

# *Bone Structure and Other Stories*

*Moti Ben-Ari*



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## Bone Structure

"I was going to tell you the truth, but I was afraid that you wouldn't believe me. There's no point in lying any more, so I'll tell you exactly what happened."

\* \* \* \* \*

I hardly slept last night. Fortunately, Pearl slept well and at dawn, when I got up, I decided to let her sleep a few more minutes while I checked and re-checked the equipment. The cage was spotless and the cans, bottles and cloths were careful stowed in a picnic cooler. I went down to make sure that the car would start and warmed up the engine for a few minutes. Finally, I woke Pearl, let her have a few sips of milk, put her in her cage and left as quietly as I could. Needless to say, even on such an important day, my wife didn't bother to see us off, to say nothing of offering to come and help.

Early on a weekend morning, there was no traffic and I arrived downtown in a fraction of the time it usually took to get to work. Across the entrance to the building a large sign read: "The Grand Hotel Welcomes the 16th Annual Regional Cat Show." I parked my car in the garage and went upstairs to the exhibition hall. The organizers quickly registered Pearl and showed me the area assigned to Siamese cats. I spent the next hour or so with Pearl, lightly brushing her coat and smoothing it with a chamois cloth. I let her nibble on a few tidbits, just enough to take the edge off her hunger, but not enough to make her want to doze off. Mostly, I just held her, looking into her brilliant blue eyes, stroking her and re-assuring her that everything would go well. I had my heart set on Pearl placing first in the seal-point Siamese category. Last year, she had missed winning a ribbon by placing fourth and I think that she had sensed my disappointment.

When Pearl seemed to quiet down, I walked around the exhibit hall, first for short periods of time, and later, as Pearl began to feel at ease, for longer walks to other parts of the hall. I checked up on the competition. Many people had begun raising more exotic versions of Siamese, such as chocolate-point with their ivory coats or blue-point with their white coats, so my direct competition had lessened. Still, there were some beautiful seal-points and my confidence began to evaporate, until I returned to Pearl's cage. My gorgeous Pearl, no one can beat you.

I took a quick walk past the Persian cats, who were submitting meekly to incessant brushing. Perhaps Persians are more regal, but I would never exchange one for a Siamese: inquisitive yet obedient, demonstrative yet devoted and affectionate. I was never really attracted to the wedge-shaped heads of the Abyssinians or the Burmese, but the Somalis are irresistible. The wedge is rounded and the coat is a glowing orange with incredibly soft fur. Of course, the mutant breeds have their fans, though, every time I see a Scottish Fold with its horizontal ears, I keep thinking that someone had been petting it too hard. Finally, I looked in on the Ocicats whose spotted coats and long legs make them look as if they had just come out of the jungle.

By now the judging had started, so I returned to Pearl to wait for our call. After about an hour, it

came. I gathered up Pearl into my arms and carried her to the judging area. Placing her in one of the cages, I took a seat in front of the table. Pearl settled down comfortably to wait, but I fidgeted in my chair as my heart pumped in nervous expectation. It took about ten minutes for all the contestants to be placed on the table and then the judge approached.

"Ladies and gentlemen. This is the presentation of seal-point Siamese."

The judge stood behind a wide table. On the table, in front of him, was a raised white stand, illuminated from above by a bright light. One by one, he brought out the cats, carefully disinfecting the stand and his hands between each one. I hardly paid attention, for I was looking at Pearl trying to commune with her--though she was far away and behind the wire mesh--beseeching her to do her best. Finally, her turn came. The judge brought her to the stand. For an instant, Pearl tried to bolt, as she had done last year, but then she remembered the training we had worked on for the past year and settled into a relaxed, yet alert crouch under the judge's hands. It had begun. I remember every word, though at the time, his words floated over me.

"This is a beautiful seal-point. I like her personality, spirited yet disciplined. Look how she holds her head up fearlessly, though her body shows no tension. The cream-colored fur on her shoulders merges imperceptibly into the fawn of the haunches. Her coat is glossy and beautifully presented."

He picked Pearl up and studied her face. "Large, widely spaced ears, perfectly proportioned face, strong, narrow chin. The brown fur of the mask is symmetrical and unblemished, the traces of brown to the ears are dense in the center and light, though well-defined, on the sides. Deep, clear blue eyes, like gem stones."

The judge placed her back on the stand and ran his fingers over every part of her body from shoulder to tail, then picked her up again, stretching her supple spine to gauge its curvature. "Exquisite bone structure. Slim legs, small feet, perfectly balanced."

He rechecked all his findings, uttering once again, "exquisite bone structure," and returned Pearl to her cage.

With a sigh of relief, I slumped in my chair and waited for the judge to finish with the other cats. Then the moment came, the incredible tension, and finally, the overwhelming excitement and joy when the judge attached the first place ribbon to Pearl's cage. I must have fainted and woke up with someone was holding a glass of water to my lips. I graciously accepted the proffered congratulations, and carried Pearl in triumph back to her cage. I opened a container of her favorite seafood and let her eat to her heart's content. The rest of the day went by quickly. Envious competitors were cool and correct, owners of toms wanted to close deals, and uninformed onlookers gawked, trying to figure out what was so exquisite about Pearl's bone structure.

Finally, it came time to pack up and go home until next year. The drive back took much longer since the roads were packed with weekend sports' fans and shoppers. Exhausted, but exhilarated, I arrived home and burst in shouting, "We won! We won!" My wife came from the living room

and began upbraiding me: "Will you stop shouting? I'm trying to watch TV. It's always you and that damned cat. I'm fed up. If you don't put that cat down, I'm leaving. It's either me or it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You've seen her, Detective, her bone structure would never win a competition. So I shot her. I put her down, just like she asked. And that's the whole truth."

"Detective, can I take Pearl with me when I go to prison?"

## The Rat Czar

He stopped in front of the door, took out his handkerchief and wiped an imaginary smudge off the polished brass nameplate. The embossed black letters read: Frank Pico, Commissioner for Rodent Control. Originally he had had some misgivings about the title and the acronym CRC, but his apprehension evaporated when the press began referring to him as the Rat Czar. Today was his first day on the job.

Work was about to begin on the new subway extensions and the experts had almost derailed the project by apocalyptic prophecies of hordes of rats about to be released from their cozy underground burrows to run wild in the city. The mayor had become alarmed by the steadily escalating size of the demonstrations by citizens organizations such as "Mothers against Rats." Even the leaders of the depressed communities which would benefit the most from the subway extensions capitulated under pressure from their local chapters of "Mothers." Intensive negotiations had led to an agreement under which the mayor would appoint a commissioner who would be given plenipotentiary power and adequate resources to wage a war on the rats. In his hour of need, Mayor Anderson had turned to Frank Pico.

Not that Pico was his first choice. But Anderson's cronies were comfortably ensconced in their positions and refused to take the job. To be CRC was distasteful to say the least, and since there was no guarantee of success, even the rank of commissioner proved to be an insufficient inducement. But Frank Pico jumped at the opportunity. He had been Assistant Director of Sanitation, Assistant Director of Housing Inspection, and Assistant Director of almost every branch of the municipal government. He had a burning ambition to be Director of Something, but had always been stymied by the distribution of directorships among the patrician politicians in city hall.

Of course, Pico was too astute to be seen lusting after the position. He had had his name dropped by the right people, had played hard to get and finally, after a long bargaining session with Mayor Anderson, came away with the two things dearest to the heart of an official: absolute authority to distribute patronage and every perk that had ever been invented by the fertile imaginations of municipal politicians.

Frank Pico glanced at his watch which showed 09:25. While he always insisted that his staff be punctual, he had learned that a boss's prestige is enhanced by moderate tardiness. He opened the door and stepped into the outer office. Maureen rose to greet him. Even if he had been a mere director and not a commissioner, he would have been allowed to choose his own secretary. But a commissioner's secretary earned thousands more than a director's so there were dozens of applications, each accompanied by a large photograph and each duly supported by some important community leader. Pico had them all checked out and finally offered the job to Maureen.

Maureen's office was well-furnished with the best equipment. His glance noted a glossy new laptop, the most prestigious smartphone, and a multiline telephone, in addition to something that

he thought was a "tablet." The potted plants were real, not artificial. On the left, a leather padded door led to his office. Pico returned Maureen's greeting with a smile and entered the inner sanctum.

The deep pile of the beige carpet absorbed the impact of Pico's steps as he strode to his desk. He sat in the black leather executive chair and surveyed the room, noting the warmth that emanated from the teak-panelled walls and ceiling. From his days as a housing inspector he could appreciate the difference between real teak and teak-stained pine. His desk was large and uncluttered. There was a futuristically styled multi-line telephone and another direct line to the mayor's office. A fountain pen for signing documents and gold-framed pictures of his wife and children were the only other objects visible. A conference table abutted the desk. Across the room, a plush sofa, armchairs and a coffee table. A well-stocked bar was nearby, though Pico had long ago learned not to drink on the job.

Two large windows displayed a panorama of the city's skyscrapers as far as the harbor. Above his head hung a portrait of Mayor Anderson flanked by portraits of the President and the Governor. Frank Pico opened the buttons of the jacket of his new pin-striped suit, leaned back and carefully rested the heels of his wing-tipped shoes on the desk. Not bad for a high-school dropout.

His reverie was interrupt by a gentle buzz from the telephone followed by Maureen's voice, "Mr. Pico, the staff is here for the opening meeting."

"Thank you, Maureen. In five minutes you can send them in."

"Yes, Mr. Pico."

Pico straightened himself up and took a few deep breaths. The Rat Czar was ready to begin work.

\* \* \* \* \*

The staff filed in and took their places around the conference table. Prof. Peter Walsh from the Zoology department of the University was the scientific advisor. Though Walsh felt more at home in a custom-tailored suit, to improve his credibility he cultivated the appearance of an absent-minded professor with a pipe and a tweed jacket.

Across from Green sat Richard Trent. Pico had chosen him to be in charge of recruiting the exterminating crews because rumor had it that he was well-versed on the hiring of illegal immigrants.

