms with tall silos, were the trees of Possom Trot.

No more than a couple of miles away, the town was actually a village. It was composed of two church steeples, one clock-tower without a cross, a strip of stone storefronts—as bleached as post-rock fenceposts—a few rectangular, tree-shaded blocks of insignificant houses, one grain elevator, one water tower, one freight depot (the tracks ran along Commercial Street).

In the heart of it rose a crenellated, sand-coloured mansion.

Blake first pointed out the Prairie Dog County Courthouse (the clock-tower without a cross).

‘As you see, Vandermark house is just as large,’ a note of disapproval in the lawyer’s voice. ‘Same architect did them, 1891.’

The Dancing Master came alive. As they made their approach, he even found the signboards amusing: ‘Green River Ordinance Enforced’ ‘Your Money Is With Friends At the Farmers & Drovers’ ‘Methodist Church—2 Blocks Left’ ‘If You Lived in Possom Trot You’d Be Home Now.’

‘Oh, come now,’ Lothar brandished a diminutive, manicured hand at the scene. ‘I do not think such a place can really exist.’

Turning onto Commercial Street, the Cadillac slowed to a processional, bricks lapping like water under the tyres. Blake took his eyes off the street, which was empty, and laid them accusingly on the Dancing Master.

The lawyer adjusted his sun visor and guarded his words. A late afternoon sun had come down to blind them.

‘Possie you should prepare yourself for.’ Blake’s summation struck a sombre note. ‘She’s a trifle wild, a little spoiled. However, as the expression goes, she’s one hundred per cent woman.’

Lothar did prepare himself. He touched his tie, smoothed his hair, tugged at his suit. If he’d been alone he would have eagerly licked his fingers and brushed them cat-like over his cheeks.

Despite his years of studied indifference, he couldn’t resist the thrill of adventure stirring in his flesh. In his head hung the image of a glittering *jeune fille*, a slender Gigi giggling to him timorous as a brook.

They were stopping. The sun was transforming the mansion into golden stone.

Immediately, the Dancing Master shrugged off the land he’d just been brought through, that which held him even yet, enfolded in its great tawny paws. He dismissed the High Plains with a toss of raven curls.

Surely, at last, he had arrived.

• **HOMECOMING NEWS** •

That week's edition of the *Record* heralded the High School's Homecoming football victory—the Possom Trot Redskins over the Russell Springs Cavaliers (a pyrrhic victory, 3-0, with five boys sidelined for injuries).

On the back page, among the obituaries and livestock market reports, the newspaper also announced the arrival of the Dancing Master.

WE ARE WELCOMING A NEWCOMER TO TOWN THIS WEEK. MR LOTHAR, FORMERLY OF NAPLES, ITALY, ARRIVED HERE LAST SATURDAY FROM NEW YORK CITY.

MR LOTHAR IS AN INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN DANCER. HE STUDIED WITH THE GREAT MARANO IN NAPLES. HE IS IN POSSOM TROT AS DANCE INSTRUCTOR TO MISS POSSIE VICTORIA VANDERMARK.

LOTHAR HAS PERFORMED WITH SEVERAL EUROPEAN BALLET COMPANIES. RECENTLY, HE HAS BEEN A DANCE TEACHER IN NEW YORK CITY.

LOTHAR RESIDES IN THE WEAVER HOTEL.

· *Afternoon of the Faun* ·

For this first lesson he would never forget her choice of a skin-tight navy-blue body stocking. To him she was a lurid blob.

‘I’m still in mourning,’ she squeaked when he stared at her in disbelief. He watched dismayed as she strove to arch her huge feet on tiptoe.

‘Aren’t we going to begin soon?’ she pleaded, oceanic eyes washing over him. He did feel at sea.

Yet, for now at least, the girl loomed reasonably quiet. A shaft of morning light seemed to pin her still on the studio floor—no more jerking or quivering or bear-like shambling.

Lothar took advantage of the blessed hiatus to reassure himself; to breathe deeply, to count to ten, to mumble a scrap of Dante.

As well, he attempted his first smile of the day. It fizzled.

Lothar himself, for this auspicious occasion, had taken refuge in his oldest tights and jersey. They gave him courage.

As an added precaution, he continued his sly backward inching. So far, in ten minutes he’d managed deftly to creep a good yard away from her.

Frankly, he was still uncertain of how to go about touching her. Also, he did not yet wish to know whether or not his head actually cleared her shoulder. Such details could wait.

‘Let’s do something, please. This is driving me crazy!’ Trying to twirl, the girl almost fell down.

‘Patience, dear, let Mr Lothar think.’ Behind them at the Steinway, the beady-eyed aunt sat enveloped in a Hawaiian mu-mu—lurking like a weasel in tropical flowers.

Lothar felt another spell of hysterical laughter coming on. To date he’d been able to control himself, letting go only in the seclusion of his hotel room. Last night, for example, he’d roared until the tears fell, imagining the girl as Giselle.

But this afternoon was no laughing matter. For sobriety he turned to marvel at the absolutely perfect dance floor, the new balancing rails, the grand piano, the expensive prints, the series of wall mirrors.

Lothar acknowledged that this room, so grand, warm and professional, with its high, allegorical ceiling and large windows, could be anywhere in the great world. The studio bespoke power, and neither the burly young woman nor her aunt, the guardian devil perched at the piano, could detract from such eloquence.

Shaking back his curls for emphasis, he began his opening speech prepared in advance in the bathtub.

‘Ah, yes, here we will learn well ...’ With both hands he directed their attention to his elegant haunches.

‘To begin, it goes like a baby. It is to crawl, Miss Vandermark. But later we will stand and take a step. Slowly, slowly, we will proceed.’ For speaking to the girl he chose a fatherly tone—his manner and expression somewhat warmer.

In response, Possie set herself vigorously to rubbing her flanks (some sort of exercise, he surmised), flanks indelled in his thoughts with the rest of her—her physique etched before him in a naval balloon.

To him she was like a Rococo nude, stupendous, heroic, but ultimately ridiculous.

Yet he must admit that while women in general rarely inspired him (he preferred contemplating his own form, naked), this effusive and pink creature did intrigue him. He paused at the thought of holding such a mass pliant in his arms.

But would his arms even stretch around her? He must admit the truth—her nipples were at his eye level.

Never attempt to lift her! he ruled. An old groin injury demanded some consideration.

‘May we have the music now, Mrs Dowell?’ He should deal with this aunt only when necessary, and as if she were retarded.

Other rules: He should always pretend to take this work seriously. It might also be prudent actually to teach the girl a few rudiments. He must control his temper, be obliging and yet profound—Americans took their artists bland, no garlic.

Number one, he must dance. When in doubt he should always dance. He must dance at every lesson. His dancing would tame this wild young woman! His dancing would lull the watchful eye of the duenna aunt.

Dancing was Lothar’s religion. Dancing was his only morality. Dancing was his one God. Therefore, here he’d need to guard it carefully and keep it safe from clumsy women.

But it would not be sacrilegious to fill these empty heads, the heads of these two women, with his dancing. He’d do it as easily as filling out his tights (three hankies in the crotch).

The piano stuttered to a melody. The Dancing Master dismissed it. Instead, something like Debussy fluted in his head, a sensuous anthem of virility and genius.

‘First I dance for you!’ he announced, flourishing his slippers, dimpling his buttocks.

‘Watch me, Miss Vandermark. Watch me with more than the eyes. Signorina, regard me with your heart ... That is how you will learn.’

Yes, he saw it clearly, the telltale signs in her large face. Already the fool revered him. It seemed ordained that, simple as she was, he would have no difficulty in making her do whatever he wished.

In compensation, he would wish for much.

Lothar took position in front of her, tensed for a performance, hypnotizing her to him.

He gloried in himself, his own image, where it rebounded in Possie's studio mirrors. He undulated, darkly beautiful, proud, priapean.

The aunt tapped a cold and spiritless music on the piano.

The girl stood agog, hands clasped under her plump chin.

Never mind, the Dancing Master had just been transfigured. In the magic of the moment, he became a faun, prancing forth to seduce the world.

• *Plots Have I Laid* •

Bertha sat on the toilet in the cool, clammy recess of her bungalow. She sat naked, skin excited. Nipples stood erect, sharp and raw. She stooped to her work, holding the pencil tightly in one fist.

Because she little cared for the others who slept, dreamed or tossed awake and restless, she ignored the late hour and the idea of the sleeping town.

A glass of Dr Pepper on the top of the tank skidded in bright rings, closer to the edge. Bertha dug her heels into the antiseptic glare of the floor tiles. For a momentary rest she cocked an elbow bone on the rim of the sink and straightened, hips and buttocks pressing deeper into the well of the toilet scat.

In the bathroom everything was white. Everything clean. There were no shadows or doubts, and the clarity of the place soothed her. The envelope slipped and she pinched it tighter between her knees to keep it from falling.

On the envelope she had already drawn a stage with a curtain parted. A grotesque balloon figure in a short stiff skirt held the centre of the stage; to the side bent a small skinny caricature with a long face and a huge roll of male parts barely concealed in tights. For an audience there were rows of button beads with round unseeing eyes and straight unfeeling mouths.

Below this rough sketch Bertha had written: *Lights, programmes, music, costumes, flowers,* PUBLICITY.

The little woman relaxed, shrinking into a foetal position. She began rehearsing again, speaking out loud and tapping the envelope with the pencil.

‘I’ve been thinking, dear ... Dear? ... Dear!’ She modulated her voice for different effects, listening to herself critically, for pitch and authenticity.

‘I have been thinking ... dear,’ the last word quivered with emotion, full of feeling and rising with affection. ‘Isn’t it time we began planning your recital!’

The fateful words rolled like cannon balls and Aunt Bertha smiled. The last bit was very well done indeed.

She proceeded, the rest of it down by memory.

‘You’re making such amazing progress. Don’t you think after Christmas would be a good time? People do need something in January to lighten the gloom. We’ll be sure to have a large crowd ...’

She shook her head over that. Perhaps ‘crowd’ would be frightening. Better give the boob an ‘audience’.

‘The *Record* will print our programmes. We’ll have the Garden Club help with staging - I’ve already hinted something to the ladies and they’re just thrilled. Mrs Post is so handy with things and Billy Jo Atkins draws. She’ll do the sets. Joy Dalrymple has volunteered some of her Girl Scouts as ushers - we can do them up elegantly too in red velvet dresses and white corsages.’

Bertha squeezed her bowels and winced expectantly. Nothing yet plopped into the bowl.

Ah, but she mustn't overdo it. The girl, she acknowledged, had a certain animal cunning: Possie needed great drama to be handled well.

'Now, of course you have a wonderful set of costumes already. In fact, you can wear a different one for each number, maybe build up to the white tutu since it's your favourite. Oh, yes, and what about the programme? Wouldn't five numbers be perfect? Just enough to give the town a real taste of your abilities. Five dances sound very classy to me, but Mr Lothar will know all about that for sure.'

Soap was one of the few things Bertha liked. She bought so much of it that there were bars everywhere, in drawers, in the closets, in the kitchen. With Will gone there were even bars of soap in the bed. She'd stacked several around the bathroom sink, all white and virgin.

Turning where she sat to the tap, she wetted a fresh one now in hot water and rolled it between her palms. The soap delighted her. Under the pulse of scalding water, she revelled to a sense of cunning, strength and cleanliness.

All evening long she'd been lathering and rinsing her hands. They were now a fragrant blood red.

'Brief numbers might be best. Elegant little dances with you solo in your wonderful outfits and Mr Lothar joining you for two or three. He must have his own costumes, but if not we'll just order some up from Kansas City.'

'We can bring in the string quartet from Hays - the professors there do have a darling ensemble and just beg for any chance to play. You absolutely must have a trumpet fanfare! And, oh, we'll use only white and light pastels for the lighting, for the scenery, for everything! It will be a pastel extravaganza with trumpets, violins and at the centre you and your Dancing Master ...'

Bertha howled with delight, the eye-slits screwed into sharp wrinkles.

'For a finale we'll have the Hanselchek girl, the youngest one, you know, who looks like a chipmunk, run up on stage in a little ballerina's outfit. She'll curtsy and hand you an armful of long-stemmed red roses. Won't that be stunning?'

'Goodie, goodie!' She puffed out her cheeks and rolled her shoulders in imitation of Possie.

Yes, it was well done. It would do the trick.

'And there'll be photographers. And you'll be plastered across the front page of every newspaper. And, oh, God, but you'll be sure to get all the attention you deserve ...'

Bertha keeled over holding her sides, the words sputtering off into laughter.

When the fit passed she straightened. A change flickered over her features.

'Do you believe me, you big dumb slut! Are you drooling at my words! Won't you nod your head and lift your clumsy feet!'

It was a wonderful moment for Aunt Bertha. Suddenly she sat holding reality trapped in her own two hands. Not a fantasy, not an idle dream, but raw reality. She clenched her fists to keep it near.

Aunt Bertha squeezed again. Nothing plopped.

• *Inductions Dangerous* •

In the distance, echoing out of the entrance hall, a jubilant slam of the front door marked Aunt Bertha's departure. The tomb-like resonance set the wine to shivering in Possie's glass.

But the girl herself sat very still, elbows planted on one end of the long dining room table, a sad smile frozen in her make-up.

Recital or no recital, as usual Aunt Bertha had made her feel like a creep.

Recital? But the very word was magical, if not alarming.

Alone, Possie sought to fill the monumental room with her clamouring thoughts on a recital - she tried hard to banish the image of Aunt Bertha hunched at the table tearing skin from her fingers with her teeth.

Possie felt her life pivoting, turning at the waist into another angle, another frame of mind.

A dance recital! The time had come at last to change into something else. Darker days awaited her. Invisible voices droned around her, dropping octaves lower, singing in a Russian choir.

Even through the mists of lasagne, Possie now beheld the scriptures being readied for a great event, a triumphant act of imagination.

The Dance and the Dancing Master plucked *misterioso* on her heart strings.

'He's teaching my blood to dance!' she exclaimed, exactly like Joan of Arc, pointing a fork at heaven.

It didn't really matter to her that he'd turned up middle-aged, too short and with padded balls. His legs were his masterpiece. Sometimes she thought of them as trimmed in fur, and hoofed.

'Anyway, he's not a lover,' she told the empty room. 'He's a great teacher!'

Tonight, Possie sat at the head of the imperial table, opposite Daddy's accustomed place, the spot where Daddy had choked to death on his last piece of beefsteak. This was the first time she'd dared touch the table since Daddy's death. Doing so, for her, was like visiting his grave.

Feeling loneliness like a coffin around her, Possie turned her smile from chair to chair. 'Would you like me to have a recital?' she quizzed the empty places.

No replies to her questioning look. No answering smiles. Nothing. Not even a ghostly belch.

'If I have a recital,' she asked her Daddy, 'would you come back for it?'

Silence.

At that, Possie gave up trying to ignore the plaintive squeak of Mrs Plaget's rubber tips on the kitchen linoleum. With a sigh for the laws of art and nature, she gathered up her silverware.

In the kitchen, Mrs Plaget stood bent over the sink with a pot half submerged in dishwater. She scraped angrily at a red rim of crusted sauce. Weariness made her greyer than usual.

‘What’s for dessert, Mamu?’ asked Possie.

‘You’re going to bed without any!’ It had never occurred to Mrs Plaget to count the pots, pans, dishes and cups she’d washed in a lifetime, nor to consider how many more she had yet to do before her time was up.

The pot of the moment clean, she laid it to dry with the others, dishes stacked as simply and neatly as the truth in her Protestant heart.

‘No more pumpkin pie? Not even a sliver?’ Possie handed over her own plate, quite wistful about the pie.

The old woman kept a rigid back to the girl.

‘Guess what ... Aunt Bertha says we can have a recital!’

To Possie’s great disappointment, the fateful words bogged in the slop-slop of dishwater. Even the linoleum was wet.

‘It’s supposed to be a big secret,’ she faltered. ‘But maybe we can invite Mr Lothar to dinner and surprise him?’

‘Surprise him yourself!’ Mrs Plaget drowned the plate with one gurgle. ‘And folks have been on to your “big secret” for two days now. You’ll be fixin’ that dwarf a bowl of cereal as far as I’m concerned.’

‘Dwarf? ... Who? Are you still mad at me? I’m sorry I told you to fuck off, but you’ve been such a cranky Mamu ever since Mr Lothar arrived.’

Without looking up, the old woman wiped her hands on her apron, untied its strings and draped it across the walker.

‘I’m more than angry with you, child. I’m heartsick about this nonsense. I been thinkin’ about it for these two weeks, day and night. No use!’

For an exclamation, she banged down her ring of house keys on the metal draining board. The loudest noise she’d ever made purposely in her life.

‘There! Give ‘em to Bertha! I’m goin’ up to Cawker City tomorrow on the bus. I’m gonna stay with my sister Alma until this thing’s all over and done with. Then I’ll be back down to put the pieces together again.’

Mrs Plaget, even when upset, had the calm reality of an old woman who has spent her years with the wisdom of fruit and vegetables, the philosophy of pie crusts and muffins. Her hands, which Possie loved, possessed the knowledge of ripeness and could wring a chicken’s neck with a gentle twist.

‘I was standing on this very spot when your grandfather busted something in his head and went bugs. I was here when they came down to say your mama had died at last, wasted to nothin’ from

not eatin' a thing. I'll go to my grave remembering how I found you and your dad, him with his face in his plate.'

In the middle of her sermon, Mrs Plaget was going to work on a pile of Possie's panties, baptizing them roughly in a tub of soapy water.

'For a gal who's been a member of the Women's Society for thirty years and voted Prohibition since 1936, I seen lots of carryin' on in this place. Your daddy and his loose women would have made the Devil blush. I stayed though, lookin' the other way, thinking, "They're makin' something here. Something important's happening.'"

The old woman leaned on her walker, her back to Possie; tears dripped like dishwater from her chin.

'But now I won't stay to watch it all come down. I will not take orders from Bertie Flatbottom. I won't have that fancy little man around me! ... That bus leaves at 10.20. Saddletoe's gonna fetch me down to catch it.'

She squeezed out the lemon-chiffon pair - which she had never approved of - with a sniffle.

'Come on, now, ain't you gonna try and stop me?'

Possie made no reply. In fact, she was no longer even in the kitchen.

With Mamu turned to the sink, she'd left without a word, her moon face glowing, lit up with an implacable numbness like the head of a stone saint.

Already she was climbing the back stairs.

The planet revolved at her feet. The chariot soared across the sky.

• *To the Stars Through Difficulty* •

By the time Lothar joined her for their first lunch date, Possie was looking impatiently to order, sitting bright and eager, menu in hand, scarves tangled around her like vines.

‘Royal blooded,’ he muttered. ‘But pagan.’

He eased with insinuating grace into the booth opposite her. Despite her presence, that aura of money and orgasm, the slippery plastic stung him even through the tailored seat of his English trousers.

Normally, Lothar brooded bitterly over the industrial green walls of the Igloo Café, its dirty linoleum surfaces, its crusty menus and the fly strips dangling in the windows, black with bodies.

The Igloo he had resigned himself to - he’d dined in it every day for three weeks.

Possie it was who still confounded him.

But this was their first time alone together. No silly aunt to contend with here. The opportunity was too great to lose.

He commenced by reaching for her hand.

Bernadette grabbed him instead. ‘Hiya! How’s my grumpiest customer today? Hungry, I bet.’ Bernadette shook her sharp nose at him.

‘Igloo Special is hash with two vegetables, your choice, roll and butter and jello. It’s pretty good. But ham steak with pineapple ring is best. Martha really outdone herself on that today.’

Bernadette cocked a large, 1962-waitress hip at Lothar, squinting coyly. When she nodded to Possie she opened her eyes wide and seemed to be saying ‘tip’.

‘Hash for me,’ blurted Possie, husky with longing. ‘But I want cherry pie instead of the jello. Tell Martha to give me two helpings of mashed potatoes with lots of gravy.’

Lothar freed his hand.

‘Will do ... and you, honey?’ Bernadette leaned over the table in mock conspiracy. ‘He all the time has chef’s salad and plain hamburger, no bread. No wonder he gets up on the wrong side.’

She scribbled furiously on her pad, lips pursed. For Possie, she rattled her charm bracelet; for Lothar, she hitched up her bra strap, plucking it through the shoulder of a green nylon pantsuit.

‘Not to fear, your food is near.’ She swished off, tennis shoes smacking the floor.

He began again. Long delicate fingers, dark and possessive, inched across the wet linoleum, easing like good hunters through a swamp.

He also tried to catch the girl’s eye, to force those green eyes back into a deep-end of love.

But where, oh where was the inspiration for the love words he ought to be crooning? Around him he heard only the music of clacking forks, on teeth, on plates, on the floor. The kitchen belched a recitative of pots and pans. In the next booth two farmers compared hogs.

Lothar could too vividly picture the Igloo's customers grovelling on all fours before troughs, knee-deep in their own excrement. This café offered one no hope for civilization.

'I'm feeling so physical!' Possie suddenly announced. 'Know what I do when I'm feeling like this, goosey all over? I stop and think about art or nature, even St Francis. I'm working on creating a soul. Don't you think we have to make our own?'

He touched her hand. She was trembling.

It amazed him how this female built excitement into everything. She made herself breathless over inedible food. Vulgarity was a lack of control - and so she was vulgar.

Lothar pulled gently on her fingers, making love to her largest diamond ring with his thumb.

'How is it,' he asked, 'that I am so happy to be here with you?' He stroked her with his silkiest tone.

Possie gave him a distracted giggle. 'No, it's OK, although they did have a case of food poisoning last summer.'

She smiles too much, he thought - he would break her of that in time. She is too friendly. He must teach her the beauty of disdain. A cool touch became a woman as abundant as she. Tintoretto knew that as well - his pink ladies never made one think of marshmallows.

I know for a fact, she is dreaming of me, he assured himself. She only pretends to be hungry in order to hide her true feelings ...

They were suddenly separated by the appearance of two boat-like lunch platters. Knives and forks dropped from the sky. Paper napkins fluttered soggy to the table.

'How's that for fast!' Bernadette bellowed joyously. 'Eat your heart out, McDonald's!'

Without waiting, Possie bowed her head and dug a fork into the hash.

For her, eating out was a form of communion all its own. Among others things it brought people into fellowship with each other's bodies - something very important to an only child.

Art, for that matter, she was thinking, had probably been a mealtime invention.

In the background, she heard her Dancing Master trying to purr. 'The circles under your eyes tell me you are working too much!'

Yes, she saw it clearly, written all over the Dancing Master's face, art came from specie-specific feeding, rather than from religion or sex.

Actually, Possie figured, art had first happened right after eating, when fullness made the cavemen braver, made them fonder of themselves. In that glow of self-satisfaction, any primitive homo might have been tempted to pass a little imagination as easily as gas.

‘Be patient,’ Lothar was saying. ‘Take the dancing gently and in tiny sips. Don’t gulp it, my Pussy Cat.’

In order to breathe on her, the little man had rested his elbows in puddles and lifted his rump several inches off the plastic.

Possie cocked her head at him, fork in mouth.

... After a feast of raw antelope a caveman with an extinct forehead, slightly more sensitive than his fellows, was scrawling a tribute to what lay in his belly on the walls of the den. He used warm antelope blood. His hands dripped it lavishly. The old men sat thumbing their noses at his foolishness. He was always the one who stared at the sky instead of at the ground ...

Across the way, the Dancing Master leaned back insouciantly in his booth. At the same time she detected something nuzzling her left foot. Charcoal eyes flashed at her.

In fact - and Possie thrilled at the thought - that early genius had surely seen his own uniqueness then for the first time, since uniqueness and art go hand in hand. He’d known for the first time of his own isolation. He’d seen how differently the others ate - clawing, chewing, spitting, trying to steal more, filching bones from the floor.

Possie dropped a morsel of gravy onto the tail of her best paisley scarf.

... In the rush of self discovery, her caveman was inventing eccentricity as well as art. It blew her mind.

Eating out was obviously very important.

All action came to a halt under the table.

‘Oops-a-doodle-daisy!’ Bernadette was spilling coffee into Lothar’s lap.

Lothar cursed. Bernadette chortled. In counterpoint, Possie chewed on a scrap of gristle.

Kneeling, knees popping, Bernadette went to work on the stain with a dish rag. Her hands flirted happily with his crotch.

‘Gee, honey, so sorry. I’m a mess today. Spilled a plate of scrambled eggs on a trucker during breakfast rush. Least jeans ain’t tricky like this stuff. Why, I had him wiped off in a jiffy.’

‘No, no! Get away!’ Lothar’s voice rang too sharp and high for the Igloo’s acoustics.

‘Now, now. No harm’s done. Don’t be a sour puss! Eat your salad here. I’ll just bring you another cup compliments of me.’

When they were alone, Possie searched for something consoling to say to her poor, drenched Dancing Master.

But she hadn’t yet shaken the images of naked men squatting together, balls hanging, mouths working laboriously - another figure behind them, his shadow leaping, tracing the blood-red form of an antelope on the rough stone.

Mr Lothar was such an alien image; she tried putting him in the cave too. Thick, barely prehensile fingers drew him beside the antelope. A distressed form in Lord Balhurst slacks, Pukey shoes, Di Vinci sweater.

He was a dream of evolution.

‘Hey, know what?’ Possie beamed mysteriously, like a woman who hears all about her what others never even guess. ‘Has Aunt Bertha told you about the recital?’

She’d caught him off guard, sullenly poking his salad. For him, for a noble spirit, appetite of any kind needed coaxing. In this forsaken village, in this reprehensible café, he found only gluttony and futility.

At the peculiar music in her voice, he looked up startled. The girl trapped him with her eyes. He noted again, as on several occasions in the studio, the deep, glittering light that suffused her face, emanating from the very core of her.

‘A real dance recital, here in Possom Trot!’ continued Possie. ‘She insists that we have one. It’s all set to go. All we need is your blessing.’

No, no one had said anything about a recital!

Slowly, it took meaning for him. Instead of love songs, an obscenity flitted through his thoughts, of stumbling feet and floundering arms. His penis bathed in tepid coffee.

‘Recital ... what recital? But she is joking!’

His laughter broke before he could check it - Lothar, disciple to the Great Marano, master of a provincial farce, on display with a monstrous ballerina?

On the spot, his laughter drove the stunning lights from her face. She gave him a mask of make-up.

To hide her disappointment, Possie devoured the pie in four self-destructive mouthfuls. One scoop of a tear brimmed on an eyelash.

‘She must mean in two years!’ he stammered. ‘Yes, perhaps in three years! Perhaps if we sip, sip.’

‘She says January,’ Possie’s breath was a cherry delight.

‘She is an imbecile!’ stormed the Dancing Master.

‘Guess I shouldn’t have listened to her.’ Possie dabbed a stray crumb onto a fingertip and popped it into her mouth. ‘But she was so excited about the lights and the music and my white tutu.’

Her voice cracked down to him even sadder, a goddess lamenting her own creation. The tears on her cheeks were stars.

‘Aunt Bertha talked and talked and the recital became like a grand design, like something revealed, sort of like a prophecy.’

‘More pie?’ Bernadette stood over them tonguing ham steak from a molar. She plucked up the dishes.

Possie shook her head forlornly - red hair in a sunburst against the greasy walls of the café.

‘Want a doggy bag, Mr Lothar?’ Bernadette poked the hamburger in his face.

The Dancing Master snarled.

‘I’ll work harder than ever,’ whispered Possie. ‘I’ll work and work and work. Aunt Bertha said only five little numbers. Just five. And you’d dance too ...’

‘Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat! We will talk no more of this! We won’t pay any attention to a silly old aunt, will we?’

She blushed, and the colour dazzled him.

He followed the flicker of emotion down her body - this hefty, stupid princess wanted waking with a kiss!

Possie moped over the wreckage of their lunch, suddenly feeling sorry for all cavemen and dancers. A High Plains wind blew in her ears. In her mind, her house stood starkly empty. Her Daddy was dead. The hills were too far away for help.

In desperation, she picked up the bill; he did not demur. She put down a buck for Bernadette.

‘We must become better friends,’ he murmured to her, eyeing the dollar bill. It was the first genuine murmur ever made in the Igloo Café.

‘We will spend much time together, *si*? Then we will talk again about this ... this recital.’

Possie ambled off to the cash register, to nibble dejectedly on a chocolate-covered mint.

Bernadette was already there, counting on her fingers at the till.

Lothar took advantage of the moment to slide the tip off the table and slip it into his own pocket.

Difficult as life was, it did afford him an occasional pleasure.

• *Under the Bull* •

Aunt Bertha chose her time carefully; a Sunday evening just after sundown when the sky burned rare at the horizon. The hush of an autumn Sunday pervaded the town. Most of the older people had gone to evening services; younger adults watched television; all over Possom Trot the children sat at kitchen tables doing their homework.

It was a time for secret missions, for walking cautiously through lengthening shadows to the front door of the Weaver Hotel.

As she knew she would, she found him in the lobby, the *Kansas City Star* open in his lap. He sat in a brown leather chair, which engulfed him, that had been made in St Louis almost a century before by a manufacturer smitten with the idea of brawny cattle barons who needed such thrones to rule their territories.

The chair occupied the brightest corner of a dim lobby. Above it hung a sombre oil painting of a bull—a beast invested in turn by its maker with the pride and bearing of an Italian prelate of the sixteenth century.

Of course they were alone—no other guests in the hotel, and Old Saddletoe, owner and desk clerk, would still be busy at the church (he was also custodian for the Methodists).

Lothar showed no surprise when she touched him on the shoulder. Actually, nothing had surprised the little man in nearly twenty years—except Possie, who, he swore, would startle anyone, anywhere.

Bertha took the end of the nearest couch for herself, close enough to grab him when the need arose.

Summarily her tongue shot out at him. ‘It’s Possie. I’m worried about her. Does she look well to you? Not sick or feverish?’

For too long Bertha had waited, repeating ‘patience’ to herself.

Now the time called for action—Panzer divisions to the front. And so she had donned her best dress, her sharpest jewellery, and come mid the lethargy of a Sunday evening to pin herself to the little Italian dancer. She would cut him with the flint of her eyes.

With a great show of indifference, the Dancing Master carefully folded up his newspaper and tossed it to another armchair—the ancient upholstery hissed a cloud of dust.

