

ONE

Early one November morning, a week after he received treatment in County Hospital for a concussion he'd suffered during a fall down a flight of stairs, heavy rain pelted the window next to Arthur Goodbody's bed. He dreamed about a crowd of men and women dressed in togas and sandals, citizens of ancient Rome, gathered in an assembly hall, hands joined, singing wordless syllables in a unison chorus. A man dressed in a multi-colored robe darted through the hall and charged out a side door onto a sandy beach in hot pursuit of a sticklike figure with spinning arms and fire-hungry eyes. The chorus, now invisible, indifferent to the nearby drama, went on singing. The man in the colored robe, which gleamed in the sunlight, chased the stick-figure from his hiding place in a grove of palm trees into a roiling sea. The man smoothed his robe and walked down the beach, returning to thoughts he'd left unfinished, locating himself at a point of stillness. The chorus went on singing.

Arthur woke up, moaned, and swung his feet over the edge of the bed to the floor. The window frame quivered under the lash of the rain, while a current of steam hissed and snapped in the radiator pipes. "Oh my," Arthur groaned as he pulled back the shade from the window and looked at the street three stories below. Even the neon light on Caraway's Package Store had gone out. A peal of thunder roared and growled, and in a shimmer of lightning, he saw a face staring at him from the other side of the window with eye-lights that flamed like the coals in a furnace; a pale hand tapped the glass. Arthur let the shade go and lay back down to think of friends he'd left a few hours before at his favorite bar: Rita Courageous and Maxine and Waldo Wentworth Gunderson and others, whose names he repeated many times so that the syllables shot like sparks from the well of his memory to the dome of an imaginary sky where they fixed themselves like stars in opposition to the dark visions that the rain and the northeast wind suggested to him.

"Oh, dear," Arthur said and scratched his forehead. The storm soon let up, though, and he was back asleep.

Later in the morning, a few puddles in the gutters of eastern Sagadac was all that remained of the storm. Arthur sat in a half-filled bus as it rattled along Willoughby Avenue on his way to visit one of his late wife Laura's favorite aunts. He noticed that the passenger next to him, a slender man in a salt and pepper overcoat, was reading the Botolph Messenger, a paper he'd never heard of. Arthur glanced at the headlines: the Botolph Phoenix had won another hockey game, three people died in a fire on Clancy St., a test-tube in a genetic laboratory had exploded, causing still another fire, and a researcher had found a diary in an attic trunk written by the wife of one of Sagadac's seventeenth century governors. *How the past hangs on*, he mused as the bus chugged by a shimmering new hotel that had elbowed its way to a place of prominence between two rows of commercial buildings. *Some folks will always be curious about beginnings, such as bygone times in old Sagadac, when people lived in small, intolerant communities, that held up ideals such as neighborliness and good behavior.*

In the midst of these ruminations, Arthur felt a slight pressure on his arm; he turned to see that the passenger next to him had folded his newspaper in half and now held it out for his inspection. "I'm done with it," the man said.

As he was about to decline the offer, Arthur saw a familiar face staring up at him from the black and gray dots of the third page: Waldo Gunderson had just won a million dollars in the Sagadac Sweepstakes. "Yes, I know him," Arthur said. "He'll find a use for the money. Such a good-hearted man." The lips in the photograph suddenly seemed to move, and Gunderson's left eye winked at him, as if to show that he appreciated hearing a compliment.

Then, with a shiver of alarm, Arthur noticed that the eyes of the man sitting next to him glowed like charcoal in a pit and his breath smelled of sulphur. "The same could happen to you," the man said in a voice that rasped like organ pipes in need of repair. "Our days are full of opportunities."

"I'd like to see them," Arthur said with a touch of bitterness that surprised even himself.

He left the bus at the corner of Maple and Willoughby and walked by a block of buildings, doomed relics of the nineteenth century, in the shelter of which, as a boy on one of his first trips to this part of the city, he had once waited out a thunder storm.

A clock in front of a parking garage that enterprise and imagination had transformed into a school of modern dance told him that he still had half an hour until his appointment with Mrs. Binghamton-Davies, whom he hadn't seen since Laura's funeral five years, seven months, two weeks, and six days before. He went into a drug store, found an empty stool at the lunch counter, and ordered a cup of black coffee.

He noted, while he waited, a strong smell of cherry syrup and melted chocolate and cheddar cheese. He reached into his pocket for a notebook and found a crepe paper flower he hadn't seen before along with a calling card that said simply, "Mr. Octavius". Surmising that someone had given them to him the night before as a joke, he handed these items to the waitress to throw away when she brought his coffee and then opened the notebook. After gazing at a cereal rack next to the grill to collect his thoughts, he set down a few memories on the green-tinted page with a ball-point pen, the nibbled end of which seemed to him an unarguable symbol of what he knew to be his spiritual demise.

