

**BLEEDING
EDGE**

A NOVEL

**THOMAS
PYNCHON**

ALSO BY THOMAS PYNCHON

Slow Learner

V.

The Crying of Lot 49

Gravity's Rainbow

Vineland

Mason & Dixon

Against the Day

Inherent Vice



BLEEDING EDGE

THOMAS PYNCHON

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[*About the Author*](#)

New York as a character in a mystery would not be the detective, would not be the murderer. It would be the enigmatic suspect who knows the real story but isn't going to tell it.

—DONALD E. WESTLAKE

1

It's the first day of spring 2001, and Maxine Tarnow, though some still have her in their system as Loeffler, is walking her boys to school. Yes maybe they're past the age where they need an escort, maybe Maxine doesn't want to let go just yet, it's only a couple blocks, it's on her way to work, she enjoys it, so?

This morning, all up and down the streets, what looks like every Callery Pear tree on the Upper West Side has popped overnight into clusters of white pear blossoms. As Maxine watches, sunlight finds its way past rooflines and water tanks to the end of the block and into one particular tree, which all at once is filled with light.

"Mom?" Ziggy in the usual hurry. "Yo."

"Guys, check it out, that tree?"

Otis takes a minute to look. "Awesome, Mom."

"Doesn't suck," Zig agrees. The boys keep going, Maxine regards the tree half a minute more before catching up. At the corner, by reflex, she drifts into a pick so as to stay between them and any driver whose idea of sport is to come around the corner and run you over.

Sunlight reflected from east-facing apartment windows has begun to show up in blurry patterns on the fronts of buildings across the street. Two-part buses, new on the routes, creep the crosstown blocks like giant insects. Steel shutters are being rolled up, early trucks are double-parking, guys are out with hoses cleaning off their piece of sidewalk. Unsheltered people sleep in doorways, scavengers with huge plastic sacks full of empty beer and soda cans head for the markets to cash them in, work crews wait in front of buildings for the super to show up. Runners are bouncing up and down at the curb waiting for lights to change. Cops are in coffee shops dealing with bagel deficiencies. Kids, parents, and nannies wheeled and afoot are heading in all different directions for schools in the neighborhood. Half the kids seem to be on new Razor scooters, so to the list of things to keep alert for add ambush by rolling aluminum.

The Otto Kugelblitz School occupies three adjoining brownstones between Amsterdam and Columbus, on a cross street *Law & Order* has so far managed not to film on. The school is named for an early psychoanalyst who was expelled from Freud's inner circle because of a recapitulation theory he'd worked out. It seemed to him obvious that the human life span runs through the varieties of mental disorder as understood in his day—the solipsism of infancy, the sexual hysterias of adolescence and entry-level adulthood, the paranoia of middle age, the dementia of late life . . . all working up to death, which at last turns out to be "sanity."

"Great time to be finding *that* out!" Freud flicking cigar ash at Kugelblitz and

ordering him out the door of Berggasse 19, never to return. Kugelblitz shrugged, emigrated to the U.S., settled on the Upper West Side, and built up a practice, soon accumulating a network of high-and-mighty who in some moment of pain or crisis had sought his help. During the fancy-schmancy social occasions he found himself at increasingly, whenever he introduced them to one another as “friends” of his, each would recognize another repaired spirit.

Whatever Kugelblitzian analysis was doing for their brains, some of these patients were getting through the Depression nicely enough to kick in start-up money after a while to found the school, and to duke Kugelblitz in on the profits, plus creation of a curriculum in which each grade level would be regarded as a different kind of mental condition and managed accordingly. A loony bin with homework, basically.

This morning as always Maxine finds the oversize stoop aswarm with pupils, teachers on wrangler duty, parents and sitters, and younger siblings in strollers. The principal, Bruce Winterslow, acknowledging the equinox in a white suit and panama hat, is working the crowd, all of whom he knows by name and thumbnail bio, patting shoulders, genially attentive, schmoozing or threatening as the need arises.

“Maxi, hi?” Vyrva McElmo, gliding across the porch through the crowd, taking much longer than she has to, a West Coast thing, it seems to Maxine. Vyrva is a sweetheart but not nearly time-obsessed enough. People been known to get their Upper West Side Mom cards pulled for far less than she gets away with.