‘Signora, the young woman is very sensitive. She is easily aroused.’ He calmly met the challenge of Bertha’s eyes, assuring himself he’d seen worse. ‘She glows sometimes, yes. It is in the face. Perhaps she is upset now because of this absurd notion of yours about having a ...’

‘Aha!’ blurted Bertha. ‘I know exactly what you mean ...’ Suddenly, she snagged him fast, hooking a thumb into a strand of his sweater. ‘You’re saying she’s a big simple child who needs our help!’

At last, after weeks of vague hints, innuendoes dropping like dead leaves, Aunt Bertha was coming out into the open. Silently, she cursed this vain fool for forcing her hand.

‘Of course you don’t mean anything unkind,’ she showed him her teeth. ‘Isn’t she a wonderful girl, so alive and sweet? And I must agree with you, she needs a man to hold her to the mark. These farm boys are hopelessly in awe of her!’

Bertha stretched back her lower face to smile. It reminded him of someone pulling on a foreskin.

‘The child really needs more authority,’ persisted the little woman. ‘Someone like her father ...’

He sat idly unmoved, not even an eyebrow rustled.

‘A man like you, Mr Lothar. Yes indeed, like you yourself.’

The dismal lobby, the hard-natured woman beside him, such kept the Dancing Master from clapping his hands in triumph.

Instead, he managed to give her his most charming expression, worldly and melancholy. ‘You are very kind ... I am nothing here. She is everything. How can I expect to ...’

‘Don’t play games with me!’ Whispering ferociously, Bertha leaned nearer. ‘You’re doing everything you can think of! And she is beginning to care for you. A woman knows.’

Her tone angered him, frightened him, yet also made him feel the excitement of a conspiracy. He too leaned closer, so that their heads almost touched.

‘What you aren’t doing enough of is lying,’ she continued.

‘You’re too honest for her. You’ve also got to be more exuberant! Try to be a little ridiculous, like she is.’

A telling moment of silence. They heard mice scurrying behind the front desk. The stairs creaked with ghost feet returning to their rooms above.

Bertha eased up a little. ‘You see, what she really wants is not only to escape, but to escape with a few chosen followers in tow—like you and me for instance. So if we want to keep her, we’d better play along. Of course, that’s also in her own best interests.’

The Dancing Master was distinctly uncomfortable now. No sure defence came to mind. Again he felt the bitterness of being a stranger, a discoverer in an unknown land where tribal customs were cherished in secret.

He could do little more on such a continent than put one foot gingerly before the other—his legs wouldn’t carry him here as well as they had in Italy or New York. Too much room here, too vast a theatre for a poor dancer who feared losing his part.

Temporarily, he saw no alternative but to accept this woman as an ally.

He cleared his throat. ‘I am thinking that we both do know how clumsy she is. There is no hope of her ever mastering the dance. What I do, what we do, it is a joke.’

He lowered his voice. I, also say, if it were not for her uniqueness ... and for the attractive salary ...’ Lothar paused long enough to impress her with his candour. ‘If not for such considerations, I would not be here now.’

Aunt Bertha gurgled with delight. The battle at last had been joined.

‘Now don’t be too harsh,’ she simpered. ‘The child has great sensitivity; a girl of her size rarely has that. Despite all that loose flesh she manages to move with an intriguing energy.’

Bertha tried licking her lips seductively, snaking a vein over cracked skin.

‘Possie’s struggle to do something with herself is inspiring. Give her credit for that!’ Bertha opened her lids as far as possible, flashing her tiny eyeballs like lightbulbs. ‘In fact, I think the beauty of her effort is heroic. It’s a model for us all!’

With great excitement, the little woman was coming to the point. She pushed on, fixing him in place by laying a hand on his knees—bitten nails digging into trouser cloth for emphasis. She wondered at the silly thrill of gripping his flesh for the first time; but business and pleasure were not to be mixed.

‘In fact, I want Possom Trot to share in that. Surely you agree that the people here need such lessons desperately. We are very untaught. We need the beautiful here, like they need religion in Africa.’

A chill dropped through the air of the lobby. It fell on the murky surfaces of the worn chairs and sofas. Neither dust nor musty shadow dispelled it. To Lothar it felt as if a malignant force were ringing him in, creeping towards him inch by inch.

The situation was now ice clear.

He began politely. ‘Possie, do not mistake me, is already dear to me ... Certainly I will try to be more enthusiastic. I am honoured that you think I would be a good man for her. I want that too. I want that very much. But ...’

The Dancing Master rose an inch higher in his cattle baron’s chair. His voice stiffened.

‘No! I will have nothing to do with a recital. It would be a sacrilege. It would be farce!’

Bertha was mildly surprised; he was not quite the victim she’d pictured. As he talked she saw him changing into a bothersome, bristling little beast.

‘But they don’t laugh at the Vandermarks here,’ she said.

‘That is not my meaning,’ he persisted. ‘I tell you that no one I am connected with may mock the dance. It is my life!’

If Bertha had believed in nobility, she might have believed his speech. As it was, she grunted in his face.

‘Don’t give me that! You’d better do some thinking. What does all of that mean? Possie needs something to focus on, and right now. This recital is the very thing. It would also be a nice little sacrifice on your part ... to prove how you feel.’

Bertha folded her hands as if to say, ‘Now it’s your turn—top that.’

Her wiry, excited hands fascinated him. They were suddenly brutal and selfish hands, and evil in a peculiar way. They were the hands of a witch.

‘Being here is enough sacrifice, I think,’ he said. ‘I repeat, no recital. No public demonstration of the dance. Not by her.’

‘Don’t waste time worrying about her waking up to the truth!’ Bertha was attacking him now, antagonism clear in the tensed cords of her neck. ‘She’s blind to the absurd. That’s why we absolutely must keep her dancing. She’ll wander on to something else if we don’t, something worse. She’s already done college, horses, painting, farm boys. She needs to settle down.’

‘No!’ The little man waved a hand in dismissal. ‘It would be a sin. I will court in another way.’

He attempted the levity of a wink—it died in the chill.

Vice-like fingers were squeezing his thigh—dangerously high.

‘I’m not so sure you have a choice, she said sweetly. ‘Think first about our dear pink Possie. Think about land and money—don’t protest, we’re adults. Think about your future. Are you young enough to begin again? Above all,’ and here her voice sank rich with tenderness, ‘think that if the girl loses her faith in the dancing, you’ll be packing your bags on the very same day.’

Bertha gloried in the power of her words.

‘For sure, don’t doubt for a minute that a little dose of reality from Aunt B wouldn’t be enough to shake anyone’s faith in anything!’

With a jerk he brushed her hand away.

She laughed. ‘I do want that recital.’

To gather up her purse from the floor, she sprang at him as if to peck him with a sharp instrument.

‘Don’t say another word! Don’t you make an enemy out of me, my friend ... Tomorrow afternoon we should begin in earnest. Wouldn’t *Valse Triste* be a lovely number?’

Suddenly she was gone, sweeping off in a blast of Commercial Street air. The bull rattled against the wall overhead. Dust settled in the lobby.

The Dancing Master sank with a groan into the leather. He felt as if he’d just lost a piece of his own being.

· *Things That Go Bump* ·

At a near run, Bertha made it back down Commercial Street in less than five minutes. But instead of returning to her own bungalow door, she darted across to the shadows of the great house. She prowled through the piles of dead leaves, concealing herself.

At the top of the front steps she looked quickly in both directions. No one must see her touching the heavy double doors, how her desire for those wood carvings—flowers and votive sheep and cheerful guardians—became obscene when she laid hands upon them.

For a lifetime she had stood here eager for admittance, on this very spot, at these portals, begging to be let in, by her cousins first, then Sister, then Mat, now Possie.

But no more! She delighted in the truth.

Even in the darkness, it took her but a moment to sort through the heavy ring of keys—Mrs Plaget's keys. Now *her* keys!

No shuffling wait on the front steps now. No more! Never again!

Bertha giggled softly at the memory of how easy it had been to get hold of them, only a few hours before, in fact— 'Dear, now that Dorothea's gone why don't I use her keys, wouldn't that be convenient for our lessons and such'—and without a murmur the empty-headed idjit had turned over these wondrous instruments of power.

The front door key slipped into the lock with a sigh of recognition. Bertha wiggled with expectation. This would be her first time through!

A lover's motion in the door's entrails and the locks tumbled. The doors fell open. She was in.

Softly she slipped off her shoes. The great house, dark and warm, welcomed her naked feet.

Bertha skated across the marble floor of the entrance hall. She crept slinky as a cat over the heavy carpets in the living room.

The breath of the house caressed her. She moved, luxuriating in it, feeling her way, loving the darkness, seeing through it easily, knowing by heart the position, colour, shape of everything in it.

She used her fingers like eyes. Gliding to the living room walls she plucked at the wallpaper; it had strings to her fingers, walls musical as harps. She played their music. She soothed the paintings and etchings, fondled the gilded frames. To her, the feel of tables and chairs was that of clear water. Whenever she came to something small, a silver dish or crystal bowl or china figurine, she clutched up the object and rubbed it against her hair. Electricity sparked wherever she made contact.

Before the giant fireplace she stretched out flat on the French sofa. She embraced herself, sang coos of pleasure to herself.

Only the thumping and tramping of feet overhead remained to remind her that she merely haunted the living room—of how the rest of the house, body and soul, belonged to that dancer.

‘I hate you, bitch!’ groaned Aunt Bertha. She tossed in the heat of her hatred, thinking too of how firm the Dancing Master’s flesh was to the touch, of how the girl upstairs would in the end have that firm body as well.

Slit eyes were wolf-yellow in the darkness. Fingers flashed like fangs, snapping at nothing.

‘God help me but I will have my share too!’ Bertha hissed it into the very face of the house. ‘I’ll take it all and see her screaming mad in the ruins!’

Exhausted, Aunt Bertha collapsed small and lumpy into the cushions.

But at the first sound of feet on the stairs, feet falling like boulders, Bertha froze with a snarl.

Big feet slapped the stairs in a run. Size 12 soles sucked on the marble of the entrance hall floor.

Bertha shrank deep into billows of French upholstery.

Possie came to stand like an uncertain child at the threshold of the living room, as if waiting for the adults to tell her to enter.

Bertha knew how the massive face would be working. Thoughts would be flying pell-mell through the caverns of that monster’s head.

She needed no light to see the wavering fire of the girl’s body. The girl glowed, nipples blazing. Below the round tummy the ruby fur between the legs glistened.

Bertha held still, inanimate as a piece of furniture, invisible as lemon oil on wood.

The naked girl shambled through the room, unconscious of darkness, blinded still by the lights of the studio, by the whirl of Degas’ ballerinas.

Bertha also heard her raving. Heard the breasts heaving, the sweat trickling, the make-up melting into pools as the girl limped by.

Possie was saying, ‘Daddy, it’s harder than you said it would be. I work and work. None of you told the truth!’

Like that she wandered on into the dining room.

In another moment, coming out of the depths of the house, Aunt Bertha detected the inhuman drone of the refrigerator compressor, the gas-chamber cough of a beer can opening, the elastic slap of lips.

‘The animal feeds itself!’ Bertha tittered. Softly, softly.

At peace, she remained where she was. It was, after all, a very comfortable spot for lying in wait.

· *Con Tutti* ·

The place belonged to men. The thrill of a dangerous pack, content with itself, held sway. In Albert's Bar the men of Possom Trot could be again a tribe of little boys, untouched by feminine hands.

The little man in the parka understood some of this. Animals! he sneered at them—quite to himself.

Even on a Monday night Albert's Bar did a good business after nine. A group of men stood around the pool table in the back. Not an empty spot remained at the counter; the booths, too dim for inspection, were also occupied—a low rumble of male voices came out of the dark. The jukebox played continuously.

The Dancing Master clung to the comfort of his new parka, which he'd bought that very afternoon at the Bon Marché, the one and only would-be department store in town. The heavy, metallic-coloured coat was three sizes too large for him (he had refused one from the Boy's Department). It enfolded him like a bedspread.

He stood at the bar with the hood pulled up over his head. His face under the hood was a long, mysterious shadow, trimmed in fake fur. Only his emperor's nose poked forth.

On all sides, tall men towered close.

Lothar was not quite sure why he should find himself in this lowly, raucous bar-room. Certainly it seemed a perverse whim. He didn't even like beer.

But tonight, as Saddletoe limped through the hotel lobby, passing as usual without a word, he'd suddenly been impelled to put down his newspaper and ask if he could go along to the bar.

The old man had waved him on with a gruff 'Please yourself, I ain't your keeper.'

Could it be that he was lonesome? No, for years Lothar had steeled himself to the discipline of solitude. Perhaps he'd tired of women, of weeks and weeks of nothing but strange and impossible women. Perhaps he was in need of some male company?

The scene before him, as reflected in the mirror over the bar, fascinated him. It was a panorama of primitive life. He stood surrounded by what he'd never known before, what he'd thought to be long dead. In all, it reminded him of a painting he'd once seen, of a cowled monk encircled by savages, innocence bedaubed with paint and humbled to the rule of Rome.

In response, Lothar kept his back straight, his stomach flexed for action. He stared cautiously down at his own glass of beer.

'Say,' whooped a kid at the end of the bar. 'Who's that Eyetalian fella, the little guy Possie's got hangin' around?' The kid wallowed in spilled beer.

The line of drinking men stood quiet.

The Dancing Master nonchalantly sipped his beer, the parka hood hiding his quickly darting eyes.

Although the men in Albert's Bar voted for the ancient covenant of peace among themselves, they did enjoy an occasional eruption of temper, a touch of male passion to set the teeth on edge and raise the hackles on the back. Although it was almost always orderly at Albert's, the customers secretly revered a good brawl.

Albert pouted over the Dancing Master. 'Here, Mr Lothar. It's on the house. We ain't all like that.' The bartender pushed forward another dripping glass and peered delightedly at the little man.

He was a fat, pear-shaped bartender, whose voice sometimes hit high C.

An elbow nudged Lothar in the ribs. 'Be polite, damn it.' It was Saddletoe's voice, as hard as his elbow. 'He likes you and he's a friend of mine. You don't gotta act like you just swallowed a pin.'

'Oh, I'm so excited about the recital!' Albert beamed at the ceiling. 'I can't wait!'

A ripple effect down the bar, the topic was of general interest.

'Yep,' said one. 'That's what the wife says, too.'

'The womenfolk got committees comin' out their asses,' commented another.

'They're already fightin' over who's gonna do what. Ain't had a show like this since Mat's whores came through.'

'Just like old Vandermark to claim those women were dancers.'

'I saw 'em running around the football field in their undies!'

'Bullshit, those were the girls' costumes, dummy!' Saddletoe craned his emaciated neck to chastise the speakers. 'You boys wouldn't know the real thing if you had it. Madame Eglantine ain't no everyday whore!'

The Dancing Master silently mocked this rough crowd and thought of children listening to fairy tales. He still found the ingenuous to be amusing.

Up and down the length of the bar the men huddled in groups. A careful listener would have caught snatches of their conversation, bits and pieces of talk that summed up their lives.

But Lothar listened only to his own counsel. He reacted with interest only when the girl's name came drifting from out of the dark— 'Possie, Possie, Possie.' Sometimes he thought he heard it from a score of throats. Vandermark land, Vandermark oil, Vandermark money.

He perceived that the men were getting drunk, running wild and reverential.

'Possie, Possie, Possie,' he heard. They seemed to be singing her name to him in a bass chorus.

He turned with a swagger to the line of drinkers, studying their features and manners. How, he wondered, did such men come to be?

Down the line of drinking men something suddenly pulled tight. Even the Dancing Master caught it, lost as he was in cultural anthropology.

‘Don’t mess with me, mother fucker!’ The words tingled in the air like piano notes. Heads turned in the gloom—Lothar’s too.

‘Boys!’ Albert called to them like a lover. ‘Ease it down ...’ And there was quiet again. The dullness of peace again.

‘Hell,’ thundered Old Saddletoe. ‘Dancers is dancers to me. Long as they don’t fall down or is deformed I can’t say it makes much difference. When I was a boy folks danced in barns, got drunk, had themselves a fine time. We didn’t know there was any other way of dancing.’

Again the Dancing Master felt those invisible circles tightening around him. He saw how the men toted the girl on high, carried her on their husky shoulders. The dance they waved like a totem.

‘What the fuck’s a dance recital is what I want to know!’ The youngster at the end of the bar hooted. ‘Hardly sounds like something tor a man to be caught doin’.’

Albert pushed another beer towards Lothar, lisping sympathetically.

The Dancing Master gulped at the draft. His buttocks taut—legs bulging beneath the trousers, calves bunched in tight, professional knots—he rolled up on his toes and dismissed them all with a wave of the hand. He assumed it to be the grandest gesture these men would ever see.

‘There is not any dance recital!’ he announced, trying to be heard above Dolly Parton. ‘No such thing exists! It will not happen here!’

His accent made the bar-room pause, from front door to pool table.

‘No, no thearrrr eez none such ting. Eat wont happen ear.’ The mimicry came from the darkness—polyphonal laughter echoed to the tin ceiling.

‘No recital? No dancing?’ Albert sounded crushed.

‘That ain’t what we been hearing, son.’ Saddletoe grinned, a bald and wrinkled Mephistopheles.

Lothar refused to answer. He wouldn’t be caught arguing with these ignorant men. He would not have peasants drawing forth his soul for inspection. There was no need for justification. For that he had spent too many years perfecting himself.

But beneath the parka hood—again—the twitching lip, the darkening eye. The aunt drew up forces on his left. The town watched on his right. Before them all lay Possier, like a virgin territory.

‘You mean to say she won’t let us see her do it?’ Albert blinked at him in dismay. ‘You really aren’t gonna dance?’

Lothar shook his nose, but gave the fat man a blessing with his fingers—he must be politic with these bumpkins. It was becoming a dangerous game he played. He saw himself as Paris among the Greeks, come to steal their Helen.

Something coarse brushed the Dancing Master’s hand. Something hard and belligerent crept at his nerves. His skin took the chill of cold beer, the gold-bright beer that glittered all around him.

It seemed that the earth itself, the land he feared, had shouldered its way into the bar-room. It came as a sensation of wind, as a constant force coming after him.

Lothar threw back his head, glowering inside the parka hood. He put a brave face to the awesome sounds and scenery.

‘I’ll bust the son of a bitch who says one more damn thing about the Vandermarks!’ The voice of a young bull raged in a flash from somewhere behind Lothar.

That bellow obliterated the jukebox wail. It made them all listen.

‘Franklin, Franklin, Franklin.’ The name chorused down the bar.

‘You best be moving on, Mr Lothar ...’ Albert squealed to him.

Behind the bar, the fat man was hopping from one ham to another, humpty-dumptying with a baseball bat in his hands.

‘Yep, I’d advise gettin’ your ass in gear,’ drawled Saddletoe.

The earth heaved. Lothar heard it for real, like a warrior’s howl it was, like a snapping of stone jaws.

A hand slammed down on his shoulder. Looking up into the mirror, startled, he looked directly into the face of a handsome young man.

Lothar tried to recall if his underwear were clean.

The hand jerked him round in a pirouette. No mirror now to shield him. He was trapped, point blank, chest high to a giant.

He licked his lips, thinking of nothing, a blank for a brain. He did try to stand as tall as he could, stretching on his legs for the utmost nature could give him.

The other’s neck had the thickness of a stump. Blue eyes were beast blue. Blond hair, Nazi blond. Skin the colour of, texture of, sandstone.

It occurred to the Dancing Master to smirk. To put as much disdain, as much of the old, better world as he might, into a twist of his lip.

The hand ascended, became a fist in mid-air, knuckles riveted in place like iron bolts.

As the blow fell, Lothar ducked. The air above zinged as if a missile had just blasted through it.

Another blow rammed into his stomach. The parka folded up like a sleeping bag.

But then, as if in answer to prayer, a rush of determined bodies swirled in. To the beating of a baseball bat on a bar counter top, a curtain of men swept across the scene of Albert’s Bar.

In the same step, perfect syncopation, Saddletoe snatched a handful of parka and dragged it unceremoniously through the crowd. The Dancing Master was hustled dazed and gagging out into the first snowfall of the year.

‘Whewee, little fella, whistled the old man. ‘Much more of that and you wouldn’t be worth a popcorn fart as a dancer!’

· RECITAL NEWS ·

For its special Thanksgiving issue, the *Record* superimposed a drawing of a turkey, in pale orange ink over the entirety of its front page. In spite of the turkey, much of the news remained legible, including the following:

AN EVENING OF CLASSICAL DANCE WILL BE HELD FOR THE PUBLIC ON JANUARY 11 AT 7.30 P.M. IN VANDERMARK AUDITORIUM, POSSOM TROT. THE PERFORMANCE WILL MARK THE DEBUT OF MISS POSSIE VICTORIA VANDERMARK.

PERFORMING WITH MISS VANDERMARK WILL BE HER BALLET INSTRUCTOR, MR LOTHAR OF NAPLES, ITALY.

THERE WILL BE NO CHARGE FOR THE PROGRAMME.

THE PROGRAMME IS TO CONSIST OF FIVE DANCE NUMBERS. THEY ARE: *LA BELLE JEUNE FILLE* BY JEAN CLAUDE ORGANIE; *TERPSICHORE* BY SIR ETHELRED SMALL-PARTS; *LA VALSE TRISTE* BY HARY SMITH; AND *TROJAN WOMAN* BY DIMITRI POPUROKOV.

THE LAST NUMBER TO BE PRESENTED IS ENTITLED *HIGH PLAINS BLAST*. IT IS WRITTEN AND CHOREOGRAPHED BY MISS VANDERMARK HERSELF.

MEMBERS OF THE VANDERMARK RECITAL PLANNING COMMITTEE ARE MESDAMES EMILY POST, ETHEL HERSHBERGER, NELLY RILEY, BILLY JO ATKINS AND WILMA WAGONER. BERTHA FLATBOTTOM DOWELL IS CHAIRPERSON.

· *A Day In the Life* ·

As she smeared on her make-up, Possie hummed ‘Home On the Range’. She hummed the tune repeatedly because it was taking her quite some time this morning to create an interesting face.

Although she’d not lost much weight, the flesh in the looking-glass looked to her to be shrinking under the mask of bright colours. The eyes loomed larger.

Still, her cheeks remained full, her dimples held, her chin was soft and round. Her face these days naturally shone brighter, more like the moon than ever.

Behind her on the desk were the oily dishes left from breakfast—sent up from the Igloo. A sprinkling of crumbs graced her dressing table, among the open tubes and jars, mixing with the thin paste of old powder.

Possie and the dressing table smelled of the same powerful perfume, partly of Parisian origin, partly Igloo.

The kimono fell to the side. She stepped naked to the bed. Morning light glanced off her side, flushing the room with a soft pink glow. Her breasts swayed pendulously when she stooped to step into the dress.

This was her red-dress day—she’d known so immediately upon opening her eyes and stretching out of her sleep. A red-dress winter day.

She chose the heavy tweed. ‘Like a hair shirt she thought, wiggling and shivering. When the material scraped across her bare skin it was like lying naked in tall grass.

Blue and white scarves encircled her throat, gathered in a loose knot and hanging down past her knees. She peered into the mirror, adjusting them, also adding a touch more rouge to glorify the red of her face.

Jewellery piled before her in gaudy heaps. She picked through it, her fingers sorting out what glimmered best for a red-dress winter day.

She draped a gold chain twice around her neck. Three gold bracelets coiled on each arm—snakes biting their golden tails. From her ears dangled enormous gold loops. The gold ring, imprinted with the head of a Roman goddess, had been bestowed on Grandmother by Grandfather at the time of Daddy’s birth—it she kissed before slipping it on.

When she held up her arms; clank, tinkle. Turning, she glittered profusely, at ear, throat, wrist and finger.

Knee-high red leather boots, red dress, red hair simmering—what a war she was of cool gold and hot red.

The full-length mink coat tickled her in all the right places, secret spots where she also liked to be kissed. The fur hung on her, sleek and singing.

Possie crouched. She grrred. She shimmied her shoulders and knew she was ready.

A clear and fresh world waited for her outside the house. First thing, she noted how the snow was already melting.

‘Not much of a storm,’ she mourned, giving the back door a violent slam—no one left now to scold her for being naughty.

Seen from the back, her house bore the same solidity as from the front—the back door and porch were no less accessible. The house never relaxed an angle or eased at a corner. The stones reared up straight and severe—hard post-rock walls.

Her eyes, jade stones themselves in winter light, glared at the imposing pile without a trace of affection.

Not even the deserted tennis court or empty swimming pool, hidden behind the redwood fence, brought cheer. The gazebo and the hard rings of frozen flower beds were mere stage props. She didn’t give a thought to remembrances of summer nights past, evenings of love and orgasms when locusts and crickets kept time, and the mosquitoes bit like lovers.

Possie drove off from it all with a faithless wave of the hand, off in a blur of crimson, gold, purring fur and Jaguar.

On Commercial Street, Daddy’s bank flashed the time and temperature at her—8.45 of a Sunday morning, 37 degrees and all was well.

Turning to the Weaver as she passed, she blessed the Dancing Master’s window, thinking that they really ought to trim it with flashing lights and a neon crown.

The Igloo Cafe also caught her eye, steaming itself like a plate of pancakes. She fought back the urge to stop in for another breakfast.

At the Court House corner she turned right, the Sunday morning emptiness of the building giving it more dignity than it deserved.

The Court House irritated her. It looked as blank and stupid as her own house, grand as her own and as lifeless.

‘Bet no one ever choked to death on beefsteak in you,’ she told the building. ‘And no one ever died of cancer in you!’ She drove by it as a totally useless thing, a place that had worn out its purpose.

‘Oh, Daddy, but you were a shameful lawyer!’

At the edge of Possom Trot were her mills and the Schindlers’ gas station. Then one more row of wooden houses—paint peeling, storm cellar doors looking like tombs out back, clotheslines bucking, trash burners spilling, elms terminal.

Such to her was the last defence of civilization.

The boundary of the town was indisputable, as if an invisible ribbon were tying human pursuits together and allowing none of it to creep beyond—no court houses or utility poles or trash burners permitted. She yearned to reach and cross that border. Crossing over into open country was a great exhilaration.

In preparation she rolled down the windows.

Suddenly free of Possom Trot, Possie jammed her foot down on the gas pedal and screamed. She raced down the county highway, grinning at the bumps, stone posts flashing by.

‘Speed!’ she squealed and held her knees clenched together.

Scarves whipped at the flanks of the Jaguar. Gold flashed. Green eyes transfigured the day.

As usual, the people knew Possie was on her way up into the hills. They knew too that it was a secret, where she went, why she went, what she did when she went.

Hiding upstairs in the great house, Aunt Bertha had peeped down at the girl as the car roared out of the driveway. She’d pressed her ugly face deep into the lace of Vandermark curtains, biting the delicate wands, teeth grinding. She was in Dead-Sister’s bedroom, wrapped in Dead-Sister’s nightgown.

At the Igloo, Bernadette wiped a hand on her ass—both sticky with syrup—and went giggly at the sound of the Jaguar passing down Commercial Street.

‘There she goes!’ said one of the truckers.

Albert, mouth full of hashbrowns, nodded. He rubbed a cherub’s fist in the steam of the cafes plate-glass window, making a hole for reviewing the spectacle.

Across the street, Saddletoe paused at the front door of the lobby, shovel in hand.

‘That’s right, girl,’ he wheezed. ‘Make ‘em pant.’

Old Saddletoe patted the shovel blade into slush, thinking that if he were twenty years younger and had a cock as hard as a shovel handle she wouldn’t be roaming off like a spooked filly.

Upstairs, the rumble of the powerful engine brought the Dancing Master stumbling to the window.

He had been doing his exercises. His arms ought to have been rigid in the air, his stomach sucked up tight, his thighs rippling—but at sight of her running off into the sunlight he caved in with a groan.

‘Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat! Why do you never stop and take me away in your beautiful car!’ For as long as possible he watched her passage, pressing himself against the frosted glass—stung to the quick, and all for her.

On the steps of the Methodist Church, Reverend Howard Sanders clutched his Bible and waved timidly as she passed. As often before, he tasked himself to lure that woman back into the fold.

The church needed a new roof.

Instead of rich parishioners, he ought to be thinking of his sermon. The topic for that morning lay tangled on his tongue. He knew, too, that it would not be any better by the time the sanctuary filled, pew after pew of upturned Christian faces holding him captive.

Actually, the Reverend was rather relieved that Possie Victoria Vandermark did not come to stare at him in the Possom Trot United Methodist Church.

‘That’s her ...’ Farmer Lacey told his family. Franklin stared bitterly at the cherries on the kitchen oilcloth. His mother merely shifted the phone receiver to the other ear, weary of listening to Miss Schmidtke.

‘Possie’s out for her Sunday morning,’ she reported.

The people of Prairie Dog County were now on the alert—Possie was vanishing off into her own empty rangeland. Not one of them really wished to follow her, not even Franklin. The people let the mystery be. The warning was clear. What she did and where she went was none of their business.

Old Mrs Laterneau, for example, who was senile and lived alone in a ragged house beyond the Smoky Hill River, would stand watch every Sunday morning at her front door. When the girl charged past, the old woman crossed herself reverently.

Possie left them all as fast as she could. The car ripped out the morning, raised the dust, went trailing long hairs of prairie grass.

Possie hummed ‘Home On the Range’, the world in her wake.

· *The Dancing Ground* ·

Possie parked the car on top of a rise. A few steps more, her coat brushing through grass—fur and grass whistling together like old friends—and the hillside fell away abruptly into a shallow, round basin.

The floor of the basin, which lay so flat that it might have been manufactured, appeared relatively small from the top of the rim. From the floor, however, the view opened out and the true size of the sink became clear.

It was a natural area almost half a mile in circumference. Her great-grandfather on first seeing it had named it Joseph's Well.

In the centre of Joseph's Well, catching the eye immediately, stood three columns of naked chalk outcropping. They in turn had been named by Possie, in her childhood. 'Pillar of Fire' rose to more than thirty feet—the depth of the basin itself. 'Cobra Rock serpentine and massed with a thick hood of chalk, was slightly shorter. 'Lot's Wife', her favourite of the three, had lost its top long before and stood truncated, twenty feet high, surrounded by its own weathered pieces.