"Dearest Laura," he began, "you were often superb. We met in front of Dexter and Sons department store on Central Avenue one spring afternoon. You were wearing a plum-colored skirt and a white blouse and sweater with a gold kangaroo pin. Continuing our conversation of the night before, you said that I had talent enough to write for a living. Although I quickly agreed, I said I didn't like the sort of thing people were reading nowadays and wanted to lock horns with sterner, more strenuous material. Oh, what arrogance! You were willing to wait, you said, until I found something that satisfied me. Your family, whose traditions you respected, were genteel, rich, and well-connected; they needed no best-selling author to enhance their status. I told you about my plans to enroll in graduate school and then look for a job in the Foreign Service, and all the time I would write poetry on the side. 'The best of two worlds,' you

said in a lightly mocking tone that made me feel foolish and then we met your brother Ralph for dinner at the Café Alphonse.

“We often talked in the early days of our marriage about achieving things that would last, interesting friends, children, grandchildren, a place on the coast of Maine and another in France. Life would gradually reveal its glories to us, like a flower that unfolds in front of a slow-motion camera. Our sand castle washed away, however, the afternoon Dr. Ezekiel told us you had leukemia. And with your death four and a half months later my will-power began to fizzle away, an inner tube with a slow leak.

“I lost my faith in all certainties. I failed to do many things that I should have done. Much useful service went unperformed.

“I dropped out of graduate school and turned my part-time job at the Botolph Museum into a full-time one, where I still work as a guard in the Roman section. You’ll be interested to know that my health is good and I have no debt. I now live in a smaller apartment than the one we had and have gradually drifted away from the people who gathered around us while you were alive, a movement so imperceptible that I hardly noticed it until the evening I said good-night and good-bye at Bayside Terminal to your college roommate, who was taking the train home to her children and second husband. I was more on my own than I wanted to be.

“For diversion, I listen to your recordings of the music of your forebear Frederick Baxter, musician and business man, who made millions in the railroads after the Civil War and wrote the most original music ever composed in America. I’ve had to replace several scratchy discs – the Toccata for flute and voice, his third symphony, the organ pieces he wrote for the Congregational church in Pinesville. I should tell you besides this that some of my poems, collected into a volume, recently won the Morrell Prize, an academic award, untainted by publicity, that has given me the courage to go on with my work.

“My cat Seneca keeps me company at night and I also have some friends at the Forum, the bar on Lincoln Avenue about which we used to say when we passed that we should stop in one night. That’s about it, except for the fact that I’ve taken to reading the Bible you gave me that belonged to Frederick Baxter and which you once said was the source of his strength. I have no strength myself at all. Others have easy going, while I see monsters at every turn.

“I append one of my poems for your consideration. It concerns my alter ego Denton. (Denton – Danton – Robespierre. Hm-hm. I pause to clear my throat.)

“Yes, Laura, you were superb.”

On the Misuse of Power

In a hospital

For surgery next day

Denton felt a tide

Of doubt within

Subdue the action of

**His midnight sleeping pill.
He likewise wrestled
To the floor
The spell of classic art:
Bernini's grace,
The harmony of Bach,
And sometimes, too
He argued down
The voice of God
And gained
(Along with self-assertion)
A temporary solitude.**

Oh, dear, Arthur said, as he repocketed his notebook and pen and gazed at his reflection in a mirror behind the coffee urn. His thrice-weekly visits to the Forum had left a mark. Only his job at the museum, he thought, kept him from living in a flophouse on public charity, at the tag-end of society. He pulled himself away from the counter and browsed through the paperbacks in a rack by the front door.

Back on the avenue, he looked ahead to tea with Mrs. Binghamton-Davies. Her note hadn't said why she wanted to see him. It was possible she'd read some of his poems, which peeped here and there through the ground like crocuses, and wanted to help him in memory of Laura: a gift of money, a better job, an introduction to an influential publisher, or a chance to travel.

He liked the warm touch of her hand as she met him at the doorway of her apartment – gray of hair, merry of eye, songful in speech – and invited him into her living room, which seemed a place of propriety, comfort, and ease, a remnant of an older sensibility than the one that now prevailed in Botolph. They sat on a white sofa across from a window through which Arthur could look down at the Training Field, in the middle of which, surrounded by chestnut trees, was a curving pool called the Carp Pond. Beyond were some high-rise buildings in a neighborhood he remembered from childhood as tawdry and squalid, a perpetual source of dissatisfaction to his father who regretted that it took him a long time to find a better place for his family. A silver tea set sat on a cart against one of the walls beneath a turn-of-the-century painting, expertly done, in impressionist style, of the very Training Field below him.

