

WRECK TANGLE

by Steve Mobia

“In this complex world when we are assaulted on all sides by stimulus, there is a need for simplicity. We cry out for simplicity. My job as a professional simplifier is to streamline your life. You don’t have time for distractions. Distractions sap your energy. You need a bullseye, a point to your life. What’s the point? The point is simplicity.”

Mark Link never thought he’d be paying to listen to such a man. Hogan Buttrick leaned forward on his desk with practiced sincerity, spilling out consoling words in a deep tone, his eyes wide and blue. Mark avoided Buttrick’s gaze by looking around the office. There was little to see; blank walls, white floor, no knick-knacks on the desk, no place to hide.

“You’re looking for distractions again, Mr. Link. Why don’t you gaze at the painting over my head. It’s proven useful to my clients.” Buttrick paused.

Mark, his face flushed with embarrassment, looked up. Above and behind Buttrick’s head was the only item on the wall; a large white canvas with a small gold rectangle in the center.

“Concentrate on the rectangle. It’s so simple, so uncomplicated, so pure. It has the golden proportions. Let all your distractions fall to the wayside. Remember why you came to see me. Why don’t you tell me something about why you came here?”

Mark took a deep breath. “I’m a musician. I play the violin. Music...I value music above all else. Or I did until recently...”

“Keep going.” Buttrick settled back in his padded chair, laced fingers resting on his white robed lap.

“I am a part of a small orchestra, one of the Disaster Relief Orchestras. As you know, we play proper soundtracks to life threatening situations.”

“You’re in a DRO? Very courageous of you. Must be difficult.”

“I just thought about how grateful the injured and dying must’ve been and how it was their right to have appropriate music playing at those difficult moments. It was my duty as a practicing musician. Anyway, last night we played a routine car crash...”

Mark saw it again in his mind. The DRO had arrived early to an accident and had time to set their music stands. A small chamber group of twelve members, there were enough instruments to create the expected emotions involved in rudimentary car crashes and with an appropriate volume to be heard over screams. Though Mark had worked with a much larger ensembles, such as the DROs assigned to burning buildings, they were

huge symphonic forces where his single contribution was swallowed up in the mass. Mark's only reservation with this smaller group was the conductor, Hal Dragin, an slender arrogant fellow whose musical interpretations Mark thought mediocre. Submitting to a conductor was hard for Mark, especially one with an aristocratic air of entitlement.

Though the orchestra readied their instruments, Hal, who only needed to carry a small folding riser, hadn't arrived yet. Stretched out before the group was the hulk of a blue station wagon. Eerily tranquil, the radio inside emitted a muffled Muzak version of *The Girl from Ipanema*. The cellist, carefully avoiding the bleeding bodies, reached in through an open side window to turn off the tune. That was a musician's only permitted physical involvement with car crashes. Radios must be turned off to prevent conflict with the official healing music being performed.

The police and paramedics had not yet arrived though there was not much traffic on the usually crowded highway. The car had slammed into a telephone pole. No one else had pulled over. Since the front fender was dented on the passenger's side, Mark assumed another car had changed lanes suddenly, hitting the wagon and sending it veering into the pole. Mark had played for many hit and run crashes. The ensemble even had a special piece titled *Hit and Run* written by a commissioned composer who himself was a victim of such an accident.

A screech of an antique Porsche 911 signaled Hal Dragin's arrival. After exiting the car, he brushed off his tuxedo and grabbed his riser from the truck, which, on that model, was in the front. Though Hal wanted to be seen as wealthy, it was clear his tuxedo had several repaired rips and the car's paint job faded and touched up. He liked to arrive shortly before the paramedics so to make a grand entrance to the most onlookers. Strutting to the front of the orchestra and with a deliberate flick of the wrist, he popped open his riser and promptly mounted it.

Hal scanned the scene. "EMTs not here yet? Okay, *Hit and Run* from the top."

Mark, on first violin, began the theme of surprise and abandonment while the viola provided undulations of throbbing pain. The cello echoed the violin theme, underscoring abandonment in minor thirds through sorrow and then hope in major sixths. The theme of hope predominately in the flute part was always an important musical ingredient at this stage of an accident. The second violin picked off the ticking of a clock with plucked syncopated accents.

Mark turned his head. No help in sight. Again he faced the crash. A middle-aged man, woman and young girl were seemingly unconscious. Could they even hear his

music? Still, Mark remembered his coaches stressing the power of the subconscious mind and how directly music penetrates it.

The woman had been driving and her head was barely seen through the web pattern of the broken windshield. The man, possibly her husband, looked as if he had turned back to say something to the girl just before they hit the pole. The girl, in the back seat, had been thrown up between the door and the front passenger seat, her closed eyes barely visible from Mark's view.

The music changed key. Normally by this time other help arrived and the orchestra could progress to the *Heroic Canon* that inspired both the injured and the medics. But there was no sign of help, not even a distant siren and so the players continued further into the same piece. The last section of *Hit and Run* was little practiced by Mark, who made a few mistakes. He hoped the flubbed notes wouldn't have ill effects.

Suddenly there was movement in the car. The girl fell back in the seat, her eyes open. She was in extreme pain, tears washing her face, her mouth contorted. She looked directly at Mark who shivered and fumbled a few more notes to stern looks from the conductor.

Though he tried concentrating on the conductor's baton, Mark couldn't get the girl out of his mind. She was a redhead around thirteen and wore some kind of formal dress. And she was out there in agony, only a few feet away. Mark hurried into an arpeggio louder than the score called for. Hal glared directly at him with haughty disdain.

Then, Mark broke under the strain and turned traitorous—his training and discipline, his confidence and faith in music, shattered. "The girl is dying. We've got to do something!"

Dropping his violin and abandoning the orchestra in the midst of a minor-seventh tutti, he ran to the station wagon door and pulled repeatedly, not noticing the depressed lock button. The girl's eyes were now closed. The door refused to budge.

Suddenly, Mark was pulled back by Hal who had stepped from his platform to grab Mark's collar. "Traitor!" Hal yelled.

Soon, members of the orchestra joined in, shoving Mark from all sides. The careful musical edifice he had helped construct now fell apart and down upon him.

Kicked, battered and bruised, Mark's body was roughly hoisted into the instrument van where he lay half-conscious, breathing in the aroma of old bow rosin. The orchestra, retuning outside, tried to patch the discordant rip in *Hit and Run* with another piece: *Come, Sweet Death*.

A shrill voice crackled over an ancient ham radio set in the cluttered office of the Disaster Orchestra Administration: “Sector C requests a tuba player not afraid of heights.”

Mr. Muffler, Concertmaster General of the D.O.A. picked up the weighted mike “That’s a tough one but I’ll do what I can.” He reached for a phone and seemed not to notice Mark Link’s arrival.

Mark’s mind was rerunning the song Hogan Buttrick had quoted: “Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free, tis the gift to come down where you ought to be.” He braced himself for Muffler’s reaction to his decision.

“Tim, we need you on the front lines. Are you ready?” Muffler, looking up from the phone, motioned to Mark to sit down.

As usual the office was layered with music manuscripts, accident reports, old dented instruments, and a faded map of the city tacked to a smudged green institutional wall. The contrast to Buttrick’s office was conspicuous.

“Tim, it’s a high rise, just your kind of assignment. Bring that new smoke inhalation march we just commissioned.” Muffler spoke into the phone like an army drill sergeant. His attitude matched the brass and silver musical notes hanging like medals on the chest of his military style uniform. “Don’t worry, they’re rigging a hanging platform for the orchestra...outside. You’ll have plenty of air for your tuba. Now report in immediately!”

Muffler hung up and turned in his squealing swivel chair to face Mark, who stood and nervously approached to shake Muffler’s hand. As he grasped Muffler’s thick palm, rehearsed tactful words were forgotten and he blurted out his intentions.

“I’m quitting, sir,” Mark said abruptly.

“Quitting?” Muffler shook his head in disgust. “I heard about last night from Dragin. You’re both fired. No melees on my watch.”

Mark glanced down. He suddenly felt profoundly deflated, a shriveled toy-balloon of a man.