The columns were supported by a low pedestal of outcropping, fanning out a few yards from the base of the columns. The snow had melted away, and it could be seen clearly that on all sides of the chalk encroached an empire of Buffalo and Spirit grass, Spanish Sword and tumbleweeds.

First, Possie went to stand between the pillars. This was a tradition for her. The spot important because there the wind wafted up in a strong current, like smoke in a chimney.

She stretched her arms to their limits; fingertips grazed the sides of Cobra Rock and Lot's Wife. Pillar of Fire needed longer arms than hers to reach.

Possie's hands knew the nature of chalk. She knew how the sea raised it, how the wind eroded it, how the sun turned it salmon-pink at dusk.

Chalk dust on her palms. Wind like a voice of the ancient sea itself. Her green eyes closed, eclipsing her memory of the sea. She swung her head in a slow circle.

As a child she had ridden her pony across the low contours of the sky, alone, coming to this place to play—running free, whooping, chasing herself around the chalk, screaming out her own name and hearing it, her own sound, repeating in the wind between the columns, going up like an offering.

Through the years she had learned here the telling of time. The shifting shades of daytime, the coming of night, the earth turning towards a different season. The sky blew through her skin here, making it invisible. Here she had learned her mechanisms of pulse and beat, the ticking and throb that made her first an animal and then a female.

Living exposed in Joseph's Well, time had come up to her like a wild beast and let her touch it.

In the winter the sky lowered and the hills were harder, bloated with frost; grey clouds and mist, primordial sunshine, the earth numb and impassive. Spring would swell around her with the magnitude of a great revolution, the wild flowers shocking her eyes into submission. Then the summer stormed in, cracking with lightning, heavens splitting, a time foaming on the banks of ominous clouds. Summer blistered her, held her in its lazy blood, made her listen to the grass

whimpering hysterical, heat shimmering over a baked horizon. Then autumn, and the grasses changed to gold and purple and the last wild flowers bloomed and the sky began its new trick of breaking up like ice, dropping patches of unbearable blue on her head.

Time the place taught her. Time and humility and all about being human. Overwhelming it was, smashing her into clarity.

For her this was the seat of the High Plains. Centre of raw, untouched, mother earth. This was the true land of wind and heart-stretching openness. No evasion possible.

When Possie left the structured lines and intersections, the thorough geometry of Possom Trot, of houses, churches and court houses; when she'd left the spell of Daddy's grave behind her; when she'd vanished from the tamed country of plump cattle and wheat, from nature as made in the image of her own ancestors—then she left herself as well.

Dualities of body and soul were forgotten. The High Plains engulfed her. She was nothing else. She held no dominion over the earth, no distinction from the native grasses grasses moving as she did, a body fashioned like hers, touched as she was by sun and sky.

She knew no superiority to rough soil, never turned. She became deep, rich, black sod, aromatic and perfect for nourishing all the life that claimed her.

She no longer looked at the sky, beheld it pretty or menacing, taking it in like a camera, glancing it down for signs of other mysteries. No more of that. The sky became her own mind, scanning a continent, the crown of her own head, blushing blue light, the nucleus of a halo.

As a child she had come to Joseph's Well a unique creature, aloof in her fears—starting back from the young snakes in the spring, jumping at the rustle of jackrabbits, cowering for dread of coyotes and the giant hawks.

But now the old distinctions of being were dropped like toys. Creatures gave her no more attention than they did to those things she was part of—the grass, the wind, the sky, the earth.

From this place in the hills, Possie discovered how it was to cease being a thing so simple that it could comprehend itself. She became a thing of such heavy complexity that it no longer had a sense of self at all.

Her boots grated on the shelf of chalk. Her feet were moving.

The day warmed, although human flesh still hung cool. Above her the sun flared larger, filling the core of the sky.

Possie took a bite out of the sun, swallowed it.

The other music she now surrendered up—piping from the tomb, sad and sweet, the majestic swells from the house, of Bach and Beethoven.

Unique sounds possessed her, creeping up her veins from the soil. Hips moved to it, arms twitched to it. She began turning, without a fumble or a single graceless gesture.

Her eyes opened wide. They were too large and bright for shadows.

This was the most natural place of all for the dancing. She knew it had always been the same. The animals danced here too. The Indians, doubtless, had been drawn here year after year, a thousand years of their dancing.

Her arms spread like wings. Sunlight lived in the gold on her neck, ears, arms and fingers. Once again it enthralled her—the mystery of how she flamed as her red boots kicked, stomped and pranced like hoofs.

This was what it was all about. The amazing joy of flaming, of burning and yet remaining unconsumed.

· *Perchance to Dream* ·

But, at the end of the day, Possie dragged herself home to the other half of her life. She came unwillingly, hoping to find the house gone when she returned, for it to have disappeared magically—for a real conflagration to reduce it to ashes, for a tornado to strike while she was out and level it.

When her car lights streaked back across the house, showing it whole and untouched, she flinched as if she'd seen a corpse in the night.

Yet by the time she stumbled through the back door, probing along the wall for the light switch, she was already easing into the familiar spell of the place. It actually soothed her, although she wouldn't admit so. This house existed beyond weathering, immutable to all save her own passions.

To comfort herself, on her way through the kitchen, trailing the fur coat in one hand along the floor, she stopped to pull a six-pack of Grain Belt beer out of the fridge.

Progressing through the rooms, she drank beer and stripped. Finishing a can, she would drop it, letting the empties fall along with her clothes, helter skelter. She kicked off her boots and stockings in the sunroom; her dress lay on the dining room table; panties in Daddy's library; bra over the back of the French sofa in the living room.

Stepping to the top of the landing, she had a third empty can in hand. With a belch she tossed it over her shoulder and down to the marble floor. The can rolled in the entrance hall with the thrill of firecrackers exploding.

'Boom!' bellowed Possie. Terrorists were creeping after her through the dining room, sniffing at her dress. They were in the living room nuzzling their beards in the crotch of her panties.

'Boom!' They'd set off the sunroom with Molotov cocktails. Depth charges awaited her in the toilet bowl. Dynamite in the bedroom. 'Boom!'

But her bedroom looked the same. It had originally been the nursery and she still thought of it that way. Her trunk of toys remained beside the bed, a row of stuffed bears and dilapidated dolls sat on the shelf by the light switch, a giant Raggedy Ann lay in the unmade bed.

Possie never let them cover up her old wallpaper, the same she'd slept with all her life. The walls remained silver, laminated with a hundred royal-blue swans sailing over the surface.

Squatting at the closet door she finished another beer. The box of tutus lay open there in the mess on the floor. Four tiny satin suits sparkled at her.

Blue, green, red and white—the tutus made her heart ache. The white one she held up, pressing it against her breasts.

'So touching, how can you be so heart-breaking!'

She fingered the tutu cautiously, as if fearing it might vanish, a used-up miracle. She stroked it lovingly.

Tutu in hand, she rose on tiptoe and retrieved the hatbox from the top shelf. There, among velvet ribbons and tissue paper, the old box smelling of lilac, lay the tiara. It winked at her, an angel's sunburst for sure.

Tutu and tiara together made her grin with delight.

'Not yet ...' she whispered to them, putting them away.

Lights out, she curled up in bed and gulped the last of the Grain Belt.

For some twenty years she had slept in this same bed. From it she lay listening to the sounds of the house. From it she could see through the dark of the house, her eyes no longer sea-green or jade-hard. Her eyes now, at the moment, were beer-bright and reflecting the glory of a white tutu.

At night, in bed alone, the house sometimes frightened her. She could remember from far back hearing Daddy's cautious step coming in late, creeping sheepishly by Mother's locked door.

She recalled the wandering, drunken steps of guests, lost in the puzzle of rooms.

The night her mother first came home from the hospital, when the end showed clearly, she had lain awake all night listening to the clocks beating, alert to the groans from the sickroom, many doors opening and closing when the night crew did its duties.

Such a vast human habitation her house was, as big in its own way as the land, as great in imagination. Why did it have to stand so stiff and sombre around her? Why was it aloof and proud? Why did it appear like a stage setting, a mock heroic backdrop? She was no longer surprised that there were no answers to her questions.

Tonight she heard nothing of interest—no history fluting through the rooms, no one stalking the floors, nothing to scare a little girl.

Her lids grew heavier and heavier. She cradled Raggedy Ann and her lids closed.

She drifted, the bed floating her off into blackout.

At the recital she would look exactly like one of Degas' ballerinas. On stage she would be a pastel figurine, a china swan of a girl, a nice girl swimming on silver waters. Her slippers would pad noiselessly, like kisses.

The recital would make everyone happy. It would make them—old, crippled, ugly mile. They'd have the dancing too then, the white tutu and the tiara.

Then she'd do her own number. The finale would be her own creation. After everyone had been made happy, after they were all smiling and clapping, then she'd dance the High Plains for them. She'd bring it all together and none of them would ever be the same again.

Of course, Possie also dreamed of the Dancing Master, who was brave and elegant. She dreamed of Franklin too. They'd slept together in this bed, it still held his shape—in sleep her hands stroked his broad back, contoured like the land of Kansas itself.

Moonlight flooded her sleep, just as it did the room, all the rooms of her house. She dreamed of coyotes calling her back, lonesome for her, howling to her from the crowns of the hills, waiting for

her to come and dance with them beside the chalk formations. She dreamed of others as well. Of Pavlova and Nijinski—incomparable forms soaring through the mind like promises of perfection and immortality.

Moonlight on a silver sea of wallpaper. Swans were gliding. Her lover smoothed her hair.

Then Possie dropped all of it—because then a shape came to bend over her. She dreamed of an evil thing, its fossil skull pinched by long black hair, its eyes wicked crevasses.

Possie tossed and moaned. ‘Go away!’

Sheets and blankets slipped off her body, revealed her body for the moon to play with.

Nothing helped. The shape bent closer, a tiny figure in long robes. It wore her tiara!

Possie dreamed that Aunt Bertha’s hands spread over her like oriental fans, bitten claws like the spines of an emperor’s fan. They dipped for her throat.

With a cry she started up.

Silence, moonlight, Raggedy Ann embracing her. All was as it should be. That was merely a ghost she heard rustling in the hallway.

She pulled the bedclothes back and then snuggled down to let sleep claim her again.

To Raggedy Ann she mumbled, ‘Now don’t you wake up ‘til morning comes to touch you ...’

· *The Frog He Went A-Courtin'*, ·
· *A-hum, A-hum* ·

Since she would do nothing to help him with the parka–stupid child, he thought—and because every surface in the house lay cluttered with bibelots, *objets d'art* or empty beer cans, he finally let the coat slide to the floor of the entrance hall, where it collapsed in a frigid lump.

‘Are you not cold, Pussy Cat?’ The shivering little man felt as if he had just been taken out of a freezer.

‘What a sight I must be!’ Possie ran her hands over the kimono. ‘I just woke up ...’

Warm and soft from bed, dreams clouding her spectacular eyes, to him she seemed the personification of sleep.

How difficult it was to restrain himself, not to reach out and touch her, basking as he did in the tones of her flesh—what he could see of it, revealed in her plump forearms and in the cleavage of robust breast peeking over the lapels of the kimono.

‘Do you know what the temperature is? Ugh! Your winters are not for my sort!’

She made no move, stuck groggy and cow-like in his path. He swept around her, strutting with a grin into the living room.

‘Come sit with me, Pussy Cat. I must talk to you ...’ He plopped down on the sofa, still grinning, and leaned back among the cushions, his legs stretched seductively out before him.

She yawned and shuffled forward. Her face filled the room. Cheeks and neck were stained with yesterday’s make-up. Her hair flared in all directions.

Again he beckoned for her to join him, patting the cushions beside him. ‘Sit, sit!’ Just like talking to a dog. The ponderous head tilted, the black curls flounced.

He placed a proprietary and sublime foot on the edge of an inlaid coffee table.

‘Gee, I’m starving,’ she piped, still standing. ‘Wait and I’ll dress. We can run down to the Igloo for a bite of breakfast.’

‘No, no. I have not come for food.’ He laced languid olive-stained fingers over his stomach. ‘We must speak about another kind of hunger ...’

‘Hold on then ...’ Possie bounced forward a step, the skirt flaring open to show him a terrain of wonderful, rose-hued thigh.

He crossed his legs.

‘I just got to eat something, did you hear my tummy growling? I’ll be real quick. You want a bowl of cereal? Coffee cake?’ Before he had time to react, the girl bounded enthusiastically out of the room.

‘Make yourself comfortable!’ she shouted back to him.

Lothar remained to sulk, too proud to pursue her to the kitchen.

This morning, on first opening his eyes, he had known the time was ripe for action. 'Strike!' he'd declared, leaping out of bed with a full erection. 'Charge!' he'd screamed, squirting his underarms and crotch with cologne.

Victory at all costs! had been his silent oath as he banged angrily at her front door, the wind lashing his back like a whip.

He had come to plant both feet on her broad back, bend her down to kiss the floor. He was going to claim her for Lothar, God and Italy.

Now waiting, he took the opportunity to check himself over. He had chosen his tightest three-piece suit for the interview. The Dancing Master patted down his curls and then looked between his legs, hiking up the trousers so that the bulges there showed to better advantage.

... But what was that! Surely he heard something moving in the room.

He cocked his head, darting lethal glances into all corners of the large and sombre Victorian room. He sensed the presence of something, like a furtive breath at the back of the neck.

Were there ghosts in this house? Belligerent farmboys?

Possie sauntered carefully by him, steadying the heaping bowl with both hands. She sat down next to him and the tip of her tongue poked from the corner of her mouth.

A mountain of golden nuggets mushed in cream and sugar. Possie gave a low yelp of pleasure and dipped her spoon.

Lothar collected his thoughts while concentrating on her mouth. It worked like an engine, jaws chomping with such precision and power that he automatically recalled the click of a thousand Black-Shirt heels.

Great lips in commotion, cheeks puffing, a slurp of cream here, a fleck of cereal there. The girl performed for him, oblivious, wiggling her slippers in ecstasy.

Her warm, moist hands—he turned his attention to them instead, dreaming of what it would feel like to snatch one up and rub it over his stomach.

'You should not be in this place!' he crowed. 'No, you should not!'

He stretched an arm on the back of the sofa, fingers dangling to pat her far shoulder. He leaned so that his lips were but a few inches from her throat.

'Let me show you my world,' he burred.

She gave him the bowl, only a spoonful left to slosh in its bottom. 'Hold this and I'll be right back. I better rescue the cinnamon toast from the oven.'

She skipped off, leaving him holding the bowl in his lap. His one consolation was to envisage the day when he'd have taught her to bark on cue and run in circles with a ruff around her neck.

Yes certainly, he must take her immediately to Italy, to the Roman season, to winter on the Amalfi coast. In Italy he would teach her to sit up, roll over, and above all, to beg. He loved teaching women to beg.

Now, absolutely! That undoubtedly was a movement in the curtains! The thick velvet hung at the front windows from ceiling to floor, enough material to robe a pope.

Of course it was merely a draught, a window ajar, no more perhaps than a current of wealth and power spontaneous to the airwaves of the house.

But Lothar's nervous energy was uncontrollable—high expectations, physical excitement, a teasing hint of the occult, many things tempted his imagination.

Cereal bowl in hand he rose and tiptoed across the carpet, a bemused smile playing on his lips.

An unusual moment for him. He loathed the ridiculous. *Opera buffa* did not appeal to him, nor had he ever considered himself acting out anything less dramatic than *The Damnation of Faust*. And tiptoeing! Really.

God, how he hated to whisper or gesture under tables, or to leer to one side. How humiliating to roll one's eyes—or go on tiptoe. Only foolish lovers or befuddled uncles sneaked to inspect the draperies.

The Dancing Master brushed chagrin aside. Conspirators must be stealthy men, they must be creative when chance permits. For the sake of an unusual house, an unusual fortune—for such he would allow himself one fleeting moment of bathos.

Lothar put his hand to the curtain; the touch of velvet thrilled him. He wondered if a wall safe might lie hidden behind it. Perhaps an open wall safe with a beach of diamonds inside?

He dropped the bowl.

Aunt Bertha gouged her sharp teeth at him. Her lips peeled back.

'Idiot!' she shrieked in a razor-thin voice.

Standing flattened against the wall, at the edge of the windows, the little woman showed only as a contorted face, a coil of black hair, a gaunt throat tensed like a venom bag. She was as pale as the belly of a viper.

He stood dumbfounded. In slow motion he recoiled. The curtain shifted in his hand as if it were alive.

'Get away or the game's up!' she hissed and snatched the curtain back in place.

Mechanically, he stooped to pick up the bowl, rubbing his fingers over the dribble of spilled Captain Crunch.

The moment of shock passed. With a hop and a croak, he jumped back to his place on the sofa.

But he was not the same little man as had sat there a minute before. For the first time in many years he felt the shame of a full blooming blush.

He contemplated various measures; snatch up the poker and beat the thing lifeless; light a match to the hem of the curtain and watch as it and the witch went up screaming—a suitable death.

The girl was lumbering back through the dining room. He sat silent, trembling.

Possie plunked down beside him.

She looked in the empty bowl. ‘Guess you were hungry after all?’

Six slices of cinnamon toast clattered on a plate. He heard another in her mouth, a harsh munching as of bones.

‘Hey, are you sick?’ She gave him her curious-bird stare. ‘I’ll draw those curtains for you. Maybe you need some fresh air. I only keep the house closed for privacy. People know too much about me as it is.’

‘No! Sit!’ At that he gripped her by the arm, strong fingers sinking into the soft flesh. ‘Leave them be! I am quite well ...’

Did he hear the curtain sighing with approval?

They no longer touched knees. Lothar stayed several inches away from her thigh, no longer even aware of bellies or breasts or strapping buttocks. He kept his hands clenched in fists. He locked a wrathful eye on the curtains.

The silence became awkward. He sat rigid. She nibbled toast, a sugar and cinnamon moustache on her upper lip.

‘What did you want to talk about?’ she asked sweetly.

Lothar cleared his throat. A single drop of sweat pearled on his forehead.

‘Your aunt!’ He spoke up for the curtain to hear. ‘I find her utterly utterly unmusical!’

‘Weird, you mean.’ A shower of toast; a rustle of velvet. ‘All the Flatbottoms are that way. Daddy said it was bad genes. I think they intermarried a lot, like Hapsburgs. Thank God Mother wasn’t like that!’

He sat framing more questions. This was like plunging rapiers into the curtain.

‘To be fair,’ continued Possie. ‘Lots of people are strange around here. Some say it’s because of the wind. I think it’s just part of the general decay that’s settling in everywhere, even in Possom Trot. Civilization is like a dog. You can tell if a dog’s sick by inspecting its stool—colour and texture are very important. A firm chocolate-coloured stool is best. Civilization is the same way. You can tell a lot about it by checking its stool ...’

He would never understand how a girl built like a clown could be so earnest.

‘Does that make Mrs Dowell a ...’

‘A bad stool?’ Possie exploded laughter. The sofa quaked. It took a moment for her to regain control, sides shaking, breasts almost leaping out of the kimono.

‘Jesus, but that was too much! No, I must say I didn’t like her at all when I was a kid. In fact I thought she was mean and ugly. We all did.’

‘Ah-choo!’ The Dancing Master sneezed on a high cinnamon count.

‘But why do you speak as if she had changed?’ Nose tingling in the air, he stung like an angry wasp. He hoped the curtain was weeping.

Possie hesitated, jaws slackening their pace. It passed in a cloud over her beautiful eyes, the hint of confusion, of doubt.

‘I want to say it’s the dancing. She’s keen on dancing now like nothing else. Yes, I’ll have to say it’s the dancing ... It sure has changed me.’ She sounded lost, fading away into a little girl.

They sat on the couch in chaste meditation.

Possie wondered at how odd her Dancing Master could be at times. She also mused on Aunt Bertha and the decline of Western Civilization. As she did so, she worked down to her last bite of toast, plucking the morsel from her fingers with a low whimper of loss. If she’d been alone, she would have licked the plate.

‘She is no good for you!’ There, he had said it at last. He felt the knife at his back. ‘At the piano I mean. I think you should tell her to go away.’

‘And the recital!’ Ignoring him, Possie lit up with enthusiasm for that promised land. ‘She’s been incredible about the recital! She deserves all the credit for that!’

In dismay, the Dancing Master no longer knew what to do with his hands and feet. He didn’t know which to ward off, the horror behind the curtain or the fatal day of judgement, the Armageddon these provincials called a recital.

The little man’s thoughts flew in the zig-zag patterns of flies—to the left of murder, to the right of love, then back to centre, to the idols of art and music, money and power.

He mourned bitterly for this lost chance. Time was running against him. How many more opportunities would he have? Why did this absurd woman make him wait and wait? What was he to do?

‘Well, almost all the credit.’ Possie shyly patted his forearm. ‘Thank you for changing your mind about the recital. It’s going to blow everyone’s mind. I know it!’

In a sudden fury, Lothar bolted to his feet and began backing out of the room, nostrils flaring.

Mouth open in amazement, Possie followed him to the entrance hall. There she almost hugged him, he looked so cute and angry.

Instead, she helped him on with his parka, leaving her prints in butter and sugar on the shoulders.

Out of sight and hearing of the living room, the Dancing Master came back to life. He sandwiched himself against her, the open parka enveloping her hips.

‘Pussy Cat,’ he whispered, on tiptoe to reach her ear. ‘Do you guess what I feel for you?’

His hand stole around her waist and down over her rump. He felt her naked under the kimono, no panties.

She beamed down at him, the sisterly smile of a woman who refuses to comprehend. ‘We artists had better care for each other, you bet.’ She too whispered, not knowing why except that it was fun. ‘There’s no other hope for us, is there?’

The mood turned round again. He went stiff with indignation.

‘Not yet are you the artist, signorina! Not yet that title! I warn you to prepare yourself! I believe we will have a very demanding session this afternoon! You want a recital? By God, you must earn one! *Ciao!*’

With that the Dancing Master was gone, shuddering in retreat.

· KANSAS POWER AND LIGHT ·

The dreariness of Possom Trot abated for the Christmas season: a momentary clearing in the clouds, and the town sparkled itself like a large used-car lot.

Over the three business blocks of Commercial Street the merchants hung a dozen strings of coloured lights wrapped in plastic evergreen. Even though every fourth light or so was burned out, enough remained to transform the blighted aspect of the scene. When the wind shifted direction and hit the lights broadside, they danced almost merrily, winking and reflecting in store windows.

In the display window of the Bon Marché Department Store stood a life-size Santa, a skinny figure of cheer since the store manager, Mr Shanker, had taken an ordinary mannikin and dressed it in a rented Suit.

The employees of the Farmers and Drovers State Bank did as they had every year since 1967. They struggled like circus performers on the roof of the bank, erecting the three mechanical elves—squat hysterical things with bulbous noses and paunchy guts, pointed hats and curled shoes—that Mathew Vandermark himself had bought in Kansas City.

Upon being plugged in, the elves blinked and rotated, jerking on toys, mouths open in silent screams. When first installed, people had driven from as far away as Goodland to see them perform.

The Sheriffs Department placed a tinsel star on the town's water tower.

The Senior Class hung an enormous wreath on the front doors of the Possom Trot High School.

Haggerman's Market used a loudspeaker system to play carols out into their parking lot. The carols blared quite loudly. On sub-zero nights the system turned itself on around midnight and blasted the town with 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer'.

Every home in town boasted some kind of ornamentation: an electric candle in the front window, mistletoe or a plastic stocking on the mailbox by the kerb. Every living-room had a tree—real or artificial, large or tiny.

Only the Vandermark house remained untouched, dark as before. Possie couldn't keep it in her head that it was Christmas at all. She had no time for religion anyway, old religions especially, what with practising, sleeping and eating.

Bertha hurriedly threw up a pathetic, emaciated tree in the living room of her bungalow. It was the smallest one for sale at the Optimist Club tree lot. By the time she had finished with it more than half of the branches were broken. But she did need something in the room to reassure the ladies of the Recital Planning Committee, who were coming for brunch, that all was well.

At the Weaver Hotel, Old Saddletoe also made an effort. He waited until dark and then drove his pick-up out to the Interstate Highway, where he chopped down one of the ornamental firs that the Highway Department insisted on planting at roadside rest areas—even though the poor little things barely survived the Kansas summers.

The old man propped the prize in a corner of the lobby. Since he had no decorations he left it as it was, the bagworm shells for ornaments.

The Dancing Master sniffed at the tree in surprise the first time he saw it—he had been lost in his own Christmas reverie (wondering how he could give Bertha a piece of coal; already trying to guess what lavish gift Possie would bestow on him). The tree did indeed stink. Saddletoe had acquired it from a rest area where tourists let their dogs out to pee.

The Igloo Cafe sported ‘Frosty the Snowman’ in cardboard, a fat and happy image taped to the window. It continually fell askew as the steam and grease loosened the tape.

Albert’s Bar featured the words ‘Merry Xmas’ spelled out in what appeared to be shaving cream on the mirror behind the bar.

Of course, the United Methodist Church produced its annual manger scene, out front beside the bulletin board. It was a spot-lit living crèche with a real shed littered with real hay, supplied by the Dalrymples. The Laceys offered a lamb. The Webers brought in their oldest cow.

Reverend Sanders stuttered and smiled his way through the season, very proud and excited by the living crèche. He drafted high-school boys for shepherds and Wise Men. The entire Cheerleading Squad participated too—Mary Rimpledorf, Sarah Stock, Agnes Harry taking turns sitting on the hay in a blue bathrobe. They did this as coyly as they believed Virgins would, for forty-five minutes each, three nights a week.

Although nothing could be done about it, the Reverend secretly grieved that they had to resort to a naked doll for the Christ child—wrapped discreetly in a long Ace bandage.

Such in general was Christmas in Prairie Dog County, or at least in Possom Trot. For it was truly a lonely spot of colour and activity on the land.

Beyond, there was no Christmas in the hills. Although no one much thought about it, the High Plains, as on every winter day, every winter night, through each wintry December, held its own celebration, to its own kind of music and light.

· *Fa-La-La* ·

The young man lurked in the shadows of the poplars at the edge of the Vandermark lawn. He was not in a Christmas spirit. He looked up longingly to the light in Possie's studio windows, the only light he cared about.

When he did look higher, tilting back his head and letting the night sky fall on his face, it made him dizzy—the moon pulling the beer up inside him like a tide. He was quite a gentle young man. except for the beer.

Possie's light was a star. The lowest in the firmament, it dangled just above Commercial Street, yet seemingly as distant and as breathtaking as one of the Seven Sisters.

Franklin put his face to her light and snaked his hands into his front pockets, thrusting shoulders up to protect his ears from the wind.

He was waiting for something to happen—for Possie to beckon to him, for stars to plummet, for the Vandermark walls to come tumbling down.

It was past midnight when he at last stepped shivering from the shadows of the poplars to lope across the lawn, determined to make a final try. He would bang on the front doors until she came down and told him herself to go away.

He was a tipsy but passionate young man who wanted Christmas to come tonight. He wanted his present to have green eyes and red hair.

The night shone large and sympathetic.

And meanwhile, five blocks away, in a dark and dreary hotel room, sitting propped up in bed, a lonesome Dancing Master was whimpering to himself. The room glimmered in an arctic mood.

Besides whimpering, Lothar listened carefully to some saving sound to come to him, something more reassuring than the rush of wind at his window or the feeble singing of the desk clerk downstairs—coming home drunk as usual.

But nothing. No intimation of glory, not even the suspicion of damnation. No hints of Heaven or Hell. Stasis. Ugliness. Ennui!

In desperation Lothar slipped his exquisite legs out from under the blankets and stepped down on to frigid floorboards. The frozen wood was a cross unto itself.

In the darkness the old wood, varnished for decades, worn by hundreds of salesmen's feet, felt similar to the stones beside the fountains of his boyhood. At the very moment, thousands of miles away, water would be sloshing from Neptune's lips, the stones stinging and slippery, like boards of a galleon long lost to the sea.

He wanted his Italy! He wanted back his youth!

The little man stretched out his hands in desire—he touched only the rough deal of the dresser, the side encrusted with dried mucus.

He needed a woman. At that very moment he needed Possie as much as her money, which never before seemed possible.

Possie could save him from bad dreams. Her touch, he was confident, would restore his manhood.

At this late hour she must certainly be alone, unhaunted, untroubled by evil spirits. She would be bulging out of her kimono. No panties!

And how appealing a man can seem to a woman, standing forlorn and needy before her. She would not be able to resist him.

He dressed eagerly, in whatever came to hand. He darted swiftly to the hallway. He crept on the stairs. He slipped through the lobby like an intruder—not a bagworm shell stirred.

The village lay as quiet and deserted as a theatre after a performance. He trotted down the middle of Commercial Street, going slyly, alert as a dog. Going so softly that not even a dog would bark at him.

The great house rose in a glaze of moonlight. Its formidable turrets and cupolas, peaks and gables, made the night scene tense with magic.

His heart rang at the sight of the light burning in her studio windows.

The thought sprang naturally to mind, the poetry of a lover's mood, and he sang it out loud— 'Like a star!'

Now he followed her lights closely, oblivious to the rest. He came on doggedly, as cleverly, as humbly, as one of the Magi seeking fulfilment.

The house soared from among the trees on its lawn, a source of wonder in the midst of a winter's forest.

Lothar pranced across the frosted grass. In his excitement he charged for the front steps. He was greedy for those gates of fertility, prosperity and happiness.

At those gates he would call down his lady. He would bring down his future, smiling.

• *Bertha's Dance* •

Aunt Bertha not only smiled to herself, she virtually giggled. With the curtains pulled apart, the same moonlight that fixed the two men on the lawn below, cutting them out of the darkness pale and frozen, also covered her as she peered into the mirror.

Whereas the men suffered in their shock of recognition, the light apportioned to her the kindest of reflections—cushioning her hardest features, dulling the edges of her bones, lifting the shadows from her eyes, chastening the pinprick points of her guttering eyes.

Light twinkled in her hair and chivalrously hid the sallow hue of her skin. Bertha raised her fingertips to her cheeks the diamond rings, her fingers heavy with the load, sparkled and spangled in the mirror.

‘Wrinkles begone!’ she commanded.

She clapped her hands together and chattered in merriment. Rising from her seat before the vanity, the dress cracked with power and shot tiny threads of lightning.