“I’m like in another scheduling nightmare this afternoon?” she calls from a few strollers away, “nothing too major, well not yet anyway, but at the same time . . .”

“No prob,” just to speed things up a little, “I’ll bring Fiona back to our place, you can come get her whenever.”

“Thanks, really. I’ll try not to be too late.”

“She can always sleep over.”

Before they got to know each other, Maxine would bring out herbal tea, after putting on a pot of coffee for herself, till Vyrva inquired, pleasantly enough, “Like I’m wearing California plates on my butt, or what?” This morning Maxine notes a change from the normal weekday throwtogether, what Barbie used to call an Executive Lunch Suit instead of denim overalls, for one thing, hair up instead of in the usual blond braids, and the plastic monarch butterfly earrings replaced by what, diamond studs, zircons? Some appointment later in the day, business matters no doubt, job hunting, maybe another financing expedition?

Vyrva has a degree from Pomona but no day job. She and Justin are transplants, Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley. Justin and a friend from Stanford have a little start-up that somehow managed to glide through the dotcom disaster last year, though not with what you’d call irrational exuberance. So far they’ve been coming up OK with the tuition at Kugelblitz, not to mention rent for the basement and parlor floors of a brownstone off Riverside, which the first time Maxine saw she had a real-estate envy attack. “Magnificent residence,” she pretended to kvell, “maybe I’m in the wrong business?”

“Talk to Bill Gates here,” Vyrva nonchalant, “I’m just hangin out, waitin for my stock options to vest? Right, honey?”

California sunshine, snorkel-deep waters, most of the time anyway. Once in a while, though . . . Maxine hasn’t been in the business she’s in for this long without

growing antennas for the unspoken. “Good luck with it, Vyrva,” thinking, Whatever it is, and noting a slow California double take as she exits the stoop, kissing her kids on top of their heads on the way past, and resumes the morning commute.

Maxine runs a small fraud-investigating agency down the street, called Tail ’Em and Nail ’Em—she once briefly considered adding “and Jail ’Em,” but grasped soon enough how wishful, if not delusional, this would be—in an old bank building, entered by way of a lobby whose ceiling is so high that back before smoking was outlawed sometimes you couldn’t even see it. Opened as a temple of finance shortly before the Crash of 1929, in a blind delirium not unlike the recent dotcom bubble, it’s been configured and reconfigured over the years since into a drywall palimpsest accommodating wayward schoolkids, hash-pipe dreamers, talent agents, chiropractors, illegal piecework mills, mini-warehouses for who knows what varieties of contraband, and these days, on Maxine’s floor, a dating service called Yenta Espresso, the In ’n’ Out Travel Agency, the fragrant suite of acupuncturist and herb specialist Dr. Ying, and down the hall at the very end the Vacancy, formerly Packages Unlimited, seldom visited even when it was occupied. Current tenants remember the days when those now chained and padlocked doors were flanked by Uzi-packing gorillas in uniform, who signed for mysterious shipments and deliveries. The chance that automatic-weapons fire might break out at any minute put a sort of motivational edge on the day, but now the Vacancy just sits there, waiting.

The minute she steps out of the elevator, Maxine can hear Daytona Lorrain down the hall and through the door, set to high-dramatic option, abusing the office phone again. She tiptoes in about the time Daytona screams, “I’ll sign them muthafuckin papers then I’m outta here, you wanna be a dad, you take care of that whole shit,” and slams the phone down.

“Morning,” Maxine chirps in a descending third, sharpening the second note maybe a little.

“Last call for his ass.”

Some days it seems like every lowlife in town has Tail ’Em and Nail ’Em on their grease-stained Rolodex. A number of phone messages have piled up on the answering machine, breathers, telemarketers, even a few calls to do with tickets currently active. After some triage on the playback, Maxine returns an anxious call from a whistleblower at a snack-food company over in Jersey which has been secretly negotiating with ex-employees of Krispy Kreme for the illegal purchase of top-secret temperature and humidity settings on the donut purveyor’s “proof box,” along with equally classified photos of the donut extruder, which however now seem to be Polaroids of auto parts taken years ago in Queens, Photoshopped and whimsically at that. “I’m beginning to think something’s funny about this deal,” her contact’s voice trembling a little, “maybe not even legit.”