Unlike Walsh and Trent, the financial officer Adrian Davenport was impeccably dressed. Polishing his Harvard MBA in a penthouse overlooking the park, Davenport could barely discern the inner city neighborhood where he had grown up.

Maureen sat at the far end of the conference table and prepared to take notes. Pico pressed his



finger tips together, dipped his head as if in thought, then raised his eyes to look directly at the assembled staff and began the opening oration that he had practiced during the preceding week.

"Gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to the Commission on Rodent Control. You have each been hand-picked to rescue our great municipality from a terrible fate. The subway extensions are necessary if we are to solve the transportation problems that threaten to drive away existing business as well as new investment. And yet, we cannot let the rats flood our streets, sweep through our homes and bite our babies."

Pico paused for a few moments. Trent would have liked to remind him that there were no voters present to be impressed, but he let it pass. After all, how long could the speech last? Pico continued.

"Mayor Anderson has chosen me to fulfil the awesome task of exterminating the rats as they poke their heads above ground."

"As if the mayor had a choice," thought Walsh.

"We will attack these disgusting creatures and not let up until not a single rat remains within the city limits."

"We could give them subsidized mortgages to move to the suburbs," Davenport groaned to himself.

"Before we get down to work I have asked Prof. Walsh to describe the enemy to us."

Walsh stood up and took a flash drive from his briefcase. Maureen pressed a button, a screen descended from the ceiling and the room darkened. Walsh shuffled his notes, cleared his throat and began his lecture.

"Gentlemen and my lady," he began, "today, we are going to talk about animals from the genus *Rattus* of the family Muridae of the order Rodentia, or in layman's language: rats. Our first slide shows an individual of the species *Rattus Rattus* also known as the black rat. The black rat is a voracious consumer of grain, responsible for near famine conditions in some areas of the world. It bore the bubonic plague that devastated Europe in the fourteenth century."

Prof. Walsh paused. "But the black rat is nothing compared with *Rattus Norvegicus*, the Norwegian or brown rat, which is bigger and more ferocious. They live in underground burrows and sewers, and can grow as large as cats. When hungry they will eat anything. Please close your eyes, Maureen, the next slide is not for the squeamish."

Walsh continued his lecture, oblivious to the fact that all those present counted themselves among the squeamish.

"Here we see the face of a baby who was severely bitten by a rat. Luckily, his parents chased the rat away almost immediately, as they have been known to kill children. In the next slide I have a chart detailing the computed density of the rat population in various areas of the city. I say the

computed density, because I haven't done a burrow to burrow census, ha, ha. Even so, you can appreciate that in the area of the subway construction, there are over a million rats. Now, you might ask, why we don't see these teeming millions among us every day?"

Pico was getting fed up with the lecture and wished that Walsh would get to the point. An imperial glare directed at the professor had no effect and the lecture continued.

"The reason is that rats are nocturnal creatures. They live underground and only emerge at night to feed. Our heaps of garbage, our sewers and occasional cats supply sufficient nutrition. In times of distress, rats even resort to cannibalism."

Walsh's voice rose as he reached the climax of his lecture.

"When we dig, gouge and tunnel into their habitats, these rats will flee seeking refuge in all directions, by day as well as by night. Woe betide those who cross their path."

"Jeez, Walsh, whose side are you on anyway?" Pico interrupted him. "I mean we've just got to kill the little bastards."

Prof. Walsh was stunned. He gathered up his notes and sat down. When the lights came on, Pico addressed the staff.

"By our next meeting, I want a report from you, Walsh, giving a list of recommended poisons for killing the rats. From you, Davenport, I want a budget estimate and from you, Green, I want a plan for recruiting and managing the extermination crews. That's all for now."

The three men marched out, leaving Maureen standing by the desk. "Is there anything I can do, Mr. Pico? "

"I don't think so, Maureen. Why don't you just call my chauffeur and take the rest of the day off?"

"Thank you very much, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

They next few months whirled by in an intoxicating rush. Prof. Walsh booked himself on innumerable junkets, travelling all over the country and even to Europe and the Far East inspecting chemical factories, and directing research grants that sought newer and more efficient substances. Davenport managed a media campaign to pressure the city council into approving his bloated budget. He was temporarily demoralized when his budget sailed unanimously through the city council with only a few token cuts. Then, in a flash of brilliance, he convinced Pico that the commission needed a computerized command and control center for the operation. Since then, he had been busily perfecting formulas for computing the ratio of rats killed to dollars spent. In the depressed inner city, Trent had no trouble recruiting workers, especially when word got around that the week-long training course was to be held in a plush resort in the mountains outside the city.

Happiest of all was Frank Pico. Press conference followed press conference. Even the New York Times deigned to send a reporter to interview him. He liked to sit in his office and read the papers: "Never in history, since the Pied Piper of Hamelin, has anyone done so much for mankind." The sweet touch of flattery caressed him.

The idyll couldn't continue forever, of course. One day, the graphs on Davenport's computer began to show a downturn in the ratio of rats killed to new rats sighted. Walsh admitted that some rats were resistant to existing poisons, and that his laboratories had not been able to develop new variants sufficiently rapidly. Trent owned up that labor relations were not what they used to be. After the warm glow of the training camp had worn off, the men became disgusted with the nauseating work of disposing of the dead rats. Talk in neighborhood bars discouraged new recruits. He dared not tell Pico that his ostentatious style was depressing morale even further.

Pico looked frantically from one to another, seeking to pass the buck. He empathized with Trent and his crews. Washington's computers were harmless in themselves. Anyway the press was not likely to blame the computer for the rat problem.

"OK, Professor Walsh. You have one week to find out why your pesticides don't work or I'll expect your resignation on my desk. Meeting dismissed."

During the week, things got worse as word of the situation leaked out. Mayor Anderson called Pico daily for progress reports and Pico had to resort to the childish maneuver of threatening to resign. With the subway work in full swing, the mayor backed down.

Tension mounted in anticipation of the next staff meeting, especially when it was learned that Prof. Walsh had been spending a lot of time in one lab in California. Just before the meeting he was seen wheeling several large boxes into Pico's office. Pico called the meeting to order and glowered at Walsh who could not repress an imbecilic smile.

"I take it, Walsh, that you've got something to show us besides your letter of resignation."

"Yes, Mr. Pico. Gentlemen and Maureen, in this box I have a some rats, one male and ten females." Immediately all eyes were riveted on the rat cage which Walsh withdrew from the box with a flourish. "As you can see, the male is copulating with a female. Now, let's watch them for a while. The act of copulation itself is over very quickly, but a male rat is capable of copulating dozens of times without rest."

Without a word, Prof. Walsh opened the second box and extracted a piece of electronic equipment. He plugged it into the wall and slowly turned a large dial, looking at what seemed to be a large speaker on the front panel, though no sound was emitted. Suddenly, a big smile appeared on his face and he pointed to the rat cage. The rats had ceased their vigorous sexual activity.

"We have discovered that rats cannot copulate in the presence of a tone at exactly 23,350 hertz.

This is above the range of the human ear, so we can't hear the sound from this signal generator, but the rats sure can. We'll flood their burrows with the tone and in a few months, there won't be any more rats."

"I suppose that you want to run electricity into their burrows so they can plug their stereos in," said Davenport.

"No problem," continued Green. "We have developed a miniaturized version that runs on batteries. It only costs \$200 and I think that 10,000 will be enough."

"My brother-in-law owns an electronics assembly shop," said Trent as he did the mental arithmetic.

The staff watched as Walsh turned the equipment on and off. With each flick of the switch, the male rat's equipment responded as if it were wired to the signal generator. Pico became very impatient.

"You people know what to do. Adrian, prepare a supplemental budget and call the comptroller. Trent, get the manufacturing plans for the device drawn up."

The following months were almost a repetition of the first few months. Trent's brother-in-law had no trouble getting a large, low-interest business loan to finance a new factory for building "Celib-Rats." In addition to purchases by the city, ordinary citizens purchased the gadget after a high-powered advertising campaign. Davenport's graphs clearly showed an increase in the ratio of rats killed to new rats sighted. Since no new methods had been developed to kill rats, the obvious conclusion was that fewer rats were being born.

Only Pico was depressed. Despite the new round of publicity, he felt jaded by the adulation. One day he sat brooding in his chair when the direct line from the mayor rang.

"Hi, Frank. How's the rat business? " Pico roused himself and prepared for the usual chit-chat with the mayor.

"Fine, thank you, your Honor. As you can see from the graphs, we are killing more rats every day."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You know, Frank, your boys are doing such a great job that I wanted to ask you when you think the job will be finished."

"Finished? "

"Yes, Frank. I'm preparing next year's budget and I was wondering if the CRC can be terminated before them or if you think you'll need an extra month or two in the next fiscal year."

Pico was speechless. It had never occurred to him that the commission might ever be closed down. After all, rats had lived with humans since the beginning of history and would live with them forever, or at least until his own retirement. He stammered out a noncommittal answer:

"We'll discuss it at our next staff meeting, sir, and I'll pass our forecast on to you by the end of the week."

"Great, Frank. Keep up the good work. Goodbye."

Pico groped towards the telephone and barely managed to replace the handset. He sank back in his chair and surveyed his office, remembering when he had first sat upon this throne. Everything was still so new. How could he go back to Housing Inspection? He called Maureen into the office. "Please call a staff meeting for tomorrow, Maureen."

Maureen's face softened as she noted the deadened tone of his voice and sad expression in his eyes.

"What happened, Frank? "

When he told her what the mayor had said, she came around the desk and put her arms around his head. Pico buried his face in her blouse and could no longer choke back his sobs.

Trent, Walsh and Davenport breezed into the meeting, not knowing what awaited them. A funereal atmosphere descended as Pico explained the situation.

"So that's it, gentlemen. Peter, I wish to express the gratitude of the city for saving it from the rats. I'm afraid that there is nothing more for you to do. Adrian, you can stay on until the budget is finalized. My appointment will probably not be extended beyond the end of the year. Rick, I'm sure that you can stay on with a token force until the last rats are gone. I have truly enjoyed working with you and I wish you the best of luck."