Muffler’s stern fleshy face tightened inside his perennial scarf. Then he regained his composure and managed a slight smile. “Hey, I know times are tough. Seems like a disaster every minute. You guys are overworked and I understand what happened last night. You see, the officer who radioed us was involved in a high speed pursuit—possibly related to the crash. We had no idea it’d take so long for backup. But look; insubordination cannot be tolerated. You’ve lost your faith in music?” Muffler stroked the solid hair of a Beethoven bust on his desk.

Mark was perplexed. Tears came to his eyes. “Maybe I just want a different...ah...more comfortable audience.”

“What about those paramedics? Don’t you think they’d rather be doing something else than pulling out broken bodies? That’s work, that’s duty. It’s also their right to have inspiring music.”

Mark slumped into a torn and taped up chair, massaging his closed eyes with his fingers.

“You’re getting soft,” Muffler continued. “Where’s all that discipline gone, all that rehearsing for your role in the community? Remember you were one of the chosen, personally hand-picked by me. I said to them: Mark has a musical backbone, he can go anywhere. Send him to bus wrecks, plane crashes, earthquakes, volcanoes!” Muffler waved his hands to the four corners of his office. “Anywhere! My man Mark will go anywhere! Okay, well I was wrong. “

Mark stood and tossed his scribbled quitting notice on Muffler’s desk. “You were right, I will go anywhere.” He turned and left.

The next morning Mark set a coffee can on the sidewalk.

“What were you but a street musician anyway?” he thought as he unpacked his violin. The rush hour was on. Hard leather shoes tapped by as Mark plucked the individual strings, tuning them. He rose to his feet and began a rendition of a Shaker tune, *Simple Gifts*.

His mind slipped back along the melody line to Tamula, his ex-wife who had pleaded for his attention midst a soaring sea of notes, staves and clefs.

“You knew when you married me that music would always be my first love,” Mark stressed repeatedly. And first loves are longest remembered. Eventually Tamula wearied from carrying the torch for another love; applauding him at concerts, helping to set up gigs and road tours, having his friends over to play until the night turned morning.

“Come to bed,” she would plead.

“One more movement,” Mark would say. It was always “one more movement.”

Tamula left suddenly and completely. The Chromelodian Quartet had just finished a nationwide tour and Mark invited the group over to his house for drinks. Tacked to the front door was a paper. On it: a music staff with a B flat quarter note.

Suddenly realizing he had been playing *Simple Gifts* in B flat, he transposed it upward to C. No one in the passing street crowd seemed to notice. What a relief. He avoids B flat as much as he can. He vowed to hate her forever for ruining that note. Since the time of her departure, B flats always reminded him of the broken marriage and that pitch, even in a glissando, would cause ripples of anguish. How could she be so cruel as to tamper with *his* music?

The first coin of the day clinked into his can. To thank the patron, Mark embellished the melody. The man, who wore a gray suit, continued his walk and ignored Mark's efforts. Though Mark started to take this personally, he remembered Hogan Buttrick's words: "Keep your life simple. Don't get lost in other people's problems."

By midday Mark's fingers ached. He sat next to his coffee can and counted the contents. For a veteran of a Disaster Relief Orchestra to only earn \$11.50 was disgraceful. He thought about leaving. His friends could sign him up with another orchestra or maybe a quartet. "What friends?" he thought.

After his marriage collapsed, the Chromelodian Quartet could not contain Mark's ever-inflating ego. Mark professed a direct line to all composers' inner wishes. He alone knew exactly the right tempos, exactly the correct phrasing, and had no hesitance in alerting the others to this knowledge. Within two months after their nationwide tour, the group broke up, unable to sustain the weight Mark placed upon their delicate sensibilities.

Mark went on to test his musical devotion to the limit, insisting that music, played correctly, could change the world. Mr. Muffler was looking for such an enthusiast, and within hours Mark Link was on the front lines, the battlefronts of grief and pain, offering the solace that only music could bring. By this time, though, his overbearing nature turned his former friends and contacts into heretics. They questioned his tempos, his crescendos, his phrasing. Most of all, they questioned his sanity. His safety net of gigs unraveled. A flurry of phone calls Mark made after leaving Muffler's office turned up nothing.

"This is the first stage of simplification," Hogan Buttrick had assuredly pronounced. "When you disentangle yourself from your former life, there follows a period of complexity. The trick is not to fall victim to complexity. Rise above it. Here, take this." Hogan gave Mark a plain white card with a golden rectangle on it. "If you need to, stare at it. Take it out of your pocket during the day. The rectangle will ease you out of complexity."

Mark was staring at the card now as he sat by his can, the noonday sun shifting. "I'll play again and think only of the rectangle," he said to himself, standing and pocketing the card.

He began a soft, lyrical piece but was confused by the profusion of rectangles around him; sidewalk sections, briefcases, car windows. In a flash he saw the young girl's tortured face again. No, he must concentrate — block out the wounded girl with the gold rectangle. He started his piece again. Two concerned accountants stopped in front of him to check their watches. Mark shut his eyes. Memories of crumpled rectangular cars softened into a mushy pillow shape and then into a sharp rectangle; simplicity, a blank screen.

Was it on that inner rectangular screen or were his eyes now open? Hal Dragin stood before him, wearing his shabby tuxedo and conducting with a baton. He had that haughty, sharp chiseled face, long nose and thin mustache. He was not watching Mark; his enraptured eyes instead turned toward the sky.

Mark suddenly stopped playing. The conductor acted as if struck by lightning or thrown from a train. His aristocratic form collapsed, nearly hitting a baby carriage as he fell back on the pavement. The baby's mother muttered, "Something must be done about these street musicians," as she pushed her stroller swiftly past them.

"Hal, what are you doing?" Mark shouted.

"Why did you stop playing?" said the man. "I was almost convinced."

"What?" Mark, incensed, put down his violin. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw...heard...it was glorious. I was conducting, setting the pace for a hundred musicians."

"So, I heard you got canned to." Mark glared at Hal who stood and brushed himself off.

"You have it made. You have an instrument," said Hal. "All I have is my intellect and my baton. It's because of your traitorous actions that I'm out in the street."

"Look. I'm still aching from the fight. You should've stopped it."

Hal gave Mark a pitiless stare. "You shouldn't have lost your faith." The conductor patted his chest. "It is through me, the music speaks! Music can move mountains. But you're a broken down gutless apostate."

Mark was fed up. "Hell with you! Go back to your own corner."

The conductor was indignant. "A street conductor can't make nearly as much as a street musician. Come on. You play a simple song, I conduct a monumental symphony. Who makes the most? You do. You rake it in with your stupid demonstrations of technique. All the public sees of me are my exhortations to empty air. I'm sick of it."

"Why didn't you ever learn to play an instrument?" Mark asked scornfully.

"You insult me! You don't deserve this street, you..." He suddenly halted his scornful tirade to straighten his lapels. "I want you to play a request."

Mark snickered. “But I assume you’ve got no money — why would you be here. Who has sympathy for street conductors?”

“If you have a heart, and I know all great musicians do, you’ll play this for me; the *Ode to Joy*, Beethoven, Ninth Symphony.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mark sarcastically. “How about something a little more...”

“Play!” The tuxedo man interrupted and moved forward, his baton fiercely extended.

Mark stifled a laugh. “Okay Hal. Will you go back to your corner afterward?”

“Promise!”

With deliberate panache, Mark began a spontaneous arrangement of the theme from the Ninth Symphony, embellishing it as much as he could to give it an orchestral flavor. Hal began waving his baton furiously, his face running sweat, pulsing red. A glint of afternoon light caught the baton in a downward arc. By this time, Mark too was swept up into the music, his closed eyes turned heavenward. And in his mind the sound unfolded to cosmic proportions, an infinity of orchestras and choruses flowing into one immense crescendo.

At this highest peak, the conductor plunged his baton into Mark’s stomach with a fierce sudden jab.

“You’re too good for this street!” Hal slid out his baton, unsheathed to reveal a long double-edge blade.

Dropping the violin, Mark clutched his oozing abdomen. The conductor quickly scooped the change from the coffee can, turned and ran through an approaching group of startled executives. Mark passed out and slumped to the pavement.