“Maybe, Trevor, because it’s a criminal act under Title 18?”

“It’s an FBI sting operation!” Trevor screams.

“Why would the FBI—”

“Duh-uh? Krispy Kreme? On behalf of their brothers in law enforcement at all levels?”

“All right. I’ll talk to them at the Bergen County DA, maybe they’ve heard something—”

“Wait, wait, somebody’s coming, now they saw me, oh! maybe I better—” The line goes dead. Always happens.

She now finds herself reluctantly staring at the latest of she’s lost count how many episodes of inventory fraud involving gizmo retailer Dwayne Z. (“Dizzy”) Cubitts, known throughout the Tri-State Area for his “Uncle Dizzy” TV commercials, delivered as he is spun around at high speed on some kind of a turntable, like a little kid trying to get high (“Uncle Dizzy! Turns prices around!”) schlepping closet organizers, kiwi peelers, laser-assisted wine-bottle openers, pocket rangefinders that scan the lines at the checkout and calculate which is likely to be shortest, audible alarms that attach to your TV remote so you’ll never lose it, unless you lose the remote for the alarm also. None of them for sale in stores yet, but they can be seen in action any late night on TV.

Though he has approached the gates of Danbury more than once, Dizzy remains gripped in a fatality for sublegal choices, putting Maxine herself on moral pathways that would make a Grand Canyon burro think twice. The problem being Dizzy’s charm, at least a just-off-the-turntable naïveté that Maxine can’t quite believe is fake. For the ordinary fraudster, family disruption, public shame, some time in the joint are enough to get them to seek legal if not honest employment. But even among the low-stakes hustlers she is doomed to deal with, Dizzy’s learning curve is permanently flatlined.

Since yesterday an Uncle Dizzy’s branch manager out on Long Island, some stop on the Ronkonkoma line, has been leaving increasingly disoriented messages. A warehouse situation, inventory irregularities, something a little different, fucking Dizzy, please. When will Maxine be allowed to kick back, become Angela Lansbury, dealing only with class tickets, instead of exiled out here among the dim and overextended?

On her last Uncle Dizzy field visit out there, Maxine came around the corner of a towering stack of cartons and actually collided with whom but Dizzy himself, wearing a Crazy Eddie T-shirt in eye-catching yellow, creeping around behind some auditing team, average age of twelve, their firm being notorious for hiring solvent abusers, videogame addicts, diagnosed cases of impaired critical thinking, and assigning them immediately to asset inventory.

“Dizzy, what.”

“Oops, I did it again, as Britney always sez.”

“Look at this,” stomping up and down the aisles taking and lifting sealed cartons at random. A number of these, to somebody’s surprise maybe, not Maxine’s, seemed, though sealed, to have nothing inside. Gee. “Either I’m Wonder Woman here, or we’re experiencing a little inventory inflation? . . . You don’t want to stack these dummy cartons up too high, Dizzy, one look at the bottom layer and how it *isn’t* buckling under all the weight on top? usually a pretty good tipoff, and, and this kid auditing team, you should really at least let them clear the building *before* you bring the truck up to the loading dock to shift the same set of cartons over to the next fucking *branch store*, see what I’m saying . . .”

“But,” eyes wide as fairground lollipops, “it worked for Crazy Eddie.”

“Crazy Eddie went to jail, Diz. You’re headed for another indictment to add to your collection.”

“Hey, no worries, it’s New York, grand juries here will indict a salami.”

“So . . . right now, what do we do? I should be calling in the SWAT team?”

Dizzy smiled and shrugged. They stood in the cardboard-and-plastic-smelling shadows, and Maxine, whistling “Help Me Rhonda” through her teeth, resisted the urge to run him down with a forklift.

She glares now at Dizzy’s file for as long as she can without opening it. Spiritual exercise. The intercom buzzes. “There’s some Reg somebody here don’t have an appointment?”