One by one they shook hands and filed out. Walsh lingered behind until he was left alone with Pico. He pointed to a box he had left by the table.

"Before I go, Frank, I've got to tell you something. That box contains a mutant strain of rats that we discovered in one of our laboratories. They cease to copulate when subjected to a frequency of 23,450 hertz and not 23,350 hertz. Please see that they are destroyed before they can escape."

Green took his leave and was gone. Pico took the box and trudged towards the elevator. On his way to the exterminator's station in the cellar he passed his old office in the Housing Inspection department. The paint was peeling, the plaster was crumbling and the linoleum floor was grungy.

Pico walked quickly to the parking lot entrance, pulled the cage from the box, opened the door and watched hopefully as a dozen rats scampered off and disappeared in the nearest sewer.

## Bravado

Joshua slid over to the window seat and looked out over the wing. The wing was clean: the pilot had yet to configure it for takeoff. Only the engine nacelle disturbed the smooth surface. Joshua thought back to his high-school days when he had built and flown model airplanes, and then felt a twinge of regret and bitterness as he recalled the letter from the Air Force informing him that his eyesight was below their standards for flight school. He had done the next best thing, studying aeronautics and applied mathematics.

By now the airplane was taxiing into position towards the end of the runway, and Joshua heard the rumble of the engine beneath him and noted that the flaps were extended in the correct position. Ever since that terrible accident when some idiot flight crew had forgotten to extend the flaps for takeoff, he had made a point of requesting a window seat over the wing. It was one in a million, but since he knew what to look for, Joshua had taken upon himself the responsibility of double-checking the pilot.

Soon their turn came and the aircraft turned onto the runway. Joshua heard the engines rev up, felt a slight jerk as the pilot released the brakes and then the exhilaration of the gentle G force pushing him back into his seat as the acceleration increased. He could almost hear the non-flying pilot call out the decision velocity, then the takeoff velocity and found his hands clenching as if it were he who was pulling back on the control yoke to rotate the aircraft. They lifted off smoothly and he heard the whine of the motors retracting the landing gear and the clunk as it locked in the fuselage. The aircraft gained height, the flaps were retracted and the aileron on his side rose to bank into the noise-abatement pattern.

After so many years studying aerodynamic equations, he could almost see the airflow over the wings. The leading edge hit the air and violently broke it into two flows, one over the wing and one below it. He saw how the streamlines formed a laminar flow hugging the wing surface, only to break into turbulence towards the trailing edge. Further out along the wing, the aileron prematurely broke the beautiful laminar flow, causing a loss of lift, which in turn caused the wing to dip. Finally, the troublesome wingtip vortex. If only wings could be of infinite length, it would be so much easier to design an airplane.

Joshua had stumbled one step before the finish line. He was nosed out in a competition for a tenured faculty position by a computerized whiz kid. The department head had told him that they had enough classical mathematicians and that they preferred someone with a more modern background. He had had dozens of offers from first-class state universities, but he found it hard to leave the city where he had spent so much time since his freshman year, and put off making a decision. In his anger, he even began scanning the job opportunities in the Sunday papers, and that is how he noticed the ad from an insurance company looking for mathematicians to train as actuaries. Out of spite, he signed up for the course. Since his qualifications were much higher than the average applicant, he began passing the exams at an accelerated rate. By the time he was required to choose a faculty position at another university, he decided to renounce his career in aeronautics and to accept the very high salary offered by an insurance company.

Joshua set a company record for passing the qualifying exams and quickly became their most indispensable expert. The insurance company knew how to reward performance and his income increased by leaps and bounds. In addition there were the usual perks, gratefully accepted except for the business-class seats on flights. Only then, as he sat by the window overlooking the wing, did he allow himself to wallow in nostalgia.

"Excuse me, sir, would you like something to drink?" he heard a flight attendant say. Turning to her he replied, "Scotch, please." Then he noticed for the first time the woman sitting next to him. They introduced themselves. Claire was an advertising executive, also on a business trip. Joshua began to chat with her.

The flight attendants served the meal which was quite good for airline fare. The food and drinks had their effect and he dozed off. A slight movement of the airplane woke him. He reached into his attache case and pulled out a copy of Aviation Week magazine.

In a concession to his past, he had kept up his subscription to Aviation Week and keenly followed the news: the titanic competition between Boeing and Airbus for market share; the ups and downs of airlines as they struggled with labor unrest, financing, route assignments. What interested him most were the reports on experimental aircraft being built for NASA or the Air Force. Forward-swept wings, high angle of attack configurations, hypersonic flight. Perhaps he really would have been better off at a university.

Flipping through the magazine, he came to the final section: reports from the National Transportation Safety Board on aircraft accidents. Another aging aircraft fuselage had cracked open. Several passengers had been sucked out before everyone was strapped in for the emergency landing. It was part of his professional pride that he could read these reports, even as he was travelling on an aircraft of the same make and age as the one in the accident.

Claire stirred and woke up. She asked him what he was reading and he started to explain about the difficulties of detecting corrosion on an aircraft. Claire became quite agitated and blurted out, "Please stop. I don't want to hear about it. Please, ever since my husband was killed, I can't bear to hear about accidents."

"Don't worry, these things happen so rarely. It's much safer than driving a car," he tried to soothe her. "You can't imagine how much damage an aircraft can take and still fly."

"I don't care. Just stop. Just say I'm superstitious, I don't care." Claire signalled a flight attendant and asked for another drink. As Joshua watched, she hunched her shoulders around her drink and seemed to withdraw into an inner world.

Joshua was angry. Why were people so superstitious? Why didn't they trust technology? Airplane accidents were so rare and always explainable. He closed his copy of Aviation Week and stared out the window. To his horror, he noticed a large crack growing in the aileron. How? Why? There had never been corrosion problems before on an aileron. With a terrible sound, the aileron ripped off and disappeared into space. With the asymmetric loss of lift, the aircraft rolled dangerously and then just as suddenly rolled the other way as the pilot deployed the aileron on

the other side to balance the aircraft. The loss of lift caused the aircraft to descend rapidly.

"Ladies and gentlemen. This is your first officer speaking. We are encountering severe technical difficulties with the aircraft. But we are in no danger. I repeat, we are in no danger. We will be landing as soon as possible. Please follow the flight attendants' instructions as the landing may be a little hard."

"Noooooooo," Joshua screamed. "No, stop the airplane. We're going to crash. I don't want to crash. I don't want to die."

Joshua was crying and moaning, completely out of control. Meanwhile, the flight attendants made heroic efforts to get the cabin configured for an emergency landing. One of them turned to Claire and said,

"Ma'am, it would help us if you could try to get him under control. In these situations, panic is more dangerous than the situation itself."

"Certainly," Claire replied, snapping out of her trance. Strangely, the emergency had given her a sense of inner calm, for at worst she would be joining her husband. If only the fool next to her hadn't talked about accidents, none of this would have happened. She placed her arm around Joshua and tried to calm him. "There now. We're still flying and they say it's not too bad and that we will land soon."

"Nooooo. I don't want to be here. I know what's going to happen. Let me off."

"Just a few more minutes now," Claire soothed him. The aircraft was quite controllable using engine thrust to compensate for the loss of the aileron, though the ride was not very smooth. The captain elected to circle for twenty minutes, dumping fuel before coming in for a landing at the nearest airport. By then, the cabin was fully configured for an emergency landing and the passengers were calm, if tense. Only Joshua continued to cry continuously, upsetting other passengers around him. The flight attendant, against regulations, brought him a drink in a final effort to calm him. Claire thought alternately of meeting her husband if they crashed and returning to her daughter if they didn't.

Finally, the aircraft touched down, scraping the wingtip on the runway. It made a horrible grating sound, but the captain managed to raise the wing before the sparks started a fire. They rolled to a stop. Joshua had passed out, and Claire and the flight attendant managed to open the emergency exit over his inert body. The blast of air entering the cabin woke him sufficiently to enable him to crawl out onto the evacuation slide. He landed on his forearm causing a slight fracture, but within a few minutes an ambulance crew had him on his way to the hospital.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had to have Joshua sedated and under a physician's supervision for the flight home. He never flew again and when a trip became absolutely necessary, he insisted on traveling by train or car, no matter how long and exhausting the ride.



Several months later, on a train trip, out of habit Joshua he took out his copy of Aviation Week and looked at the table of contents. The NTSB report of his accident was there. He quickly turned the pages and began reading. Lacking patience he turned to the conclusions at the end:

The Board concludes that:

1. The flight crew was qualified for this type of aircraft, had passed recent medical examinations, and all their actions during the emergency are deemed to be correct and to exhibit the highest standards of professionalism.
2. The weather was good and there is no evidence of any unusual forces that could have affected the aircraft.
3. The aircraft had passed all recent maintenance inspections and there were no major outstanding defects. In particular, no corrosion was found in the area of the aileron break.
4. A review of the design specifications for the aileron as well as stress tests done by the manufacturer revealed no design defects.

In summary, the board has not been able to discover a cause for the accident and has no recommendations to make to the airlines, the manufacturer or to the FAA.

Joshua pulled the window open, threw the magazine out onto the tracks and sank back into his seat. On the seat beside him was a gossip magazine. He picked it up and began reading the news from the latest reality show.

## Leah's Story

Leah stopped to rest alongside a stream flowing at the foot of the ridge. Shielding her eyes from the blinding sun with her hand, she scanned the crest of the ridge but found no sign of Jacob or of his herd. She sat for a few moments on a nearby rock and then removed her dress and waded into the stream. Leah was overheated from the long walk and she shivered in the cool water. Maybe it would have been better not to leave the encampment on such a hot day. But the wedding of Jacob and Rachel was scheduled to take place only a few months hence. She had laid her plans carefully and they could not be put off any longer. Still, it took all her determination to overcome the anxiety that had taken hold of her.