Slowly opening his clouded eyes, Mark found the hospital bed surprisingly damp. To his left, someone was entering the small blank room. Moving in slow motion, gauzy like a bandage, it was a young girl. Dressed in a colorful robe, she carefully carried his violin in her cupped hands. From her indistinct face, a smile appeared as she set the instrument on a bed-table near Mark’s head.

“You dropped this,” she whispered, then flitted away through an open door.

Mark tried to sit up. “Wait,” he yelled, triggering a sharp pain in his gut.

From the open door, an elderly woman brusquely entered, wearing a nurse’s uniform and writing on a clipboard. “You really ought to get simplified,” she said matter-of-factly,

barely looking up from her notes. “Its worked wonders for me. Let’s see how you’re doing.”

She pulled back the wet bed sheet. To Mark’s horror, his gaping stomach wound was open and uncovered – blood and viscera clearly visible. The woman replaced the sheet casually and continued writing.

“You didn’t dress my wound?” Mark gasped.

“We don’t believe in band-aid solutions here. Wounds have to heal from the inside out. If the wound is bleeding, it wants to bleed. Who are we to say no to the wound?”

“That’s crazy. What kind of hospital is this?”

The woman looked out the door. “Oh, here’s your doctor. Why don’t you complain to him. I just work here.”

A shot of alarm ran through Mark. He sat up in bed despite the pain.

The doctor entered the room, dressed in a spotless white suit. His stethoscope was neatly tucked into his shirt like a tie – more as a fashion accessory than a tool for diagnosing. He forced a broad toothy smile.

“Hello, Mr. Link,” said the doctor. “Does your wound want to say something to me?” He bent forward over Mark’s belly, hand cupped to his ear. “You can tell so much by the music of a patient’s wounds. It sings from the inside.”

In a panic, Mark pushed the doctor away and jumped out of bed; wrapping the bloody sheet around his middle.

“You’re trying to kill me here!” Mark shouted, aghast.

“Like all my other patients, always blaming the doctor for their ills.” The doctor spoke softly with an intimidating smugness. He walked to Mark’s violin and tenderly stroked it. “You of all people should love a good listener.”

Hunched over in agony, Mark pushed his way out of the room.

Down an empty hall and into a bathroom, Mark leapt upon a cloth towel dispenser and yanked several feet of towel out. Ripping it off the dispenser, he wound the long cloth tightly around his stomach and tied it securely. Pausing, he listened for footsteps. Surely the trail of blood could be easily followed. Sure enough, sounds of whispered conversation from several people were approaching.

He pried open the frosted bathroom window. Relieved to see that he was on the first floor, he squeezed awkwardly through the opening, using a nearby urinal to get a foothold.

A damp shrub cushioned his jump from the window. To hide, he limped away toward a distant overgrown clump of blackberry bushes on the unkempt hospital grounds.

Once there, surrounded by the concealing ring of bushes, he fell to the ground in pain, taking a fetal position. It took awhile before he realized others were nearby. Pivoting his head up, he saw several people crouched around a large pot hanging over a fire. A middle aged black woman in a floral hospital robe barely acknowledged Mark's arrival while tending the pot. "Join the club," she said.

Groaning, Mark sat up. He could see the nooks in other bushes around him where there were many other people, seemingly camping out, all wearing hospital robes or surgical gowns.

"We caught a big one last night." The woman fished around in the steaming pot with a wooden tongue depressor and lifted a boiled rat. "Want a bite?"

Repelled, Mark backed away but didn't want to upset her. "No, I've got an upset stomach," he politely responded. "Why are you out here?"

"You know what it's like in there. Would you rather be inside?"

"Is it really a hospital?" Mark implored.

"That's what they like to call it, the so-called doctors."

"You're all patients?"

"Yeah, we're very patient. I'd say so. Been here a few months now. Never going in again." The woman sniffed the steam rising from the pot.

Another woman, a Hispanic with large weakened eyes turned to Mark. "This place, it's no good. They make you suffer. They say it's good for you to suffer. See, I was in a car crash. My elbow here..." she uncovered a bandaged twisted arm, "...it was broken but my doctor just strapped me to a table and put a big megaphone up to my arm. He said he was waiting for the music from my wound."

Mark looked away as the rat was placed on a plate and cut up. He stood and staggered through the haphazard campsites while looking back up at the old brick hospital. In open windows he saw people wearing white coats, peering through binoculars into the distance.

"The doctors don't notice us here," said a young dark-skinned man with a shaved head who was lying on a mattress of cotton balls. "Their binoculars don't focus on us, we're too close. We're just blurs."

"Blurs?" Mark looked up again at the doctors.

The young man continued, "You're safe here as long as you stay close to the hospital."

"Why don't you leave? What are they going to do?"

“You know how they work. They’ll find something to bring you back. They’ll even impersonate other people, just to get you on their operating table. And then they just listen while you suffer.”

Mark shook his head. “You don’t really believe that.”

“Hey, I didn’t want to, but I’ve seen it.”

A high-pitched moan came from inside a particularly dense cluster of bushes. Blackberries intertwined with hollyhocks and roses, creating a palace of vines, blossoms and thorns. Mark found an opening and entered.

There, seemingly unconscious in a pile of bandages, needles, tubes and first aid kits, lay the girl from the car crash. Mark knelt down beside her. Dressed in a hospital gown like the others, the only visible sign of trauma was a gauze pad taped to her forehead. As Mark leaned forward to check her breathing, she suddenly woke with a cry. Mark recovered from his initial shock and embraced the girl, whom he had given up for dead.

“It’s okay,” assured Mark. “You were having a bad dream.”

“It was the crash again,” she said tearfully. “My mom and dad...”

Mark hugged tighter. “I know, I saw you. I thought you died in the crash too. No one came to help.”

“I heard the most beautiful music. I just wanted to keep on listening.”

Mark reeled at the thought that his music had any effect on her suffering. The girl’s tear laden eyes met his. “I remember you. You were playing in the orchestra, playing for me — violin.”

Not knowing how to handle the girl’s recognition, Mark bowed his head. “I should have helped. You were in pain.”

“You did help me. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

Her earnestness was overbearing to Mark. He thought of the girl’s parents as proof of his music’s impotence but held back, looking instead for an escape from the girl’s overt sincerity. “Where are we? Who takes care of you?”

“The other patients do. Did you meet them? We learned how to use all this hospital stuff they throw out. And rats actually taste good if you keep eating them.”

“But why do they live here?”

The girl glanced away into through the branches and forced a smile. “There’ll be better doctors someday — that’s what they tell me. When the good doctors come, we can go back inside.” She spoke trancelike as if reciting a memorized credo.

Mark shook her shoulders to bring her back. “No, we’ve got to get away from here. You can’t keep living here like this. Can you walk all right?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s go. Stand up.”

The girl stood with no trouble. “See, I only hurt my head.”

Mark smiled, when winced in pain from his own wound. “What’s your name?”

“Pondra.”

“All right Pondra. If you really think I saved your life then you’ll come with me.”

They peered out from the bushes.

“Watch out for those doctors,” Pondra warned. “If they see you, they’ll find a way to hurt you and bring you back.”

Mark and Pondra moved furtively through the patient’s campsites until Mark bent over in distress, leaning against a discarded scalpel sterilizer.

“What happened to you?” asked Pondra.

Mark tightened his towel bandage. “Stabbed in the stomach by an orchestra conductor. I mean a...” He looked past Pondra’s bemused expression to a small brick building, adjacent to the hospital. “Let’s try to get in there.”

Pondra hesitated. “We’ll never make it. They’ll send viruses after us.”

“Don’t believe what they tell you here. Come on!” Mark pulled Pondra’s hand and the two hurried across the weeded overgrown surroundings into the smaller building, which was bathed in a putrid stench.

Once inside, Pondra clasped her hands over her mouth and nose. “Why did we come here?”

“This must be the sewage treatment plant for the hospital,” said Mark as his eyes groped for clues amid the pipes and open vats. “There may be a way out where the doctors can’t find us. Look, over here.”

Next to a rust-encrusted tank of opaque bubbling fluid was a hatch on the floor.

Pondra, in a panic to escape the stench, ran to the hatch and grabbed a recessed handle.

“Come on, Pondra, you can’t lift that.” But as Mark hobbled forward to help, Pondra pulled up the heavy iron hatch with one mighty yank.