Saved. She puts aside the folder, which like a good koan will have failed to make sense anyway. “Well, Reg. Do get your ass on in here. Long time.”

2

Couple years in fact. Reg Despard looks considerably hammered at by the interval. He's a documentary guy who began as a movie pirate back in the nineties, going into matinees with a borrowed camcorder to tape first-run features off the screen, from which he then duped cassettes that he sold on the street for a dollar, two sometimes if he thought he could get it, often turning a profit before the movie was through its opening weekend. Professional quality tended to suffer around the edges, noisy filmgoers bringing their lunch in loud paper bags or getting up in the middle of the movie to block the view, often for minutes of running time. Reg's grip on the camcorder not always being that steady, the screen would also wander around in the frame, sometimes slow and dreamy though other times with stunning abruptness. When Reg discovered the zoom feature on his camcorder, there was a lot of zooming in and out for what you'd have to call its own sake, details of human anatomy, extras in crowd scenes, hip-looking cars in the background traffic, so forth. One fateful day in Washington Square, Reg happened to sell one of his cassettes to a professor at NYU who taught film, who next day came running down the street after Reg to ask, out of breath, if Reg knew how far ahead of the leading edge of this post-postmodern art form he was working, "with your neo-Brechtian subversion of the diegesis."

Because this somehow sounded like a pitch for a Christian weight-loss program, Reg's attention began to drift, but the eager academic persisted, and soon Reg was showing his tapes to doctoral seminars, from which it was only a step to shooting his own pictures. Industrials, music videos for unsigned bands, late-night infomercials for all Maxi knows. Work is work.

"Looks like I'm catching you at a busy time."

"Seasonal. Passover, Easter week, NCAA playoffs, St. Patrick's on a Saturday, da yoozh, not a problem, Reg—so what have we got here, a matrimonial?" Some call this brusque, and it has lost Maxine some business. On the other hand, it weeds out the day-trippers.

A wistful head angle, "Not an issue since '98 . . . wait, '99?"

"Ah. Down the hall, Yenta Espresso, check it out, coffee dates are their specialty, first latte grosso's free if you remember to ask Edith for the coupon— OK, Reg, so if it's nothing domestic . . ."

"It's this company I've been shooting a documentary about? I keep running into . . ." One of those funny looks Maxine by now knows better than to ignore.

"Attitude."

“Access issues. Too much I’m not being told.”

“And are we talking recent here, or will this mean going back into history, unreadable legacy software, statutes about to run?”

“Nah, this is one of the dotcoms that *didn’t* go under last year in the tech crash. No old software,” half a decibel too quiet, “and maybe no statute of limitations either.”

Uh-oh. “‘Cause see, if all you want’s an asset search, you don’t need a forensic person really, just go on the Internet, LexisNexis, HotBot, AltaVista, if you can keep a trade secret, don’t rule out the Yellow Pages—”

“What I’m really looking for,” solemn more than impatient, “probably won’t be anyplace any search engine can get to.”

“Because . . . what you’re looking for . . .”

“Just normal company records—daybooks, ledgers, logs, tax sheets. But try to have a look, and that’s when it gets weird, everything stashed away far far beyond the reach of LexisNexis.”

“How’s that?”

“Deep Web? No way for surface crawlers to get there, not to mention the encryption and the strange redirects—”

Oh. “Maybe you need more of an IT type to look at this? ‘cause I’m not really—”

“Already have one on the case. Eric Outfield, Stuyvesant genius, certified badass, popped at a tender age for computer tampering, trust him totally.”

“Who are these people, then?”

“A computer-security firm downtown called hashslingrz.”

“Heard of them around, yes doing quite well indeed, p/e ratio approaching the science-fictional, hiring all over the place.”

“Which is the angle I want to take. Survive and prosper. Upbeat, right?”

“But . . . wait . . . a movie about hashslingrz? Footage of what, nerds staring at screens?”

“Original script had a lot of car chases, explosions, but somehow the budget . . . I have this tiny advance the company’s kicking in, plus I’m allowed total access, or so I thought till yesterday, which is when I figured I’d better see you.”

“Something in the accounting.”