Leah stepped out of the water onto a rocky ledge, and while the sun dried her off, she took a comb from her bundle and carefully untangled her long black hair. Then she opened a small flask of olive oil and rubbed it into her dark skin. Why was her skin so dark and Rachel's so light? But of course, Leah took after her mother while Rachel was as pale as their father Laban. Every since they were children, Rachel's light complexion and hair had attracted the attention of every youth and even every grown man who passed through their village. So why should Jacob be any different? Leah's girl friends had tried to tell her that she was not ugly; quite the contrary, her exotic beauty was more seductive than Rachel's flashy glamor, but Leah could never shed her jealousy towards her younger sister.

Her hands rubbed the oil over her neck and arms, over her powerful thighs, but could not reach the small of her back. How she wished that Jacob were here to massage her back with his strong hands. She was certain that in a few hours when Jacob rested his head there, he would quickly forget her skinny, spoiled sister. When she was finished, Leah slipped into her dress, leaving the laces partly undone as if by accident, tied her sandals to her feet, picked up her bundle and began to climb the ridge.

The ridge was not as high as it had seemed from below and she quickly reached the top. Leah knew that her eyes were too weak to see Jacob from afar, so she contented herself with following the trail of fresh droppings left by the sheep. She was so intent not to stray from the path that she did not notice a shallow cave in the rock wall until suddenly a voice excitedly called to her:

"Leah, Leah, over here, to your left."

Jacob appeared at the entrance to the cave and ran towards her. "Are you crazy, Leah? It's too hot to walk outside," he scolded her.

"I brought you fresh bread and olive oil. I left early in the morning before it was too hot," Leah answered.

"Come into the shade of the cave", Jacob said and half-led, half-carried her in. Though not really tired, Leah felt a weakness come over her as Jacob put his arm around her and she let him guide her to the cave.

Jacob knew the desert pastures intimately and had prepared numerous shelters from the sun and the rain. This cave had been swept clean of dropping and the floors were covered with sheepskins. Crevices in the side of the cave held oil lamps and a few utensils, the simple needs of a shepherd. Leah sank onto one of the skins and Jacob brought a jar of water for her to drink. Evaporation through the porous pottery had cooled the water and Leah drank deeply. Not wanting to feign weakness too long, she soon sat up and busied herself with the contents of her bundle.

"Come, Jacob, sit down here beside me," Leah said and patted the ground next to her as she extracted fresh bread from her bundle, spread a cloth and sliced the bread with her knife. Without thinking of the propriety of sitting in such close proximity to his future sister-in-law, Jacob dropped down beside her and ravenously tore into the bread, dipping it into the olive oil that Leah poured from her flask. A few minutes later, his hunger sated for the moment, Jacob stretched out and looked at her. Leah's long black hair shined from the water of the stream and she sat there like a princess who had nothing to do but to swim in pools of deliciously cool water. Rays of the sun coming from the entrance of the cave lit her dark glistening skin, reflecting off the oil like stars in a black sky. Jacob could not take his eyes away from her, though his inner confusion was evident as he began to fidget nervously.

Leah began to tease him, tearing small chunks from the remnants of the bread, dipping them in the oil and holding them above his mouth. Drops of oils dripped onto his beard and his chest, streaking the dust of the desert that had stuck to him. The hardened muscles of his neck and shoulders bulged as he strained his head towards her fingers. A wave of heat surged through her body and yet she knew that she must not lose control just yet. Carefully, she let fall a bit of bread and then bent over to pick it up. The loosely-tied laces of her dress came undone, exposing her breasts to Jacob's eyes. He caught his breath and automatically stretched out his hand to her. Leah pushed him back onto the wool-covered ground and leaned over him. They embraced and kissed, at first hesitantly, and then with more and more fervor. When Leah felt that he was irrevocably committed, she stood up, removed her dress and lay back.

Jacob threw himself on Leah, seeking release from seven years of pent-up desire until finally he collapsed with exhaustion. Suddenly, he sat up and remembered his betrothal to Rachel. The enormity of his deed assailed him. "I have committed a terrible sin and I have greatly wronged Rachel. I must go immediately to ask her forgiveness."

Quickly, Leah rose to respond, "Jacob, we've done nothing wrong. And even if you think so, we can't tell anyone. It would destroy you and our entire family."

Leah's explanations and exhortations continued for many minutes until Jacob began to see that the deeds of this day must be kept secret. When Jacob fell asleep, Leah arose and crept away for the long walk back to the encampment.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the following weeks, Leah came often to visit Jacob as he wandered with his herds from pasture to pasture. His sharp eyesight would discern her figure approaching from afar and he

used to like to watch, knowing that her weak eyes could not see him. Occasionally, a twinge of conscience would surface, only to be repressed as she came closer and he became enchanted by the graceful way she carried her body.

The following month Leah understood that the first part of her plan had been successful. She must be even more careful now, for if her state became known, her life would be in danger. One day as she walked towards Jacob, Leah felt faint and dizzy and collapsed. Jacob, who had seen her coming, ran to her and bore her in his arms to his shelter. Jacob propped her against the wall of the cave and held a jar to her lips from which she slowly sipped the cool, refreshing water.

"Leah, you're not feeling well, you shouldn't have come," Jacob said angrily.

"You are right, I should stay behind in the encampment to protect our son," replied Leah, holding her hand over her belly. Jacob opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again. He stood up, walked to the mouth of the cave, returned and sat down again. Leah remained silent, as Jacob silently came and went.

Finally, he said, "Now we must pay for our sin. They will kill you, they might even kill me. This will destroy Rachel and maybe even your whole family. I should have known better."

"Jacob, we've done nothing wrong. How many times do I have to tell you that? Don't you want me anymore? "

"Leah, Leah. Every moment with you is precious. I want you more than I want anything in the world. But I am betrothed to Rachel. I have been working for your father for seven years for her. We can't change the way things are."

Leah drew Jacob closer and said, "Yes we can. Listen closely to my plan."

Though they were alone except for the sheep outside the cave, Leah whispered to Jacob, the expression on his face changing from amazement, to disbelief and finally to contentment. Then, as it began to be late, Leah hurried back to the encampment, Jacob accompanying her most of the way, overly solicitous of her welfare and the welfare of the baby. It was dark when Leah finally got back, but as she was supposed to be sick in her tent, no one noticed her absence except Zilpah her maidservant who, of course, was partner to the secret plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jacob appealed to Laban to advance the date of the wedding before the rainy season commenced making travel difficult. Rachel eagerly agreed and against the united front, Laban acquiesced, though muttering that Jacob was still a few months short of the full seven years. To Laban's surprise, even Leah seemed pleased, and she helped Rachel with her preparations, especially the purchase of fine linen cloth for Rachel's wedding dress. Stores of wine and bread were made ready and the finest sheep were selected to feed the many guests, for Laban was famous for his wealth and hospitality.

On the day of the wedding, the guests arrived and eagerly drank cup after cup of wine to refresh themselves from the journey. As Rachel waited nervously in her tent, Zilpah entered with cups of wine sent by Leah for Rachel and her maidservant Bilhah. Soon, both women were sound asleep. In the crowded encampment, no one noticed as Zilpah and Leah entered Rachel's tent.

Leah's original plan had been to wear Rachel's wedding robe, but of course it would not fit. Luckily, Laban had not noticed the expense of the additional linen that Leah had purchased in order to make herself a copy of the gown. Zilpah helped her dress and Leah luxuriated in the cool smoothness of the linen material on her skin, a welcome change to the wool of their ordinary dress. Soon it became dark. Clothed and veiled, Leah was led to the bridal chair. Jacob and Laban recited the terms of the wedding contract in the presence of the witnesses, and amid cheers and jokes, Jacob led Leah to his tent.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first to awake was Rachel's maid Bilhah. She confused the weak light of the dawn with evening and hastened to wake Rachel to dress her for the wedding. Soon, however, they noticed the silence that had taken the place of the celebrations. Rachel opened the flap of the tent and saw that the bonfires had become piles of smoking embers and the guests were strewn about in drunken sleep. She ran to Jacob's tent and burst inside where Leah and Jacob were lying, their arms around each other. Momentarily aroused by the flash of light from the tent flap, Leah stretched, smiled and without fully waking, nestled closer to Jacob. Too shocked to say anything, Rachel ran from the tent to find her father, tears streaming down her cheeks. Luckily, Zilpah, the only one to sleep without drink, had been up since dawn and was able to intercept Rachel and return her to her tent. With difficulty, she convinced Rachel that it would be better to wait until the last guest had left before doing anything rash.

By noon, the guests had awakened and tormented by headaches went their way after thanking Laban for his splendid hospitality, and congratulating Jacob on his marriage with one of the most beautiful and glamorous women ever seen among the tribes. When the last guest had left, Rachel tore from her tent, screaming at the treachery of her sister and at the incredible stupidity of Jacob who couldn't tell the difference between herself and that fat cow Leah. She quickly turned her wrath towards Laban who, while expressing his surprise, was more interested in preserving the honor of the family than in seeing justice done to Rachel. He paced back and forth, muttering to himself. It is true that nothing was yet known, but one of the servants might learn what had happened and then there would be no stopping the gossip.

Finally, Leah herself appeared, and Bilhah and Zilpah had to restrain Rachel from attacking Leah, though they couldn't stem the stream of curses that poured from her mouth. Leah approached Laban, kneeled before him and said:

"Please Father, forgive me. I have always loved Jacob. I know it was wrong to take my sister's place at the wedding, but please forgive me and do not drive me away."

Leah did not tell Laban of her pre-marital relationship with Jacob nor of the grandson growing in her womb. That would be an offense to his honor and she didn't know how he would react. Nor,

of course, did she tell of Jacob's part in the conspiracy. It is true that Laban was fond of Jacob, but there might be a limit to his leniency.

Laban raised Leah up, kissed her and said: "This is a foolish thing you have done, my child. I forgive you but I have no choice and I must send you away."