Mrs. Binghamton-Davies asked if he were happy at the museum.

"Fairly so," Arthur acknowledged. "A lot of people are worse off than I am."

She showed him a photograph album and turned the glossy leaves – Laura on horseback, Laura in her class play at boarding school, Laura in the Grand Tetons with her parents. "I'm hoping you'll do me a favor." Arthur watched in astonishment as the cover of the teapot opened and closed silently in time with the rhythm of their conversation. Mrs. Binghamton-Davies didn't seem to notice. Nor could she see Laura's face glimmering on the opal pin near her left shoulder

and saying over and over the words, "I hope you're well, I hope you're well." And neither could she know that her lavender-scented cologne reminded him of a Sunday afternoon he and Laura had spent in the lilac grove at the Botanical Gardens on the one April Sunday of the year when the blossoms were at their peak. "I'm available for most any adventure," he offered.

"Did Laura ever tell you about her father's ancestor Steadfast Davies?"

"Once or twice," Arthur said, for he could still remember whole swatches of their conversations. The tea-pot cover winked shut merrily and a puff of steam issued from the spout as he silently wove together his few strands of information about one of the half-dozen names from Sagadac's modest beginnings to have entered modern consciousness: clergyman, naturalist, man of letters, public figure, insufferable nuisance, and dangerous man.

"The point is," Mrs. Binghamton-Davies went on, "I've tried to rewrite a biography of dear old Steadfast that I found among my grandfather's papers. I hadn't thought about it for more than two decades. When I realized that I was stuck and needed advice, I immediately thought of you."

Arthur stifled his disappointment at such a prosaic task. He wondered if the past had a stronger hold on present-day minds than many advanced people supposed. "A talented man, if I'm not mistaken," he said, "someone who used his gifts well but difficult and rigid."

"To be sure," Mrs. Binghamton-Davies agreed in a cool tone. "There was plenty to dislike in him, though I've tried to look at his case sympathetically. He was a strong man. He never wavered or lost sight of his path. He never gave in to the devil." Arthur noticed that Mrs. Binghamton-Davies looked at him archly.

An assertion worth exploring, Arthur thought and then asked in a meek tone. "Do you believe in the devil?"

"Heaven always has its opponents...and its friends, too. Some people today have the same qualities Steadfast did. They rise to the top of their professions and stay there. We shouldn't blame ourselves if we fail to reach their level. Things are difficult for many people. Anyway, will you read the typescript for me and make some notes? I'd like to get it ready for publication. Steadfast was concerned about God's relationship with the human race. Who does he chose to live with him in heaven? Many people nowadays have given up trying to answer such questions. A great mistake."

"Yes, of course," Arthur heard himself murmur. "Election." He wondered if God would have chosen him had he lived in the seventeenth century. At the moment, he felt abandoned.

"I'll be in Spain for the winter. Why don't you take a copy of the ms. along with you now? We can talk about it when I get back." She went to her worktable. "Of course, Steadfast did many other things than think about theology. He was a multi-faceted man. I believe that's the expression nowadays."

Arthur thought with envy of her winter in Spain. As she crossed the room with her typescript, he saw the figures in the painting of the Training Field move at a leisurely pace around the Carp Pond. One turned her parasol. A child in a frilly white dress scampered across the greensward in pursuit of a collie.

Mrs. Binghamton-Davies asked if he had plans to marry again. "Not even close," Arthur confessed.

"If I were you, I wouldn't deprive myself." Arthur savored the air of seclusion she'd created in which she could guard her energy against the deprivations of age. "Not even a girl friend?" Arthur shook his head. "Even so, were I in your place..."

A man in the painting doffed his hat to a woman in a pink dress; a boy skipped through the froth at the edge of the Carp Pond. He could hear a waltz by Johann Strauss coming from the image of the very bandstand he could see out the window. "I may think about that soon," Arthur said as he turned the pages of the manuscript that rested on his knee. "In all honesty, though, I should get one or two things straightened out first, including some research I'm doing for a long poem."

**August lightning creased
The western sky,
A peal of thunder,
Shuddering rain.
He wheeled his chair
Onto the porch
To let the cooling water
Bathe his skin
And smell the changing
Freshness of the breeze.
Piano music he heard
At supper on
A phonograph
Trembled in his memory,
A treble tune
Resounded in the fall
Of raindrops on
His outstretched palm,
As still as dawn, as brief as joy,
Sadder than loss itself.
The lightning winked again
A a rumble in the clouds.
He raised his hands.
Might he, perhaps, grow old
While listening to
The summer rain and
The brave and rugged
Tunes of Beethoven?**