“Just like to know who I’m working for. I haven’t sold my soul yet—well, maybe a couple bars of rhythm and blues here and there, but I figured I’d better have Eric do some looking around. You know anything about their CEO, Gabriel Ice?”

“Dimly.” Cover stories in the trades. One of the boy billionaires who walked away in one piece when the dotcom fever broke. She can recall photos, off-white Armani suit, tailor-made beaver fedora, not actually bestowing papal blessings right and left but prepared to should the need arise . . . permission note from his parents instead of a pocket square. “I read as far as I could, I’m not, like, gripped. He makes Bill Gates look charismatic.”

“That’s only his party mask. He has deep resources.”

“You’re suggesting what, mob, covert ops?”

“According to Eric, a purpose on earth written in code none of us can read. Except maybe for 666, which tends to recur. Reminds me, you still have that concealed-carry permit?”

“Licensed to pack, ready to roll, uh-huh . . . why?”

A little evasive, “These people are not . . . what you usually find in the tech world.”

“Like . . .”

“Nowhere near geeky enough, for one thing.”

“That’s . . . it? Reg, in my vast experience, embezzlers don’t need shooting at very often. Some public humiliation usually does the trick.”

“Yeah,” almost apologetic, “but suppose this isn’t embezzlement. Or not only. Suppose there’s something else.”

“Deep. Sinister. And they’re all in on it together.”

“Too paranoid for you?”

“Not me, paranoia’s the garlic in life’s kitchen, right, you can never have too much.”

“So then there shouldn’t be any problem . . .”

“I hate when people say that. But sure, I’ll have a look and let you know.”

“Ah-right! Makes a man feel like Erin Brockovich!”

“Hm. Well, we do come to an awkward question. I guess you aren’t here to hire me or anything, right? Not that I mind working on spec, it’s just that there are ethical angles here, such as ambulance chasing?”

“Don’t you people have an oath? Like if you see fraud in progress—?”

“That was *Fraudbusters*, they had to cancel it, gave people too many ideas. Rachel Weisz wasn’t bad, though.”

“Just sayin that ’cause you’re lookalikes.” Smiling, hands and thumbs up as if framing a shot.

“Why, Reg.”

This was a point you always got to with Reg. First time they met was on a cruise, if you think of “cruise” in maybe more of a specialized way. In the wake of her separation, back in what still isn’t quite *The Day*, from her then husband, Horst Loeffler, after too many hours indoors with the blinds drawn listening on endless repeat to Stevie Nicks singing “Landslide” on a compilation tape she ignored the rest of, drinking horrible Crown Royal Shirley Temples and chasing them with more grenadine directly from the bottle and going through a bushel per day of Kleenex, Maxine finally allowed her friend Heidi to convince her that a Caribbean cruise would somehow upgrade her mental prognosis. One day she went sniffing down the hall from her office and into the In ’n’ Out Travel Agency, where she found undusted surfaces, beat-up furniture, a disheveled model of an ocean liner that shared a number of design elements with RMS *Titanic*.

“You’re in luck. We’ve just had a . . .” Long pause, no eye contact.

“Cancellation,” suggested Maxine.

“You could say.” The price was irresistible. To anyone in their right mind, too much so.

Her parents were more than happy to look after the boys. Maxine, still runny-nosed, found herself in a taxi with Heidi, who’d come along to see her off, headed for a terminal in Newark or possibly Elizabeth, which seemed to handle mostly freighters, in fact Maxine’s “cruise” ship turned out to be the Hungarian tramp container vessel M/V *Aristide Olt*, sailing under a Marshallese flag of convenience. It wasn’t till her first night out at sea that she learned she’d actually been booked into “AMBOPEDIA

Frolix '98," a yearly gathering of the American Borderline Personality Disorder Association. Great fun, who would have dreamt of canceling? Unless . . . aahhh! She gazed back at Heidi on the pier, possibly having some schadenfreude, diminishing into the industrial shoreline, which by now was too far away to swim to.

At the first seating for dinner that evening, she found a crowd in the mood to party, gathered beneath a banner reading WELCOME BORDERLINES! The captain appeared nervous and kept finding excuses to spend time under the tablecloth of his table. About every minute and a half, a deejay cued up the semiofficial AMBOPEDIA anthem, Madonna's "Borderline" (1984), with everybody joining in on the part that goes "O-verthe bor-derlinne!!!" with a peculiar emphasis on the final *n* sound. Some sort of tradition, Maxine imagined.