"Father, we are all one family. Why should we part when we can be together? One week from now, invite everyone to another wedding between myself and Jacob. Then we just have to keep the secret for one week." Laban thought for a while, balancing the clever solution with the extra expense of another wedding. What finally convinced him was the realization that all his property would stay with one son-in-law, and Laban was quite convinced that he could out-smart the simple shepherd.

It was harder to convince Rachel to agree to Leah's scheme. Even Laban's arguments were to know avail. Finally, it was Bilhah who took Rachel into her tent for a heart-to-heart talk.

"Listen, Rachel. I feel like you are almost a sister to me and I want only the best for you. Jacob is an extremely handsome man and all the girls want him."

Bilhah didn't elaborate that she herself would be thrilled if Jacob would ask her to share his bed with him. She continued:

"In a few years Jacob will take more wives, so you will have to share him anyway. You can't be serious if you are afraid of competition from Leah. Everyone knows that you are the most beautiful woman for miles around."

After an hour or so of coaxing, Rachel was in a fighting mood. That fat sister of hers had better watch out if she thought that she was going to win the affections of her handsome husband-to-be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next week, the guests arrived for another great feast at the wedding of Leah and Jacob. Ribald laughter covered a genuine envy of Jacob who was marrying a second bride within one week. Leah was radiant at the opportunity to appear in public with Jacob for the first time. Rachel behaved correctly, though without enthusiasm. She had wanted to substitute herself for Leah, but Zilpah and Bilhah agreed beforehand that they would have no part in any more fraudulent schemes.

After the wedding, Laban was relieved that the secret had been kept and his honor saved. Leah relished in the triumphal success of her plan and her place as Jacob's favorite wife. For though Jacob spent his nights alternately with Leah and Rachel, Rachel could not arouse him after a night with Leah. Only many years later, after Leah had borne him six sons and a daughter, and after Jacob had married and had sons with both Zilpah and Bilhad, did Rachel finally mature and learn to be a good wife to Jacob.

Laban and Jacob eventually became embroiled in a business dispute that became so bitter that

they were forced to split up the herds. Jacob, his four wives and their children moved away. When Rachel died at an early age, Jacob felt a pang of conscience for his mistreatment of Rachel and built her a grand tomb. Jacob and Leah lived to an old age, their love and devotion to each other deepening through the years. They kept the secret to themselves, and when asked in later years why he had married two sisters within the span of a week, Jacob explained that it was the result of a fraudulent scheme concocted by his greedy father-in-law Laban.

## Checklist

Sherry took a deep breath and entered the non-descriptive building. It was her first day as a professional engineer, and destined to be the first step of a brilliant and remunerative career. It was also the first day of her quest to find a mate. Now was time to get down to the business of having babies before work became too demanding.

Without difficulty she located the suite of offices that held the company's administration. Her file was checked: personal data, transcripts, aptitude test results, medical certificate; then she was led to her office in a suite on the next floor. The company was rapidly expanding and had begun to gobble up office space wherever it could be found. Soon they would need a building of their own.

The suite was crowded, sliced up into two-person cubicles. The personnel officer introduced Sherry to her co-workers, almost entirely male, without exception highly appreciative of the chance to look at something prettier than their computer screens.

Sherry was assigned to share a cubicle with James who was introduced as the best systems engineer in the company. He greeted her, asked a few perfunctory questions, and then piled books and manuals on her desk. Today he was busy, but tomorrow they would have a chance to talk about her assignments. Sherry looked into his eyes and was astonished to see none of the usual indications of a predatory male. Well, James was certainly very handsome, with broad shoulders that seemed out of place hovering over a computer keyboard. He probably had his choice of beauty queens.

Flicking through the manuals, Sherry found little to read, as she had studied the operating system and programming language in college, and had delved into the more esoteric details in the time since her successful job interview, while her credentials were checked. A steady stream of co-workers came to see her -- much to the annoyance of James -- offering to show her the coffee machine, and proffering doughnuts and slices of pizza.

Within a few weeks, Sherry was on her way to becoming a star. She cleaned up some obscure, but long-standing, problems that had seriously degraded the system.

Sherry accepted a handful of dates from the more attractive guys. Only James showed no interest in her; instead, a hint of competitive tension arose between them. Sherry decided that James was the anointed father of her children.

Discrete inquiries revealed that he was unmarried and straight. Check.

If anyone could manipulate a man into an offer of marriage, Sherry was the one to do so. She had had several offers before, even accepting one which fell apart at the last minute. When asking James a question, she stood too close to him and leaned over to point something out on the computer screen. A bit of brazen flirting with James at the company picnic finally netted a date.



Date followed date, the relation became more public and James was the envy of the female-starved nerds. Before things got out of hand, Sherry knew that she had some checking to do. The hardest, but most important, was to obtain a glance at James' personnel file. Claiming that a good friend of her's was looking for a job, she got an appointment with the personnel officer. Sherry insinuated that she had received the job because of her appearance. The personnel officer looked insulted, took Sherry's file from the unlocked drawer containing her file and excused himself for a minute. The drawer with James' file was also unlocked and in a second, Sherry flipped through the pages. Aptitude test scores in the top one percent. Check. Evaluations suggest managerial potential. Check. Medical exam perfect. Check. Check. She didn't want him to croak of heart disease like her father, leaving her to raise a bunch of orphans alone.

The next stage was to meet his parents. Well-to-do, solid citizens. Check. Mother not too possessive. Check.

Sherry's mother Ruth met James and later frankly expressed her admiration for the handsome, intelligent man that Sherry had found. They discussed the details Sherry's investigations, and made the decision. From then on it was child's play until James finally proposed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wedding was tasteful, but not lavish, and Ruth cried when she remembered her own wedding, so full of promise and so tragic in its outcome. The company, delighted that two of its star employees would not find mates elsewhere and leave, agreed to ignore a pending deadline, and contributed an all-expense-paid honeymoon for a full week.

On the last day of the honeymoon, Sherry woke up early and called her mother while James continued to sleep in total exhaustion.

"Hi, Mom! "

"Hi, baby. How are you? "

"Great. But James is quite tired."

Ruth laughed, "They're all like that when they're young."

"Thanks, Mom, for everything."

"You deserve the best, baby."

"I love you. See you tomorrow."

Sherry put the phone down and gently caressed James. He woke up and turned towards her.

"Oh, James, that feels so good, don't stop. It's too bad that tomorrow morning we have to jump out of bed to go to work."

James sat up suddenly and said, "What? I make enough money so you won't have to work. A woman's place is keeping house and raising children. No wife of mine is going to work."

Checkmate.

## Snip, Snip

Snip, snip.

Snip, snip.

Snip, snip.

Barbers have the exasperating habit of indulging in a preparatory ritual before cutting your hair: they cleave the air twice with the blades of the scissors.

Snip, snip.

Perhaps they believe that a cloud of devils guard your hair and must be dispersed before daring to lacerate the strands. Or perhaps it is a sign of recognition whose origins are buried in the archives of an ancient guild.

Snip, snip.

Even as a child, he had despised having his hair cut. Covered from neck to knees in a smudged white smock, choked by a noose of tissue paper, sometimes even pricked by a safety pin, he had come to associate the barber shop with loss of control, with submission to the whims of a representative of authority: "head up, don't move." But worst of all was the scissors, poking incessantly around his neck, over his ears, sometimes cutting in short, sharp chops, sometimes lazily mowing through the locks that hung down his forehead, always the clippings entwining themselves in his eyelashes, clogging his ears, once even insinuating themselves into his nose. And before each defiling cut, the ritual cleaving of the air.

Snip, snip.

He had tried to let his hair grow long, but his parents had forced him to get it cut. Procrastination bought some time, but eventually the fateful afternoon would come, and with churning stomach and sweating palms, he would stuff the proffered money into his pocket and trudge off. Bitter experience had taught him to choose a slow day, lest he be forced to wait, listening apprehensively to the dreaded sound.

Snip, snip.

When he grew older, the barbers began to use the ultimate instrument from their inquisitorial repertoire, the straight razor. At first it wasn't so bad; somehow, "strop, strop" was less menacing than "snip, snip". He even became accustomed to the grating of the razor as it scraped around his ears and down the nape of his neck. Sideburns were another matter altogether. The razor hovered above his cheek as the barber gauged the level, then came the stroke, swift as a guillotine, sometimes followed by minute touches as if severing the last strips of flesh upon which his head was attached. At least there were only two such terrifying moments, unlike the incessant clash of

the scissors.

Snip, snip.

One day, when passing the newstand on the way to the barber shop, he saw a photo of a mob killing splashed over the front page of a tabloid: "Gangland Boss Snuffed Out in a Barber Shop." The barbers were compulsively talking about it, commiserating with their colleagues across town, yet relieved that it did not take place in their shop. He squirmed in his chair, trying to keep an eye on the reflection of the front door in the mirror, getting nicked in the process and scolded by authority for his lack of composure. Afterwards, barely picking at his dinner, he had gone straight to sleep, to confront his nightmares with only a pillow to hug.

Snip, snip.

They had threatened to kill him.

Bang, bang.

Nonsense, in such situations, everyone said things they didn't mean.

Snip, snip.

College had been a respite. He had grown his hair long, long enough eventually to gather into a pony tail. His girlfriend could never understand why he refused to trim his hair. You have to cut the ends to keep your hair healthy, she would tell him. Finally, he allowed her to trim his hair.

Snip, snip.

His parole ended in his third year at medical school. When clinical rounds started at the prestigious teaching hospital, the pompous residents and professors insisted that their students be "clean-cut." What a phrase! What was he, a piece of pastrami?

Snip, snip.

Surgical rounds were agonizing. Not the blood, not the gore, but the scissors. Even though he had become the authoritarian figure, wielding the scissors, he felt tense holding them, and this lack of quiet confidence was blatantly obvious to the instructors.

Snip, snip.

They had promised to kill him.

Bang, bang.

Snip, snip.

Sheer determination kept him from dropping out, and eventually, his surgical round was over, to

be followed by others. Cardiology, pediatrics, psychiatry, gastro, radiology. He did so well in the medical specialities that they were willing to overlook his dismal performance in surgery. Infusions, catheters, endoscopes; no problem, as long as it didn't involve scissors.