How she loved her sister’s clothes, particularly the satin and silk gowns; once inside them, in the night, in this house, they changed her utterly. She gratefully accepted the illusion, allowing the bitterness in her mouth to melt, feeling almost girlish.

Glide to the bedroom door. Pause to listen. Stop again in the hallway. Listen, listen!

She heard the girl, but no matter. Slapping feet and weird cries were not out of the ordinary.

Bending to the studio door, she put an eyeball to the keyhole. It was like peeping into a penny arcade—there was the girl framed by the hole, a freak of nature on display.

Bertha lingered to watch, losing a precious moment while the girl bobbed up and down, back and forth, babbling. She noted impassively the bloodied feet, the glazed eye, the parched and cracked lips, the swollen leg muscles.

Aunt Bertha nodded approvingly before moving on. Straightening up, the dress sang dulcet tones.

Lightly, she stepped on the stairs, trailing the dress, the train sliding languorously over the carpet. As she progressed she plucked from the atmosphere a bouquet of scents and colours to transfigure the hour. They gathered in her hands.

She buried her face in these flowers of her dream—in the French perfumes, in the Spanish leathers, in English crystal and Chinese silks, in Indian spices and Alpine snow. They nourished her and made her heart gay.

Step by step she trails, sweeping down. At the bottom, stop again, pose before the full-length looking-glass.

She smoothes her dress. The dress smoothes her. She tugs at the loose material over her breasts—presto! Jugs blossom. She pats her hips and what should have been her buttocks—zap! An ass springs fully ripe.

Bertha let her arms float at her sides. Slowly she turned, circling with a swishing shuffle across the marble floor. She burped sweet sighs to the entrance hall ceiling.

Mistress of the house; lady and lover! The words beat time in her head.

She waltzed with an invisible partner, her arms around his shoulders, resting her head on his chest. Her black hair wafted loose over her face and neck, fluttered as did the dress.

‘Spirit of this house,’ prayed Bertha. ‘Send me a lover.’

She and the house revolved, swinging in a long, breathless gesture.

· *Around the Walls of Troy* ·

In a fleeting, conjoining moment of awe, the men identified each other. The young giant lumbering across the lawn; the Dancing Master prancing up on tender feet.

Where they met, a couple of yards apart, they were both at a clear angle to the front door, only a matter of steps from their goal.

The one eyed the other, too surprised for speech.

The wind came up another octave. Trees blithered frantically, branches waving skyward for help.

The wind also blew the hair up from their faces. The wind tinkered with their expressions: two males furious with frustration. Emotion showed in their postures too. Franklin stood legs spread, slightly ungainly, his frame twisted in a half-turn. Lothar stopped as if just completing a less than perfect leap, his feet too close together, hips thrust forward, body arching as if to leave skid marks in the grass.

‘God damn you! Get away from that door!’ Franklin swiped viciously with a paw, took another step.

Lothar stepped back but turned full in his enemy’s face, lifting himself onto his toes and puffing out his chest.

‘You go away! She is mine!’ He pounded his chest with a fist, snorting in turn, a pitch higher than the younger man.

A blow glanced past Lothar’s jaw, close enough to feel the force of a hammer behind it.

The Dancing Master glided sideways on the treacherous lawn. ‘Keep your filthy hands to yourself,’ he blurted. ‘Go home to your *madre, bastardo*, and sleep with the other pigs!’

Franklin grabbed hold of the parka. The little man’s bones rattled in his grip.

Foretelling a murderous embrace, Lothar kicked and battled with all his might. Half of his blows fell wasted, a few thudding into flesh, into muscle so hard it deflected concussion.

Turn and run—he could think of nothing else. In a flash he twisted and wormed out of the coat. He dashed for the corner of the house.

They ran through the flower beds, their shoes cracking the dense dead growths. The stubble caught at their feet and made them stumble. They ran to the backyard, past the gazebo, and around the thick trunk of the hundred-year-old cottonwood. They ran, kicking up gravel, down the driveway. They ran to each corner of the house, whizzing past the silent stone, too close to the sharp edges of the house. Back to the front, they ran zig-zagging over the open lawn, from a distance like grown men in a game of tag.

One time round the house; and their path was an irregular, passionate circle in the frosted grass.

‘Holy Mother of God!’ lamented the Dancing Master, trying to cross himself as he raced on.

Franklin wisely conserved his breath, curses dormant in his rage. He had a young man's endurance and distance. Step by step he gained, closing in, inexorable.

The Dancing Master's legs were good for running. Years of training helped them. His lungs, however, began to feel the strain. Although he could burst ahead each time the enemy's breath stroked his neck, such efforts took more and more of his strength. The truth chilled him to the core—he knew he couldn't run much further.

Twice around the house, and still the walls towered, haughty in their indifference. No lights of mercy bolted from downstairs windows. No faces of rescue pressed the glass. No shouts erupted for peace and order.

They passed the back porch, sealed and darkened. They chased beneath the dining room windows, the study windows, the sunroom windows, the library windows, the living room windows. They coursed by the front door, too intent on blood to notice.

Lothar pleaded his cause silently now. He damned his foolishness for ever having come to this horrible land. He cursed the girl for not letting him in, the house for not letting down its walls.

Yes, he had been struck before, the flesh insulted, panic in the body, the mind terrorised by screeching sirens. But what would this be like?

He heard the young bull's panting. That close? And this time he couldn't do it. He couldn't summon the strength for a saving dash.

Already he ran in lurching strides, staggering head down.

Three times around the house. Now they swept back again to the front. The young man ran with one arm extended to its fullest. Like a relay runner he strained to stretch himself yet further, to clasp, to hold.

By the flower bed nearest to the front steps the hand at last became a bear's paw, steel-clawed, sinking into flesh.

Franklin heaved the Dancing Master triumphantly up and around. His crude face shone terrible in the moonlight—a hero bandying the trophies of battle. He held the little man by the skin of his chest, pulling hair out, scratching into the flesh. Buttons popped and spun into space.

But Franklin stopped too short, too exultantly. The sheer momentum of his own effort threw him off balance. Once more the prey fell from his grip.

The Dancing Master floundered away, careening from exhaustion. Not much more. The older man's legs were spent.

The front doors were his last hope. He scampered up the steps. The doors. If only the doors opened to his prayers!

He pounded on them with both fists.

'Help me, Possie!' he screamed. 'Save me!'

Lothar felt hands at his throat. Was it possible? Were these hands choking him senseless?

He gathered what strength remained for a horse-like kick, a foot jabbing out spastic, desperate for life. He caught Franklin in the pit of the stomach, knocking him back down the steps.

But the young man merely shook himself. It was murder now. He had lost control.

The Dancing Master fell to his knees, his back pressing frantically against the doors.

The giant was almost upon him—harsh grunts and the air parting for a final assault. Air smashed down in reels of war and holocaust.

Did he imagine a tremor in the door? Did it give an inch? Another inch, *per favore!*

The Dancing Master pushed back with a sob.

The last moment was at hand. Lothar could even see the wonder of complete power and freedom spreading across the young man's face.

But the door gave then. The doors opened with a rush as of wings enfolding him.

He rolled back and to one side. The heavy doors slammed shut.

The great doors closed with angelic speed directly in the face of that cold, merciless night.

• *Ma Soeur, Mon Amour* •

Lothar barely made out the floor, a pale ice-glow. Would he never escape from ice and darkness? Sweat drizzled from him. He slipped on it—oiled ice, slick for the slaughter.

Shirt clamped to his back. Curls soggy on his forehead. Other than the metallic whir in his ears not a sound to he heard—nothing but a vague clop-clopping overhead which was surely the loosened works of his brain.

Clop, clop.

Swaying in a daze on all fours, he shook his head, hearing the fragments rattling. Thump-thump-thump-thump.

That must be the sound of a nag's hooves on cobblestones, an old horse on a village street, a peasant woman, a red shawl, a postcard of Vesuvius.

'*Mamma mia!*' Hush! This one fragment had been saved from the ruins. His poor head laid it back in place, looking for more notable damage.

Beyond the front door the menace still lurked. He heard it mumbling in a fury. It gave choking, miserable groans.

'Oh, Pussy Cat!' stammered the Dancing Master. He crawled across marble, drawn feebly in the direction of what must be her feet. He almost fainted, head sagging (full of rubble), tongue lolling.

A fist smashed into the door.

'That's him!' For safety, Lothar wrapped his arms around her feet and buried his face in the satin of her gown. The presence outside remained clearer yet than the one who towered over him plump, pink and warm.

Lothar listened to the outside world, he ignored the house and its darkness. He clung to a holy image of a woman—yes and that too remained; the dancing court ladies of Byzantium clutching for icons in the sulphurous stench of Santa Sophia, herding close for safety, and the Turks on the steps outside ... Another memory survived.

Outside again! Another outburst of rage? He held his own icon tighter.

How small her feet actually were! In daylight they looked like boats on the studio floor. And how slim were her ankles! He had always thought of them as pillars or as the trunks of trees.

An engine roared, tyres flared, asphalt burned—siege machines! But no, the Turk was merely leaving, and in fourth gear.

'God is good! Yes, He is, He is, He is!' The Dancing Master babbled a Hosanna of Thanksgiving to her big toe.

'That delinquent would have destroyed me!' He drooled on an ankle. Silk skin, perfume, a glitter of gems. Other senses revived, more memories came home to him.

For the moment he waded in ruined courtyards and piazzas, in a blur of paintings, churches, theatres—all elegant bodies invented and real, all music, all dancing, all singing. He was sliding on Tuscan marble into a recollection of women, the Boticellian Venus whose wisdom and sexuality swept through him like a current.

He almost stood up with the exhilaration, religion of his manhood flooding his legs.

But a sudden treacherous wave of shame left him grovelling on the floor. ‘Now you will despise your Dancing Master,’ he cried. ‘You will pity him like the mouse chased by the cat.’

His voice thickened with tears. ‘Nothing goes well for me here. Do you understand what that means to a man like me? I have courage. It takes great bravery to live as I have. Never before was I chased. Never have I run. Never. I have stood on stages before audiences no other dancer would face.’

He addressed her on his knees, darkness reeling. Such an inscrutable darkness, of the mind and soul as well. In answer, she glided away from him, left him gasping and alone in the middle of the darkness.

A muffled ‘Shhhhh’ escaped from the gloom.

At the sound he huddled mystified and frightened. Without her, the entrance hall closed in cold as the grave. He missed her ankles.

Clop, clop.

Suddenly he was a man on the moon, heavy with immobile earth, struggling to adapt. Where was his rich, fantastic princess! Where had she gone?

He hobbled forward on his elbows, rasping, head still spinning, heart still racing round and round the walls of her house.

In the far corner of the entrance hall, from under the stairs, he caught the flicker of her wealth. A constellation of jewellery winked at him, lecherous and beguiling.

Faster now, he pursued her on his knees, dripping but ecstatic.

Now at last he dared hope for a grand entrance on stage. It would be his long-awaited leap to centre. He would go, bulging, callipigian, with human legs flashing beyond the laws of gravity. For her he would be Zeus in tights.

· *'Teehee,' Quod She* ·

The seconds passing in slow parade almost drove her mad. She almost died, her heart crunching on its gravel road.

But in the end she lured him successfully into the cloakroom. She closed the door behind him, sealing them in alive, together for the first time in the sway of ancient and hidden powers.

Bertha held tenaciously to her advantage, knowing it was all she had. Only her eyes cut the darkness. Only she knew where they were, who they were—at least who they had been, for she too suddenly felt altered and disoriented.

She spread Possie's fur coat on the floor. Poor Dancing Master, she warmed to his ignorance. She pitied his blindness. The tragedy enfolded him and she saw how helpless and unawares he truly was.

To muffle her voice she stuffed a sleeve of Grandfather Vandermark's cashmere overcoat into her mouth. It made her giddy trying to imitate the girl, raising her voice into lyrical idiocy. She strove to make it fat, rosy and green-eyed.

'Lie still ... I'll undress you ...'

How like a baby he was, doing exactly as she ordered.

First she undid his shoes, hiding them in a recess of the closet so that he couldn't escape in them.

His clothing she handled as if it were living skin, freshly peeled. Each sock was folded and stuffed into hiding. She stroked the buttons of his shirt, letting each free with ceremonial care.

His undershirt she rolled over her face for a veil; ah, how aromatic were the armpits.

Momentarily, his trousers stalled her. Did she dare? Could she be so brazen? What she approached was both dangerous and thrilling. She rocked on her haunches in little explosions of apprehension.

But her fingers flew on, fumbling more urgently. The belt thwarted her. Then too the clasp at the waist. The zip would not co-operate either. At last she had to show him how much she wanted him, pawing frantic, crudely at the mechanisms.

His fly at last open, she tugged the pants down—he helped, lifting his rump with a croak of passion.

The pants snagged around his ankles. She fought them all the way. It gave her a fit of bitterness; why didn't she know how to take a man's pants off at her age?

Miraculously, finally, she had him down to his underpants.

It was pure art for her, playing him like an instrument, making music out of him. He lay passive before her, quivering to her touch. She made him groan; she forced him to whimper with delight.

Bertha touched her fingertips to his nipples. She tickled the hair between them. She rubbed his tight stomach. Slowly she went lower, tracing his abdomen, following the classic lines of his upper hips.

At the first feel of the elastic band on his underwear she skipped down to his legs. Down to luxuriate in the rich fur, the mass of muscle kindling her dreams. His legs quickened her, they moistened her.

The Dancing Master's legs! Every inch of them was a treasure. She petted them with the silk of her dress, with her long hair. She licked them. They did taste of locusts and honey. Softly she buried her face in his legs.

Now he thrust his hips rhythmically. The legs were twitching out of control. They gave a private performance. She was his most enthralled audience ever.

The ritual, of course, led her to its goal. She snaked her fingers into the cloth of his underwear and pulled. The underwear slipped away.

Aunt Bertha throated a brief ode to wonder. Never before had she held in her very own hand anything resembling this, nothing with this majesty. Its authority filled her hand. It seemed to have been made for her to hold.

'I won't ever let it go,' she promised herself. 'I won't ever permit it out of reach again. I won't tell about it or show it to anyone.'

That she dared touch amazed her as much as that she had never known one before. Will had supposedly had one—but it was blunt and sticky. It had filled her only with disgust, flopping about as it did.

Signals flashed in the closet. Signals from her, from him. In a rush she bent and caught them all in her mouth.

Yelping softly, he convulsed and reached for her, aiming blindly for her breasts.

Coats, macinaws, scarves and mufflers rocked overhead. Iron coat-hangers clanged on the pole. Mothballs rumbled. They created a storm in the closet—in the corners spiders ran for cover.

What! Was this the glory of sumptuous breasts! But where was the swaying fullness of young tits! Why were his hands groping radio knobs instead?

She had been discovered. No more darkness.

'What have you done to my Possie!' he wailed. The grief was real. Tears sounded in his voice.

'O Mamma di Dio!'

The world contracted sharply—for her a birth pang too intense for words. For him, prone on the floor, it was a sudden struggle for survival.

Instinctively, Bertha moved her hand for a tighter grip on him, playing her fingertips over the head of his power. She picked up the warring in his blood, lust versus loathing. The tempo pulsed in her hand.

It made no difference to them now. She understood so. They were spellbound.

‘Move and you’re finished!’ Her voice surprised them both. It whispered as silkily as Dead-Sister’s dress, hard as frozen water.

And he lost to it, alone and bound up in the dark. He sank with a drowning cry beneath it, going down under an evening of terror and confusion. It seemed that she had wrapped his feet in cement.

Did this woman hover over him too near for safety, or miles up and omnipotent in the sky? He could not tell. Her sphinx wings blotted out the sun.

He heard the skirmish of her dress coming up—how, he couldn’t guess. She still held him in her talons. He sensed her mounting, lifting a leg to straddle him. She was in blind descent, rushing upon him, squatting, bare haunches lowering.

Impaled, as if he had punctured her, she gave a blast of breath and sank. Life seeped from the tear. Her flesh parted for his, surfaces falling back. She eased down until he lay completely stricken, subsumed into her.

Now he really did hear her wings. He waited for her teeth to nip his throat. Already he felt her ribs, tart as barbs, her breasts gouging him like arrowheads; her pulverizing pelvis ground him in broken glass.

Before all this, beneath all this, his will snapped. He humped wildly, his body gone berserk, his mind smashed.

They bucked. They flailed. They thrashed convulsively into falling coats and hangers. The sky literally yawned and screamed.

‘Fuck me, fuck me!’ sang out Bertha.

Two heavy stoles, from Grandmother Vandermark’s wardrobe, suddenly draped them in a tumultuous downpouring. It was a most sensual mink.

‘Flood me! Drown me! Wash me away!’

She raved in the tempest. He ejaculated. They pumped in agony, but as one hydraulic unit.

The stoles tumbled at the very instant of release so that both Bertha and Lothar were shocked into orgasm at the same split second.

Lothar bit off a shriek. His terror shot out with his semen.

Bertha snorted, shuddered and drooled on his chest.

The stoles enveloped them, musty, dust-riddled and redolent of cats—of perhaps twenty long-dead cats.

Finished, they fandangoed in an aftershock, bodies pinned on a Richter scale.

On impulse, Bertha leaned forward and put both hands on his shoulders, steadying herself that way, comforting him too. She truthfully meant it as a gesture of love.

To him it was like being nailed by an octopus.

Yet that was not fair, because not once had Bertha even seen a sea or ocean (when she was young her parents had once shown her the tip of Lake Superior, as if that counted).

Now, not only earth's oceans lapped in her eyes, rolled in her guts, but she was also soaring over a far-flung Rocky Mountains of the heart: even she who had never known the magnificence of a mountain top either (although Will had taken her to Pikes Peak for a honeymoon).

She clung to him hoping for more. Another chance to be unreal. One more time she believed might seal her forever into the deep, aquamarine life of fins and coral.

Squeezing this man between her thighs she could hear it—squeash, squeash.

Cruel it would be, falling back now into oceanless Kansas.

'Come up into me again! Please do it again!' She coaxed him by wiggling, whining beseechingly. Darkness hid her mandarin eyes, which were no longer harsh.

It was all right that he wanted his Possie—she would give him that for a present. It was just that she repulsed him—she had no right to his beauty. All she asked for was one more chance. Another trial. Then willingly she'd fade into the shadows.

His anger came in a brutal motion. A swift discharge of hands and legs. He knocked her away, flicked her off as if she were nothing more than an insect.

'Where are my underwear, woman!' He roared at her between clenched teeth. 'I want my shoes, *prestissimo!* Give them to me!'

In answer, her bare knees went scuttling over the coats on the closet floor. He heard her weeping. 'You bucked me off before I had my second chance ...'

The floor was a frightening terrain of clothing and twisted metal. She alone seemed to know how to move. He continued to flounder in the Sphinx's land.

Moving about, she was the sound of tissue and cartilage tearing, wings crumpling in mid flight. Only a faint echo remained of satin, damp satin.

But she did return his underwear. She also tried touching him again, groping for his parts.

He pushed her back. Snap of elastic, animal procedures.

For protection she crawled into one of the old coats.

'I want you to marry her. You will marry her. I will fix it for you ...' In her desperation she would say anything.

Nothing worked. The man stayed away.

'I'll give her to you!' The sky filled with coat-hangers. Long ugly coats, lank as the Kansas winter, trailed down to touch her. Reality crowded her.

'Where is my undershirt!'

‘On my head ...’

‘Give it to me!’

She heard his arms twisting, chest and trunk swivelling; it drove her wild listening to his body. Now the buttons on his shirt were slipping one by one back into their appointed holes.

‘Stop doing this to me ... You will have it all ... Stop and listen to me ... Please!’

Her voice cracked and fell. ‘God, don’t you know how I feel saying that? All I wanted was the house ... until you came. You!’

He hurried, suddenly afraid of what else she might say.

‘Don’t pity me or I’ll kill you!’ As if all along a cat had been lurking in Grandmother’s stole, eyes flashed in the dark and a paw with claws ripped at him. By luck she scratched him deep on the thigh, and no more than two inches from his scrotum.

In defence and terror, he struck back. His hand smacked her awkwardly, spinning her back against the wall.

As before, their commotion translated into swinging coats and jingling hangers.

In a panic he pulled on his trousers, cursing at the tangled legs.

When she managed to speak again it was with more control. ‘All I want is the house ... You can work that easily. Make it a gift to me. I must have your word on it ... For her, you give me the house in payment ...’

Her voice gave her away; he had rarely heard such pain in a human voice.

‘You take her. I take the house. You must agree now, here. I won’t let you leave until you agree!’

This must be over with soon. The Dancing Master was reaching a limit of endurance. He wouldn’t be able to take much more.

‘There then, damn you, I will give you the house!’ He growled. ‘Consider it yours!’

‘You must promise me ...’

‘Yes! Agreed!’ It seemed to him at the moment as if his future had just been swallowed by the Thing in the dark.

‘You may take her away the night of the recital ... That’s when it happens. Right after the recital.’

‘What do you say? We have said nothing of the recital. That was not in our bargain!’

Now it was her turn to hear the catch in his voice.

‘You still won’t look at it, will you,’ she said. ‘You were lost the first day when you saw her come in. I was watching. You sold out when you didn’t bolt and run at the first sight. You knew. You’ve got to pay!’

He could say nothing. He wondered if he were dead.

Bertha collapsed against the wall.

‘She’ll have them rolling in the aisles and giving the hog laugh. She’ll have them weeping with laughter, spitting up and slapping their knees with laughter ...’

Suddenly her voice trembled, sibylline. ‘Remember this! The Italian Dancing Master and his idiot clumsy wife can roam where they will, but this house and that recital stage and those laughing farmers will haunt them to hell!’

If Lothar could have lifted the mask of darkness he would have seen something never to be forgotten. Her face was fanged and from the eye-slits streaked sparks. She was swollen with tears. Long black hair hung all about her as if shredded.

Clop, clop. Thump-thump-thump-thud. Possie had begun to run in delirious circles directly above them.

Jerking to his feet, he banged his head against the closet ceiling. Still he hesitated, shoes in hand, head throbbing.

‘I have paid you in full for saving my life.’ He did his best to sound ferocious. ‘So know also that I will have her without the recital! Without you!’

His curls were almost dry enough to toss now.

Thump-thump-thump. Thud!

Bertha’s cackle carried with it the memories of the entire evening. It scourged him to the bone.

‘Oh, my dear, dear little man,’ she wheezed as if being knifed. ‘Oh, my love ... Don’t you know anything! Just listen to her!’

At that he scrambled from the closet, horrified but free.

· AN ICE AGE COMETH ·

The sharp trill of scraping iron resounded in Possom Trot as people dug out their walks and driveways. They shaped the snow in ranges, small Himalayas of ice and snow. The children played in it—built snowmen, forts, lay in it waving their arms to make angels.

The children at least seemed to have no fear of it. But the Hays radio station announced that one farmer had already been found dead in it. Yet that happened almost every year. Folks fell down in it. They broke bones in it. They froze their toes in it, had heart attacks in it. Snow slowed their lives to a standstill; it made them helpless.

Snowmen aside, in heavy winter storms, more so than in the more dramatic summer storms, the people of Prairie Dog County lived with an unspoken apprehension.

Outwardly, they claimed to look forward to it. Snow was vital for the wheat. Snow was natural and God-given. Snow was romantic at Christmas time.

But when it came in triumph, a mighty white dominion drifting to the height of a tall man, piling untouched for days in moonlight as well as sunlight, when it blotted out everything in the world except the glaring sky, then they dreaded it. Then they feared.

In this land of huge distances, of broad, deceptive height and negligible population, a heavy snowstorm was like being slowly smothered. It choked the hamlets off from the rest of humanity. It distorted light, muted shapes; spread, blinding, inescapable, menacing. It muffled the towns, farms and ranches in silence.

When the rolling plain became a mass of frosted, frozen earth swelling out to every horizon, when inch by inch the snow rose like a giant burial mound, then the people began to consider the condition of the roads, the fate of their livestock, to check the larder, hide the firewood, fret secretly over the electricity, gas and water.

As before, the town of Possom Trot bore its Christmas cheer. But tinsel and coloured lights and mechanical elves were as much a brave front against the winter as they were for celebration. In their heart of hearts, the citizenry hoped to placate the snow with flashing baubles.

At such times no one dared contemplate the true sweep of the surrounding land. They did not look at it. They really did not want it near, ancient and forbidding and empty. Open pastures were avoided. The Smoky Hills were ignored.

The people stayed close. They nonchalantly pursued communal activities—school, church, shopping, the bar, the clubs. Anything to bring them together, to reassure the belief that they were the sum, the Lord's image, the crown of Creation.

The uplands could be stripped naked in the blast of wind. Snow could blow in sky-battering towers. Ravines, gulleys and creek beds could be lost in snow. But when the snow coursed on the wind coming down the long wide fields, no one cheered.

· *The Snow Ball Queen* ·

The tireder she got, the more she fell. The more she fell, the funnier she thought it.

Possie had already bruised her knees on the chalk and scraped her palms raw. But such tumbles, careening off-balance with a hopeless giggle or stumbling headlong with gaping mouth and surprised eyes, became a part of the dance—a cruel move dictated by the grand choreographer to humble her to the lessons of gravity.

Falling did cause her a moment of shock. She'd laugh at it though, and struggle up to begin again.

Snow matted her coat so that in time she'd come to resemble a polar bear. That too was all right with her. She rather liked being a polar bear.

During breaks, when she sat warming in the jeep (in hardest winter, the Jaguar was exchanged for Daddy's jeep), she ate candy bars and drank coffee from a thermos. By 4.30 she'd eaten three Pay Days, two Baby Ruths, and half a dozen Reece's Buttercups. The wrappers littered the floor of the jeep.

Sweat and snow were frozen into her clothes so that when she chewed or swallowed, she'd hear herself making stiff little mechanical noises reminiscent of the cuckoo clock at home. She thought that delightful.

Whenever the coffee made it necessary, Possie squatted to the left of the pillars, not more than six feet from Pillar of Fire. There she bared her pink parts to the snow. The piss sizzled. Its music made her smile. She even put it into her own tunes, a piss number.

Because she returned several times to the same spot, the snow there became a golden circle as the afternoon progressed.

The candy bars made her flatulent. Which pleased her. She wondered if farting could give her added lift-off, good for jumping and leaping.

Although the afternoon had been lots of fun, it was also serious business. By five o'clock she was numb with exhaustion. She kept her eyes almost constantly closed, moving as she imagined a blind dancer would.

This caused her to fall more and more frequently, repetitiously blundering into the pillars, prancing up too far on the rim of the basin—where she stepped into burrows and tripped over unfamiliar rocks. She was doing little more than staggering, flapping her arms, feebly pumping her legs.

The sky, fiercely blue before, paled and expanded as dusk came. The sun became a cat's eye on the western rim. The pillars cast massive shadows. Jacob's Well deepened with time, with grey light. It ran cold, as in a northern water.

Possie sang to the sun. It was her own song and no one else's. She sang, feeling the sun burning on her face, seeing it behind closed lids.

At times, her singing rose into the wind, amplified over the hills. Sometimes it sank musically into human dimensions, a child's hymn. But when it shot up in an ear-splitting screech, her red hair stood on end and the grass buried in the snow seemed to rustle.

At last her singing voice grated away into the rocks. Her body crumbled. Her very lips fossilized into white chalk.

In one extended finale, coming as the sun set, she slid in a lolling roll and grappled with thin air. She dived for the snow and lay grovelling on all fours, still swinging her rear and jerking her head up and down, wrists buried in snow. 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy-Life! Daddy-Life!' she roared. Her mouth eroded with the words.

This, officially, was the end of her dance. She stiffened to the tortuous angle—one leg out straight, elbows locked, shoulders akimbo. Her beringed fingers clutched snow, suspended in the frantic act of digging.

• *An Encore* •

Peace returned to Jacob's Well only after the headlights of the jeep dipped from sight over the ridge. With Possie gone, the land returned to deepest silence. Perfect stillness received the last glow of the day.

In the basin, where that morning snow had lain ankle-deep and unblemished, the floor was now packed down like an ice-skating rink. The girl's weight had pounded the area flat.

At first glance, the evidence of her dancing seemed the only hint of life to be found. Too cold and late for the day birds, too early for creatures of the night.

Later, however, a haze of clouds parted for a fat moon-god. It rose over the top of the world to look far off and even into the bottom land, where the lights of Possom Trot blinked, themselves like grounded deities.

No light at all to the west, just stars upon stars.

Towards midnight a lone coyote came padding over the ridge. Tail straight, eyes golden and piercing, he was a handsome and wise old coyote. He worked the hills down to the basin.

Many times the animal paused to look and lift his snout. He would squint and prick his ears.

In the wind was the lingering spirit-smell of man—the flesh-smells had long been dissipated. It drew the coyote down to the pillars. His black nose twitched, testing the excitement.

Over the spot where the woman had crouched, he too circled. With a snort he lifted a hind leg and left his own signature.

His eyes were eager for rabbits. The night was alive.

· *High Society* ·

On the morning of 15 December, a Haggerman's Market grocery sack containing 350 envelopes landed in the Possom Trot Post Office. This was the largest private mailing in the history of the Post Office, and the postmistress, Miss Schmidtke, was overwhelmed by the magnitude of it.

'How darling!' remarked Miss Schmidtke, holding up a specimen to the light. They were fragile, snow-white envelopes with silver filigree trim. She didn't ask about what was in the envelopes, because Wilma Wagoner told her all when she brought in the sack.

For that matter, Mrs Wagoner and the other members of the Vandermark Recital Planning Committee were breathless for days as they related the details of their Project Invitation. It had taken them two whole afternoons to complete. And the names they'd painstakingly inked onto the envelopes had left them shivering with excitement.

The mailing list in itself was a veritable Who's Who of notables in Kansas. Envelopes went to the Governor in Topeka, to Senator Dole in Russell, to three Congressmen, to Dr Proudie—the Methodist Bishop—and to the President of K-State and the Chancellor of KU. Envelopes were winging to the wealthiest families in the region and to the officers of every important arts council, DAR Chapter and Junior League between Kansas City and Denver (not to mention those to the lowly dance critics at the *Kansas City Star*, *Denver Post* and *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*).