Stunned by Pondra’s strength, Mark gazed down through the circular hole. “Is it full of sewage?”

Pondra knelt and took an anxious whiff. “It sure smells better than up here. It looks like a big tunnel. Let’s go.”

Slipping nimbly down the corroded ladder, Pondra left Mark to labor with closing the hatch cover behind him. He gave up after a couple of strained attempts. “You’re a strong girl, Pondra. I couldn’t have lifted this hatch even without an injury.”

Down from the ladder, Mark realized the tunnel was far from dry. But though slippery, he could move slowly through the ankle-deep sludge.

A dim shaft of light from the hatch above, revealed many other circular tunnels branching off from where he stood.

Mark caught his breath. "A flashlight would come in handy."

"I think I see some light coming from that one." Pandra pointed to a faint glow coming from a tunnel to the left. Mark wasn't even sure he saw the glow but Pandra insisted. Freed from the spell of the hospital, she seemed now possessed with uncanny determination.

Pandra pulled on Mark's hand and as they proceeded into the darkness, the fluid level in the tunnel grew deeper. With each step forward, Mark's stomach pain grew more numb, as if he was healing by will alone, or by Pandra's resolute grasp.

"See, there is something ahead," said Pandra confidently.

True enough, the light grew until Mark could see the opening clearly. The tunnel emptied out into a swamp ringed by reeds. By this time, Mark and Pandra were practically swimming in water that was blanketed with rust-red algae.

"Here, let me help you." Pandra scrambled up the soggy bank through the reeds and reached back for Mark. The petite girl had astonishing strength. With her help, Mark had no trouble getting out of the red water.

At the top of the bank, their feet sank in thick mud.

Looking up from the mire, Mark was awestruck by the sight of a large old rotting fishing boat, the decayed hull towering above him.

A head peered down at them from over the bow — a costumed man sporting a feathered hat, false bulbous nose and theatrical make up. "Show's not ready yet. You're too early. Come back later." He turned away.

"What show?" Queried Mark. "Could you help us?"

"I said, the show's not ready!"

Pandra shouted back. "Whoever you are, my friend here is hurt. We need to come up."

The man's head reappeared and he leaned over the edge, studying Mark and Pandra. "You're not from here, are ya?"

"I don't think so," Mark replied.

"You related to the Chums?" The man inquired.

Mark and Pandra were baffled. Mark spoke up. "Never heard of the Chums."

There was a long pause, then a boarding ladder extended downward. Pandra ran to it, climbed a little, then reached down for Mark.

After clambering over and onto the deck, the strange man helped Mark to sit down. Besides the feathered cap, the man wore loose-fitting garments emblazoned with once bright, now faded colored patterns: tassels, sequins and paisley curls. Mark felt the man's face was familiar, even under his garish make up and false nose. "Sorry, but I'm in a rush," said the man. "My name's Hindrigal, and yours?"

"Pondra and Mark." Leaning his head back against the deck rail, Mark observed a tall mast and fishing crane rising from a central cabin. "You're not a fisherman are you?"

"Oh, something like that. I used to fish for food, but then the tide went out. Now, I fish for an audience." Hindrigal was scurrying around, decorating the deck with tattered streamers. "I'm the village puppeteer. A string player, so to speak."

"Village?" Pondra wondered aloud.

"Yeah, look off starboard there. The village of the fish that got away." Hindrigal pointed to a collection of small, utterly dilapidated buildings barely supporting themselves on the marsh. A few people could be seen sluggishly milling about.

"I call 'em the chums. They leave me alone long enough to make a show." Hindrigal turned away to position chairs on the deck. "They'll be coming over soon. But I'd stay away if I were you. Besides, they smell so bad...ugh."

Down in the village, a low bell clanged. Arising from the moldering assortment of crooked homes came the putrescent inhabitants, flies buzzing furiously around them. Wearing fishing nets over shoddy clothes and a mix of fin-like headgear, they seemed to fight a profound lethargy while hobbling to a trail leading up to the boat. Grumbling and picking fights along the way, they used whatever surplus energy in pointless squabble. Sluggishly, they pushed each other over; then, standing again, continued their pathetic procession. The women were bloated and blackened, their skin covered in slime. Even so, the men made awkward passes at them between swigs from barnacled bottles.

"That's all that's left of 'em, and they're the hardest to please," said Hindrigal as Mark and Pondra watched the slowly advancing procession. "You'd better hide. They get pretty riled up."

"You're kidding," Pondra exclaimed. "They can hardly walk."

"I'm telling you, better hide. I'm not lying." Hindrigal motioned toward the cabin. Though puzzled, Mark and Pondra followed Hindrigal's instruction.

Cautiously, they entered the creaking cabin and found it lined with puppets, costumes, props and masks.

Pondra was transported by the sight. "God, my mom would love all these costumes. She works in a costume shop."

“But your mom is...” Mark stopped himself though not in time to remind Pandra of her grief.

“I know,” Pandra turned from Mark and walked to a dusty table covered with pieces of puppets. “I can remember the first puppet show I ever saw. Can you?”

Mark silently shook his head, no.

Pandra examined a wooden clown’s face, shorn of hair and bodiless. “It was what they call a Punch and Judy show, something like that. You know the kind where the puppets beat each other up all the time. And there was a tune played.”

“That’s a pretty good memory.” Mark watched Pandra from across the room.

“The funny thing is,” Pandra continued. “Those puppets never got hurt —they just got right back up again for the next show. I thought the music had something to do with it. And every time I fell down or got hurt, that tune would run through my head. But what did it sound like? Let me think...”

Amused by Pandra’s recollection, Mark walked around the room, inspecting the backstage jumble. Pulling aside a spangled draping he saw several large bottles of what looked to be real animal guts.

“How’s your stomach?” Pandra asked.

Mark quickly covered the bottles and turned to face her. Ever since their escape, he had felt progressively stronger, his pain receding into a dull throb. Even so, he hesitated inspecting his wound for fear it would again announce itself.

“Oh hey, I just remembered.” Pandra approached and touched Mark’s damp bloodstained towel. “Pretend I’m a calliope.” From her pursed lips Pandra exhaled the tune. It was both wistful and silly and though Mark had played many a melody, he couldn’t place it.

Wanting to spare Pandra the sight of his injury, he turned away and unwound the towel. Despite the blood stain on his hospital gown, when he moved it aside, he could find no trace of a cut. Pandra finished singing and pulled the bandage from her forehead. Mark examined it closely to find her skin unblemished.

“Guess we really did get away from the doctors,” she exclaimed. For a moment Mark was swept into sublime bliss. He couldn’t help but laugh with Pandra, charged with exhilaration and wonderment. Then a raucous sound broke the spell.

The slimy crowd from the village was climbing onto the deck. Mark and Pandra peered out the windows of the cabin.

Hindrigan assisted his audience. “Watch your step, ladies and gentlemen.” Though they reached for his hand, they jeered Hindrigan and spat in his face. Once on deck, some fell over and tried to trip the others. Hindrigan, though harried, tried to force a certain

dignity to the proceedings. Ignoring the spittle hanging from his hat feathers he gently though insistently pulled on the nets of his bedraggled patrons, guiding them to tottering deck chairs worn down to a few strands of nylon. Once seated they appeared to give way again to the lethargy and slumped limp-limbed into a gaping void.

Hindrigan, with an exaggerated smile, passed the now seated audience, making his way to a puppet theater shaped like a headless skinned human torso. "Ladies and gentlemen: Hindrigan proudly presents another gut wrenching drama..." He stopped and seemed to be searching the deck for a title. "You've seen the *Wounded Clergyman*, you've seen the *Wounded President*. Now witness before your eyes: *The Wounded Musician!*" He ducked behind the torso puppet theater.

"Screw you, Hindy!" A stray outburst from the salty crowd punctured the grandiloquent opening. "Ya know it's just the same old show," shouted another.

Hindrigan's head emerged above the severed neck of the torso theater so that it appeared to be his own body. A plush red curtain covering the abdomen parted.

Mark and Pondra gasped. Inside on the puppet stage were what looked to be actual organs attached to strings. They began to come to life, pulled into motion by Hindrigan.