Later in the evening, she noticed a calmly drifting presence, eyeball stuck to a viewfinder, taping lensworthy targets of opportunity with a Sony VX2000, moving from guest to guest, allowing them to talk or not talk, whatever, and this turned out to be Reg Despard.

Thinking it might be a way out of this possibly horrible mistake she'd made, she tried to follow him on his pathway among the merrymakers. "Hey," after a while, "a stalker, I'm finally in the big time."

"Didn't mean to—"

"No, actually you could help me distract them a little, not feel so self-conscious."

"Wouldn't want to compromise your cred, I'm weeks overdue at the colorist, this whole puttogether here ran me under a hundred bucks at Filene's Basement—"

"Don't think that's what they'll be checkin out."

Well. When was the last time anybody suggested even this obliquely that she qualified as . . . maybe not arm candy, but arm popcorn maybe? Should she be offended? How little?

Tracking from one group of attendees to another, locating presently a normal-enough-looking citizen with an interest in migratory-bird hunting and conservation stamps, known to collectors as duck stamps, and his perhaps-less-involved wife, Gladys—

" . . . and my dream is to become the Bill Gross of duck stamps." Not only federal duck stamps, mind you, but every state issue as well—having wandered with the years into the seductive wetlands of philatelic zealotry, this by-now-shameless completist must have them all, hunters' and collectors' versions, artist-signed, remarques, varieties, freaks and errors, governors' editions . . . "New Mexico! New Mexico issued duck stamps only from 1991 through 1994, ending with the crown jewel of all duck stamps, Robert Steiner's supernaturally beautiful Green-Winged Teals in flight, of which I happen to own a plate block . . ."

"Which someday," Gladys announces chirpily, "I am going to take out of its archival plastic, compromise the gum on the back with my slobbering tongue, and use to send in the gas bill."

"Not valid for postage, honeybunch."

"You staring at my ring?" A woman in a beige eighties power suit entering the shot.

"Attractive piece. Something . . . familiar . . ."

"I don't know if you're a *Dynasty* person, but that time Krystle had to pawn her

ring? this is a cubic zirconia knockoff, \$560, retail of course, Irwin always pays retail, being the 301 point 83 in the relationship, I'm just the supportive partner. He drags me to these things every year, and I end up pigging my way into a mid-two-figures dress size 'cause there's never anybody to talk to."

"Don't listen to her, she's the one who has all two hundred-whatever episodes on Betamax. Focused? you have no idea—sometime in the mid-eighties, she actually changed her *name* to Krystle. A less understanding husband might call this unnatural."

Reg and Maxine find their way eventually to the onboard casino, where people in ill-fitting tuxedos and gowns are playing roulette and baccarat, chain-smoking, leering back and forth, and grimly waving fistfuls of make-believe money. "Jujubes," they're informed, "Generic Undiagnosed James Bond Syndrome, whole different support group. Hasn't made it into the *DSM* yet, but they're lobbying, maybe the fifth edition . . . always welcome here at convention time mostly for the stability, see what I'm saying." Actually, Maxine didn't, but bought a "five-dollar" chip and walked away from the table with enough, had it been real money, for a short trip to Saks if and when she was lucky enough to get back off of this.

At some point a face rosy with drink, fatefully belonging to one Joel Wiener, appears in the viewfinder. "Yeah, I get it, you recognize me from the news coverage, and now I'm just camera fodder, right? even though I was acquitted, in fact for the third time, on charges of that nature." Proceeding to unstopper a lengthy epic of injustice, somehow related to Manhattan real estate, that Maxine has trouble following in all of its nuances. Maybe she should have, it could've saved her some trouble down the line.

Borderlines by the boatload. Eventually Maxine and Reg find a quiet few minutes out on deck watching the Caribbean glide by. Cargo containers tower everywhere, stacked up four or five high. Like being in certain parts of Queens. Not yet mentally all the way on board this cruise, she finds herself wondering how many of the containers are dummies and what the chances might be for some seagoing inventory fraud in progress here.