By the time the Committee ladies finished inserting all the snow-white-and-silver cards into all the snow-white-and-silver envelopes, the mightiest people in 100,000 square miles had been graced with an invitation to attend a dance debut in Possom Trot on the evening of 11 January.

Needless to add, within twenty-four hours of this record-breaking mailing, Miss Schmidtke had shared the news with her own numerous friends. 'Plan on going early to that Vandermark recital' she warned, time and time again. 'All the best seats are already reserved for high society.'

• *Essay In Criticism* •

Albert and Saddletoe paid tribute to Sunday night with a long-standing habit. At ten, after Saddletoe finished his chores at the Methodist Church, the two met to share a bottle of gin. For this they gathered in the old man's room, that dreary abode at the back of the hotel, on the ground floor, just down the hall from the front desk.

Saddletoe merely liked gin—but for Albert it was his only free evening of the week. He looked forward to it as an escape from the thwack of pool cues, the endless selections on the jukebox—played too loudly—and the constant stink of malt. It was also his one chance to get clear of his mother, who he left in the bedroom above the bar huddled in a trance.

Principally, it gave the bartender an opportunity to talk, instead of listen. Throughout the week he listened to the point of exhaustion to the same men chewing on the same stories, troubles and philosophies. Albert needed a friend to hear what had happened to him during the past six days of his life, and even if the tale varied little week to week, it still demanded telling.

Over the gin, the two cafeteria glasses and the table, they faced each other. The fat one sagged into an avalanche of gut; the old one was carved out long and sharp.

Saddletoe's room had three windows opening onto the railroad tracks. The plastic curtains at the windows had not been washed since Saigon fell. The life of the room was summed up in the single iron bed, the solitary armchair, the broken stand-up radio.

The two friends sat on tubular steel folding chairs—backs stamped with 'P.T. METH. CHURCH'. Bending together, heads almost touching, at first glance they might have been a pair of odd lovers.

When Albert wore his favourite green sweater and yellow slacks—as he did every Sunday night—he resembled an exotic toad. Saddletoe wore the same khaki janitor's uniform he wore every day. It was as wrinkled as he was. His bald homely head gave him a buzzard look.

At the moment, the gin bottle and the glasses were dancing on the table. The table itself wobbled. Albert's gut bounced. Saddletoe's wattles wavered. The evening freight train was passing through town.

The evening freight train did nothing else in Possom Trot other than shake the Weaver Hotel. It hadn't stopped in thirty years.

The two waited stoically for the clamour to fade, for a long lorn whistle to sound as the train raced away across the High Plains.

When the final locomotive quake subsided, Albert continued.

'No now, that just ain't right. She is gonna be good, real good. I hear she may even gonna be great. That guy upstairs, he ain't here for nothing. If she ain't any good how come a fella like that's hanging around here?'

'Nope, can't be.' Saddletoe poured them each another glass. 'Take another look at her and then come back and tell me again what you just said.'

Saddletoe's grin, going directly over the tip of the bottle, was unabashedly mean. 'Drink your gin and don't bother about it. It ain't for us to figure out. We can't stop it or make it go away. Me, I'm gonna settle back and enjoy the fun.'

'No now, I'm not buying that. Not one bit of it. Possie Vandermark can dance. Bertie Flatbottom says so. Mr Lothar must be saying so. Everybody in town says so too. So there.'

To show his depth of feeling, Albert gobbled gin.

'She's going to come floating out like a big pink bubble,' he exclaimed. 'And I'll be sittin' on the front row for sure.'

'So's you can look up at her panties? Come on, Al, she's a horse. Horses can't dance. What's all this bubble shit anyway? Don't you got eyes? What'd people say if you put on your bathing suit and clowned around sticking your ass in their faces!'

Albert's expression told the old man that he'd said something wrong. The jowls hung scarlet. The nose puckered wet and abused. The fat man was sensitive about his size, particularly about his hips and buttocks—those blobs of unmusical flesh. Since childhood Albert had anguished over the omission of fat thighs on the images of crucified Christs—hadn't he suffered enough himself to have them put there?

He shouted at Saddletoe. 'OK, I bet you ten bucks she has 'em standing up by the end. I bet you another ten, old friend, that you don't know your you-know-what from a hole in the ground.'

The old man took his elbows off the table. He liked Albert too much to hurt his feelings over Possie Vandermark, but money was money.

'You're on! Twenty bucks it is. The only thing standing in that auditorium is gonna be your pecker. That girl's gonna fall flat on her pretty butt!'

The two stared at their cafeteria glasses. For the first time in many years a Sunday evening was being ruined by high words. This had not happened since their argument over Dr Henry Kissinger ('He is not a Kraut!' had stormed Albert; and in his anger Saddletoe had been led to pour the gin down the toilet).

After a pause for drinking, Saddletoe prepared himself to mumble an apology. He even opened his mouth for that purpose. But instead the room was suddenly engulfed by a heavy and menacing tide of running water.

The ceiling of the old man's room seethed with grinding joints and blurting pipes. A trickle of water sprang to life directly above them. It came from a piss-coloured stain. The bucket beside Albert's chair caught some of the leak.

Jumping to his feet in a rage, the old man shook his fist at the ceiling. 'You goddam Wop!' he screamed. 'I hope you sizzle your balls!'

Albert staggered up as well. 'Leave him alone! He's paying more to stay here than the dump's worth!'

That did it. Stony-eyed as an Old Testament prophet, Saddletoe marched the gin bottle to the bathroom.

The booze was splashed into the bowl, every last drop of it. It was a thin tinkle compared to the deluge coming from upstairs.

For benediction, Saddletoe flushed the bowl. Adding to the drama of the moment, the plumbing overhead also stilled itself.

Then indeed there would have followed a fateful pause, the friends jammed glowering at each other into the tiny space of the bathroom. However, over the usual rheumatic creaks of the Weaver, the men heard something extraordinary. They turned amazed.

‘What in hell’s that?’ growled Saddletoe.

‘Maybe it’s the bell?’ whispered Albert.

Someone was actually in the lobby, leaning on the service bell.

The old man throttled air with the empty bottle and charged for the hall door. ‘If it’s that faggoty midget parading around in his towel and bitchin’ about the hot water then he’s in for it. I’m gonna bop him with this here bottle!’

‘No, you ain’t neither!’ bleated Albert, already trembling in an effort to move fast. ‘You won’t touch him long as I’m around!’

To keep the old man’s back in view he had to jog. In his haste he stumbled into the hallway and jelloed against the wall, bouncing off with a high, tense giggle.

But Albert did get down the hall, breasts wobbling freely, and in as close to a trot as anything he’d managed in years.

• *More Magi* •

The lobby shone unrecognizable. Pale lights suffused the gloom. The shabbiness had been vanquished. Neither man, riveted in place, remembered the greasy chairs or the expanse of carpet torn and frayed, growing unruly tentacles. Even the doomsday Christmas tree waxed greener, more like an idol of fertility.

Most powerfully, the smell of the place had been transformed. Stench of mildew, hair oil, cigar butts, stale odours of heating ducts and dirty linen—all were dissipated by the essence of molasses, the aromatics of a Hollywood springtime, by the provocative and moist flavourings of cheap women.

Four women sprawled in delicate languor over the face of the Weaver Hotel lobby. A fifth, their commander, maintained a scarlet-nailed finger on the nipple of the service bell.

Effortlessly, the scarlet fingernail raised, pointed.

‘You! Saddletoe! You’re just as slow and evil as ever! These girls been freezing their tails here, unloved, for an eternity.’

Albert posed, mouth open, tongue lodged between his teeth.

The old man was slapping himself silly and doubling up with glee.

‘What the hell, Eglantine ...’ He danced in a circle, ‘I thought you was in jail!’

The girls on the sofa, none of them looking particularly cold or young, continued as before. Valerie pouted, filing her nails. Latisha turned another page of the paperback romance she held in her lap. Lilly lit a cigarette and blew the first billow.

Sitting sidesaddle on the arm, Eloise twitched, nervously alert, scanning the world with impressive and deadpan eyes.

‘*Oui, maman!*’ enthused Eloise, bird-bright but off-key. ‘As I said, nothing here has changed. The old man looks just as he did. His friend too. And if Papa Mat would come ...’

‘Quiet, dear. Let the dead rest.’ The grand white figure trembled, as if hidden springs were in gear. Mechanized like a Pasadena float, Madame Eglantine swept from front desk to sofa, a procession unto herself.

Madame raised her heavy, perfumed arm and swept that too, a magic wand across the scene of the lobby. ‘Enough of that crap. I ain’t gonna—rather, I am not going to weep. I’ve come back to relive a happy past.’

‘Oh, brother!’ Lilly groaned to the ceiling and belched more smoke. The others remained engrossed in their own pursuits. Eloise, for example, pinned her eyes on the progress of a large black cockroach through the dust on the floor.

The insect scurried along at the base of the front desk. When it stopped, the girl started. When it twirled its feelers and pressed on, she wiggled with excitement.

'*Blatta germanica*,' she explained.

Albert rolled another step closer, like a beach ball, and remembered to close his mouth. On the few occasions he'd been permitted to see these women they had appeared as now, grouped in a strange formation, behaving in very unusual and disturbing ways.

Once before he'd seen them in the lobby, that of a warm summer night with the ceiling fans beating the air in admiration. Like others in Possom Trot, he'd spied on them as they promenaded down Commercial Street en route to the Vandermark house. He'd also caught glimpses of them lounging at tables in the Igloo or hanging out the windows of their rooms above—shoulders naked, hair streaming, unforgettable.

But not he, not any man in town, fully comprehended these brilliant, fragrant, fairytale women—women who were not at all attractive except together. For that reason always together. Grouped as now, side by side, like mangled flowers in a pretty arrangement.

Lilly was skinny and bumpy. Latisha had many large teeth. Valerie, finest of them, was built in barmaid style, thick and hairy. Only Eloise showed a dancer's body, although her skin would turn green on stage.

Sickly Eloise—of the small head and ruthless eyes her ears, dear little cauliflowers, protruded even through her hair.

Among them, Madame Eglantine was the thick ribbon holding the stems together. She intimidated Albert greatly, being robust and hearty and knowing. She did carry herself with an almighty pride. She was assured of her high colour, her cathedral of peroxidized hair, of her fire-blue eyes and china-doll cheeks. She was ample of ass and tit.

Saddletoe beamed at her benevolently. 'We just poured a pint of gin into the stool, but I got a bottle of Ancient Age squirreled away. Albert here'll help you in with the bags. I'm gonna go get that bottle.'

A wind of interest stirred among the flowers on the sofa. Madame eased her grandeur down into a sitting position. With a whoop, the old man skipped back down the hall, leaving his fat friend to face the women alone.

Albert tried smiling, remembering how his mother always said that he wouldn't get hurt if he remembered to smile.

Madame eyed him dubiously, a naked appraisal, and as if he were less than fresh.

'We do have a load. The make-up freezes, you know, if we don't get it all in. Let's see ... Lilly has sores ... Valerie's not speaking to us this evening ... Not Eloise. Latisha, it must be your turn. Help this kind burgher in with our things.'

Sad-faced Latisha closed her book, tried to close her lips over her teeth.

'Pour me a glass,' she grunted. 'Don't none of you steal it neither.' She motioned Albert to come along.

The process of moving in took considerable time, although the little party in the lobby paid it no heed.

Saddletoe wielded the bottle of whisky, sitting on the floor close enough to put his hands on a feminine knee whenever the urge arose.

Madame sat enthroned above him, aglow and sharply in focus, at centre stage as always. Her laughter rocked the lobby. When she moved it was like a lamp in motion. As the booze flowed she spread her knees further and further apart. This permitted her old friend on the floor to have a peek into heaven as well.

Honourably, one full glass was set aside for Latisha. It was placed like a chalice beside the registration book on the front desk.

After a drink. Lilly and Valerie tried to sing a song but forgot the words (their favourite: 'I Won't Dance, Don't Make Me'). Eloise kept careful watch for cockroaches.

Saddletoe became a withered pasha, grinning and leering.

Madame flushed rosy.

'Bone-apple-tit!' roared Madame Eglantine and raised her glass. 'Let's drink one to Mathew ... I miss that son of a bitch!'

They all drank.

Madame sighed. 'Come on, Saddletoe, keep pouring the booze. And tell us some jokes. We sure do need a good joke. It's a hard road they gave us to go, that's for sure ...'

'Yeah, all the way back to Wichita.'

Madame ignored Lilly's aside, jaundiced smoke rings spiralled.

Madame's glass raised again, almost empty now. 'And here's one to that kid of Mat's ...' The glass emptied down the powdered throat.

'The one enchanted!' proclaimed Eloise in a rather deep voice. She did not move her head from where it lay on Valerie's shoulder.

The others ignored her, accustomed as they were to the incomprehensible.

Forgoing the glasses now, Saddletoe passed round the bottle of Ancient Age. The women swigged from it in turn. He took the opportunity to snake a finger up between Lilly's knees.

'Guess you wouldn't be here if you hadn't heard the news.' The old man gave Madame his sexiest wink. 'It's true. The whole town's taking it in the ass and beggin' for more.'

Eglantine shot meaningful glances at her girls, urging them to look sharp, listen and take note. Each turn of the bottle, they were perking up, blooming with their stems in whisky.

'We did hear something to that effect ... So little Possie is now a dancer, right?' She stopped to extricate gently the old man's hand from under Lilly's dress.

‘Yea, and she still ain’t shaped to wear her what-ya-call-it.’ Saddletoe fondled Madame’s calf instead.

‘Tootoot, to the profession, instructed Madame Eglantine.

‘Whatever,’ continued Saddletoe. ‘But what you don’t know is this little Eyetalian she’s got stashed away upstairs. He’s supposed to be a dancer too. Him and her gonna give the world a demonstration here next month.’

A titter broke low and musical from the sofa.

‘Yep, you got it. She’s as clumsy as ever. She’s got the two damnedest left feet in the state.’

Lilly’s chortle passed down the chain of flowers until the whole bunch was guffawing. Madame herself rippled like an entire field of daisies.

‘And this greaser thinks he’s a real rooster,’ crowed the old man. ‘And Bertha Dowell’s got all the old biddies making decorations and looking up French words in their dictionaries!’

Tears of amusement dribbled in Madame’s powder, coagulating in her dimples. Only Eloise sat silent and morose, waiting for the others to calm down.

But Madame Eglantine’s fit of laughter passed as quickly as it had struck.

‘Are you listening, girls!’

Such a tone, from such a woman, would make anyone pay attention. The flowers turned towards the sun obediently.

‘Perhaps we will do a little business with this Italian of yours.’

‘He’s a jerk,’ Saddletoe informed her, planting a quick kiss on her kneecap.

‘Business is business, old friend. We’ll see, we’ll just have to wait and see.’

At that she discreetly lowered her voice. Albert had come puffing into the lobby, carrying an electric hot-plate and accompanied by a blast of refrigerator air. The cold front rattled every piece of costume jewellery in the room.

Madame smiled at him encouragingly—she would have been good with native bearers.

As Madame Eglantine left her middle years behind, she filled out in ways that were new to her admirers. But white, her chosen colour, took the weight in stride—she wore white exclusively these days, white dresses, white hats and shoes, even a pair of white gloves.

‘Maman!’ drawled Eloise. ‘I do not like these cockroaches! I won’t sleep with them. They are too severe. This one reminds me of an old priest!’

‘Hush, dear. You shouldn’t make a fuss.’ Madame blew a kiss and waved the bottle as Albert passed.

Albert winced and almost dropped the hot-plate. Eloise clapped her hands.

Saddletoe sat indifferent, deeply impressed with what he could see by lifting Valerie's skirt up another inch, holding it with gentle aplomb between thumb and forefinger.

'Hot damn,' raved the old man.

• *Blessed Are the Feet* •

An old Volkswagen camper stood outside in the crushed snow. It was parked under the single streetlight, halfway up on the sidewalk in front of the Weaver. Against the snow it shone a dirty nicotine colour. It had been seriously bruised and hammered.

At one time in the long-forgotten past, someone had plastered the vehicle with dayglo flower decals. The same hand presumably had also painted the ungainly lettering along both sides: ‘Madame Eglantine’s Great Western Troupe’.

Albert kept no record of how many trips he made back and forth from the camper. He was in the cold one minute, then again into the hothouse lobby. He trudged repeatedly up the stairs, down the long hallway—into one room to deposit a bag, into another with a trunk. The rooms were small and repellent.

Alternately his head cleared with sharp night air, was seduced by perfume and Madame’s dazzling presence (nods in effect saying, ‘Surely now, that must be the last of it’), and then offended by the stench of dry rot upstairs.

His fat began melting around him. The strapping Latisha would give no respite. She handled the heaviest suitcase like a drugged bell-hop.

Following her hypnotic rump up and down the stairs made him quite dizzy. He also reeled back in shame each time they burst in from the street, laden with baggage, snow on their soles, cold at their backs—seeing how they disgusted the others, those warm ones on the sofa. Every time he and Latisha made it up to the top of the stairs he wanted to beg for a rest; the grim mademoiselle humbled him to silence.

Upstairs, all lay dark and silent. The hall light had burned out the year before. The light-bulbs had been stolen from the rooms where they left the luggage. They worked to the ember gleam of the fire-exit sign at the rear of the corridor, and to the glow emanating from under the Dancing Master’s closed door, light fanning in a golden mist across the hallway floor.

On the fourth trip up, it suddenly dawned on Albert that someone should stop and explain to the Dancing Master what all this commotion meant.

The very next pass-by, feeling quite resentful after another round of stairs, Albert did halt to knock. He primly set down the two hairdryers beside his feet, sighed, mopped his steaming brow, smoothed his hair with a sopping hand.

Albert rapped timidly. Nothing came in response. He bided the moment, taking a nice rest.

Next he used his knuckles. Nothing.

Albert put his mouth to the door and called softly.

‘Mr Lothar? It’s me. It’s Albert from Albert’s Bar.’ Under his breath he added, ‘Poor little fella ...’

In the vague reaches beyond the door he at last detected something, which made him think of how his mother sounded during an asthma attack.

Latisha swang by, crushing herself against the far wall in order to make it around him. She gave an accusing scowl and kicked pointedly at the hairdryers. ‘Those go in the far room.’

‘Yes, of course they do. Coming right along. Yes, I am.’ With that the fat man turned in confusion.

At the same moment, the door jerked open.

‘Why do you persecute me!’ The Dancing Master peered raging into the hallway. He was naked except for a towel clutched indifferently over his erogenous zone. Water dripped from him onto the floor; delicate feet shed tepid puddles.

To Albert he was stunning-black curls knotted to the skull, black hair plastered to the legs and chest. The hips and thighs and sinewy abdomen reminded him of those in the underwear ads he kept hidden in the bottom of his cash register till.

‘What do you want with me? Who sent you?’

While the angry little man thundered, behind him in a frame the hotel room steamed.

Albert couldn’t help admiring the large lump under the towel.

Recounted time and again, over the bar, this became accepted canon– ‘hung like a Louisville slugger’.

‘Do you think I give autographs in the nude? Have you come to interview me in my bathtub?’ Lothar raised an eyebrow, shooting bolts in either direction down the hallway.

The towel slipped an inch. Albert caught his breath, hoping it might yet fall to the floor.

‘Oh, yes, Mr Lothar!’ squealed Albert. ‘I mean, I just wanted to explain the noise out here. That’s all, just to say howdy and tell you about the noise ...’

‘But I do not give “That” for your stupid noises! Nothing here is worth listening to!’ Snapping fingers, dilating nostrils, flaring eyes.

Albert almost swooned.

‘And to your concern–NO! I am not to be said “howdy” to. I am not, I am not, I am not! No one in this village may say “howdy” to me!’

‘But Madame Eglantine is here,’ lisped Albert. ‘She and the girls have returned. They’re here now. That’s what we’re doing, moving them in ...’

‘Who! What! Don’t mumble! None of you makes sense!’

‘The ballerinas are back.’ Albert said it simply. He was very excited. Never before had he ever imagined himself in such a position, telling a nude Dancing Master that the ballerinas had returned.

‘The hell you say! Get away from my door!’

With that the door slammed shut. The resonance vibrated Albert into a bow–he would have curtsied if his hams had permitted.

Darkness in the hallway again, a fan of golden light, a devil-eyed ‘EXIT’ light in the distance. Only the puddle on the floor remained as proof of what had just transpired. Albert revered the puddle.

How thrilling. He’d just talked to the Dancing Master, been shown a glimpse of his stout legs and bare torso. He had been selected to bring the Dancing Master the most important news. For the first time in his life, he had stood in the glare of the great world, touched an edge of its stage, of that which held Possom Trot in the palm of its hand.

In amazement, Albert considered how his hometown was now the only one in Kansas with five ballerinas, a great Dancing Master, and a star falling every night–God’s truth about the stars, he’d heard the men talking about it for a week now.

Yes, something strange was happening in Possom Trot.

Albert swelled on it, ecstatic, even as he struggled on with the hairdryers in tow.

A small slice of the mystery had just been revealed, and to him—to Albert. So moved was the fat man that he spoke of it aloud, to Latisha who had just come grunting up behind him with an exercise bike.

‘It’s all because of Possie Vandermark,’ bubbled Albert. ‘Why, it’s just like the Shepherds and the Wise Men finding the Baby Jesus!’

• *The Night Has Eyes* •

And all the while, outside the hotel, across Commercial Street, down in the cold and snow, Bertha Flatbottom Dowell stood watch. The little woman lurked amid the ruins of the former Western Tire and Supply Store—a rubble-strewn gap in the post-rock facade of the business district.

She'd taken position at the side wall of Albert's Bar, concealed there from the pathetic puddles of Christmas lights. She huddled in one of Willy's overcoats. Binocular cups bored into her eyesockets.

In the deep of a snowy Sunday night she feared no detection and could concentrate through the binoculars with all her might.

Sometimes she trained the glasses like siege guns on the street level scene, sometimes on the gooey glow of the Weaver lobby.

'Good enough!' she commented, watching Albert and Latisha struggling with the luggage. 'The more the merrier!'

Her constant companion on the street was the forlorn VW camper.

'Grrrrr, you swine!' seethed Aunt Bertha when the lobby door opened and Madame Eglantine's laughter trilled to the street like a cold-air aria.

Most of the time, however, Bertha fixed her binoculars on a particular upstairs window, on the pulled blind of the Dancing Master's very own hotel room.

'Here I am ... down here,' moaned Bertha to that furtive emanation.

She didn't feel the cold when staring at his room light—nor fatigue, nor any fear of the utter darkness and emptiness that enveloped her.

An occasional shadow flitted behind the blind, teasing her.

She pressed angrily against the frigid brick. She ground her heels into the slippery rubble. Her neck craned forward, lips convulsively twitching, breath scorching the air. Her claws gripped the binoculars without pity. Her eye-slits X-rayed through the lenses.

But the vigil was worthwhile. For one fleeting moment—upon which she hung a lifetime of desire—she did catch sight of a nondescript piece of human anatomy flashing through a tatter in the blind.

To that vision, she purred. In that second of excitement, she arched her back.

'Don't let the bed bugs bite!' spat Aunt Bertha when at last his light went out.

• *Moments of Inspiration* •

‘Golden Urana!’ shrieked the television chorus. ‘Makes your wheat grow higher and higher. Makes your wheat stand strong and true.’

Since dusk, Possie had moped in front of the TV, on the studio floor, in her bra and panties.

‘Lazy, lazy blood,’ she scolded. A grand lethargy possessed her back and legs. Her beautiful eyes were nothing but two tiny television screens.

‘I’m all right, sure thing,’ she told herself, when the guilt returned, taking a sharp nip at her. ‘Everybody gets time off for good behaviour. Tomorrow I’ll work all day. Yes, I will!’

To prove it, she tensed her legs, pink skin marshmallowed with muscle.

The glow she felt like a drug. It held her in warm water. She’d been swimming through it all evening, drinking Grain Belt and nibbling cheese.

The television yakked at her, unimportant but sociable.

Only the mood meant something to her. It kept her company on a lonely night. It was sexy too, just like lying alongside Franklin.

First time for them had been in the bed of his pick-up, on a dirt road that led nowhere. They’d parked underneath an I-70 overpass ten miles north of town, out where the great Federal highway system rode the crest of the Smoky Hills, and where no one lived.

Spring sky had been eclipsed by overhanging girders—for her like looking up at the private parts of a bridge. Nothing had disturbed them, except the overhead roar of engines and tyres, which made her think instead of enormous animals rushing together, making heaven and earth.

The blanket hadn’t done a thing for the harshness of the truck bed. Franklin had been hard too, and heavy as a bull.

‘I just lay there so soft and small. I lay between him and the truck, between the bridge and the dirt road, between the people travelling overhead and the people dead in the ground. Between sky and earth, between Kansas City and Denver ...’

Her mind boggled at the galaxies. She shrank it back to the size of the TV set.

It told her, ‘The Late Show has been brought to you in part by the Vandermark Feed Lot in Possom Trot, where you get more than service. You get friendly folks who are concerned about keeping their customers satisfied.’

Along with the voice appeared a colour still of feeding cattle.

The girl smelled it. Strong it was, as if she actually stood in it again.

Her little cowboy boots were rimmed in cowshit. The stink soaked up into her jeans and cowboy shirt. Horseflies strafed her.

But she was running free, loving all of it, stomping in the cow pies, splashing in the mud, ignoring Daddy every time he called for her to stop.

She lashed the flies. The cattle stared at her in surprise over their feed troughs.

Earth sucked at her, a thousand Herefords pressed forward, big men watched her every move. They were Daddy's ranch hands. They stood knotted at the core of the world, holding up the scene on their broad shoulders, keeping it safe for her, she who ran about them strange as a princess in a feed lot.

Daddy's men drank beer and spat. They smoked cigarettes without filters. Their fingers were sallow with nicotine. They smelled of cattle and horses. She sniffed them cautiously, enjoying them, relishing their naked smells.

'Fat-legged little shit, isn't she,' Daddy proudly declared. And tobacco smoke went up into incense—plumes circling in the sky that cupped her heart in its bowl.

So amazing, how those big men did exactly what Daddy told them to.

'But I didn't!' shouted Possie.

From the TV: 'Our Minute of Inspiration tonight will be delivered by Reverend Howard Sanders of the First United Methodist Church of Possom Trot.'

Possie wiggled her toes at the familiar face. 'Hiya, Howard!'

The middle-aged gentleman with the worried eyes had lost the place where he'd been told to look. He stared fearfully into space and not into the camera.

'Help him, you jerks! I bet he's home right now watching himself!'

But nothing changed on screen, except that the preacher began. 'Don't we modern people wonder whatever happened to all those miracles the Bible is filled with? Just think of a few that real folks like you and me experienced. There's the burning bush that flared in Moses's face. There's Joshua's trumpet and the walls of Jericho. Remember Jonah? Elizabeth too! We can't forget how her belly blossomed for the Lord.'

Reverend Sanders coughed, turning his head politely and covering his mouth with a hand. He faced squarely into the camera, which picked up his grimace of fear. He turned back to stare again into the unseen.

'We Christians also love to hear about Jesus and how he fed the multitude with sssseven fishes and sssseven loaves of bread. He walked on water and arose from the tomb to be our dear Lord and SSSSaviour.'

That first time when Franklin ejaculated she'd felt the truck itself shudder, the bridge too, and the sky, and the earth. They had all come together. It all spilled into her. And then it had been utter jubilation—Franklin grinding his stubble into her cheek, the tyres rolling like cello strings overhead, sparrows flitting out from the nests they'd built among the girders.

But then, scaredy-cat Franklin had gotten into a rush to pull his pants on, and she'd not been able to stop him. Not even when she beckoned to him and said, 'Come on. No one can see us. I want to try that again!'

The Reverend continued. 'Why is it that we modern people don't have hands writing messages across our living room walls, or get to talk to angels when we're out back hanging up the clothes to dry? Why aren't there any wheels turning in the sky over our windmills?'

She had been just as hurt and disappointed when they buried Daddy. She'd asked the ranch hands to carry the coffin, thinking it would be sort of like a Viking funeral, Kansas-style. But the ranch hands had struggled clumsily with the coffin. They'd looked old and helpless. Standing with them at the grave, she'd suddenly known for sure that no one was ever going to hold up the sky for her again. Nothing but her own shoulders would do the job.

‘We modern folks have a way it ssssseems of doubting God just because none of these wonderful experiences come our way. We never ssssstop to think that maybe what we need first is to have a miracle inside of us.’

Evidently, the preacher had just been given his time cue. In a panic he raced on, dropping punctuation in a rout.

‘What place have we left to be alone with our Maker and see His world as it really is—Don’t we crowd out miracles—What with newspapers clocks alcohol drugs make-up ssss socialism television ...’

Reverend Sanders continued, mouth working, hands raised fervently, but they had taken away his sound. Instead, that invisible voice, weary of weather reports, returned. ‘Thank you, Reverend ...’

The girl on the floor hugged herself and whimpered. Shadows were gathering around her. In alarm, she watched them coming.

Her green eyes burned with the knowledge that there were no more memories to bind her, nothing to shield her from the dancing, from the fate stalking her.

‘Shit,’ she mourned. ‘I sure do need a miracle inside me! Yes, I do indeed.’

All around the studio, the bright mirrors caught her mood change. Ten Possies tensed, faces in agony, legs cramped, hearts breaking.

‘What a worthless night!’ screamed Possie. She threw an empty beer can at the television screen. The image pitched and rolled.

· NATIVE RITES ·

Beyond New Year's, the town changed again. Trimmings were pulled down. Coloured lights were unplugged. The houses returned to normal, the streets lost their spectacle, and no more stars twinkled out of time and place, courtesy of Kansas Power & Light.

A general despondency settled over the rooftops. Albert washed the 'Merry Xmas' off the mirror over the bar. Saddletoe threw out the Christmas tree. Reverend Sanders watched the living creche wander away piece by piece.

All over Possom Trot, wrappings and ribbons and dead conifers—trailing sorry shreds of tinsel—heaped high the trash burners. The Methodists, as was their wont, organized a tree-burning party in Haggerman's parking lot. Christmas trees were brought in on the bed of a grain truck, to be deposited in a large pyre. When the tinder-dry trees went up, blazing on the evening of Epiphany Sunday, a feeble cheer also burned to ashes.