The intestines were trying to ambush the liver. The liver allied itself with the stomach and fought off the shimmying intestines. A heart swayed above them like a pendulum, getting knocked from side to side in the struggle.

The crowd began to ripple with attention, captivated by the oozing action before them.

Two kidneys sadistically danced a jig on a pancreas. A spleen asserted itself impudently from behind the stomach and spurred on the agitation of all the organs like a rooting cheerleader. Under the ingenious direction of Hindrigan the small and large intestines coiled around each other like fighting snakes and a full bladder burst, showering the aroused audience with stale urine.

A profusely drooling man and woman, seized by a churning eroticism, turned their slippery fondlings into newfound energy and burst forth from their flimsy chairs, charging toward the theater.

"Wait!" screamed Hindrigan, "you have to see it all!"

"No, we don't," the woman said as she threw herself before the torso, pulling the intestines from the stage, snapping their intricate strings. Her teeth sunk deeply into the gushing membranes. The man turned to the erupting crowd. "Let's hear it for Hindrigan!"

Revived from their lethargy, the crowd rose up, cheering "Great show! You've done it again!"

Mark looked to Pondra. It was as if his vanished wound had been transplanted into Hindrigal's theater and become the catalyst for the villagers' frenzy, now reawakened from cantankerous apathy and in a chaotic cyclone around Hindrigal.

A group of five hoisted Hindrigal from behind his theater and onto their shoulders. His puppet organs slumped to the stage floor before being snatched by the fans who fought over them with unharnessed rage.

"Why don't you ever let me finish?" protested Hindrigal over the incessant chanting of "great show!" The group lowered his body in front of the lustful couple who began the rampage.

"Hindy," the man began. "Your show meant so much to me. I just want to say, congratulations!" With his final word the man took a direct punch at Hindrigal's jaw.

Hindrigal recoiled and fell to the deck. The others started to kick him ferociously.

Inside the cabin, Mark and Pondra watched in horror as Hindrigal bore the brunt of some imploding union of praise and hate. Pondra made a move toward the door but Mark restrained her. "We can't fight them. There are too many."

Lifted to his feet, Hindrigal was struck from all sides. He gave up blocking the hits and instead gave way to them, welcomed them, bowing in appreciation. A slam in the face crumpled his false nose.

"Let's string him up!" The voices clamored in unison as if everyone knew what would happen next.

Mark shuddered to realize that this uncontained outburst, this apparent chaos, was possibly some recycled rite. Feet pounded the stairs to the roof of the cabin as Hindrigal's limp body was carried up to a rope that hung from the fishing crane above.

It was all Mark could do to hold Pondra back as she was livid, trying to make the door. "They shouldn't beat him up like that! We've got to do something!" Her strength was overwhelming. She pried herself loose from his grasp and nearly caught the door handle before Mark shoved a steamer trunk against the door to block her exit.

"Pondra, calm down. We need some kind of weapon." Mark searched the chamber with its puppets and props for something dangerous.

On the roof, Hindrigal's feet were tied to the frayed rope and he was thrown overboard, suspended upside down from the crane over the swamp water below. The crowd cheered and hooted, throwing whatever they could find at the hapless Hindrigal before climbing off the boat and bounding down the path back to the village, dancing and slapping each other on the back, totally rejuvenated.

Mark found a knife among the bottles of preserved entrails, though by that time the last villager had left. Mark and Pondra ran out of the cabin and up to the crane.

“I hope he’s still alive,” Pondra said, glaring at Mark for not coming to Hindrigal’s aid sooner.

With the knife, Mark pried loose a wooden stair railing and ran with it to Pondra. “Let’s try to get him swinging to where we can reach him.”

With both holding the long railing pole, they gently pushed on Hindrigal’s body until he began to swing. Pondra ran to the roof’s edge and reached for Hindrigal’s limp arms as he swung toward her. He was just beyond her reach. Mark gave Hindrigal a final shove with the pole, then ran to help Pondra pull him aboard upon rebound. Mark felt Hindrigal’s hands close around his wrist as they pulled him in. Though barely conscious, Hindrigal was alive.

Mark cut the fishing rope with the knife and Hindrigal fell in a heap with his tassels, sequins and broken feathers.

“Are they always so bad to you?” asked Pondra.

Hindrigal’s eyes slowly opened under smeared mascara. “Yeah, but you see how pleased they were?” His voice was hoarse as a smile crossed his battered face. “They really liked this show, couldn’t even wait till it was over to congratulate me.”

“What are you talking about?” Mark challenged. “They nearly killed you.”

“They reacted,” exclaimed Hindrigal, trying to sit upright. Mark assisted and pulled him so he could rest against the mast. Hindrigal seemed reanimated, gesturing with his arms. “How many puppeteers could do that? I mean, I tried other kinds of shows with the usual puppets but now I give them what they want. And they like it, don’t they? Makes their miserable lives a little easier.”

“Don’t you ever want to leave?” asked Mark, checking Hindrigal for broken bones. “What kind of life is this?”

Hindrigal struggled to his feet, using the mast to steady himself. With an air of great dignity he straightened his outfit and looked off into the horizon. “Someday,” he began, “the tide will come back in and I’ll take this boat to freedom, away from the village.”

Pondra shook her head. “This boat is rotten and stuck in the mud. There’s no way...”

“Someday,” Hindrigal interrupted, his head uplifted, “this great vessel and I will journey to an island paradise.”

“Hindrigal,” Mark broke in. “Let’s get out of here. Pondra’s right, the boat isn’t going anywhere. If the tide came in, you’d be drowning.”

Hindrigal glared at him. “You have no faith.”

Mark led Hindrigal downstairs to the main deck. “Come on. You’re going with us.”

Hindrigal braced his bruised body against the cabin door. “It’s my art. It’s my reason for living. You can’t take it away from me.”

“How long have you been here?” asked Pondra.

Hindrigal paused, his bowed head forward, eyes scanning the rotting wood planks of the deck. “Don’t remember. Something like ten years since the drought.”

“You were a fisherman then?”

“Well, yeah. I always wanted to be a puppeteer, but you know — you do what you can to get by. I did put on shows for the guys on deck to pass time while heading out to sea. I used to say all fishermen are puppeteers when they have a catch on the line. It’s all about pulling strings.”

“Were you with passengers when you ran aground?” Mark inquired.

“No. I went on a solo to uncharted waters. I’d heard about some really big fish — a new species. No one had caught one cause they were fierce fighters. I wanted to check it out. Well, I got stuck here during the night. But next morning, there they were, the Chums, all over my boat. That was a day of trouble all right. They hate outsiders. Of course they’re really people, not fish, but you see how they dress.”

“We know a way out,” said Pondra, checking the swamp below for villagers.

“But you don’t get it.” Hindrigal shook his head. “I finally have an audience that thinks I’m a great puppeteer. The whole town comes to my shows. They depend on me.”

“Look,” Mark approached Hindrigal and clutched his shoulders. “I’m a musician without an audience. At least you know your shows have an effect on people. That’s an important thing but you can get a better crowd than the Chums.”

Pondra broke in. “It’s getting dark. Let’s hurry.”

Hindrigal and Mark held a long frozen gaze, then Mark spoke up. “You can take off that false nose now. You’re not performing anymore.” Mark handed Hindrigal a torn cloth from the deck, “...and all that make up. Get ready for a new life.”

Mark was not prepared for what he saw. Hindrigal dragged the cloth across his face, blotting up the smeared grease paint. Then the crushed false nose was lifted.

“What’s wrong?” Pondra asked the stunned Mark who stood and backed away from Hindrigal. “You recognize him?”

“It’s Hal. Hal Dragin. He’s the guy who stabbed me.”

Hindrigal stared back, blankly puzzled before suddenly shrugging his shoulders. “It’s getting dark. We better go,” he said, forcing a cavalier smile.

Mark bolted toward Hindrigal and clutched his neck, knocking him over. They fell to the deck, and Mark’s vengeance-fueled attack reignited the stabbing pain from his lower gut.

Pondra quickly pried Mark's choking hands loose from the puppeteer's neck. "Mark. Stop it! You're as bad as the Chums." Hindragal made no attempt to defend himself, only gazed back wide-eyed at Mark's ferocity.