She notices Reg hasn't made any attempt to get her on videotape. "I didn't have you figured for a borper. Thought you might be staff, like a social director or something." Surprised that it's been, oh, maybe an hour or more since she last thought about the Horst situation, Maxine understands that if she gets so much as a toenail's worth into that subject, Reg's camera will come on again.

The long-standing practice at these AMBOPEDIA get-togethers is to visit literal geographical borderlines, a different one every year. Shopping tours at Mexican *maquiladora* outlets. Gambling-addiction indulgence at the casinos of Stateline, California. Pennsylvania Dutch pig-outs along the Mason-Dixon Line. This year the destination borderline is between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, uneasy with melancholy karma dating back to the days of the Perejil Massacre, little of which has found its way into the brochure. As the *Aristide Olt* sails into picturesque Manzanillo Bay, things rapidly grow unfocused. No sooner has the ship tied up to the pier at Pepillo Salcedo than passengers preoccupied with large fish are excitedly chartering boats to go out after tarpon. Others, like Joel Wiener, whom real estate has driven from curiosity into obsession, are soon cruising local agencies and being dragged into the fantasies of those from whose motives greed, not to mention fuck-the-yanqui, must not

be ruled out.

Folks ashore talk a combination of Kreyòl and Cibaèño. At the end of the pier, souvenir stands have quickly materialized, snack vendors selling yaniqueques and chimichurros, practitioners of voodoo and Santería with spells for sale, purveyors of mamajuana, a Dominican specialty which comes in gigantic glass jars in each of which what looks like a piece of a tree has been marinating in red wine and rum. For a cross-borderline cherry on the sundae, there's also been an authentic *Haitian voodoo love spell* laid on each jar of Dominican mamajuana. "Now you're talking!" cries Reg. He and Maxine join a small group who have begun drinking the stuff and passing jars around, presently finding themselves a few miles out of town at El Sueño Tropical, a half-built and for the moment abandoned luxury hotel, screaming through the corridors, swinging across the courtyard on jungle vines, which have found a purchase overhead, chasing lizards and flamingos not to mention one another, and misbehaving on the moldering king-size beds.

Love, exciting and new, as they used to sing on *The Love Boat*, Heidi was right on the money, this was Just the Ticket all right, though later Maxine would not be so sure of the details.

Picking up memory's remote now, she hits PAUSE, then STOP, then POWER OFF, smiling without visible effort. "Peculiar cruise, Reg."

"You ever hear from any of those folks again?"

"An e-mail now and then, and every holiday season of course AMBOPEDIA's after me for a donation." She peers at him over the rim of her coffee cup. "Reg, did we ever, um . . ."

"I don't think so, I was mostly with that Leptandra from Indianapolis, and you kept disappearing with the real-estate obsessive."

"Joel Wiener," Maxine's eyeballs, in semi-horrified embarrassment, scanning the ceiling.

"I wasn't gonna bring that up, sorry."

"You heard about them pulling my license. That was indirectly Joel. Who, without meaning to, did me such a mitzvah. Like when I was a CFE I was cute, but a defrocked CFE? I'm irresistible. To a certain type. You can imagine what comes in the door, nothing personal."

The big selling point about a Certified Fraud Examiner gone rogue, she guessed, is a halo of faded morality, a reliable readiness to step outside the law and share the trade secrets of auditors and tax men. Having run into cultists who'd been expelled from their cults, Maxine was afraid for a while it would be that kind of social badlands. But word had gotten around, and soon Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em had more business than ever, more than she could handle. New clients were not of course always as reputable as they'd been in her licensed days. Darkside wannabes oozing out of the damn wallpaper, among them Joel Wiener, for whom she found herself cutting what turned out to be way too much slack.

Regrettably, Joel had somehow forgotten to include in his long recitals of real-estate injustice certain crucial details, such as his habit of committing serial co-op board membership, the beefs resulting over sums entrusted to him, typically, as co-op treasurer, plus the civil RICO indictment in Brooklyn, the wife with a real-estate agenda of her own, "It goes on. Not easy to explain," wiggling all her fingers above

her head, “Antennas. I felt comfortable enough about Joel to share a few tricks of the trade. For me, no worse than an IRS guy moonlighting as a tax preparer.”