Even the Methodist youth who handled the burning of the green seemed rather listless at the prospect of a long, arduous winter. Their pastor, shepherding them, caught the feeling and shook his head sadly, thinking of how the church never had managed to do without its pagan customs.

People hung their new calendars and settled back for months of uninterrupted gloom. Normally, nothing at all occurred to enliven the scene until spring, until Easter. Nothing.

But, this year there was something. The people of Prairie Dog County, most of them at least, dutifully consulted their clean and virgin calendars, mindful of a particular night in January.

They reserved the night of Possie Vandermark's Dance Recital.

The event was not easy to forget, particularly since seventy-five per cent of the calendars in use in the County came compliments of one of the following businesses: The Vandermark Oil Co., The Possom Trot Milling Co., The Prairie Dog County Stock and Feed Co., or the Farmers and Drovers State Bank.

Thoughtfully, Aunt Bertha had ordered those calendars—printed with Vandermark money as they were—to be red-lettered on the date with 'Dance Recital—7.30 Vand. Aud.'

• *Pas de Trois* •

In a fit of temperament, Lothar wrung his hands at the studio ceiling. The cupids there leered down at him, mocking him from their perches among the foliage of scrolls and flowers. They were obscene cupids, horrible pink butterballs, the work of a deranged WPA artist.

For courage he retrieved his baton from the music stand. Mincing angry steps echoed in the silent studio. He would lash these women with his baton. He would whip them like dull oxen. The white baton quivered, cutting through the air.

‘Your piano, *matrona*, needs contradiction. Do you need to stare at me? No! Think of your music! ... Your feet, *signorina*, are impossible. Young woman, stand like this! Do not slouch. If you dance like that join the circus. *Avanti!*’

He would make them obey him. They lacked rhythm and design. They lacked ideas. He would drive the roughness out of them. When they suffered for him it was good. That was their purification—no more crudeness and barbarism.

‘Step. Step. Step. No! You fool!’ He danced energy and passion.

The women cowered. They were dumbfounded as he bullied them with his breath, rattled them with his baton, thrust and heaved.

Possie struggled to do his bidding. She bit her lips and occasionally yelped in pain. Sweat spattered the floor. Consciousness was slipping away from her, growing as large as the continent—she no longer touched its confines.

But the Dancing Master knew only of his own shame and desperation.

‘Little pig—wee, wee, wee. Dance! Do you know the word? Start again. From the beginning. Music, Mrs Dowell. I do not want dry kernels or nuts rattling. If you have intelligence, use it!’

‘Oh, please,’ wailed the girl, her head sagging, the great shoulders slumping.

‘Please who?’ He charged at her again, the little man shaking her into a spin. ‘Please me! Like this and this and this!’

He soared over her head. He made the studio turn on its toes. The cupids sang.

‘Look in the mirror. I order you, look ... And what do you see? Nothing! Too much and too little! You are chaos and confusion. I will not have it. I will remake you!’

The baton set both women on again, eyes bulging, breathless and contorted.

Flames at Possie’s heels. Her body smoked like burning grass no more decorous plumes or mysterious shadows. Degas’ ballerinas glared at her.

She called to the Dancing Master for help. She called to Daddy. She pleaded for the others to come as well, the great ones who ran with the light, whose make-up never smeared. None of them would help. Instead, they leaped with the Dancing Master. Whispering in her ears, they echoed his voice. Their tongues were slivers of glass.

No one came to rescue her. They were destroying her.

Silently, she was a burnt offering rushing towards water.

‘Wee, wee, wee. Dance like a girl!’

‘Please ...’

‘Please who? Please me! Dance!’

They were dancing into a blackout. Possie saw the light ebbing from around them, afraid of them, retreating in the heat and running down the walls. She groped in her mind, fighting gravity.

‘Did I say to stop, signorina? I did not. You have not earned a rest. Where is the music? I demand music!’ His voice rolled on and on as if drunk.

Aunt Bertha clutched at the keys. Her fingers pounded and she guessed they would be permanently disfigured, flattened at the ends like spatulas. Notes blurred before her. Her tongue lolled. But she played on, driving the girl before her.

When he jabbed the baton at her, Bertha wanted to suck on it. It inspired her. It enabled her to torture the girl with music. Note after note, each one struck was a pin punched into the dancer’s body. Fingers clawed at piano keys but they were actually ripping through human skin.

‘Are you beating a tin drum? Are you the monkey at the grinder? What do you think you are doing at the piano?’

Bertha moaned at the pleasure of his voice. How sopping wet her panties were becoming! Pleasure trickled between her legs.

‘Flooded! oh, yes, yes!’ she whispered. When he slashed with his baton and kicked at the girl, she treasured the beauty of his buttocks rolling in tights.

‘Flooded!’

Bertha leaned forward as far as she could, spreading her knees and twisting her bottom back and forth over the stool. Fingers spidered in and out of the music, tying it in knots around the girl’s throat. Every time the man shouted, to Bertha it was a cry of passion. Every time he danced, she came closer and closer to orgasm.

‘No more ugliness!’ whimpered Aunt Bertha. ‘No more pain. No more shit!’ Her feet pumped iron, fists pummelled ivory, panties squeashed contrapuntal.

Lothar, himself, had stepped beyond law or justice. It was, he knew, a brilliant performance he gave. He gloried in it—the fury, the cruelty, the honesty. Their corruption lay exposed at last. He had uncovered it to the sun like a nest of snakes.

Strutting to the piano, he banged his baton on the lid. Whirling round, he charged and screamed at Possie.

Bertha yelped out loud and broke a fingertip on middle C.

Possie shuddered and dripped, the body stocking hanging on her wet with sweat, no longer crimson. Her nipples showed through the material. Her skin turned blue. Glazed-eyed, she trailed bloody smears on the floor.

She couldn’t make sense out of the studio any more. The mirrors swirled around her so that even when she stood still they continued on like a rollercoaster. The Dancing Master as well, from so many outbursts, from so much dazzling movement, had become something else. He’d become dangerous.

Instinctively, she began to resist. Lothar, Aunt Bertha, the piano, the house—feebly, she denied their power over her. At first she sorted out nothing but disconnected visions—of grass, rangeland, a long and undulating horizon, a fiery sun. These she held up close to her eyes, like figures of saints. They coalesced.

Immediately, one of her feet turned away from the path it had been following. Momentarily, it broke the pattern. For a mere second it swang free, flourishing itself, a gesture that broke up the dance. Her foot teased the Dancing Master.

Lothar shouted in her ear. ‘What was that! I saw that! I forbid you to do that again!’

The blasting voice, his smell, his presence, the little body pitched to full frequency—it almost made her faint, as if every dancer in the world, on every practice floor, had also turned, pointed and bellowed. Contritely she forced herself on.

But again the same foot broke free.

‘No, don’t,’ she pleaded with it. ‘Please wait, you’ll have a turn.’ And her foot listened and waited.

Whenever the Dancing Master turned his back, whenever he talked to Bertha or swept off into his own spins and flutters, then the foot rebelled.

Now a hand joined it, furtively. Now the other foot. Now a hip. Now a shoulder. The rebellion spread, secretively.

‘You ask for a rest? Why? You have been lazy and dull today. Only good students may rest. The Great Marano allowed no loafers.’ Caught up in his own glory, Lothar did not notice the sly movements of her hands and feet. The revolution continued but he saw only error and imperfection.

Righteously, he raised his hands in supplication to the cupids.

‘What do you think of your musical ability, Mrs Dowell? Do you think of excrement? You should. The Master would have rapped your knuckles and sent you home in tears by now. I am a lesser man, but I warn you. You must do better!’

Bertha tittered in delight, rubbing herself furiously. She gloated over the blood on the floor.

‘Look at her feet!’ screeched Aunt Bertha, unable to contain herself. ‘She’s bleeding. I love, love, love it.’

‘How dare you bleed, signorina!’ stormed the Dancing Master in an *Il Duce* voice. ‘You are not good enough to suffer. Nothing you do merits punishment.’

Possie’s head rolled with his tirade. The red curls seemed to be squeezing her mind into a ball. She nodded at him, mouth gaping wide.

‘Continue! I order you!’ he was raving now. ‘What right have you to complain, you who would humiliate me in public. You who would hang me up for all to scorn!’

‘Dance!’ woofed Bertha from the piano. Flecks of foam gathered at the corners of her mouth.

But Possie’s insurgent foot refused to obey. She mutinied. The errant hand shot up straight over her head. It waved at the rest of her, a banner to lead the masses on.

‘Stop me, please make it stop happening. Don’t you see what it’s doing!’ She pleaded to the others in the room.

They did not understand.

‘Ha! Dance, ballerina, dance, dance, dance.’ Bertha was getting close now.

‘Go on, signorina ... Step. Step. Here is no place for playing games.’

‘Help me!’ The red hair stood on end. Green eyes rolled in a violent wave.

‘Dance, you two! I’m almost there!’ Bertha bent double, her haunches frantic.

‘Mrs Dowell!’ His voice cracked. The room heaved. He knew that the cupids were tumbling down around them.

‘Possie ...’

‘Help!’

‘Dance, you two!’

Possie escaped completely then. Her feet kicked like a mule’s. She spread her arms like wings. She wiggled her hips wildly. She scampered about the studio utterly out of control.

‘Stop!’ squeaked Lothar. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ In consternation, and some dread, he stepped back into the clutches of the spider—one step too close to the piano.

‘Let me do it!’ Aunt Bertha gave no heed to the running girl. She laid strong hands on the Dancing Master’s hips and pulled him to her. In the same motion she leaned around and buried her head in his crotch.

A flash of red. A sizzle of flying sweat. The galloping comet passed them by. The house shook. Possie ran by rendering a perfect meadowlark call.

‘Back! Back, you witch!’ In his panic, Lothar drummed both fists on Bertha’s head. He knocked her off the stool.

Even there she clutched at him, grabbing one slippered foot, bathing it in her tears, trying to dry it off with strands of her dishevelled hair.

‘Get up and play,’ he hissed. ‘Play or I won’t ever touch you again!’ He gave her a parting kick and sprang into pursuit.

As Possie passed again he tried vainly to catch her. He clutched an armful of hot air.

Behind him one woman wept, tears splashing on the piano keys, demonic chords banging at his heart.

Before him darted the other, a bleeding, capering prize.

‘Calm yourself, Pussy Cat,’ his hands fluttered hysterically. ‘Listen to me. Stop and rest ...’

The girl whooped. She jumped a good six feet, slid on her slippers.

‘We will now take a break ... perhaps we should stop for the day, no? ... Regard yourself! Is this dancing?’

The girl humped and jittered, coming down holding her breasts in her hands.

Now the piano thundered a hymn of Armageddon. Notes pitched like boulders. Bertha was stomping on the keys with both arms.

‘Both of you stop this! I command it! Give me “Clair de Lune” ... I will have five perfect de Medicis, Miss Vandermark. Give me at least twenty Louis Quinze. Do you hear me?’

Possie thundered, lifted off, gave the house the finger as she broke the sound barrier.

The Dancing Master began to chase the girl around the room. A folding chair collapsed, the oriental screen folded and crashed on its side. The two rampaged in perfect harmony. He went leaping, with elegant asides. She romped in ecstatic hops.

Passing the piano, he said, 'Play, bitch! Don't just pound!'

Possie eluded him. She whinnied and pawed. When his arms shot out to enfold her she positively gleamed in her freedom, bolting him with green lightning. All around her in the mirrors there were wild things grimacing and fleeing.

In a spectacular manoeuvre, Lothar lurched off-balance and swang down upon her with all his weight, coming down in a swan dive and catching her by the shoulders.

Fierce as the girl was, he managed to hold on.

Possie had been trapped in a half-crouch. She bucked in a frenzy, showing the whites of her eyes. She shuddered convulsively.

'Play ... slowly ...' Lothar spat the words between clenched teeth. His face set into coarse and furious lines.

'I will now teach our rebel ... I will teach her to obey ...'

Even as she shoved and jerked he could feel his mastery gaining over her. To hold her down took all his strength.

'Listen to the music ... You are to listen and obey!'

The will to resist left her. Her legs spread out beneath her like a coIt's.

'Kiss the floor, signorina ...' He pushed down her steaming head. He forced her deeper and deeper into a split, holding her to a few inches from the floor.

'Further!'

She was locked in position. Her hair licked the floor. Stunned upside-down eyes blinked uncomprehendingly. Her bottom slowly stretched the body stocking to its limits. She sank further and further.

Assured of his victory, he straightened and stepped back to admire his work.

The Dancing Master could see nothing of her now except that strained material, the powerful legs spreading, haunches rising invitingly towards him, the buttocks looming larger, rounder, more amazing with each passing second. The great urge was to reach out and touch them, to rub himself against them.

'Down,' he whispered to her, voice thick with longing.

From the piano Bertha watched the pantomime. The dancers were far, far away from her, separated by a sulphurous atmosphere, air spent with lust and yellowed with jealousy.

She saw them in profile—the girl ludicrously doubled over, ass stuck up over her head, head on the floor, the Dancing Master poised behind her, tights showing his full erection.

Aunt Bertha's hands were as still as the dead. They lay like the dead, crumpled in a mess on the keys.

And at that very moment, the crotch of the body stocking tore.

Possie's body stocking, her best red body stocking, not only ripped from front to rear, it peeled from her like the skin of ripe pears.

The broad back shook with indignation. The top of her head slipped in a puddle of make-up and perspiration.

In the presence of such a revelation, Lothar too was transfixed. Before him the bared cheeks were milk white. They were plump and juicy. Their once-hidden fruit took away his breath. The saucy flesh sucked into a pink core and with an auriol surrounding it of fiery hair.

He was so moved that he knelt with his hands locked together.

'Pussy Cat, I ...'

'Go away!' shouted Possie. 'Both of you get out!'

The Dancing Master sagged, heart-struck.

Behind him, Aunt Bertha began her wailing. She sent up a wail for the cupids to hear, just as high and boisterous as they were.

And the cupids? That painted audience peered down upon the scene from the safety of the ceiling. They rolled merrily, laughing in their vines.

• *Room 2-D* •

‘Oh, do you think she’ll really give us that much?’ asked Eloise. ‘I’d buy a dozen silk panties.’

‘Don’t be vulgar.’ Madame Eglantine looked a little uneasily at the patch of grey sky. The windows of the room smudged it greyer and more turbulent than it was.

She bent over to take her big toe in one hand, the tiny paint brush in the other. The bathrobe parted for one lush, alabaster leg. One milky breast plopped out of the bathrobe. It too, of course, was heavy and soft. Blue veins ran in delicate embroidery to the rosette nipple.

The cast-iron radiator belched and ejaculated a thin ghost of steam.

Between the beds Eloise pirouetted. She was naked. She hummed loudly.

‘Plus Key Lent! You are making me happy, child.’ Madame swayed in time to the tune.

Eloise hummed even louder (although it was not ‘Plus Que Lente’).

The radiator gave a raucous chorus and went dead.

Someone banged on the opposite side of the wall. Valerie’s voice swelled out of the tattered floral wallpaper.

‘When are we gonna eat! We’re starving!’ she yelled.

Without disturbing a toe or missing with a stroke of the brush, Madame Eglantine raised her own voice to a shout.

‘Shut up in there! We’re gonna eat this evening. Why aren’t you girls practising? It’d take your minds off your tummies.’

‘What the fuck for!’ Latisha answered back.

Madame blew on her toes, a pretty pout. ‘Don’t be cross now!’ And make sure Lilly isn’t picking at her scabs!’

A burst of giggling in the wallpaper. The sound of a falling chair ensued.

‘No fighting either, God damn it!’ Madame, when she chose to, could bark like an Irish deerhound.

Silence in the other room.

Eloise stopped dancing. She sagged on the bed, her blank hard eyes suddenly tearful.

‘What if Possie won’t give us money? She made ugly faces at us when we were here last. She wouldn’t even say hello.’

‘Never discuss money in such a loud voice!’ whispered Madame. ‘It ain’t ladylike. And I believe you are a child who needs to trust her mother. I don’t know a damn thing about the future. You’re the one who claims that.’

‘But the hotel bill will be very large. And I’m hungry too.’ Tears had now begun to run, plopping down to run in circles around the tiny brown heads of the girl’s tits.

Madame ignored the tears, stared at the tits. ‘I’ve already seen Saddletoe about the bill. That account’s settled. Don’t make a scene over nothing.’

Brightening, Eloise jumped to her feet. 'Already!'

She spun on her toes. 'We are going to be in Possie's recital. We are, we are. I'll wear dark blue nail polish and borrow Valerie's emerald-green shift. I'll look like the sea edged with dark shells.'

'If we do dance, and I stress the "if", then you're gonna wear the usual ... your pink suit with the pink roses and the white stockings ...'

Holding her fingers in cauliflower cars, Eloise bolted out the door. Madame looked up in time to frown at the last piece of her bare rump as it disappeared into the hall.

The door to 2-D sagged on its hinges. Shiny bare patches in the hallway carpet were as round and black as musical notes.

The radiator was again trying to steam.

'Don't catch cold!' Madame's motherly concern caused a clump of angel hair to drop over both ears. Despite that and the radiator she could hear Eloise complaining next door about the detestable colour pink.

Madame Eglantine patted her hips lovingly. She sucked in her stomach and reached for the musk oil.

'You know, Mildred,' she remarked to herself. 'There are some things you just can't put a price on.'

• *Words To Live By* •

Something miraculous happened to Possie on the night of 6 January, which was Daddy's birthday. The Vandermark telephones rang at eleven, the approximate hour of Daddy's birth (the degree of synchronism didn't occur to her until much later).

Possie let the phone ring and ring. She'd not answered it in weeks, not since Mrs Plaget had left her.

The ringing caught her in the studio, feeling very sorry for herself. The Dancing Master and Aunt Bertha had truly hurt her feelings.

Actually, when the phone rang she was in the act of stretching for heaven on her tiptoes, with a doleful face, pleading, 'Take me, take me,' to the ceiling (an exercise in doubt and despair that was not to be found in the pages of the 'How-To' book).

'Damn!' screamed Possie and stamped her foot in anger at the incessant ringing.

But her heart fluttered at the odd tone of the telephone, a sweet obbligato it seemed. The sudden thought of it also being Daddy's birthday gave her a pang of remorse—she'd completely forgotten it.

The ringing was quite loud. Louder than it ought to be. That convinced her. Contritely, she ran for the nearest extension.

It was to her own bedroom phone that she went, and in the rush she didn't even bother to switch on the light. Stumbling through the debris on the floor, she paused only to snatch up Raggedy Ann for courage.

'Hello there,' she let Raggedy Ann say it, answering in the dark with a doll's voice, timid and trusting.

Of course, it was Daddy. The very first groan and she recognized him beyond a doubt, despite the static on the line.

'They let me call,' gasped Daddy, and she squeezed Raggedy Ann in breathless delight.

'Happy birthday, Daddy! Happy birthday to you!' She restrained herself from bursting into song.

Daddy didn't have much to say, a total of twenty words (she counted them up later).

To her he sounded as if he were calling from Africa, or some place like it, and with a bad head cold. The background noise was very odd, she decided it was a Third-World orchestra playing *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* backwards.

Daddy said: 'Don't you turn bitter —' rasp— 'Don't give up —' cough, sneeze. 'Be kind ... But don't let the assholes ruin it —' gurgle.

That was all. When he'd finished, instead of a dialling tone, she got a pulsating silence.

Before hanging up, she listened to the silence. She said, 'Oh, thank you very much! I'll be good. Yes I will. I'll go back to work this very minute. I'll try again soon as I'm off the phone.'

And she did, too.

In retrospect, Possie decided that what she liked most about the phone call, more even than the sound of Daddy's voice, was that beautiful, haunting, dancing silence.

• *The Weaver Conference* •

It was devilishly tempting—a shoulder to lean on, a friendly ear, a woman of the world to share his troubles with. Lothar hesitated, frowning.

Meanwhile, Madame meandered around his room, lightly touching his belongings—not an atom of doubt in her.

‘Won’t bother me at all,’ she coaxed. ‘You go right ahead and take your bath. That’s what I get for droppin’ in on you uninvited like this.’

Madame stroked the tip of his cologne bottle—took a quick sniff. ‘Nice ... So go on now, bet your hot water’s goin’ stale. I’ll just get comfy and we can talk all afternoon if you want, just the two of us, about the recital and this dumpy town and that rich little girl ... holler when you want your back scrubbed ...’

But at that critical moment in their conversation there came a scratching, a scratching at his chamber door.

Certain animate sounds have the nature of arresting human thought and action, sentencing men and even women to poses of awe or dread. These were such noises.

Madame Eglantine, who knew nothing, cocked her voluptuous head and considered the possibility of mad dogs or rabid rats. She hoped Valerie was not in the vicinity because the girl went into convulsions at the very sight of a rat’s tail.

The Dancing Master, who knew everything—this would make his twelfth visitation in three days—had been caught off guard. He had missed the warning shuffle on the corridor matting. He hadn’t noted the insect-crawl at the base of his skull, which was his early-warning defence system.

With a flap of bathrobe he scooted to brace the door with his back and arms. The look of terror and pleading he turned to Madame caused her to halt in amazement.

Scratch. Scratch.

They listened entranced. A pathetic slurp and rustle. A low, miserable banshee moan.

‘Is that a dog, Monsieur?’ (She pronounced it Ma-sewer.) Madame Eglantine flashed self-confidence, beamed imperturbable.

‘He must be hurt, she said. ‘We better let him in ...’

‘Shhhhhhh!’ begged Lothar, standing rigid against the door. Bathrobe dropping open, he faced her stark naked from head to foot.

Steadily now, the noise level from the hall rose. It filled the shabby room and reverberated in the window panes.

Issuing from the base of the door, a cracked voice joined in with the lament of ragged nails scraping across wood.

‘Let me in,’ it panted.

They flinched at the tones, flesh crawling (Madame could see the goosebumps on the Dancing Master’s thighs).

‘Love me!’ wept the door.

Lothar almost puked. He felt the door heaving at his back, its hinges ready to pop, the wood giving before supernatural pressures.

‘Have me again! Let me touch your legs!’

In response to all this, Madame rendered her slyest smile. She acted swiftly, amazing for her size and far too artful for him to intercept. She stooped down between his spread legs and towards the source of the voice—the lower panel of the hall door.

‘Mrs Dowell, is that you?’ crooned Madame Eglantine in her nightingale voice.

The corridor was suddenly stricken with silence.

‘Real nice of you to drop by,’ purred Madame. ‘Unfortunately, Ma-sewer is indisposed at the moment. Why don’t you two have your little tit-a-tit another time, OK?’

The corridor seemed to be strangling. There was also a good deal of spitting, clawing and vicious coiling. To Lothar it sounded as if the second age of reptiles had come at last.

‘Whore!’ gasped the door, shuddering in its violence. ‘I’ll see you in hell!’

The voice added, and for the entire hotel to hear, ‘I’ll have you by the balls again, little man! Just you wait!’

Running feet and a cacophony of sobs ended the brief drama.

A pause in the hotel room—the Dancing Master sagged at the door, exhausted. He only knew enough to clutch the bathrobe together again over his naked loins.

Yet they would not give him time to recover. They knew no mercy.

Eglantine stood by the bed laughing at him. She was a deity of the snow, rippling white, a sparkling presence that showed not a trace of warm blood.

This mirthful glow flickering across his walls, this comedy of musk oil and white—Madame’s laughter hit him in the face. It was a slap that made him weep with anger and frustration.

‘I have nothing more to do with you!’ he bawled. ‘We have nothing to talk about. I will have no woman in here!’

Her rosy lips and merrily dancing eyes were as bitter to him as the feel of tears on his cheeks.

‘God damn!’ she spluttered, trying to stem the giggles. ‘My poor fellow, you are in trouble ...’

She went off again into a snowstorm of laughter.

In his fury, the Dancing Master pranced and raised his hands in fists. His tears were shooting now like hot grease.

‘You are a nobody! You are a fool! Get out!’

Madame Eglantine faced him with a languid smirk. She no longer laughed. His heat warmed her a little too.

‘Cover up, Ma-sewer. Indecent exposure is a crime in Kansas.’

In his agitation, the bathrobe had once more slipped open.

She leaned one thigh on the unmade bed. 'OK, then,' she said. 'You wanna be nasty? Then we'll be nasty. Listen good too. If you don't we'll throw you to Bertha Dowell.'

The room still tinkled with icebound laughter.

'That'd be a nice bone for her to gnaw on, sure would ...' Madame was breathless from so much amusement.

'Shut up!' He stepped menacingly towards the bed.

'Dry up, twirp,' she warded him off with a hand. 'This is how it is. That girl's a Christmas turkey. We want her served up hot, here and now. That way everybody gets a share. Bet you were thinkin' you could sneak her out of town before the recital, right? Well, think again!'

More than anything, Lothar yearned for a day of reckoning. He felt the urge to attack, smash a fist in flesh, in wood or even iron. He hopped up and down, waving his arms.

She wouldn't let him speak. 'Count on us being in that recital. And a little extra money from you to keep us quiet wouldn't hurt neither. Me and the girls just might decide to tell the kid about you and her aunt. Shame on you, by the way ...'

These women were destroying him. This one chilled him like a bowl of poisonous ice cream, Bertha constricted him in her reptile plots, Possie was as scorching and inaccessible as the sun. They were too potent and organic for a man to wrestle with.

Nevertheless, he jerked Madame off his bed and shook her. A landslide of Miami Beach hair enveloped him.

He pushed her roughly towards the door, plopping his fist into her back for emphasis.

'Lay off, buster!' she stiffened, diamonds and granite.

Manhandling this woman gave the Dancing Master the only moment of peace he'd had in a long, long time. The women had not left him quite helpless, he still had his animal powers.

Yet before he could give her a parting kick in the ass, she froze him fast-foot raised—with one withering glance.

Contemptuously eyeing the tip of his penis where it peeked forth from the bathrobe, she drawled, 'I see why they call you a little man, Ma-sewer!'

Madame Eglantine tossed off his hands, but took herself fairly rapidly out the door.

• AND WHO WILL ABIDE •

From a satellite you could have seen it, like an enormous hand spread out over the heart of the continent. If it had been a hand, the palm would have rested in the Canadian Rockies, the fingers stabbing down into the American plains.

In the lower atmosphere, the storm was a veil of dangerous mist. Pilots took their planes up above it, to avoid its deadly currents. Birds stayed well out of it.

From below, the storm had various faces. In the mountains it drifted around peaks, a thick grey sludge churning up the blizzard people wouldn't forget for a century.

Sweeping out of the mountains, it was furious—pushed by winds up to sixty miles per hour. In the Dakotas the storm wreaked havoc. It buried the Nebraska prairie knee deep. By the time it blew across North-West Kansas it had dissipated only slightly—lasting no more than a day, it still dumped an ocean of snow.

On the plains, seen coming a day before it actually arrived, the storm loomed picturesque. High banks billowed in the sky. Morning sun touched the clouds, bleached them blue-white.

But the moment of the final coming was dreadful—no sun to paint it. Then the sky echoed back human noises, a rattling echo as if death throes were being tossed up into an empty metal box.

The storm arrived suddenly, dramatically. Its direct approach took less than an hour. Up close, the clouds showed sullen, ugly, a harsh and forbidding front. Seeing this, the farmers, ranchers and citizens of the far-flung little towns knew what was coming, knew it was unavoidable. They would all catch it.

In Prairie Dog County they heard about the ravages of the storm long before it threatened. The Hays TV carried a special report from the Sand Hills of Nebraska, a horror story filmed amid vast, blinding backdrops, and recounting the seventy deaths already attributed to the storm. The *Kansas City Star* gave the storm front-page coverage, including an aerial photo of one community utterly inundated and cut off, a place so devastated that there were no signs of life.

Possom Trot took the news bravely. The people were proud of their pioneer heritage, of their hard work, of existing comfortably on a tough and uncompromising land.

They openly expressed their doubts—the thing would abate; they'd get a mere half-foot of it; they were protected by the hills; the storm wouldn't cross the Smoky Hill River; the weathermen were dropping chemicals into the clouds to stop it; God wouldn't let it happen.

Secretly, however, there was considerable alarm. Each person took the threat in different ways, as it affected his or her life.

The most vulnerable were the old folks. They worried in their bones about the disaster of falling, about the appalling loneliness of being cut off, about no one caring enough to push through to their door to see if they were still kicking or not.

Of course merchants frowned too. The grocers did a quicker business as the news grew more and more alarming, but they also realized how soon their stocks would spoil; they wondered what if any deliveries would be able to get through.

Even the officers and directors of the Farmers and Drovers State Bank were gloomy. And that was something remarkable.

• *Changeling!* •

In the driveway of the Schindler gas station, Henry Schindler and his wife Ramel stood helplessly staring at Possie Vandermark.

Until this moment, they had endured thirty uneventful years of pumping petrol, fixing flats and collecting hubcaps. They'd never closed, not for a single day. They had never taken a vacation. not even to Colorado.

The only secretive thing they'd ever done was make love quickly in the dark, once a week, on Saturday nights.

But, now, a sense of dread stalled them in their tracks, in matching overalls—matching, weather-beaten, honest souls.

All they knew was that Possie Vandermark sat in the jeep stiff and incredible—in blue jeans, K-State sweatshirt and full-length fur coat. They guessed she'd just returned with an empty tank from wherever it was she went to out in the hills. All they knew was that for some reason, for the first time, they were afraid of her.

'Gasoline! Gasoline! Feed me!' Possie yelled at them. It took a loud yell because she couldn't budge even to roll down the window.

To them, looking in, her dazzling, earthy face seemed permanently distorted by jeep glass. Her vague mouth was oily, like the maw of a nightmare creature.

It was dusk. Closing time. Farmers and ranchers had gone home. The station was empty.

The Schindlers exchanged worried glances over the top of the jeep. 'Be careful!' Ramel silently mouthed the words.

Neither of them dared take another peek at the girl, the being who sat frazzled, wild-eyed, sopping wet, frozen to the steering wheel.

Henry suddenly recalled a few lines from *The Wreck of the Hesperus*, which he'd memorized his senior year in high school. Class of 1957.

Ramel was promising herself that if Possie Vandermark would just go, she'd clean the men's room—and that hadn't been done in a year.