Snip, snip.

Surprisingly, he found peace of mind in anesthesiology. Intently studying the monitors, adjusting the doses of gasses and drips, he never noticed the distinctive sound of the scissors among the clash of the other instruments, the macabre jokes of the surgeons or the ambient music.

Snip, snip.

His pre-op preparation was detailed and his concentration was superb, unmatched among practitioners of a specialty that many considered to be boredom incarnated. He had lost very few patients and his insurance premiums were unbelievably low for an anaesthetist. He had even begun to be able to sit calmly for a haircut. His method was to read a research article before coming to the barber shop, and then to rerun the article in his mind, delving for mistakes in methodology or sloppy statistics.

Snip, snip.

Until that day.

Snip, snip.

The complication was rare, but not excessively so; it occurred once every year or so. A doctor with his experience did not panic and he tried every known antidote. By the book. Exactly by the book. And even several last-ditch measures beyond the book. There was no question of negligence.

Snip, snip.

At least that was what the examining board and the insurance company said. Not a single ambulance-chaser saw any point in pressing the issue. But not the family. They had promised to kill him.

Bang, bang.

Snip, snip.

There had been telephone threats and letters. Eventually, these stopped and he began to forget the incident. Except when taking a haircut. He tried psychotherapy and even took tranquilizers. To no avail. The sound of the scissors cut into his soul.

Snip, snip.

He sat there, taking deep breaths, attempting relaxation exercises as the scissors clipped away.

Snip, snip.

He closed his eyes, but that made it worse.

Snip, snip.

Resigned, he opened his eyes and looked in the mirror. Two men stood in the doorway, caricatures of mobsters with trench coats. Suddenly, the scissors stopped.

Bang, bang.

Bang, bang.

Two-shot bursts, very professional.

Snip, snip.

Blood spurted from his neck.

Snip, snip.

The barbers scattered.

Snip, snip.

His head fell forward.

Snip, snip.

His eyes closed.

Snip, snip.

Sni, sni.

Sn, sn.

S, s.

...

## Consecration

"You really did it?! With him?! Where?! Tell me all about it!"

Miriam could hardly contain her surprise and excitement at Sarah's confidential admission. Sarah nodded her confirmation as Miriam's face registered a combination of adulation and incredulity. The two girls squatted under the lintel of the entrance to the courtyard of Miriam's house, which offered a narrow bar of shade from the blazing midday sun in late summer. From their perch, they could see much of the city of Scythopolis spread out before them. The house was in the jumble of narrow alleys and small dwellings that crept up the slope of the ancient mound that formed the nucleus of the great city.

"Look down there," Sarah pointed out a small but elegant building, below them and to the left. "That is the Temple of Tyche." Miriam looked down and saw the newer sections of the town stretched away directly in front of her: the broad avenue with its row of columns, terminating in the partially constructed theater. Scythopolis was growing wealthier day by day and the citizens felt secure enough to invest in the glorification of their city. "No, Miriam, not there. To the left," Sarah put out her hand to turn Miriam's face in the right direction. "The Temple of Tyche is very old, at least four hundred years."

While most of the Greek and Roman population frequented the imposing Temple of Dionysus, the worship of Tyche, goddess of luck and plenty, was still popular. Tyche's temple was quite overshadowed by the splendor of its larger neighbor, but its charm captivated those who were repelled by the crude pompousness of the cult of Dionysus. Graceful colonnades enclosed an intimate courtyard where a fountain sparkled in the sun. "Not so loud," Miriam whispered. "Someone might hear us."

"Don't worry so much? Anyway, Jonah and I went inside, ..." Sarah began her story.

"You went inside? But you know that it's forbidden," Miriam interrupted.

Sarah replied. "Forget forbidden and listen."

Miriam held her arms around her body, shivering despite the heat, almost afraid to listen. As the decades had passed since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the second rebellion, Jewish law had become more stringent in forbidding contact with pagans. The loss of political independence was counterbalanced by a retreat into deeper religious and social independence. To enter a pagan temple under any circumstances was inconceivable. Miriam looked in awe at her friend. Sarah was just seventeen, only a year older than her, but looked so much more mature.

Sarah began her narration: "We went during the evening so that no one would see us in the dark. There is a side door that is used by people who come secretly. Inside, the statue of Tyche dominates the temple, lit by tens of oil lamps hung from the ceiling. She is very beautiful, her curls and her eyes both painted black. In her left hand is the cornucopia of plenty and in her right hand a scepter. Around her shoulders is a cape of the finest purple, clasped at the throat by a

large ruby. She has a crown of gold and bracelets and anklets of gold and lapis lazuli."

"Please, Sarah, not so fast, it's hard for me to understand," Miriam said.

After the pagans massacred the Jews of Scythopolis during the first rebellion against the Romans, it was decades before Jews drifted in again. Sarah's grandfather had moved there from a small village nearby, just after the second rebellion. He had been a peasant growing flax and as a result of the rebellion had been forced off his land. He went to the city to engage in the manufacture of Scythopolis linen, the finest in the world. Sarah's family, far from the centers of Jewish life, spoke Aramaic like the pagan peasants. Miriam, on the other hand, came from a family of priests that had wandered from Jerusalem over generations. Her father and uncle had recently moved to Scythopolis to butcher meat and grind grain for the Jewish stone-carvers and masons employed in the construction of the theater. They insisted that Miriam speak Hebrew at home. The only language the girls had in common was Greek, picked up by Sarah on the streets of Scythopolis and taught to the sheltered Miriam by a series of tutors.

Sarah continued, slowly and carefully pronouncing every word, "Well, around the statue of the goddess, seated on splendid cushions are about a dozen beautiful women. What we didn't know before we went there is that the worship of Tyche is a disguise for the cult of Astarte." Miriam slumped over and hid her face in her hands. Astarte was Ashtarot, the goddess of the Canaanites. Along with the god Baal, their cult had always been seen as the most threatening and was forbidden under the most extreme penalties.

"We weren't sure what to do," Sarah said. "We knew that couples went to the temple to be alone, but we didn't know that that the temple is a center for cult prostitution. Jonah put his arm around me and stared at the harlots until an elderly woman came and took us to one side. She was the high-priestess of the cult and had seen many couples just as stunned as we were, so she knew how to reassure us. It turned out that as long as the formalities observed, no one has to actually lie with one of the harlots. She asked Jonah to choose one of the women who looked most like me and then handed me a veil to put on. I stood behind the women that Jonathan had chosen and then he approached the goddess. He placed a silver coin before her and the high-priestess told him what to recite: "In return for the seed that I give you, let the seed of the earth grow and prosper." Then he walked around, inspecting all the women until he came to the one reclining in front of me. He also gave her a coin and recited: "Will you, servant of Astarte, receive my seed in her place?" She assented, but instead of going with him, Jonathan took my hand and led me away.

"The space between the columns supporting the roof of the temple and the walls is divided by curtains into cells. The high-priestess led us to one and left us alone. It was small, but covered with rich rugs and cushions. A small oil lamp in an alcove in the wall cast its light over the cell. We slowly undressed and lay down on the floor. We touched each other. Jonah ran his hands through my hair again and again, and then held my head and kissed me. I asked him to slow down but he wasn't listening."

Miriam had straightened up by now. She was no longer shivering, but perspiring freely. She thought about Marcus. She had told no one about Marcus, not even Sarah, her best friend. Once



Miriam's father had mentioned his family: they had joined the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, known as Christians. Even though Marcus' family was Jewish and continued to observe many of the religious commandments and customs, most Christians were converted pagans who neither knew nor cared about the Jewish religion. Miriam was warned to avoid contact with Christians. But Marcus was such a handsome and polite boy who knew many languages and who used to talk for hours with Miriam about philosophy and religion. Miriam wondered what it would be like to lie with Marcus.

"Then we rested a few moments, but the high-priestess came to tell us that our time was up. We washed ourselves from a jar of water in the cell and then quietly left by the side door. Jonah keeps telling me that we should go again, but he can't afford so much money. Swear to me that you won't tell anyone about this."

"Of course, Sarah, I won't tell anyone," said Miriam and thought to herself, "except Marcus."

By then the sun was lower in the sky, the lintel no longer provided shade and the girls moved inside the wall of the courtyard and leaned against its cool stones. They sat next to each other lost in their thoughts. Soon, there were sounds of people awakening from their afternoon sleep and Sarah rose to leave, as she was expected back in her father's workshop.

The next time that Miriam was able to see Marcus was on the Sabbath eve when there were no chores for her to do. They met in the darkness among the columns of the main street and sat together talking.

"Marcus, have you ever heard of the Temple of Tyche," Miriam asked.

"Certainly, Miriam," answered Marcus and launched into a long lecture on the relationships among the various Greek gods. Miriam sat quietly, entranced by his earnestness and by the movements of his hands, especially when a lock of hair covered his face and he pushed it back. Finally, Marcus asked, "But why do you ask?"

"Did you know that the cult of Astarte is practiced there?" Miriam inquired with as casual a tone as she could manage.

"How do you know about such things, Miriam?" Marcus retorted sharply, "You're too young to know about Astarte."

"I am not too young," Miriam pouted. She repeated to Marcus the story that Sarah had told her, omitting, of course, the intimate details and sisterly suggestions that Sarah had included in her narrative.

Marcus sat still for a moment and turned gravely to Miriam and said, "Miriam, these are terrible sins that you are talking about."

"But don't you want to marry me, Marcus? " Miriam blurted out.

Marcus took her hand, "Miriam, I love you very much, but you know that we can never marry.

You are the daughter of a Jewish priest and I am a Christian. Your father would kill you rather than let you marry me."

"I don't care, we can run away," Miriam pleaded. They argued for a long time, but Marcus' philosophy eventually lost out to the attention lavished upon him by the lovely and tempestuous Miriam. While he would not yet agree to marriage and flight, he did agree to go with her to the Temple of Tyche and to lie with her.