But running her gravely afoul of the ACFE Code of Conduct, which Maxine in fact had been skating up to and all along the posted edges of for years. This time the ice, without creak or visible darkening, had given beneath her. Enough of the review committee saw conflict of interest, not only once but a pattern, where for Maxine it was, still is for that matter, a no-brainer of a choice between friendship and super-picky guideline adherence.

“Friendship?” Reg is puzzled. “You didn’t even like him.”

“A technical term.”

The stationery the decertification letter came on was pretty fancy, worth more than the message, which was basically fuck you, plus canceling all her privileges at The Eighth Circle, an exclusive CFEs’ club over on Park, with a reminder to return her member’s card and settle her bar tab, which showed a balance. There did seem to be a P.S. at the bottom, however, about filing an appeal. They included forms. This was interesting. This would not go into Accounts Shreddable, not just yet. Alarming, what Maxine noticed for the first time was the Association seal, which showed a torch burning violently in front of and slightly above an opened book. What’s this? any minute the pages of this book, maybe allegorically The Law, are about to be set on fire by this burning torch, possibly the Light of Truth? Is somebody trying to say something, the Law in flames here, the terrible inflexible price of Truth . . . That’s it! Secret anarchist code messages!

“Interesting thought, Maxine,” Reg trying to talk her down. “So you filed the appeal?”

Actually, no—as days passed, there were always reasons not to, she couldn’t afford the legal fees, the appeals process could all be just for show, and the fact remained that colleagues she respected had thrown her out on her ear, and did she really want back into that kind of vindictive surroundings. Sort of thing.

“A little oversensitive, these guys,” seems to Reg.

“Can’t blame them. They want us to be the one incorruptible still point in the whole jittery mess, the atomic clock everybody trusts.”

“You said ‘us.’”

“The certificate’s put away in storage, but still hanging on the office wall of my soul.”

“Some rogue.”

“*Bad Accountant*, it’s a series I’m developing, here, I got a script for the pilot, you wanna read it?”

3

The past, hey no shit, it's an open invitation to wine abuse. Soon as she hears the elevator doors close behind Reg, Maxine heads for the refrigerator. Where, in this chilled chaos, is the Pinot E-Grigio? "Daytona, we're out of wine again?"

"Ain't me drinkin that shit up."

"Course not, you're more of a Night Train person."

"Ooh. Do I really need wine-ism today?"

"Hey, you're off it so I'm just kidding, right?"

"Therapism!"

"Beg pardon?"

"You think twelve-step people's a lower class than you, always did, you on some spa program, lay around with the seaweed all on your face and shit, you don't even know what it's like—well, and I am telling you . . ." Pausing dramatically.

"You are not going," Maxine prompts.

"I am telling you, it is work, girl."

"Oh, Daytona. Whatever this is, I'm sorry."

So it all comes plotzing forth, the usual emotional cash-flow statement, full of uncollected receivables and bad debts. Bottom line, "Do not, ever, associate with nobody from Jamaica the island, he thinks joint custody means who brought the ganja."

"I was lucky with Horst," Maxine reflects. "Weed never had any effect on him at all."

"Figures, it's that white food y'all eat, white bread and that," paraphrasing Jimi Hendrix, "mayonnaise! All in your brain—every one of y'all, *terminally* honky." The phone has been blinking patiently. Daytona gets back to work, leaving Maxine to wonder why Rasta drug preferences should have anything to do with Horst. Unless Horst is somehow on her mind, which she can't say he has been, not that much, not for a while.

Horst. A fourth-generation product of the U.S. Midwest, emotional as a grain elevator, fatally alluring as a Harley knucklehead, indispensable (God help her) as an authentic Maid-Rite when hunger sets in, Horst Loeffler to this day has enjoyed a nearly error-free history of knowing how certain commodities around the world will behave, long enough before they themselves do to have already made a pile by the time Maxine came into the picture, and to watch it keep growing higher while struggling to remain true to some oath he apparently took at thirty, to spend it as fast as