All the while, Possie sat scrutinizing them with impassioned sincerity. To her they were the truth, unadorned and unavoidable.

'My goodness ...' murmured Possie, somewhat dazed.

The dials on the dashboard in front of her held motionless—no more ribbon of road to fool the eye, hypnotize the brain, delude the body with the sensation of freedom.

Instead, she had Henry and Ramel.

Beyond the glass, the figures of the truth laboured silently, obviously terrified. To the girl inside, it was pure sex—Henry poked his grisly head into her motor, his hands up to the elbows under her bonnet; Ramel crouched in a football stance at the rear, inserting a penis-shaped gas nozzle into her tank.

Between them, Possie steamed, slowly vaporizing the windows, creating a miniature atmosphere all of her own inside the vehicle.

Henry trotted round to the back of the jeep to take over from Ramel, who had panicked at last, running for the safety of the station house. He himself was twitching at the jaw. He capped the tank long before it was full.

When he came to stand by the driver's window, hands rubbing overalls, he wanted only to be paid so that he too could run away from her (money in hand).

'That'll be nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents ... please ...'

This thin man wiggled pathetically before her, and she suddenly, in a blooming, understood his fear. It made her love him.

'Let me be kind to you!' she screamed to him through the glass. Two tears of recognition trickled through the mascara-colour and dash of ocean spray.

'You can make it nineteen dollars even ...' Henry licked his lips. From where he stood, looking back at the plate-glass window of the station, he could see Ramel praying behind the cash register, her head bent against the map rack. He guessed she was praying for him to get back to her double quick.

A night of storms was approaching. Tree limbs rapped like knuckles and rained broken twigs onto the asphalt.

Henry cringed away from the jeep, green coloured in the waning light.

'Or is he the reflection of my eyes,' wondered Possie.

'I'll just put it on credit, OK, Miss Vandermark ...'

He gulped, a large Adam's apple convulsing. A Christian symbol of the fish out of water, thought Possie, musing on the power of the abstract to corrupt the simplest need.

The scrawniest, most middle-aged man and the greenest face; he was now retreating from her, hands shaking 'no' and 'go away' in the air.

She was also moving, slowly extricating herself from behind the steering wheel, unbending stiff knees and shifting bloody feet.

Coming out of that steel body was like being born, hatching from an all-American egg shaped like a jeep. She thrilled at the thought of the jeep lying like a broken egg shell beside the pumps.

Once outside, her coat billowed around her. Her jewellery clattered out a birthday song. Her hair floated in a frenzy of afterbirth.

Henry was running. His big boots pounded the alarm. She followed him with sad eyes as he too retreated into the station.

She watched their reunion—Ramel and Henry—and how they went together to bar the door against her. They blubbered in mime for her to have pity.

‘Let the storm be your guide ... Open up your clothes and let it in!’ Possie hollered as she retrieved her ‘Flying Jayhawks’ tourist bag from the jeep. She had carried it with her all day.

Possie stepped forth jauntily, the sky giving her a memorable backdrop. A wall of black cloud two miles high and twenty miles wide was falling down on the town. In half an hour the temperature had dropped ten degrees.

The Schindlers turned on all their lights, flashing a protective current of electricity in a vain hope of warding her off.

Possie approached the locked door. To them, inside, her swinging hips were siege machines. Henry reached for his big wrench; Ramel made another short but eloquent prayer.

‘Dance!’ roared Possie. ‘Don’t pray and whine. It doesn’t do any good to pray. The sky doesn’t speak English.’

The girl pressed her face against the glass of the door—cheeks and nose and lips flattened. She rolled her eyes at them.

Thoughts on the sacrificial nature of entertainment inspired her to a renewed commitment. If she could forgive the treachery of Bertha and the Dancing Master—and she had, seeing how desperate their spy’s and traitor’s countenances were—then she could surely love the likes of these two well-meaning fragments of heaven’s glory. Even if they couldn’t dance and refused to be taught.

‘I love you! The words squashed with her features into the pane of glass. ‘None of that fascist art for us, right?’

She encouraged them with a grin—her pumpkin face bloated with joy.

Seeing how they thought she was crazy, Possie merely shrugged. She was so much stronger than they were. How else could one carry the cravings of an entire county?

‘And human desires are a lot heavier than tyre irons, I assure you!’ She said it quite distinctly, but they didn’t seem to understand.

When she pulled loose from the door, she left the imprint of her suffering on the glass. The scars ran in shades of green eye-shadow, red lipstick, and black, the very blackest, mascara.

‘Just try washing that off your old gasoline station!’ laughed Possie.

The Schindlers shuddered, speechless.

About them, Possie guessed that Henry, who had indeed been constipated for much of his life, was at the moment shitting copiously in his pants; Ramel, she assumed from the look of things, would soon be experiencing the first epileptic fit of her life (the second on record in Possom Trot).

‘I can’t save them,’ declared Possie. ‘But maybe I can at least excite them? One excited human being must be worth more than all the ages of inanimate boredom! If I stir them up just a little then I’ll have done a lot.’

With her tourist bag swinging from her arm, the girl skipped to the corner of the building. The concrete blocks made a stark angle cutting her horizon, a provocative statement on twentieth-century aesthetic neurosis. For the time being she would have to let that one go. No more evasions. The change was upon her at last.

In tribute to the moment, she promised herself never again to hum the last movement from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Already Ramel found it difficult to speak. Her tongue flopped blue and swollen towards the back of her mouth. She did eke out a gagged cry, which only Henry would have understood.

‘God help us, Henry! She’s broken into the men’s room!’

Through the wall at their backs they now heard smothered snortings. Henry put a hand to the wall. ‘It’s hot!’ he reported.

Together they shuffled slowly back towards the garage—a mechanical tango. Henry almost carried Ramel, her body as stiff as a drive shaft.

‘Not the men’s room!’ blubbered Ramel. ‘Not there!’

The snow had not yet come. Frozen rain pelted the oil-smeared driveway. The sky faded from grey to black. The remaining light ran like dark water.

A large limb crashed to the roof of the station. The wind toppled over an empty anti-freeze can, rolling it in clattering circles at the floodlit base of the ‘Schindler Gas and Parts’ sign.

‘Praise the Lord!’ gurgled Ramel and went board-straight and silent.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ Henry dropped Ramel where he stood—she jerked and foamed beside a stripped-down transmission.

Possie Victoria Vandermark had just come bounding back into view.

She came spinning out from around the station house corner. She came in a whirl, dazzling the grim, storming world, blinding it with the glory of her body. She came, bringing back the sunshine in white satin and silver lace and sparkling tiara.

This was the dawning of the Great White Tutu.

• *A Case of Stage Fright* •

Huddling naked in the corner over an abandoned pile of dust, his back pressed against the wallpaper, his head buried in his arms, the little man waited. Dimly, he understood that a wrathful grey glow hovered at his window. In part he was waiting for that light to fade.

He was waiting for more night, and more snow.

He no longer flinched at the sight of the unmade bed, vapours rising from it—it was the steamy ship of nightmare, foul with his odours, with the stench he had brought to it.

Neither did the expanse of ruined linoleum confront him as usual with the dread of inescapable ugliness.

The bathroom door stood ajar and the view of the porcelain tub on its lion's paws reminded him, when he thought of it, of toilets in Italian hospitals. Of hygiene prized so highly that it had an aura of great medicine about it.

But he had lost faith in cleanliness.

His clothes lay here and there, dropped and forgotten. They were animal droppings. He stepped cautiously around them when he moved, which was rarely.

The Dancing Master was also waiting for his daily visit. With the evening hour would come again the hoarse utterance and the angry scratching at his door—cries and whimpers from the she-monster at his door.

As he waited, he chattered to himself. 'Snow will save me,' he was saying. 'No recital. More snow. Snow will wipe it out. More snow. No recital. More time. Time to get her for my own. Snow and no recital ...'

He couldn't bear listening to himself, hearing his own futility. He tried sticking fingers in his ears, gagging his mouth. He tried cowering back further into his corner, holding still as the dead behind his locked and bolted door.

No good. He still heard it—'Snow and no recital. Snow and no recital. No recital. More time ...'

The only thing on earth he had to stare at, for the moment at least, were his own testicles. They hung long and loose underneath him, like those of a beaten dog's.

Truly, the Dancing Master was trapped.

• *The Double Plié On the Bar-room Floor* •

A quiet Saturday night. And when Albert's is quiet it's a forlorn place, given to confessions and self-accusations. The snow that continued to fall, and the wind that rose with a roar to gale force, subdued the crowd.

On a typical Saturday night, eleven is the start of a most boisterous hour, but on such an evening as this, with the customers already worrying about how to get home, even the bartender could ease his flabby butt on the stool behind the counter and rest his feet for a moment.

None of Albert's customers dispelled the aura of sadness. Some of the two dozen or so men were actually laughing, but their laughter rang hollow since bar-room jokes have always been old and the wind outside was louder.

The drinkers closed ranks tighter tonight than usual, searching more than ever for the elusive comfort of comradeship. Beer flowed as an accidental. And, though the evening was far from a failure as Albert's till could prove, the crude slash of male voices bordered on the listless.

For the moment, wheezing at rest as fat men will, Albert ignored the prattle at the bar and attended reverently to the photos he'd cut out of the *Record* that very afternoon and taped to the mirror over the cash register.

One of the cut-outs was of Lothar, a copy of the same that had first stirred Possie the young dancer as faun with deep flashy eyes fastened passionately into outer space. Mated to this, hanging beside it, was one of the girl herself—a picture taken at least three years previous (Bertha had found it on one of her nocturnal rambles, giving it in turn with the press release to the *Record's* editor). This showed a buxom, rather ordinary young woman, looking at the camera in utter amazement, mouth open.

In background to Albert's reverie, a loud pop marked the beginning of another game of pool—one of a thousand he heard played each year. The jukebox changed gears, searching for another record through titles that had not changed in six months. Albert tuned in to the telltale rattle of empty glasses hitting the counter—the sign for him to heave himself up and pour out another round, one man serving an ocean of oblivion.

An old rancher who had retired and moved to town talked softly with another old-timer at the end of the bar (which made Albert miss Saddletoe, who had not been in since Madame Eglantine's arrival). The young men played pool, one whooping now and slapping his thigh.

As usual, without women in the bar the men didn't bother to close the restroom door. Even from the front you could see straight back and into the john, studying how one of the Vandermark oil riggers pissed—broad shoulders humped, hips forward, head cocked down.

Despite the gloom, this pattern of the bar-room remained supreme. It held the men fast. It caused them, as on any night, to spread their legs at just the right angles. It made them show their spines and hips.

A spurt of drinking kept Albert busy for another fifteen minutes. Then followed a lull—although even in the worst of times men can talk of women. When nothing else comes to mind, of women—who are things unreal to them, but the essence somehow of what makes them men.

Albert ignored this talk, yearning most of all to turn again to the photos on the mirror. For him that would have been peace, to stare at those dancers and dream. But he held two empty glasses under the spigot, the beer splashing.

Through the smoke, under an amorous light, the walls of the room glimmered like subterranean rock. The men's voices and their movements echoed back into the furthest reaches of the room, and further too, as if the place were a tunnel filled with an endless line of partially drunken men, a tunnel of drinkers sinking from sight into time. The bar-room had a beginning at the first cave wall, the hairy forms of the band gathered round; it promised to end at the front door, with a feeling of dread.

It was 11.15. Time crept after the men—a beast they couldn't hunt.

Hiram called for another beer. Marvin Harry got up to go back for a piss, fingers already fumbling with his fly. Another game of pool commenced. Whack, thump, and the balls were atoms exploding over green felt. The jukebox finished playing 'Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys' and ground to a halt.

But even as the jukebox fell silent, even as the pool balls rolled, the rest suddenly came to an abrupt stop.

The sporadic clinking of glass, the easy shuffle of boots, the crack of jeans and leather belts, the braying laughter and guttural speech—all of it subsided, on the instant, as if a catastrophe had struck the men unawares.

'Mother fuck!' blurted a youngster at the back, dropping his cue stick.

Albert held his towel wedged in mid-air, as if wiping the atmosphere clear for a better view. His mouth made a succulent O.

The old rancher, benign, too old to be startled, slowly swallowed a sip of beer.

She shone with cold. Blue lay beneath the ruddy glow, as if lake ice were submerged in her flesh. Through the tobacco mist and beer-coloured light, Possie's colours were as strong and deep as enamel. The green eyes shone emerald-clear, an idol's eyes under moonlight. Her red hair was a live coal ember. The white tutu dazzled the murkiness, glittering with a universe of silver points.

The men standing retreated a step. Those seated stood up. Her image twirled in the pupils of their eyes.

She charged in among them, knocking chairs and tables out of her path. Beer trembled in the glasses, empty glasses crashed to the floor.

The men's eyes showed white. The younger ones snorted and shied back against the walls.

Down the line at the bar she pranced, swaying to them, her slippers on tiptoe plopping. She gave them twenty double pliés in a row.

At the end of the bar she broke into a spin. With room to spare, she followed up with a dozen Kilgore-Rangerette kicks. Overhead, the revolving Coors Beer sign was eclipsed by the light of her tiara.

Along the way she touched the men, casually. Her mysterious smile burned them as much as her touch; the wild scent of her panicked them as much as the knowing glint of her eye.

Her fingers stroked shoulders and legs, flitted for split seconds with rears and crotches. The old ones she patted on the head.

The youngest she approached more cautiously. Seeing their terror, she held back her hands and glided past them.

At the pool table, sweeping an arm across the felt, she pocketed five balls in one swipe.

The street door banged wide open. Wind followed her, knife sharp across the men's faces. Snowflakes swirled in the air, more and more of them blasting in from the street.

Snow and smoke and the ancient spell of a bar-room he shot on through, cutting it in two. One leap, and three tables hit the floor.

Possie reared up, framed vividly for them, a vertigo woman in a whirlwind of silver.

One of the young men fainted and slid senseless to the floor. Marvin Harry stood entranced in the men's room doorway, his penis in his hand. Albert clenched a piddling fist over his palpitating heart.

Before darting out into the night, she blew a kiss at the men. She left them with a curtsy and a shake of her fanny, the satin brushing up.

Their last sight of her was one of white panties and a dimpled, voluptuous, venus mound.

The street door gaped. Snow and wind raged. Possie was gone.

Albert's Bar remained, tomb quiet, dead still. No one moved, not even to close the door.

The old rancher was the first to find his voice. 'Now, that's the most interestin' thing I seen in years,' he commented.

He emptied his glass in one gulp.

• *The Last Tango in Kansas* •

Nights Bertha now spent downstairs in the closet. Her greatest fear was of dying there, of expiring in the entrance hall closet, ignored until spring cleaning.

The smell of the man alone might be enough to kill her. It hung in the air. It tormented her. Desire remained palpable in the closet.

The tiny room was foetid with memories. She thought they might strangle her. Sometimes in the night she clawed for breath.

Then Bertha would howl, ‘One more time!’ and thrash on the floor, over Grandmother Vandermark’s mink stoles.

‘Let me do it again and I’ll be changed. Once more and I’ll be good for ever!’

If she didn’t die, then she would go crazy. For sometimes, unpredictably, the small, sealed, dark world would melt away in crashing walls of ice.

She would be terrorized, aroused, left buoyed on a spume of green water.

Her eyes saw incredible sights then. She heard unbelievable sounds. Her hands felt what they had never known before. She sank into the depths of the closet and glutted herself again and again on all its pleasures and agonies.

Nothing existed for her beyond this upheaval. Feet dancing overhead were merely another prop in her damnation.

But Bertha listened to them carefully. ‘Damn feet! Damn legs!’

She growled at the stampede. She snapped at the invisible ankles. The blighting footsteps pounded her down further and further into the closet.

‘You hear me, bitch? I’ll rise up and scourge you! I’ll give you him—I’ll give you hell in tights! But you’ll have him only after I’ve ruined him. I’ll ruin everything for you. I’m a Flatbottom! I’m a Bertha Flatbottom!’

Cursing was fast becoming her all-time favourite hit. She lay on the closet floor wiggling her feet in time to such music. The spirits quickened inside her, almost frolicking.

Bertha would remain on the stoles, on the floor, but her spirit would surge out of the closet.

Her soul swirled around the entrance hall. It skipped over the marble. Round and round it went. It tangoed and rumbaed and even did a little boogaloo.

Rising to kneel in the darkness, Bertha looked up at the hangers and rows of coats. She held up the hem of Dead-Sister’s dress, a tip of satin in each hand.

Moving her head, she lolled back and forth, swaying to the strumming of guitars, to the jungle beat of Brazilian forests, to the music of Italian dancers, of Dancing Masters prancing naked to guitars in the greenest heart of the green rain forest.

Then Bertha felt tropical rain on her cheeks. Hot streaks of rain spattered from a green sky.

• *Ceremony In White* •

The Reverend Howard Sanders raised his arms on high, and because it was an unusual Sunday morning in Possom Trot, the unusual gesture actually stirred a soul or two among the assembled Methodists, pulling them up like a tide.

‘Dancing! Does the word make you flinch?’ So began the sermon. Palms open to the heavens, black robe draping from shoulders to shoes, head thrown back, the preacher addressed the invisible, speaking to a ceiling as barren and white as the snow that surrounded the church.

‘Why do we Christians fear it? Perhaps we dwell on how the Israelites blasphemed at Carmel by dancing before the Golden Calf. It is too clear to us how they shed their armour and danced with the devil. We see them dancing like maniacs without care for the stones cutting their feet or for the sweat stinging their naked bodies.’

For once, the Reverend did not refer nervously to his typed notes, that stack of ink-smearred pages on the lectern. Wings outstretched, eagle-fierce of eye, he had been changed into a large black bird.

‘Seeking release from lust and boredom, they poured out a wasteland of sin and error. The great anger of the Lord fell upon them. When Moses saw he dashed the tablets of the Law into pieces!’

At the organ, Miss Clare closed the sheet music, pulled the switch, and curled back her feet (in brown posture-paedic lace-ups) from the pedals. Dutifully, she folded her hands—dry paper movements in everything she did, like a large church bulletin.

With a small start, she was the first to realize that her preacher was not stuttering this morning.

‘No feet dance in our church because of this history of carnality and evil. As children we hear the story of Salome. Mark tells us how the princess danced with such charm and beauty that she won from the lecherous Herod a promise: “For such dancing, I give you a gift—any wish in my power shall he fulfilled!” And the girl, as any might, then turned to her mother for advice on what to ask for. Herodias hissed in the girl’s ear, “The head of the prophet, daughter, the head of the wildman prophet. Have the fool give you that on a platter!”’

As was her custom, the preacher’s wife sat three rows back, in the centre. Usually she endured Sunday services by reliving the plots of her favourite television series. This morning, however, she was too weary for TV. She’d just taught the seventh grade class, substituting for Bertha Dowell, who claimed to be home sick with the flu.

Because Mrs Sanders didn’t attend or focus well, she’d not yet noticed how intense her mate became as his sermon progressed.

Several large drops of perspiration were trickling along the Reverend’s eyebrows. His fist crashed on the pulpit. The rhetorical flourish did not stir the congregation from their daydreams in the pews.

‘Such deeds have kept the joy of dancing out of our churches. And surely this has been a sad loss, for if we look at the Scriptures closely we find that dancing was actually an important fact of life. Dancing is mentioned as often as mourning.’

From where she sat rattling her charm bracelet in the choir loft, Bernadette (she took time off from the Igloo to sing in the choir) could follow the Reverend's backside as it wiggled to his words. Bernadette brought an incense of fried chicken to the sanctuary.

She noted that today he wore his best black funeral suit beneath the robe—she'd seen the cuffs of all three of his suits, knew their colours and conditions. This one was old and too short so that the socks showed. Bernadette surmised that the preacher had had a rough morning because his socks did not match.

'At Yahweh's annual feast the maidens danced on the grapes. At the sea of reeds the Children of Israel danced for the Lord when their deliverance from bondage was complete. The Chosen of God danced at weddings, at feasts, at their celebrations of God-given victories ...'

Around him, the bodies of the Methodists were asleep like grass under snow. The power of his words touched them not. Almost every head was indeed turned towards him politely, bulletins did lie silent in their laps, the red hymnals were closed. But he knew that they did not actually hear him. They sat enchanted by a sleepy white light, snow light that dappled the whitewashed walls of the sanctuary with shapes that were to him in themselves the images of the Calf, of dancing Jews and arrogant prophets.

The preacher's wife returned his stare with sweet unrecognition. He saw that Mrs Craggs was fast asleep beside her. He heard women rustling their skirts, the temple-bell tinkle of Bernadette's bracelet behind him, men coughing and shifting on the hard pews.

Reverend Sanders began to feel a fit of stuttering coming on. He bravely went forward.

'Rarely was the dance profaned by the temptations of the flesh. Rarely did it serve any idolatrous purpose. Instead it was a way of rejoicing and giving praise. Never forget, in Luke, when the Prodigal Son returns he is received with dancing ...'

Having emptied the collection plates and counted out the money, the ushers now returned to sit on the back pews. They sat as a team, tired from play, arms folded stoically. Like the other men in the congregation, their faces were masks. They sat straight and poker-faced, just as their mothers had taught them to do in church. They allowed themselves only an occasional sneak at their wristwatches.

'In Psalms 30:11, 12, we find, "Thou hast turned me my mourning into dancing; Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness that my soul may praise thee and not be silent. Oh Lord, my God, I will give thanks to thee for ever." ... Let us think on this. "Thou has turned me my mourning into dancing."'

The Reverend continued in his uplifted mood. Despite the state of his flock, stutter aside, forgetting for the time being the latest power struggle in the Bishop's Cabinet, he continued to believe that this was the finest hour of his ministry. A strange stirring, warming of the heart, even Wesleyan expectancy, charged him this morning as he had not been charged in years. He hoped it was more than the weather at work.

'Read Psalms 149:3, "Let them praise His name with dancing." Then let us here think of praising His name ... Did not King David bring the Ark into Jerusalem dancing naked before all the people? David danced before the Ark of God! David expressed the Covenant of God in dancing! David danced naked in the eyes of his people and of God! And David was the elect, a great man of the Lord. David danced! David praised the name of the Lord with ...'

The vestibule resounded in commotion. The storm sent a stack of missionary brochures fluttering in all directions.

Oops! She really had not intended such a noisy entrance. Not at all. It was only that she was so cumbersome with cold.

Here in church, a choice of style was important. The windows would rattle if she stomped. Leaping among these quietly grazing Christians seemed inappropriate. Pelvic thrusts likewise were out of the question.

She was ashamed even to think of swinging her ass or twirling her tits.

So it was that Possie began by merely ambling down the aisle. Her soggy slippers sponged the carpet—absolutely the only audible sound in the sanctuary. For a model she picked the figurine on the lid of Grandma’s German music box—walking on her toes, keeping her legs respectfully straight at the knees and ankles. Arms she cocked at the elbows and up front, perfectly demure.

Because she required enough momentum for just one little leap, as she approached the communion rail it was necessary to speed up.

Ah, and the leap was quite nicely executed too, directly to the altar. Then the windows did indeed rattle, an ominous deep-throated gurgle of startled church glass; but she couldn’t compromise on everything!

From the wee leap she twirled into a score of entrechats. As planned, the entrechats resolved into a splendid arabesque, which, alas, she couldn’t hold—tottering over with an ‘Oh, darn it!’, she landed in a full and thunderous split. But even then, on the floor, she remembered to throw up her arms, toss back her head, and give them her best ice-capade queen grin.

Of course, all eyes were upon her. For good reason. She’d spent some time that morning working on her face. She’d even powdered her throat and arms so that she came as purity itself. And, because she had carefully calculated the distances and lighting effects in advance—brushing on extra rouge and enlarging her crimson lips, adding several more lines of shadow under her eyes—she knew that they could see her clearly.

What marvellous lighting this was for the satin and silver. The white tutu, although no longer in its first blush, still sparkled like a frost flower. Her tiara shone radiant, a heavenly crown.

And the sets too were excellent. Diaghilev couldn’t have done better—a stunning white backdrop, the choir stalls on either side, the picture of Jesus over the altar (in the Garden of Gethsemane). It was elegantly simple, yet intense.

‘Wow!’ she almost squealed it aloud.

She thought she heard someone sobbing. The ushers were whispering in a huddle at the back. An old woman kneeled in the side aisle (Mrs Wolf hadn’t been quite right since her last stroke and was under the impression that this was an altar call).

At the pulpit, the preacher remained in mid-speech, his black robe hanging on him like a deflated balloon. He rolled his eyes and moved his lips but not a word was to be heard.

Possie bounded up from the floor. The vibration clacked shut the false teeth in Miss Schmidtke's mouth. As a bonus, she gave them a final pirouette.

Waving cheerfully, the girl galloped to the side door and was gone.

That left the Methodists communally sagging and sighing; their sanctuary rocked on a rough water.

Bernadette it was who gave the single, solitary clap (applause which the choir director never forgave her).

The Reverend whispered, 'Amen.'

• *Doin' the Possom Trot* •

‘Oh, Maman, look by the bed. Look! May I?’

‘Certainly, love, don’t be silly.’ Madame, however, remained at the window.

Eloise tiptoed to the bed, eyes glowing. ‘A patriarch!’ She exclaimed. ‘He is so black and fat. He thinks he will fool me by keeping perfectly still. This old one is very crafty ...’

She squatted for closer inspection.

‘There he goes! Even the heavy ones run for their lives.’ Eyes wider than usual, Eloise leaned to one side and brought her fist down on the floor.

‘Did you hear the pop? He was the best one in months. Look at all this juice!’

Madame neglected the window only long enough to cast a baleful glance at Eloise; the girl scrutinized the edge of her hand.

‘They are so very old. Even the young ones are like old men. I wish we could eat them. They make me think of black, shiny crabs. When they pop I think of African grapes.’

‘Don’t be difficult, Eloise. Be quiet and let me think.’ Madame Eglantine rolled a speckled fingernail on the sill.

Eloise listened to the tapping, concentrating on the music in it. ‘When you have bad thoughts about her it makes me very unhappy. I don’t think we should stay here any longer. I see bad things coming ...’

‘I said shut up, dear. Mother doesn’t want any prophesy this afternoon.’

From the window Madame Eglantine could see the world like her own reflection. The furthest contour of horizon mirrored an expanse of diamonds in the sun.

‘Eloise, you listen to me carefully!’

The girl looked up smiling. If Madame had been in a better mood she would have shown her the dead cockroach, its hairy legs still twitching.

‘I want you and the girls to accompany Ma-sewer Dancing Master wherever he goes. Have Saddletoe tell you what he does with his time. Peep through his keyhole. Don’t let the guy out of your sight!’

Madame seemed hypnotized by the sight of so much snow. She stared unblinking, her head and shoulders basking in the bright tones that emanated from the glass.

‘I want to know about everything he does with Possie. Do you understand me? Everything! We must keep her here and he wants to take her away from us. We can’t allow that, can we? She’s a baby. She doesn’t know how nasty those Italians are with their garlic and their unnatural sex practices.’

‘Oh, how unnatural, Maman? Tell me, please.’ Eloise forgot the cockroach momentarily.

‘Now now, dear, don’t distract me. Don’t worry about the details. Just keep in mind that he is an obnoxious little creature ...’

‘Are we going to be like spies?’

‘Yes, exactly like spies. It’ll be fun too. You can dance and exercise outside when you follow him. It’ll give you something to do. Won’t that be nice!’

Turning, Madame caught the pained expression on Eloise’s face. ‘Do as I say, sweet. Just follow the blood in the snow.’

Sitting on the bed, to an exclamation of springs, she stooped to peer at the dead cockroach. Her thoughts, however, were still on the Dancing Master.

‘He was wrong to think we were a joke,’ growled Madame Eglantine.

Eloise stared at the floorboards with wide sad eyes. She answered in a dreamy voice. ‘Just because he was an obnoxious little creature ...’

• *A Crisis of the Liver* •

The doleful lover's music of Massenet fluted in the sunroom. It was *Thaïs* on the phonograph. Thaïs of Alexandria. Lady of sin. City of sin.

The Dancing Master listened to the music and thought of New York. A few months before he had lived in a modern-day Alexandria and not for once even believed in 'sin'.

Such grand thinking, like the music, made him uneasy—why, he could not have answered, except that at the moment all his thoughts were going up fervently like prayers, while all around him closed an appalling emptiness.

An afternoon of boggling complexities, a frightening hour, a frightening house. And this was the day of the recital!

'I love you.' The Dancing Master choked on the words.

Possie lay on her back, spreadeagled, legs in the air. She lay in the centre of the Persian carpet. The white tutu prickled defensively around her waist. As she pumped air with her slippers heels, she made a sly, crackling sound.

The tutu, he noticed was not now as it once had been. For three days she'd worn it, night and day. She'd slept in it, wallowed through the snow in it, gobbled her TV dinners in it. Brown gravy and ketchup spattered the front.

The tutu was torn in places as well, little tears with the satin flapping. Each rent seemed of vast significance. To Lothar, in fact, it was as if her soul itself has been transformed into the dainty ruins of a tutu.

'I really do love you,' persisted the Dancing Master. He at least did not move, standing dejectedly in the shadows by the curtains.

In contrast, Possie lay lit up brutally, in hard, piercing detail. It made him wonder if this amazing and inexplicable creature could summon the light at will. She'd probably pulled the sun to her and ordered it to play across her body.

No alternative left for him but to look, dazzled, at her; to watch and wait and wonder. He began to sympathize with the poor sun, he too at her beck and call.

And there was nothing else. Nothing. Out the windows, he knew, lay a universe of snow too deep and huge to fathom.

Lothar cleared his throat, as if to sing along with Athanaël, '*Viens, ma soeur, et fuyons à jamais cette ville!*'

Would she never lie still? Would she never reply to his avowal? While love music bubbled in the background she went on showering him with the perfume of her armpits.

He took the opportunity to investigate the nearest curtain, checking for eavesdroppers. This was accomplished by savagely gouging his fist into the velvet panels.

No, at last they were truly alone. Alone, but too late and not together.

He felt his forehead—feverish. The bitterest ironies abounded—here he stood, experiencing a profound religious truth (its nature undisclosed as yet) and all the while she, its source, would pay him no attention!