It was several weeks before they could arrange appropriate excuses and meet at the Temple. Miriam consulted with Sarah who tried to dissuade her with numerous excuses: she was too young, Marcus was a Christian, the daughter of a priest should be more chaste than an ordinary girl. But nothing convinced Miriam, and finally Sarah agreed to come and fetch Miriam at the appointed time for some innocent purpose to disguise the assignation with Marcus.

Everything was exactly as Sarah had described. Marcus had the two silver coins, one for the goddess and one for the harlot. Miriam averted her eyes from the goddess so as not to commit the sin of idolatry and she pretended not to hear the recitations of the fertility rite. Finally, she was alone with Marcus. They undressed and held each other. They looked at each other's bodies, caressing and touching for a long time, and then as their embarrassment and anxiety gave way to passion.

As they were coming out of the cell, they were approached by a couple heading towards the adjacent cell. The woman was dressed in the clinging linen garments and veil of the consecrated harlots of the cult and the man held himself in the manner of one used to commanding respect. In the dim light, he seemed familiar and as they approached, in the shock of recognition, Miriam blurted out, "Uncle Aaron, what are you doing here?" Suddenly she realized what she had done and ran for the door, not bothering to look around or to see if Marcus was following her. Miriam ran all the way home and into her room where she fell on the bed in a fit of hysterical weeping. Her mother gave her some wine to drink and helped her to bed.

She lay delirious in her bed for several days. Finally, when she had recovered, Miriam's mother brought her something to eat and helped her to dress. Miriam knew that she would have to face her father eventually. She went to his room and stood before him with eyes downcast.

"Miriam, your Uncle Aaron claimed that he saw you leaving the Temple of Tyche. Is this true?" her father asked. Miriam, too frightened to talk, nodded her admission.

"Come my child, sit here," he said. "I think that it would be best if you told me all about it and I'll see what we can do."

Miriam nodded again and slumped down. She told her father the entire story, how was in love with Marcus, how Sarah had told her about lying with Jonathan in the Temple and how she had gone their with Marcus and seen Uncle Aaron there. Her father seemed sympathetic, until the very end. "Miriam, I've known Aaron all my life. He's a very saintly man, a true priest. He would never desecrate himself by going into any pagan temple, much less an abomination like the Astarte cult."

Miriam looked up astonished. Her own father would not believe her and would never defend her against the elder brother he had looked up to since they were children. She understood the bleakness of what awaited her and a veil of blackness came down before her eyes as she fainted.

Later that week, Miriam stood before her father and her uncle. "Pinhas, the child must die. The daughter of a priest who defiles herself must be put to death," Aaron repeated again and again, his righteous indignation fueled by his fear that eventually someone might believe Miriam's claim that he was in the Temple of Tyche.

"Aaron, why don't you stop talking about priests. Its been a hundred and twenty years since our ancestors were priests. Now you're just a tradesman like me," Miriam's father retorted.

"But soon we'll rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and we'll need priests," Aaron countered.

Pinhas refused to yield, "We no longer have any authority to carry out a death sentence. Even if we did, the legal basis is extremely shaky and would never hold up in court. You know this as well as I do."

Finally it was agreed that Miriam would have to be expelled from the community. Afraid that Aaron would take the law into his own hands, Pinhas agreed. Miriam was given an hour to collect some clothes and food, and forced to leave the house. The whole time she said nothing. She had no more tears to shed. Leaving her grieving parents, she stepped out into the dark night.

Miriam automatically walked towards Sarah's house and knocked on the door. Sarah opened the door of the courtyard and said angrily: "You've ruined everything, haven't you? You just had to go telling everything to your parents."

Miriam stood with her head down, ashamed at the tragedy she had brought on her best friend. Sarah's hostility relented and she put her arms around Miriam. "I'm sorry. I never should have told you about the temple in the first place."

"What's going to happen to you, Sarah? " Miriam asked.

"Well, I'm going to be forced to marry Jonah, which of course we were planning to do anyway, but we will be forced to leave Scythopolis and to live in some dreary village."

"I'm so sorry, Sarah. I know how much you love the city," said Miriam and explained that she had been expelled from her home.

"I can't help you, Miriam. Jonah and I have to be very careful until we are married. I wish I could do something."

"I wish you and Jonah all the best," Miriam said and sensing the tears welling up in her eyes, embraced Sarah and ran down the alley.

There was just one more possibility. Perhaps Marcus and the Christians would have her. Slowly, she walked to his house. Marcus' large house was in one of the nicest parts of the city. A servant

opened the gate and stepping outside, pulled her to an alley where they would not be seen.

"Look Miss Miriam. I'm not supposed to talk to you, but I suppose that you've got a right to know. Marcus was allowed to repent his sin and as part of his penance, he is to become a hermit. He left for the Judean Desert last week. He told me that if you came to look for him I was to tell you that he is sorry about what happened. It was probably for the best anyway, because he had already been considering a hermit's life."

Heartbroken, Miriam turned away and walked away down the broad avenue towards the city gate. She would go away where no one knew her and perhaps find employment as a servant girl. The summer heat had broken and she shivered in the cold autumn wind that was blowing. Rain began to fall, hard single drops at first, soon changing to a steady downpour. Her clothes were becoming soaked. Miriam sought shelter among the tall columns of a building along the road. A door opened behind her and she instinctively rushed inside.

"We must get you some dry clothes, child." It was the high-priestess of the Temple of Tyche.  
"Come, child, I know you have nowhere to go but you're welcome here. We will take good care of you."

## **Black-Forest Cake**

Sandra bustled around the living room, checking and re-checking. She moved the bowls of fruit and nuts from the coffee table to the end table and back, each time stepping back to study the visual effect.

"Tom", she called out, and again "Tom." A door opened and Tom called back, "Yes, dear".

"Tom, should the fruit be on the coffee table and the nuts on the end table or vice versa," Sandra shouted trying to make herself heard over the sound of the electric shaver. Tom switched off the shaver and came into the living room, patting on some after-shave.

Tom put his arm around her, brushing it over her short-cropped blond hair and said, "Whatever you think is best, honey."

"Be serious, Tom," Sandra replied, unwrapping herself from his embrace, "you keep telling me how important this dinner is."

Tom held Sandra at arm's length, looked directly at her and said, "I am serious, dear. Just be nice to them and everything will be OK. Charles will say: 'When I retire in ten years or so, Sandra, your husband will have a shot at the top.' As if his heart will last him more than two or three years. He really doesn't care where you place the fruit, as long as he comes away with the impression that we're respectable."

Sandra raised a finger as if to scold a child and said, "I'm sure his heart would last a lot longer if he changed his diet. Why don't I lend him that new book on low-cholesterol diets? "

Tom said sharply, "Sandra, please, please, please. Don't talk about diets and health foods and cholesterol. You know how you go on and on," and a shadow of concern darkened his face.

"But I just want to help people stay healthy."

"Yes, dear, but not tonight. Just do this for me. Not tonight," Tom pleaded with her.

"You don't have to get steamed up. I'll play your game."

Tom left the living room to get his jacket, as Sandra once more began switching the bowls back and forth. Finally, her face lit up as the solution popped into her mind. "Of course," she said aloud though Tom was no longer there, "the fruit should be on the coffee table. They're less fattening than nuts so they should be more accessible."

The doorbell rang. Sandra glanced in the direction of the bedroom, then went to open the door. She stopped in front of the mirror, checking her figure, and pulled her stomach in, trying to flatten an imaginary bulge. She was glad that she was wearing a loose dress.

Charles and Wendy were standing in the doorway. "Please come in," Sandra invited, extending her hand. Charles slowly mounted the last step, took a deep breath and said, "Good evening, Sandra, it's so nice to see you again. You know Wendy, of course."

"How are you, Sandra? Congratulations on Tom's promotion."

"Thank you, Wendy, you're look so lovely this evening," Sandra replied, inwardly disgusted at Wendy's appearance. Fifteen years younger than Charles, Wendy had luxurious black hair and touches of makeup expertly applied. Above all, Sandra was appalled at the rich pink dress that accentuated Wendy's voluptuous figure.

Snapping back into her act, Sandra smiled, and took their coats. "Please come in to the living room," she said.

Tom had just come in to the room and greeted the guests, "Charles, Wendy, thank you so much for coming."

"It was nice of you to invite us," Wendy replied. "Oh, before I forget, I've brought a little something for later," she said, handing Sandra a box which she put unopened on a side table.

Tom walked over to the sideboard and said, "Let me get you something to drink. What would you like? "

Charles sat down heavily in an armchair, and said, "Scotch and water. Scotch and water, please. Doctor says lots of water on a little Scotch, but I think we could make an exception tonight, don't you agreed?"

"Wendy, a glass of sherry? " Sandra asked, "I allow myself one glass of sherry in the evening. It's supposed to dilate the blood vessels and help the blood flow." Wendy nodded and Tom made the drinks, Scotch for the men and sherry for the ladies.

Charles raised his glass in a toast, "Well, here's to you Tom, on your promotion to Vice-President of Marketing."

Tom returned the gesture, "Thank you, Charles. I'll do my best to justify your faith in me."

Ignoring him Charles continued, "You know, Sandra, when I retire in ten years or so, your husband will have a shot at the top."

Sandra smiled at Charles, "I'm glad that you have such confidence in Tom."

Wendy tilted her head and glancing at Tom, said, "I'm sure that Tom is quite competent in everything he does." Tom raised his glass to Wendy, but said nothing.

Charles mellowed as the drink began to take effect. He held the glass up to the light, appraising the whiskey. "Excellent Scotch, Tom. Single-malt, is it?" Tom nodded. "Wouldn't mind another." Tom got up to make another drink.

"Now, Charles, you remember what the doctor said," said Wendy, reproaching Charles.

Sandra jumped right in, "Wendy's right Charles. One drink, maybe two, and that includes the wine we're having at dinner. Too much alcohol can cause diabetes or liver disease. I'm sure the doctor told you that."