Disgusted, Mark rolled off Hindragal, and could only crawl away to a nearby railing. "I can't believe he fooled me."

With great effort, Mark pulled up his now aching frame, using the railing as support. Gazing into the muddy water below, the ludicrous nature of this predicament hit full force. "This whole thing was a trick. We're not taking that guy," he yelled back at Pondra. Yet, like the murky swirls around the boat, things were supremely confused and unclear.

Pondra helped the battered Hindragal stand. "Come on you guys. Stop the fighting. There's been enough of that today."

Bracing himself next to Mark on the starboard railing, Hindragal spoke softly. "It's the truth, not a trick. I don't know who you think I am."

"You're that damn conductor who tried to kill me."

Hindragal shook his head. "You're mistaken my friend."

Pondra approached and placed her hands on both of their backs. "Whatever happened before doesn't matter now. We're leaving it all behind, okay?"

A choice between pain and healing pulled Mark away from his sense of betrayal. The gut pain could clearly recede if he thought about Pondra, and would accentuate when revenge took hold. And what would revenge amount to? Hasn't Hindragal already been through the wringer? Mark decided to release his anger and follow Pondra's guidance.

Once down the ladder and muddy slope, Mark and Pondra positioned themselves to either side of Hindragal. Pondra spoke reassuringly into Hindragal's ear, "It's cold water, but you won't sink. It isn't that deep."

Into the morass, they waded to the overgrown tunnel entrance. Just before entering, Hindragal stopped and turned back, giving a last look up through the reeds to the old fishing boat, which let out a low creaking moan that reverberated into the tunnel before them.

"It wants me back." Hindragal muttered in a deep, hoarse voice. "It's calling for me."

"Hey Hal, ah...Hindragal." Mark approached. "Remember, you're done with this stuff."

Pondra led Hindragal solemnly into the passage. Alone, Mark listened outside a moment more to the wail of rotting wood. It was certainly uncanny, but perhaps the boat wasn't accustomed to being uninhabited, that perhaps Hindragal's weight had somehow balanced the timbers and now with him gone, the wood was contracting. The

crying vessel awoke Mark's own loneliness. He felt adrift, a castaway. And wearing only the soaked hospital gown, he trembled at the threshold, suddenly feeling sorry for Hindrigal and guilty for destroying another man's faith and purpose.

He turned and entered the darkness, hearing the continuing echo of the creaking boat along with sloshing water off the concrete enclosure.

"Pondra!" His call echoed down the tunnel, multiplying as it reflected through the many openings. No reply returned. After walking further and faster, he suddenly stopped until the water stilled around him.

"Pondra...Hindrigal!" It seemed minutes before he no longer heard the vestige of his own voice. Then, from an uncertain distant direction came splashing footsteps.

"Speak up, Pondra. Say something, Hindrigal!" — Still no voices, only footsteps.

Mark saw nothing around him. He tried to find the swamp entrance again, but saw no light anywhere. Had he accidentally entered an offshoot tunnel by mistake? He thought again of Hindrigal's eyes under the crumpled false nose and face paint. He had seen that look before, that look of hurt and righteous indignation. Mark wondered; How could it be that in ten years, Hindrigal had never seen the tunnel? And where did Hindrigal acquire the guts for his puppets?

The splashing got louder. Mark shivered. He thought it might be more than two approaching. But it was difficult to discern since the echo enriched the sound. Instead of speaking out again, he tried for silence, taking shallow breaths and not walking.

The footsteps stopped. Mark held his breath, listening to the last lapping of waves off the hard walls. Then everything grew unbearably quiet. Mark could feel presences near him, two or possibly more bodies just inches away.

"Pondra!" Mark screamed as he felt hands upon him from all sides, gripping his arms and shoulders. Without speaking they held him rigid, immobile. Then the distinct intrusion of a needle stung his left arm and soon his muscles involuntarily succumbed to a resigned lethargy.

He vaguely experienced being carried through the tunnel on his back, hearing the recurrent sloshing of fluids. Once again there was the irregular pain in his gut. Then, like a distant radio signal from another land, voices were finally heard.

"He's going to feel very complex when he revives," said an elderly woman's voice.

“I’m glad you phoned me,” answered a man with a deep resonant tone. “Did you know he was a client of mine?”

“Is that so,” replied the woman with pleasant surprise. “He seemed to be in a much too complex situation. I mean, to get stabbed on the street. Isn’t it true that complicated lives are more dangerous?”

“Both to mind and body. You’ve learned your lessons well. Now we must help all complex people to see the beauty and truth in simplicity — then we can ease the suffering of this world.”

Mark used all the effort he could muster to raise his eyelids. The voice he heard seemed very familiar. Hogan’s smiling, beneficent face radiated toward him. “Mark, Mr. Link. You’re awake now. Good. You know what complications can arise in sleep.”

Perplexed, Mark strained to get a better view of his whereabouts. Yes, it was Hogan Buttrick, the Simplifier and seated next to him, a nurse. Realizing he was back in a hospital and jolted suddenly by fear, he sat up and was immediately hit by the pain in his gut. He fell back to his pillow. “Where’s Hindrigal?”

Hogan looked bewildered. “You’re succumbing to complexity Mark.”

“They were right,” Mark ranted on. “The doctors will try anything to get you back.”

“Please, Mr. Link,” the nurse said as she stood to restrain Mark. “You’ve just had a major operation. You need to relax.”

Mark felt tight bandages around his lower body and an IV tube running into his left arm. He caught his breath. “Where’s my doctor? I’ve got to see my doctor.”

The nurse responded. “Dr. Mink had to fly out after the operation, an emergency call.”

“To find more patients?” Mark responded. “...couldn’t he just use the binoculars?”

“What?” The nurse seemed bewildered.

Hogan turned toward her. “Mark is suffering from acute complexity. Don’t fall into the trap with him.”

“A trap,” Mark laughed frantically, “Now you’re saying something.”

Hogan leaned-in and whispered to Mark in a slow monotone. “Remember the rectangle. When you just begin the simplification process, it’s easy to turn the rectangle into a screen. On the screen all manner of complexity will appear and it’s easy to get caught up in it. But the true golden rectangle is not a screen, it’s a form, pure and simple. It’s based on an eternal mathematical ratio. Sometimes we need a visual aid in times like this. So I brought just for you...”

Hogan pulled out a golden rectangular box and tilted it up, revealing a opening on the bottom and a lighted display inside. “This box was built according to the golden ratio.

It's called a *Simplivisor*. When you wear it on your head, it temporarily removes you from external complexity. And inside, to fill the screen you're so tempted to project on, we have an elegant spiral. The spiral is based on the same number-ratio as the rectangle and it turns slowly, drawing you in. An hour or so a day with this device and within a month, you'll be effectively simplified and ready for the next stage."

Mark shook his head. "What I really need is your help to find the girl who was in that last crash. Her name is Pondra. She may be here in the hospital. We were both caught together, so she's probably here. Can you look for her?"

Buttrick frowned. "Don't get involved in other people's problems. It will only make your life complex."

Mark swung his legs off the bed and attempted to stand. The stomach pain threw him off balance and he fell into the old nurse's arms.

"Please Mr. Link," The nurse pushed him back onto the pillows. "You must settle down."

"Mark." Buttrick raised his voice uncharacteristically. "I'm leaving the *Simplivisor* here for you to use when you're more in control of yourself. I'll try to reach Dr. Mink and ask him about Pondra."

"No. I've got to find her." As Mark protested, he felt a crushing drowsiness overcome him. The nurse was injecting a fluid into his IV tube.

Hogan bent forward and spoke softly into Mark's ear. "The golden rectangle will forgive you. We all are prone to projection. It's our human weakness. If only we were single-celled animals like the paramecium. They are the highest form. Humans like to think of themselves as greater because they are the most complex but in fact, it is the reverse. Our complex man-made world is an obvious sign of pathetic mutation. We should all aspire to become protozoans. Protozoa don't project, they simply are.

The days that followed were cloaked in a timeless blur. Young student interns came to view Mark at odd hours to prod his wound, waking and depriving him of dreams. Never completely asleep or awake, he held the middle ground of limbo. Fluids of sundry colors ran through the IV tube. At long last, on some stray morning, the tube was removed and Mark made his first hobbling attempt to walk.