'Impie!' warbled Athanaël. *'Crains de mourir si tu touches à celle-ci. Elle est sacrée! Elle est la part de Dieu!'*

'I love you,' refrained Lothar, the music for inspiration. 'I want to take you away from here. I am going to take you away today, this afternoon, before the recital!'

Her legs continued scissoring.

Had he really waited too long to speak out? Of course he could make his excuses—he hadn't felt this way a week ago. The farmboy had blocked him. Madame Eglantine had confused him. Bertha had plotted against him.

In his condition, honesty seemed a last refuge. No, he could admit it to himself, he'd hesitated too long because he feared the girl. That was at the heart of it all. No need now to evade that in thoughts of past glories.

Possie breathed heavily, from the exercises and not passion.

In desperation, he struggled to stand straighter, taller, to be a bigger man than he was.

'Say something! I know you are not cruel!'

Legs pumped air.

Helpless, his eyes rocked back and forth following the metronome of her legs. He began speaking his thoughts carelessly, as a desperate man will.

'Does my age bother you? I am healthy and strong. Is it my size? You are bigger than any man on earth, that should not bother you. Is it your aunt? Surely you do not trust her. Trust me. I will tell you all. You can judge me then for yourself. But you are to judge me and no one else!'

He whispered, knowing she heard him, that she listened and understood. He proceeded as calmly as Massenet, as subdued as bright snowlight. How humbly and without fury came the truth. It excited him too, being a child again and vulnerable.

'If you love me that is all the judgement I deserve ... If not ... that too is judgement, no? It is fate, and damnation too. See how much I learn here!'

At last he had given himself. No more equivocation. In agony, his olive-shaped night-black eyes did indeed lift to the window, to the horizon there—caught there for the first time on a hook of the land's grandeur, the sky's authority. For a moment he verged on either fainting or ejaculating.

But the inexorable ticking of her legs recalled him. He could not open further to the horizon, accept it as a philosophy, a place of unwinding.

There was nothing about him to startle the girl out of her trance of 'How-To' exercises.

‘I will save you from the recital. You will save me from the rest of my life. Does that make sense to you?’

At his back, outside, the house, the thin lines of snow and atmosphere, water and air, trembled in the subtleties of their natures. The horizon moved.

Inside the sunroom, the Dancing Master trembled in his own subtlety. Possie was moving. Her tatters fluttered invitingly.

Actually, it wasn’t anger, stubbornness or shyness keeping her quiet. Possie said nothing, kicking, merely because she was helpless to do anything else. This was like being trapped in a perpetual motion machine.

She was also partially lost in the creation of twining carpet threads, of the sun, of herself too. She was the music of French opera, where tragedy becomes champagne lyrical. She was the shock of living, fear of dying, entire civilizations reduced to the momentary tissue of a white tutu.

Ancient designs of wise Persian hands, notes of vibrant voices, horns and strings twanging the ear, the air dancing before her eyelids. Such patterning held sway. It dictated reality.

But if she could have forced her body to obey, made it desist in its foolish machinery, then she’d have jumped up on the spot and begun immediately to spin out a pattern of her own over the prairie. She would have lit up the High Plains from Russell to the Colorado border.

Closer to her, Massenet and the Dancing Master seemed to be singing duets. The Dancing Master spoke of love so she guessed she ought to be serious.

Capricious, as always, her legs now stilled themselves. Suddenly they poked up rigid, rebelliously, towards the ceiling. She took advantage of that to fold her arms and take a rest.

Evidently it was important for her to say something, though she knew that the finest things human beings ever said were to themselves while moving their bowels or cleaning their nails. But she didn’t want him to accuse her of forgetting her lines.

‘What’s all this judgement and fate shit?’ The sentence fell out of her before she could stop it.

From her place on the floor, seeing the Dancing Master upside down, she perceived how she clouded over his corner of the room, how cold and bitter she was making his life.

‘You better be kind!’ she reprimanded herself, and promised to repeat the phrase at least fifty times in penance.

Another beginning. Yes, this would be much better.

‘I just want you to teach me how to dance ...’ To make him understand, she shouted—just in case all along he’d had a problem with his middle ear. ‘At the first, when I saw your picture, you were like a lover to me. But with the dance, you know. Only that way.’

More gently, she added, ‘Why make it so difficult? Let’s be real simple. It’s best to be simple.’

The horizon snapped at the back of Lothar's head. He bowed to her, doubling over in a fit. His curls almost touched his knees.

'Tiens, satyre, à toi!' That was sung especially for him.

To her he replied, 'But I do not believe in the dance any more! I believe in you!'

At that Possie sat up. It broke the pattern—no more ancient threads, fantastic thinking, sensual musics. For her it was the metabolic shock of withdrawal.

'Nope! We dance, that's our agreement. Anything else would be scary.'

'I will rape you then. Will that be the love you talk about? Will it be simple enough to please you?' Although he bristled, the futility in his voice overrode the bitterness. He didn't move an inch.

'Oh, Jesus, love would be the end ...' Possie gave a panicked cry. 'I knew I should have put on the Mozart instead!'

In a forward somersault she got to her feet and stretched to her full height. On Lothar this had the effect of drawing a steak knife across glass.

'I love you!' he howled. 'Don't you value anything! You must accept me! I am more important than dancing!'

In horror, he recognized the signs—her limbs were beginning to twitch, her eyes were turning wilder with the passing moment, her tongue played on the dead skin of her lips.

She was on the verge of breaking free again into the dancing.

'I won't let you dance. Not ever again. I will not permit it. It is dangerous. I am going to steal you away from them. I do not care what they do!' The little man rushed to her side and threw his arms around her.

He was in the nick of time, for indeed her hands were starting to weave through the air. Her feet were tapping.

Lothar pinned himself to her. He nestled his curls against her breasts and held her with all his might. The effort left him breathless. It was like struggling to hold a mountain still during an earthquake.

Despite his strength, the girl managed to flex a buttock, to wiggle rhythmically here and there. She didn't fight him consciously, actually she smiled at him as her body slowly churned.

They rocked in place, tightly bound. The Dancing Master perspired profusely, feeling how powerful she truly was, feeling as effectual as a rubber band around her. He clenched his teeth and held on.

If he gave up it would be cold again. He would be old and useless. He would have no one. The earth did not want him. This sky had no room for him. This woman was his last hope.

Possie swayed like a cottonwood in wind, aware of how deep her roots were sinking; her roots turned in thick fibrous wedges nudging into the foundation of the world. She knew how tall she had grown, that now if she were violent she could reach up and close her fist around the sun. If she but wished she could pluck the sun.

This man clung to her and she acknowledged him. If he had let her arms free she would have tenderly stroked him. Poor man, to have given her everything he had, and for which she had no use at all.

In her compassion for him, and in the peace of her own strength. she stopped herself from hurling him down.

Anyway, she could carry more than one man and still dance.

The Dancing Master's silent tears speckled the tutu.

And Athanaël too was crying on the phonograph— '*Non! Le ciel ... rien n'existe ...*' — 'Nothing is true but life and the love of beings ... I love thee!'

• *Ménage à Quatre* •

Bertha dragged the foetid coat along after her. The fur comforted her like a child's baa-baa. She wanted most to hide in it, letting it be her cloak of invisibility. It draped her head and shoulders and trailed to one side—the fur matted with lint, with tiny balls of excrement, with clots of her own long black hair.

Behind her, the closet gaped farewell. It looked and smelled like a cave.

Sister's dress swished under her knees as she crawled forth. The dress sparked electrically. Across its sleeves fell the mass of her hair, the hair so long it curtained her eyes and touched the floor between her hands.

Bertha crawled on all fours sniffing the floor. Her nose brushed marble. Yes, the scent was still fresh. She could follow the trail of those feet wherever they led. She would not let those beautiful feet escape her again.

The trail led through the living room. She went at her own pace, dawdling here and there to sniff at a couch or a stuffed chair. The carpet cushioned her palms and knees. She went, swaying her back and with the fur slithering through the luxurious pile.

Nausea struck her at the doors to the dining room. She smelled death there. It was also the gnawing tremor in her guts, as if tiny teeth were nibbling on her.

She could no longer ignore the movement inside her body. It made her heave. Her head sagged to the floor.

'God damn you!' she whispered. 'I won't have it! Stop it this minute.' She tasted a mouthful of bile.

'Please don't do this to me, don't dance. Please don't. If you keep dancing I'll have you scraped out and flushed down a toilet!'

Such passion, even as quietly as it came, made her vomit. She spewed on the rug, at the base of the Chippendale china closet. Brown curds mottled the wheat-coloured carpet. She spat on the mess and wiped her mouth in her hair.

She rested, waiting for the nausea to abate. The turmoil ceased inside her.

A deep breath. She took up the hunt again, crawling faster now, lightened of a load, pulled forward by the signs and smells.

The last chords of the Massenet sounded mournfully. Music shimmered through the rooms. It meant nothing to her.

At the threshold to the sunroom she halted to glower at the scene. She snarled through a mouthful of hair at what she herself had created, the work of her own hands. It was a pieta of living figures, becoming pink stone in the last red rays of the sunset.

Possie loomed enormous while the Dancing Master clung to her neck like a hurt child. They were framed by the windows, both facing away from Bertha's line of approach. They seemed engrossed

in the sight of reddening snow. Their edges burned. Possie's hair shone too sharp and luminous. In her shadow, the little man's curls were even darker than usual. Bertha heard him weeping.

She crawled up to them cautiously. She came to brush her hair lovingly against his calves.

'Holy Mary Mother of God!' screamed Lothar. He jerked his legs up, clenching them fast around the girl's waist.

Possie's eternal smile flickered. She stood as sturdy as before, although his entire weight now rested on her left side. Her eyes deepened into still water while the snow ran crimson in the sunset.

Something wild and on all fours was at her feet. It barked. The sound made her think of the lonesome coyote in the hills. It drew down her glance.

'Mother!' the girl sang out. 'You're too dead to be up. Get back to bed before you catch more cancer!'

The fur coat shivered. Silk and human hair grated on each other. Bertha half turned and hiked up the dress.

The Dancing Master made no effort to control his terror. Looking down he mumbled his prayers as Bertha lowered herself into a squat. She was peeing on Possie's slippers. A dull raining.

'See how it ends?' The girl spoke to them, calmly raising her eyes to the light waning in the distance over the thread of the horizon. 'The sky is too big for us.'

'The vortex!' babbled Lothar. Above him flamed the girl's hair; below him writhed the witch, slipping in her own piss. He smelled fire and urine.

Bertha finished and began to coil herself as tightly as she could around Possie's feet.

'Look down, look at me!' she hissed and constricted another inch. 'Look down. I'm the one. I did it. I made it happen. Look!'

But neither Lothar nor Possie paid her any attention. They were again turned to the windows. The girl cocked her head quizzically. The Dancing Master whined incoherently.

They were turned because of the faces in the windows. Real faces pressed against real glass.

• *Con Brio!* •

Valerie, more than the others, shone vigorously in the sunset—the light holding to her skin like down, light like a mantle on her head and shoulders.

She was the one rapping loudest, her knuckles threatening to break the glass. Her bare fingers were purple with cold.

Lilly, long Lilly, hugged her arms about herself and cast an envious eye on the inside of the sunroom. Where her coat gaped open, the glitter and sequins of her costume winked dully.

Latisha appeared to be grinning in madly at the ceiling chandelier, but it was only a case of very cold and aching teeth. Amber and azure feathers hung bedraggled from her hair, pinned there by one large artificial diamond pin. Feathers and grimace combined artfully and she could easily have been mistaken for an avenging angel.

At the middle window, barely clearing the sill, hunched Eloise. Her eyes were as hopeless and sad as any ever seen. Her hair had blown into a tangle of snakes.

Eloise mouthed words to the window, none of which were heard on the inside. Her lips moved, but in the silence of an aquarium.

The girls of the Great Western Troupe were rapping on the glass in unison now. The tapping was a nerve-racking and staccato salute.

Possie sighed. When she clucked her tongue, the Dancing Master trembled like a leaf, hearing in it his call to judgement.

Yep, it's the harbingers, sure enough, she said. 'You got to give them credit. They do it real well ... voices without bodies, bodies without voices ...'

With one brisk shake, she disengaged herself from the Dancing Master.

He dropped amazed, landing with a thud. He fell on his back with both feet on Bertha's hip.

'You two make yourselves at home,' chirped Possie. 'There's beer and six Hostess Twinkies in the fridge.'

With a single bound she escaped from Aunt Bertha's coil.

At the door she called back again. 'You know, I think this may have been the best lesson we've had yet.'

Grunts and groans answered from the carpet. Bertha climbed swiftly on top of the Dancing Master. The little man shrieked.

The rapping at the windows ceased. The gang of girls swept away, a flight of starving birds.

For Lothar on the floor, the struggle was a matter of life or death. It was much like fighting with a Hindu god—Bertha was all arms and legs.

To free himself he smashed his fist into her face.

Bertha contorted. She tasted blood, saw it in her eye, imagined it as a roaring torrent.

‘Love me!’ she pleaded with open arms. ‘I’m pregnant!’

But he too was gone.

Possie moved fast. By the time the girls swarmed around the side of the house she was already in the jeep with the engine running. Because she had thought to lock the doors they couldn’t get in at her. As before they resorted to a blitzkrieg of knuckles on glass.

‘Beware ...’ declared Eloise, almost lost in the shadows of the garage.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ Possie shouted her down, the engine too, which was wildly revving. ‘Just don’t let the assholes ruin it!’

At the sound of someone crying ‘*Ti amo, ti amo*’ from the back porch, the girls scattered, swooping in harmony, a squawking glissando.

Her way clear, Possie took reverse. The jeep skidded out of the garage and slid sideways off the driveway.

Lothar burst from the house, his arms raised high in surrender.

It was his crudest hour. Action at last, clear movement, no more fevered subtlety, no more of that damnable holding back.

‘Wait for me, Pussy Cat!’

Possie saluted him with a cheerful honk, the jeep cutting Peggy-Flemming figures in the snow on the front lawn.

In a frenzy, the Dancing Master tore at his curls, much too upset to notice the pack of women at his heels.

Without warning, the ballerinas jumped him.

Before he could stop them, they’d gone for his belt. In a tittering twinkle, they’d yanked down his pants. The thick blonde stuck her tongue in his ear and pinched his cheek. The others were already warming their hands inside his fiery red bikini underwear.

To the dreadful retreating roar of Possie’s jeep, Lothar grabbed the blonde by the sequins and threw her down. She spluttered on a mouthful of snow. The others cringed away from him.

Only the little one, the one with the cauliflower cars and the midnight eyes boring into his soul, remained solemnly in his way.

‘... of the dancing!’ intoned Eloise, pointing her index finger at his nose.

Lothar dashed her aside as well and pulled up his pants on the run.

The keys were in the Jaguar. The engine stirred grudgingly to life.

He backed up with the gas pedal to the floor. The jaguar exploded through the garage doors. Debris flew like shrapnel—wood, chrome, tail lights, metal slivers.

Chasing out of the driveway, the Dancing Master howled in agony, stripping the gears—he himself had just been blown loose, and for the first time in his life.

• *Live From Possom Trot* •

Backstage, Vandermark Auditorium, Emily Post and Wilma Wagoner tiptoed through last-minute details. In the shadow of sets, the matrons prowled like sleuths.

Mrs Post kept her watch turned up on her wrist.

‘It’s a full house out there!’ Her voice rose towards hysteria, closer and closer. ‘Why isn’t Possie here? Why hasn’t she come? Where is that Bertha!’

Mrs Wagoner was too frightened to speak.

In the far left dressing room, which smelled of damp athletic supporters and where the rows of bare electric bulbs were frozen in the mirrors, Madame Eglantine sat cool and crisp, every whisp of hair locked up tight in a charismatic pile on her head.

Madame studied her face in one of the mirrors. She moistened her lips and tilted her chin in rueful calculation.

Away from her, the Great Western Troupe huddled in the chill-leotards and circus suits. The sequins stuttered. The plumes hung in defeat. The girls waited pale and dispirited, their pallor heightened by the rouge pools on their cheeks.

For almost an hour, Madame had refused to address them. When they moved, she frowned. When they coughed, she glared. Even Eloise, the antique child of the night, could not make Madame smile.

At five minutes before curtain time, the powdered face contorted with passion. The pile of mashed-potato hair went turbulent.

‘Shit!’ enunciated Madame Eglantine. ‘You ruined it! Now we have nothing. He’s done it. He’s won. He’s taken her away with him. Conceited wop!’

Valerie scrutinized her bunions. Latisha mumbled ‘bitch’ under her breath. Lilly plucked absently at the loose cloth that bunched between her buttocks.

Eloise merely sighed. ‘It isn’t what you think, Maman. You know I’m right. I always am.’

With a flounce of her bunny rump, Eloise led the others out to take their positions on stage.

Beyond the closed curtain, in the brightly lit auditorium, waited the majority of Possom Trot’s population.

Bernadette was among the familiar faces, her smile fixed firmly, as if around the word ‘tights’. She sat gassing the seventh row on an overdose of Passion Play perfume. She carefully kept her charm bracelet muffled.

The Laceys were on the tenth row. The farmer fidgeted, as flushed and embarrassed as any man in the audience. His wife kept an encouraging hand on his thigh.

Franklin glistened. He leaned forward in his seat, as if to menace the stage. His fine, honest, blue eyes were laid fiercely on the heart of the stage.

Midway in the auditorium were the Sanders. They sat, hard-faced from a conjugal argument. The Reverend smiled rigidly at this large and enthusiastic congregation.

In a sudden fit of petulance, Mrs Sanders tossed her programme to the floor and lunged for the preacher's ear, almost suffocating their son who cowered between them.

Her revenge was uttered in a whisper. 'She's a fake and you're a fool!'

Together on the back row, as if seeking to mute the stage's power, waited Old Saddletoe and Mrs Plaget. These two nodded in a familiar communion.

They talked exclusively of the past, as if hoping it might yet save them from the present.

Ramel and Henry Schindler stood warily beside the front doors. They held hands.

Ramel was in a dress, for the first time since her mother's funeral. Her hair smelled of motor oil. Henry had dug out his only white shirt and spit-shined his longhorn-steer brass belt-buckle. To pass the time, he shifted cautiously from one big foot to the other, back and forth.

Of course, way down front, dead centre in the first row, quivered the eager paws and partridge thighs of Albert. The fat man had come to lay his flesh at the feet of the night's stage. He held all his expectations in his eyes. He sat soft and yielding.

Hidden behind the curtain was a good deal of fantasy. The Recital Planning Committee had spent a breathtaking sum of Vandermark money and a considerable amount of their own time on the sets.

It was a moonlit scene. A rose-coloured castle shimmered on a mountain top, stage-left. A velvet-blue lake spread across the backdrop. Stage right held an ornamental balustrade wrapped in plastic vines. The dozen pea-green peacocks with golden tails—extremely flamboyant tails fanning out amid the scene—were the genius of Billy Jo Atkins, who had once taken art courses at K-State.

Madame Eglantine's girls lounged against the peacocks. Their idle feet were already tired. They thrust their hips *contrapposto*. Their drawn faces were utterly indifferent.

Eloise crossed her legs at the ankles and yawned. She could find nothing of interest in the dust on the stage floor.

Madame herself came to wait in the open door to the dressing room. Her Marie-Antoinette head and Rubenesque bottom were in stark silhouette. As consolation prize, she was finishing a pint of Jim Beam.

Mrs Post stalked back and forth in front of the ornamental balustrade, wringing her hands and bleating for deliverance.

'Look for yourself,' she wept. 'Bertie Flatbottom's not out there. She's left us to face them alone!'

Mrs Wagoner, flashing hot and cold, sat down in a rush on a convenient saw-horse.

Now, at a few minutes past curtain time, noises from the crowd were of several kinds: the impatient scuffle of shoe leather, the swish of skirts, the tick-tock of 300 watches.

Already, a few infants bawled. Puling voices grew insistent. Youngsters raised the age-old 'I gotta go!' and 'How long now?'

The orchestra made the same exclamations. They were a small group of professors, the Fort Hays State College Faculty Chamber Orchestra. The conductor was an expert on the Inter-Regnum.

These musicians had already tuned up twice. They refused to straighten their ties again. They peered fearfully over the tops of the music stands.

But the curtain remained closed and the only late arrivals were the men from the Hays TV station. The crew came racing down the centre aisle with a flurry of clacking, mysterious equipment. For a moment they caught the audience's attention, being strangers, being such self-important and imperturbable young men.

Waiting, waiting.

The atmosphere vibrated to the creak of wooden seats, the angry moan of a public building stressed to its limits, girders teased, beams sway-backed and still giving.

At fifteen minutes past curtain time the crowd grew restive. A squadron of paper jets (fashioned from programmes) attacked the stage. The roguish sort became belligerent. Hoots were trumpeted. A spatter of rhythmically tramping feet made everyone edgy.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Centre stage, Madame Eglantine was brandishing her empty whisky bottle and yelling. 'Open the fuckin' curtain! And call me Mildred, God damn it!'

While attempting to pirouette, she blundered with a hiccup through the painted lake.

Stage left, Wilma Wagoner fainted to the floor.

Down front, on the count of three, the orchestra made a run for the nearest exit.

Vandermark Auditorium had filled with the awesome uproar of elephants on parade.

• *The High Plains Blast* •

She led him into a dark, crystalline world where the only sound was the wind and the only light came from the stars and the moon—gibbous moon and evening stars in a pitch-black sky.

The edges of that world were vague hills of snow, pale contours lashing the two of them, the two of them alone, to the horizon.

It was much colder here—and unfortunately he had left his parka in the house. It seemed far darker to him than it actually was. He squinted intently for the first sign of danger. In front of him the frail stream of his own breath kept him company. The snow came up half-way to his knees. Never had he been in such snow before.

Lothar lifted a leg as high as he could and shook it. Useless. He shuddered and put it back. The foot sank out of sight.

At his back, on the ridge of the nearest rise were the jeep and Jaguar, silhouetted like ghostly toys. When the wind gusted, which it did in mammoth swells, the vehicles, like everything else, were lost to sight.

Now he wished that he had left the car lights burning and the engine idling. Stupid. He realized too late how comforting the roar and glare of a man-made machine can be—it would have been something to return to.

He seemed to have run out of choices. The field of snow pearly grim and absolute, like infinity itself.

‘Possie?’ he sent his voice out searching, hopeful.

It seemed that she was ever on the point of vanishing; a visionary tutu that was a mere silver shade away from the colour of snow. She splashed on, perhaps twenty-five feet in advance, at the furthest flicker of vision. Sometimes, to his dread, she disappeared altogether, swallowed up by the snow and the wind and the night.

He knew they were now plunging down the side of a hill. The snow lay thicker. As they descended he noticed the wind change, how it roared above their heads instead of at their backs.

Suddenly before him were the trunks of giants. He stopped short in consternation. Unafraid, the girl whipped sharply on.

He made out the base of the stones, guessing that they were indeed stones. He could not see how far up they might soar. They were monolithic to him.

He wondered, vaguely, if this could be the secret of the land, what the natives whispered about and kept darkly. It was surely not to be laughed at, too dangerous for laughter. A druidical farce is too menacing for humour.

He stood chilled in the background, refusing to approach them.

‘Come on! Touch them!’ she ordered, for the first time acknowledging his presence. She herself hovered beside the stones as if in flight.

‘Touch them for luck ... They’ll change your life!’

Because he guessed that these stones were important to her, he tried to appreciate them. He wanted to be impressed by them. He did try.

Gingerly stepping forward, he put out a hand. The stones were brittle, like an ancient and deep-frozen flesh. He detected no movement in them. There was no source there, no pulse or heat. Had he ever touched anything so alien? He did grant them a semblance of power, the type that hangs over any place that has been missed by time.

Looking up, throwing back his head, he tried to see to the tops of the columns. The moon hung on the chalk like the head of an idol.

‘The sea made them.’ She had come up silently, close behind him.

He whirled. She glimmered within touching distance. At the sight of her, breath hissed through his teeth, veiling her image with his own embodied spirit.

Her face mimicked the moon’s. The eyes were stretched enormous. They were oceans in themselves. Such a face had stars in its hair and tore at his heart.

‘You really shouldn’t have come.’ She spoke to him gently. The tone was different. He had not heard her speak like this before, never with so much fullness and peace.

Thinking she meant Kansas, Possom Trot, he said, ‘But you are here. And how could I have resisted that?’

She charged off laughing before he could reach for her.

‘Wait for me! I want to be part of you!’ Even to his own ears he sounded pathetic.

Possie lifted her head, sailing on. Her laughter came to him like the notes of shattering ice. Her face and the moon’s were identical to him now, both etched in silver.

‘You are, silly!’ she called back over her shoulder.

Now she led him higher, climbing back into the wind. He followed, cursing the snow that held him back. Hard as he fought to push ahead, he could not gain on her.

The land levelled out and they moved on more gracefully, faster. Momentarily, a lapse in the wind cleared the atmosphere, and he caught in a flash how the earth rolled awesomely, on all sides, a landscape without end, desolate and low sweeping.

The girl fled across the frozen tract. He wobbled and jerked in pursuit.

Cold became a serious problem. His feet no longer seemed to exist. His fingers throbbed. His body had been stung by an invisible menace.

‘Possie!’

She wouldn't heed him. Perhaps she didn't even hear him. They were stumbling along a network of connecting ridges and the wind was ruthless with human speech.

Only a few steps behind her now, he occasionally heard her body forging the way. He could see less and less. The snow seemed to be attacking his eyes. With sight and sound waning, he panicked.

How far had they come? How long had they been out? Would he ever find his way back? Did she know what she was doing?

But she stopped abruptly. He too halted, a blind man trying to learn to listen. His one hope was to stay near to her for warmth and protection.

A current of air seethed at his feet. Huge sails of snow closed in on him, pushing and pulling at him.

How close was she? Very close now, he was certain. Surely within reach? He listened, frantic for a hint. He heard laboured breathing, not his own. A floundering weight moved somewhere nearby.

He could see nothing but the fury of the earth; it raged in his face. It seemed to taunt him, as if they—he and the earth—were fellow rivals for her hand.

Standing still, he groped in the space around him, hoping to come upon her warm body. The bitterness of not having her was at its acutest.

'I should not ... have let ... you go ... should have held on ... stayed in the house ...' Lothar shrieked into the wind.

The little man struck his fists angrily into the air, banged them viciously, with all his might, at the cold and snow.

Possie stood a single step away from him. She listened to him, amazed by the anguish he poured out on the scene.

All she'd done was to come to stand there on the edge, where before them the High Plains swept away two hundred miles to the Rockies. And where the hill dropped thirty feet below, a sheer cliff no more than a few inches away.

She'd brought him here to show him the place where her own family had come to cut out the soft hill and drag off the ribs of stone to use for fence posts, banks and tombstones. Simply enough, this was the cutting place the source of particular kinds of dreams, of her own house for instance.

The girl said nothing because what she knew made her too full for words. In the fullness she assumed that every breathing creature understood the same, venerated the same in their blood as she did.

'If you are dancing,' he roared, 'I will ... be furious!'

The little man battled with his arms; the Dancing Master goose-stepped forward. He reached out for her, going directly into the upsurging blast.

He called her name once in the falling.

That was when the night screamed her name, although Possie said nothing in answer. Even when she was all alone, afterwards, in the long, elegiac silence, she said nothing.

Possie remained speechless while her heart read a mournful poetry. Her tears were lost in the wind.

Down below, she knew, without thinking of it, there were at least a hundred jagged stones, some as sharp as teeth. And over those hammered and chiselled pieces had been thrown a drift of snow.

The drift would be almost perpendicular. It would be the colour and shape of a curtain.

· CHAPTER THE VERY LAST ·

The rains that spring were historic. They came in late April. For two weeks the sky dripped, deluging western Kansas.

The creeks swelled in their beds. They climaxed in a rush at flood stage. Catching it, the Smoky Hill River shot up eighteen feet and out of its banks for the first time since 1952.

Whole fields were washed away. Barnyard fowl floated about on chicken-house rafts. People rowed to town.

In Possom Trot only the business district could be sandbagged in time—to the Hosannas of the Jaycees. The brave fellows who saved the Weaver Hotel even earned a private performance from the Great Western Troupe.

Other areas of town were not as lucky. Working away in the Vandermark living room, Mrs Plaget heard the waters lapping over the front steps. ‘Good, cover up the whole darn mess!’ she remarked to herself.

To be heard upstairs, Mamu shouted No, I will not stop to sew Raggedy Anne a life jacket! You just hold on to her and she’ll be OK. I’m down here, trying to save your daddy’s law books, so be good and stay out of my way!’

On her own side of the street, Bertha Flatbottom Dowell was not feeling particularly stoic. She almost bit off her lips watching the bungalow porch tilt and finally crash in a ruin. The flood also swept away her hand-painted sign, the one she’d placed in the front yard advertising ‘Aunt Bertha’ and the ‘First Bungalow Holiness Church of PT’.

Aunt Bertha then screeched an eloquent denunciation of the elements, the Vandermarks, and herself, from the bathroom window, via a rented sound system. Not an easy feat for a small woman big with child.

Although the heavens remained impervious, the display did impress some of her fellow sufferers and subsequently brought her a few converts to Bungalow Holiness.

On the day the flood crested—six inches up the walls of the Vandermark entrance hall—an announcement appeared on the back page of the *Record*. It was to be found beside an advertisement for oven roasters at Haggerman’s Market. The same notice ran for weeks in the pages of *Writer’s Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, and the *London Times Literary Supplement*.

The announcement read:

ATTENTION—THE GIUSEPPE LOTHAR MEMORIAL FOUNDATION IS NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR THREE (3) POETRY ENDOWMENTS. ENDOWED POETS ARE TO RECEIVE CASH STIPENDS AND AN ALL-EXPENSES-PAID RESIDENCE AT THE AUTUMN WORKSHOP OF THE HIGH PLAINS POETRY CENTRE. APPLICANTS SHOULD SUBMIT EITHER TEN POEMS OR NOT MORE THAN 20 TYPED PAGES OF ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT (SASE PLEASE). APPLICATIONS MUST INCLUDE A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH, AND BE POSTMARKED BEFORE MIDNIGHT JULY 4. APPLY TO: P.V. VANDERMARK, C/O THE HIGH PLAINS

POETRY CENTRE, 508 COMMERCIAL STREET, POSSOM TROT, KANSAS
67547.