"Oh, to hell with the doctor. Come on Tom, bring me the Scotch." Charles took the glass and savored the sharp taste in his mouth. They all sipped their drinks in silence for a few moments, until Charles became animated again. "That was quite a trip we had to Japan, Tom."

Tom replied, "Extremely interesting, and profitable, too. I think we'll double our exports by the end of the year. Of course it takes a while to learn how to do business there."

"You're telling me. I almost got another heart attack from those hot baths. They really roast your ...," said Charles, stopping himself in mid-sentence. "Sorry ladies."

"You know Tom, the worst part was the food. I ordered something with a funny name from the menu and all I got was a few slices of cold, dead fish."

"Actually, I rather liked it," said Tom, "especially dipped in that horseradish sauce."

"Lucky for us there was a MacDonald's around the corner," Charles replied, and broke into a hearty laugh. The strained silence returned to dominate the room, until a thought brightened Sandra's face and she volunteered to resume the conversation.

"Do they have granola in Japan, Tom? "

"I don't recall seeing any," said Tom.

"That's too bad. You know, I've been having trouble finding a good quality granola. Wendy, do you know any stores that might carry it?"

Wendy fidgeted uncomfortably in her chair. "No, I don't. Actually, I don't eat granola."

Sandra looked at her, not believing what she had heard. "You don't. You really should, you know. It's a great source of fiber. And it's natural, too. Not processed like all those breakfast cereals. You would be astonished at the increase in colon disease caused by lack of fiber."

Wendy stammered, "I, uh, don't keep up with those things, Sandra. Uh, actually I've been feeling extremely well the past few years."

"That's when you're in the greatest danger. Something could go wrong with your health and if you don't pay attention, you could be in deep trouble."

"Whatever you say."

Tom became alarmed at the tense atmosphere and rose. "Why don't we go into dinner? This way,

please." While Charles and Wendy took their seats, he drew Sandra aside. "Enough is enough, Sandra. Will you shut up about your damned colon disease?"

"Look, Tom, I'll say what I please. Come on, our guests are waiting."

Sandra brought the first course, a fruit cocktail. The guests picked at it with some trepidation. Charles murmured to himself, "Yellow and green, yellow and green, intriguing." Then aloud, "Tom, we did some business with a country whose flag is yellow and green, didn't we? Who were they?"

"The Irish, Charles, but their flag is green, white and orange."

Wendy tried to be polite, "It's, uh, exotic. What's in it Sandra? "

Sandra straightened up and launched onto a discourse, "It's my own creation. Mango cubes in kiwi juice. You know how important the vitamins in the dark yellow fruits are. Of course you do. But did you know that these fruit have both vitamin A and vitamin C? Isn't that exciting?"

The others gazed at her, Tom fuming inwardly, as she continued without hesitation, "Did you know that vitamin deficiency diseases still exist, even in our own cities? It's hard to imagine that in these modern times, people don't understand how essential they are."

Tom could barely contain his temper, and interrupted, "Vitamins, yes. The almighty vitamins. I can see them. Two thousand and fifty-seven vitamins are crawling around in my dish." He jumped up, pushed the dish away, and asked, "How about some wine to keep the vitamins company?" Tom busied himself with the wine-opening ceremony.

Charles raised his glass, "Here's to you again, Tom." He drained the glass of wine, which Tom dutifully refilled. Sandra just touched the glass with her lips before replacing it on the table.

"I propose a toast to our company," Tom said. "May it long prosper under your inspired leadership, Charles."

Another refill and Charles, rather drunk, stumbled to his feet and said, "I propose a toast to the ladies."

Tom raises his glass to Wendy, "To beautiful women," to which Wendy replied, "and to beautiful men."

The rounds of drinking had made Sandra rather agitated. She jumped up and rushed out saying, "I think the fish must be ready."

Still holding an empty wine glass, Charles looked after Sandra and sighed, "Yes. Lovely woman, Tom. Sandra certainly knows how to keep in shape."

"It's the aerobics," Tom said. Turning to Wendy, he asked, "Do you do aerobics?"



"That's not my style, Tom. I prefer skiing."

"And apres-skiing?"

"Even more," she replied, not removing her eyes from Tom.

"Never could understand the point of climbing a hill just to slide down," Charles interrupted. "Excellent, here's Sandra with the main course. The whisky has certainly stimulated my appetite."

Sandra carefully shoveled the crumbling fish onto the plates, explaining, "This is baked sole. Four ounces, no more. We don't want to eat too much protein, do we?"

"I actually like to eat protein," Tom said, and glancing at Wendy.

"Really, I don't think you need any more protein, Tom," retorted Sandra. "There are string beans and baked potatoes; no butter or sour cream, of course, but a few drops of olive oil for those who need it."

Sandra made sure that everyone had exactly the right amount of food and continued her lecture.

"I really should have served salmon, of course, but it is so very expensive. Wendy, did you know that salmon contains a large amount of omega three which is an important element of a diet to control heart disease? "

"Isn't that interesting, Sandra. I'm sure that Charles would be overjoyed to have salmon every day. Dear?"

Charles had been concentrating on dissecting the fish and hasn't been paying attention. "What that, dear? Yes, of course. Whatever you say, dear. Excellent fish, Sandy ... Sandra. Do you mind if I call you Sandy?"

"I prefer Sandra."

Tom grumbled, "It used to be Sandy, a long time ago, when she was still a woman, before she became a walking vegetable."

Wendy whispered, "I've always been Wendy, Tom, and I always will be."

The knives and forks scraped the plates as each one coped with the meal. Sandra carefully removed every flake of the fish, while Charles ate the pieces that came off easily, leaving large chunks attached to the bones. Tom and Wendy wolfed down the potatoes but left the string beans untouched. Tom placed his knife and fork on the plate, straightened up and exclaimed, "I hope we have something good for dessert. I'm still so hungry, I could eat a horse."

"Horse, did you say horse?" Charles jerked at the sound of the word and smiled, "Quite tasty. Once in the army, we ran out of food and had to eat a horse. The French are quite fond of

horsemeat. They have special butcher shops for horsemeat. Tom, bring some back with you on your next trip to Paris."

Sandra nearly choked as she listened, "Stop, please stop. I don't want to hear about it."

"Why not Sandra?" Tom pounced on her, "What's the difference between eating a horse and eating a fish? Is it OK to kill fish but not to kill horses? Where do you draw the line? Chickens are OK but not cows?"

"Please stop," Sandra pleaded. She jumped up and hurriedly removed the dishes, dropping several forks as she retreated to the kitchen.

Tom apologized, "Sorry, Wendy."

"That's alright, Tom. I know how you feel." Suddenly Wendy excused herself, "Oh, I almost forgot the dessert we brought." She went into the living room and returned with a plain white box, wrapped with a red ribbon. Unwrapping it, she called out to Sandra in the kitchen. "Sandra, would you please bring a knife and some plates?"

Wendy removed an exquisitely crafted black-forest cake from the box just as Sandra returned from the kitchen. Sandra froze, set the plates down and slumped into her chair. "Oh my God, oh my God. Cholesterol, caffeine, fats, alcohol, sugars. Oh my God." She hid her face in her hands, shocked by the grotesque object on the table.

Tom jumped up, no longer controlling his anger and shouted, "What's wrong, Sandra? Never seen a black-forest cake before?" Turning to Wendy, he said, "Thank you, Wendy, for bringing such a wonderful dessert," then took a knife and cut slices for everyone.

"Look at it," Tom continued. "Rich chocolate cake, creamy chocolate icing, luscious whipped cream, tangy liqueur and cherries on top. Here's a big slice for you, Wendy. And one for you, Charles, Charles?," but Charles had nodded off and did not respond.

"Two ounces only for you Sandra," he said. Sandra flinched when the plate was set in front of her.

"And a big slice for me, too," he said, taking a bite out of the cake. With his mouth full, it became difficult to understand his words.

"I can already feel the alcohol dilating my blood vessels, the sugar coursing through my veins, the thrill of the caffeine high. Try some, Sandra, you might like it."

Sandra shook her head violently. Tom scooped up some whipped cream with his finger and went over to Wendy.

"Here, Wendy, have some cream," he offered and Wendy dutifully licked it off his finger.

They fed each other cake like children, smearing the icing and whipped cream on their faces.

Sandra, whimpering, called out, "Tom, stop that this instant, you're killing yourself."

"What's it costing me, Sandra? Each slice is how long? Six minutes off an average life span?"

Tom stretched out his arms like an orator, "wine, women and black-forest cake, Sandra!"

Viciously turning on her, Tom shouted, "which is the most dangerous? The wine eating away at my liver? The women sapping my protein? Probably, the black-forest cake. So many diseases just lying there in ambush, waiting for a slice of black-forest cake to spring the trap."

Without a pause, Tom dug his fingers into the cake and continued. "The dark black chocolate conjuring up visions of jungle magic. The blood-red cherries evoking violence from the depths of the soul. And the snow-white whipped cream. Yes, that's the worst, isn't it, Sandra? Sandra, look at me. The snow-white whipped cream: heavenly pure on the outside, yet full of poisonous temptations lurking just under the surface. I'll give up the extra six minutes, Sandra. How about you, Wendy? "

Wendy smiled at Tom, her mouth still full of cake. "You like whipped cream, don't you, Wendy?"

He scooped all the whipped cream off the cake and began to stuff her mouth. "It's not a nature food, is it Sandra? Not like granola?"

Wendy looked at Tom. "Take me home, Tom. I'm sure we have another black-forest cake there."

Wendy stood up and pulled Tom after her into the hall to get her coat. Just before they left, Tom returned to the table, took an extra slice of the cake and disappeared after Wendy.

Sandra sat frozen in her chair. At the sound of the door slamming, she jumped up, went into the kitchen and returned with a plastic garbage bag into which she dumped the remains of the cake, holding it at arm's length, as if it were poisonous. She bumped into Charles who woke up.

"A wonderful meal, Sandra. Tom, how about an after dinner brandy?"

Sandra put her arm around him and helped him up.

"Come Charles, why don't you rest on the sofa in the living room? I'll make you a nice cup of herbal tea."