Willy, the intern for the day, assisted Mark toward the toilet room.

“You’re doing fine,” Willy remarked. “You’re healing nicely.”

“Where’s my nurse?” asked Mark feebly.

“Oh Edith. She seemed to be going senile. Her duties became too much and we sent her to a nursing home. The hospital administration changed this week. We’re bringing in a lot a new people with fresh ideas.”

“When I finish here,” said Mark in a low voice, “can we go out of the room a little?”

“Oh sure, if you feel strong enough,” said Willy with practiced concern. “Shouldn’t rush things though.”

Sitting on the toilet, Mark wondered if Edith was truly going senile. Perhaps she was accomplishing her simplified state. Above on the wall was a cloth towel dispenser, reminding Mark of the events outside the hospital.

From the bathroom Willy helped Mark down a white hall to the nurse’s station. Several doctors there were having a jovial conversation punctuated by explosive laughs. They were all noticeably young, in their early twenties and, like fashion models, immaculately groomed. Under their spotless white suits, Mark could detect gold necklaces and bracelets.

“Please,” said Mark. “I need to know if there is a certain patient here.”

“Who’s your doctor?” asked one of them with an annoyed sideward glance.

Mark paused. “Mink I think.”

“Ah, Karl Mink. That old codger. Just kidding. And your name?”

“Mark Link.”

A doctor nearest the computer typed in the name. Some text appeared. “Yes, he’s still away but he did send instructions for you. You’re to be sent to a kind of halfway house for monitoring. He says that there’s a man, Hogan Buttrick, who is setting up your new room for you.”

“No, listen. I need to know if there’s a young girl named Pondra being treated for a head injury here.” Mark felt his pulse quicken unsteadily as the doctor scanned the computer screen.

“Let’s see; Rhonda, Wondra— no Pondra. What’s her last name?”

Mark recoiled. “She was in a car crash two nights before I was stabbed. She hit her head.”

“What’s her last name? Without it we have no hope of…”

“Let’s go back Willy,” Mark pulled away from the desk, assisted by Willy who grinned back at the doctors.

An immense sadness seized Mark. Pondra had given him so much strength and hope. He peered into open rooms desperately searching, only to see miserable strangers his age

or older. He thought of Pondra's light red hair, her smile, her determination and faith. "She must be alive," Mark mumbled.

Willy tried to calm him. "Hey, if it was a mild injury, she's probably home by now."

Mark stopped and turned toward Willy. "Her parents died."

Willy looked at the floor and shook his head. "That's tough."

To Mark, Willy just seemed to be going through the motions of empathy, only feigning concern. Willy and the medical staff seemed members of a private club, laughing at Mark behind his back.

From the other end of the hall rolled a fleet of gurneys – moans wailing out like sirens. A green-gowned man ahead of the pack motioned to Willy. "Clear a way. We need room. Massive pile up on the interstate."

Mark was pulled back into a drinking fountain alcove as the parade of suffering filed past. Though Mark had seen so many wounds before, this time he turned away and nearly heaved into the fountain basin.

Willy clutched Mark's shoulder. "Better get back in bed. Too much traffic out here."

The *Simplivisor* sat on the night stand. Returning to his inclined bed, Mark studied the rectangular box. Outside the open doorway, a tangle of screams and groans from the bodies in the hall continued without respite, accompanied by shouts of the young doctors who seemed unable to find enough facilities to accommodate the new arrivals. Willy left to assist.

Mark picked up the device. It was certainly lightweight enough. "Probably those new polymer plastics," thought Mark as he examined the light display inside. Finding an inner switch, he lightly pressed it. Quietly, through enclosed speakers, Hogan's voice was whispering. Mark was unable to hear the voice over the clamor in the hall so he placed his head in the box.

Immediately the screen before him came to life with a gently curving spiral slowly moving inward. Mark could now make out Hogan's words: "repeat after me, repeat after me."

Mark fell into a trance.

Slowly the *Simplivisor* lifted up. The spiral on the inside screen was replaced by a bright white room – the plane of whiteness only broken by a simple bed, chair and chest of

drawers. Mark was surprised to find that he was now standing, not aware of having left his hospital bed.

Behind him, Hogan Buttrick held up the *Simplivisor*, removing it completely from Mark's head. "Here's your recovery room. The hospital became too crowded. They needed your room and asked me to move you out early. I think you'll find this room more conducive to healing."

"Hogan," Mark began. "How did I get here? You know I can't afford this, in my situation..."

"Sssh. Think nothing of it." Buttrick walked to Mark's side. "Let's just say I need a good testimonial. I'm trying out a new arrangement with the hospital. Your successful recovery will benefit us both."

Mark was now seeing more details in the room. On the neatly made up bed lay a white violin with its equally white bow beside it.

Hogan noticed Mark's attention. "Your violin was found and brought to the hospital. I hope you don't mind what I did to it. It's just a reminder that things are different now. Enough of those complicated and difficult pieces. Just play one note. Hold it as long as you can. I'll leave it to you to pick the note."

A sudden determination gripped Mark as he approached the bed. He thought about Tamula. Like a land mine planted in a field of notes, the B flat had killed him so many times. He wondered what her mood was the moment she drew the farewell note. It had obviously taken some time, the stem of the quarter head downward, the accidental carefully drawn. It wasn't scribbled or impulsive but had the serious intention of a textbook example. "Drawn and quartered," thought Mark with a slight smile at the pun.

Mark reached for the violin, the soreness of his wound mirroring the pain of his recollections. Suddenly it appeared that the wound in his gut was that note, and his avoidance of that pitch made manifest inside his bandaged abdomen. After a long breath he raised his bow.

Hogan Buttrick listened intently as a tentative B flat began; soft, faltering, without vibrato, then strengthening into an intense solid tone. "Keep it going, Mark."

Still facing the bed, not looking back at Hogan who slowly slipped from the room, Mark's attention was inward on Tamula. It was only by keeping the tone constant that he could hush his physical pain—they canceled each other out. He moved the bow in the opposite direction, careful not to break the sound. For Hogan, music was only a tool for simplification, not a trigger for complex feelings. A wave of guilt engulfed him, but he dared not stop his playing — trying instead to hear only a pitch, a specific frequency of

moving air and nothing more. But his concentration waned and a memory assembled, the B flat tugging in details.

It was of Tamula before they married— an outdoor concert they attended together. Sitting on white wooden chairs before a festooned bandshell, they watched an orchestra begin a slow, solemn piece — Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. Mark had his arm around Tamula, who through surrendering to the music also surrendered to Mark’s calculated casualness. In only a month’s time, Mark had swept Tamula into an audio whirlwind, and she rode the currents of counterpoint and crescendo with a grace and ease new to him. All former romances were awkward and crude in comparison. She had refused to speak of her past, only saying that something horrible had recently happened, something too difficult to speak of, and now she was tired of talking; she preferred to listen. So Mark gave her much to listen to, a relentless serenade. And this day was so ripe and plentiful; a gentle breeze slightly stirred the sheet music on the stands, adding an undercurrent of suspense and suppressed passion to the surrounding pastel bunting.

It was toward the first musical climax that this perfect picture fell loose from its frame — one cough and then another, a chair collapsing, a laughing drunk passing. Mark began to sweat. Tamula was still enraptured by the sound, but Mark had to resist his temptation to turn to the distractions. After all, he knew the piece very well, and these unwanted sounds were debasing it. More people began talking, giggling and clanking glasses, amplified by Mark’s attention. The musicians continued – methodically resolute. Perhaps the players only heard the score and were outside of time, outside of the park and its visitors. Mark, however, could not even hear the subtle phrasings anymore, his concentration being on the next laugh, the next clatter. At the peak of the music Mark stood and turned around to the crowd, shocking Tamula from her reverie.

“Be quiet!” Mark shouted to the disrupters. “You’re ruining the music!”

Tamula tugged on his arm and spoke under her breath, “Sit down, you’re ruining the music.”

Mark was insistent. “Did you hear me? This is a great and profound piece. Shut up and listen!”

The conductor at the bandshell turned and gave Mark a stern frown while his baton continued its metronomic course.

Tamula stood and, without speaking, walked away, leaving Mark alone facing the bemused crowd.

Back in the recovery room, Mark pressed his bow harder and the B flat was given a harsh edge. Why had he remembered his first embarrassing moment in his courtship

with Tamula? He resisted changing B flat to another pitch, one unadorned with such anxiety. But, willfully, he was committed to purifying this note, returning music to pristine form.

He began to hear scuffling and grumbling behind him — eruptive, unruly sounds. Then voices called out:

“Hey, snappy tune!” said one.

“Could you play something a little more lively?” yelled another.

“Lively, ha — I like that. Maybe he’s still tuning up.”

“No way. He just can’t play.”

The insults propagated like the infectious beeping of auto horns at an intersection. Mark’s violin could not drown them out.

Another screamed, “Hey, if you can’t fuckin’ play, get off the stage!”

Absolutely perplexed by the voices and unable to continue playing, he turned angrily around. “Shut up, you’re ruining the music! I can’t hear myself anymore!”

To Mark’s astonishment, he realized this empty white room was actually a stage set and he had been performing for some kind of audience, seated in the dark below. Squinting through the spotlights, he saw the crowd was composed of smashed and bloodied people — and they continued staggering in, filling the theater seats.

“Hogan,” Mark yelled into the dark auditorium. “What’s happening here?”

“That’s as funny as my busted collarbone!” said a thin man with a narrow, rat-like face and twisted neck.

“That’s almost as good as my dislocated hip!” sarcastically chuckled a large woman on crutches in the aisle.

A riot of laughter arose. Mark seemed to be the butt of a shared joke. Every move and facial inflection triggered compulsive chortling. The smelling, pale bodies of the audience accented their gaping wounds.

In a startled flash, Mark recognized them. The faces he had seen through veils of shattered auto glass—those not healed by his playing—were now reborn as mocking grotesque caricatures. Mark had watched their last moments, striving with strong melodic lines to pull them away from death. But for these, the lines could not hold and they slid into oblivion. “You’re all dead!” Mark screamed. “You died in car crashes. I watched you die.”

“Hey, he’s fuckin’ great, huh,” cackled a young woman with blood-matted hair and a shredded nose. “Tell us the one about my concussion!”

“No, who cares,” intruded a large bearded man. “Tell us about my broken ribs and punctured lung. That’s a show stopper!”

“Need props?” belched another. “Here.” The emaciated man tore his shirt apart, reached into his gashed-open frame and pulled forth his stomach. “I’d give anything to see a good show.” He hurled his oozing organ with a spring-like motion, hitting Mark’s bandaged wound.

Clutching himself, Mark bent over in pain. As if he’d given a signal, other bloody organs came flying, splattering on Mark and the surrounding white walls. Holding out his violin as a shield, Mark caught a glint of something attached to the wrist of a person tossing a liver. And another’s hand, after pitching a heart, was torn loose of the arm and seemingly floated in the air. It was then Mark’s eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he could see thin strings leading up from the chaotic crowd and their appendages. He was being jeered by an audience of corpse puppets.

Mark tried to make out where the strings converged. On a catwalk over the crowd and above the lighting grid, was a large wooden cross to which all the strings were attached. It was fastened through chains and pulleys to the ceiling. A brightly colored figure was frenetically moving behind the cross, pulling on one set of strings, then another.

“Hindrigan!” Mark screamed angrily as a kidney hit him in the eye. “I saved you. Why are you doing this to me?”

The corpse puppets rose to their feet in applause.

Looking swiftly around the stage, Mark spied a wall ladder in the wings, darted for it and started to climb, his stomach pain spurring him to greater heights.

Hindrigan dropped his cross and the corpses slumped, abruptly, back into their seats, putrid fumes wafting from their fallen limbs.

Consumed in rage, Mark climbed onto the catwalk. Hindrigan was already up another ladder and running through a doorway. Determined to catch Hindrigan, Mark lurched forward along the narrow metal walk, his gut wrenching with every step.

Through the door he caught a fleeting glimpse of Hindrigan’s cloak disappearing around a pile of boxes in a room resembling a backstage storeroom. Though Mark felt he was catching up, after rounding each corner he saw yet another door open out for Hindrigan whose fleeting form teased and beckoned. Mark was so blurred with hate he lost track of where he ran. The passages grew ever more dusty and small, cluttered with packages of unknown contents, arranged in piles or on rusting metal shelves.

Then there was light ahead. Hindrigan bolted for it but slid on an oily concrete floor and nearly fell. Now only a few feet away, Mark leapt forward and grabbed Hindrigan’s shoulders. They plunged through an opening and into glaring sunlight of a dirt lot as Mark slammed Hindrigan to the ground.

“You betrayed me!” shouted Mark, whose fist struck Hindrigal’s nose, knocking off the disguise. Underneath, the face of the street conductor formed a smug smile. Mark’s fists, in a frenzy of anger, repeatedly beat down on Hindrigal, who did not put up a fight but let the punches solidly connect as if welcoming them.

Under the blows, Hindrigal became as limp as one of his puppets—his body giving way, offering no resistance. As Mark raised his hands to strike, a mesh of strings enlaced his arms. Mark thrashed and rolled, attempting to untangle himself, only to be further caught in a jumbled web, his efforts a flailing constriction. Hindrigal’s pummeled human form was now completely a mass of tangled twine.

“You can’t escape this time!,” roared Mark, as wrestled and pulled on the lines, futilely attempting to break them and only succeeding in making a puppet of himself: One arm lashing out pulled the other in. One leg kicking sent the other one contracting. Every force exerted was returned.

Mark collapsed, exhausted, to a ground blackened and smelling of spent engine oil. It was only then he saw the auto wrecks piled high around him. A distant violin played a tune he vaguely recognized. He closed his eyes against the bright sun and just listened—past the crumpled cars of the apparent wrecking yard— to that lilting solo. As Mark relaxed, the lines around him relaxed as well until a hand could be slowly raised, a knee bent, an arm outstretched. Carefully and patiently, using the distant music as a key, Mark was able to untangle himself from the slack strands.

Once completely free, he slowly stood. At his feet Hindrigal, his bodily form undone, was nothing more than a limp pile of chaotic string. Behind him, the worn brick wall of the theater sat on the upper edge of a hill, the theater’s entrance probably being down-slope a block away. But the area also seemed industrial, as he stood in an auto wrecking yard. The violin solo continued and Mark slowly walked past the hulks of rusting vehicles—his gut pain subdued, permitting him to move full stride toward the source of the sound.

The sun glinted off a splintered car window—one, then another. The corridors of stacked cars appeared endless and lifeless in the still afternoon—no sound of birds or traffic. The only sign of life was the muffled tune coming from somewhere up ahead.

Around a bend, he saw a familiar blue station wagon sitting on the ground—alone, not stacked, a new arrival. The music was coming from inside. The interior of the wagon was clouded, obscuring his view as Mark pressed his face to the side glass. Still, he recognized her in the back seat, playing a violin. A forceful yank on the door handle and fog flowed out from within, instantly evaporating in the dry air as the music stopped.

Then, Pondra exited the car, resplendent in the party dress she wore the night of the crash. She radiated health and vigor and smiled the broadest smile he had ever seen.

“Bet you didn’t know I play the violin too,” she said. “That’s why your music meant so much to me.”

“I recognized the tune. That Punch and Judy show...”

“Here, you play it.” Pondra handed the instrument to Mark.

The melody came easily. Mark quickened the tempo as Pondra began to dance, leading him away from the car.

In the back of his mind, Hogan Buttrick was protesting. Mark had been Hogan’s test case but now everything was lost. Mark imagined Hogan penniless, flustered and furious—assailing the devils of complication, preaching on a downtown street with an ironing board for a desk and being ignored by the passing multitudes.

As Mark and Pondra approached a huge exit gate of golden curlicues, more elaborate than any wrecking yard could afford, Mark realized that what he had thought was the smell of spilt oil was actually of rubbing alcohol. Before him Pondra—crossing the threshold of the gate—spun beneath its arch and was again concealed by fog. Mark stopped his playing and stood staring through the embellished gateway. It was enough to have seen her, thought Mark. Like a profound dream that, once awoken from, still radiates long into one’s life—Mark, lying tucked under the white hospital sheets, felt rescued and feverishly alive.