

MILK?—or LEMON?

But for today's gentled surf, the echoing whaps and occasional grunting whoop of victory from the terraced tennis courts which abutted the cove beach below were the only suggestions of moving life that resounded up the hillside. The marring call of feeding gulls had already much earlier subsided. Sometimes a soundless sunny breeze would rustle dryly the stalky grasses and clumped scrub. The house, of teak and limestone, cantilevered into the pale silver air overlooking the Pacific was high up the rocky hill's slope and mostly hidden from view of the below beach and tennis courts by rough incline and a canopy of landscaped palm trees that had been thoughtfully provided, studded among the maintained live oaks and sycamores, by the quaint resort hotel that spread camouflaged at land's end about the cove miles north of San

Luis Obispo. The noises barely floated through the foliage to the house's westward-facing terraces, not into its' interior, and because of their metronomic rhythms, could be tuned out at any rate much more easily than the occasional scurryings of screeching seagulls. Peter obscured those few earthly and concrete sounds of the beach resort, however muted, obscured them apart from the almost continuous heaven-directed dialogues he conducts inwardly with himself while padding about the various stony aspects of the house and staring into the atmosphere above the Pacific. Often on naturally still and hushed translucent obsidian-hued evenings above the surf he could hear the tingling swaying ripples of melodies from a dance band playing old tunes from out an open-air canopied pavilion near the water at the shadowy-dappled hotel. The moon might glide toward Hawaii, frosting the crests of the sea; and Peter would stare bemusedly at its luminous icy-white diffusions, a wineglass in his hand, listening to the faint music, while detached and adrift, remembering the New York streets

of long ago, the gridded infinity of low-lying lights seen from the hills of Los Angeles, the other coasts of Maine and Cape Cod, of going out dressed for the steamy-baking stony sidewalks of the night, dancing on Saturday midnights before he had stopped appearing in public. Other evenings, absent fog, are as dark as black velvet, a cashmere coverlet of dense dark oblivion into which Peter also would stare, trying to project his thoughts onto its immense unlit screen, at times scribbling a thought onto a scrap of paper, straining sight fading within the glow of a guttering candle. The long goldflecked sunsets and misted dim twilights and black tortoise-y nights pass through infinity in that way. And then eventually cold dawn creeps over the eastern mountains spreading a thin light into the corners facing the pebbly driveway, washing the windows with glow. This morning, earlier, Peter had wandered out—unconcernedly naked, wrapped only in a soft breeze—on the western terrace where the shadowed flagstones were still cool beneath his feet. He

never tired—although varyingly impatient with this turn in his life—of the ocean and often discovered himself standing mesmerized, entranced, by the undulating aspect of its immensity, its motion, its myriad colours, the pulling tides of its ceaseless flow. It moved in interlocked mosaic tesserae continuously, while he remained moored, mired, in one place. The ocean an undulating vast world, the beach teemed with bits of life, while he stood motionless on his rock and watched. When once a week Matinita came to clean, delivering groceries, whether in early or mid-morning or just before noon, she found Peter in a bathrobe invariably staring out at the swaying mass of surging lapis crests. She, anyway, shyly said only “*Buenos dias*” or nothing at all, for she was only to pick up a bit, dust, un-stack the dishwasher, and restock the pantry and refrigerator; and not to disturb the *senor*. If Peter ever stirred from his reveries to acknowledge her he was undisturbed by her at any rate; and she left unobtrusively, sometimes leaving a written note as simple communication

about some small matter. He, hearing from the friend of another client of his agent's, had subleased the house (once photographed when new for *House and Garden*) to be alone, secluded; and, for eight weeks, he had been. It was a gem-like house set amidst rambling outdoor spaces with acres up the cliffside surrounding not-easily-accessible grounds, natural and uncultivated, seclusion being a handily attained attribute. A three-quarter-mile of pebbled drive leading to the turnaround in front the offset garage stemmed out seaward from where the lane began at a sensor beam behind a rickety wire gate set back at the mailbox several yards from the main road, a side track skewing off the west side of the Pacific Coast Highway. Peter Tazenby walked nearly every day, reveling to proclaim as much as he wished in a voice sung to no other listener in the lonesome sunshine, to that mailbox; and back, seldom leaving the path to risk the thistles, for he was often only wearing shorts and flip-flop sandals. Sometimes he need not bother to dress himself at all. And, even had they been

astounded to do so, there was no one about wherever in any embodiment to recognize Peter Tazenby, writer, night owl, previous social flitter and pub crawler, playwright, former bright light of the theatre.

Peter Tazenby's flickering wattage on Broadway, sparked initially by a semi-autobiographical wistful play about growing up, and later the book to a slight musical that, despite a television-name star eking out a run only for three months, had dimmed as the marquee went dark. In the beginning struck by a limelight of congratulatory glow and self-reverential public relations appearances, shuffled and toppled later, as the curtain rang down Peter felt dimmed as well. *Playbills*, such cheery paper and glossy inks holding all the striving names of the eager hopeful, slipped down crumpled among the cracks of the velvety plush theatre seats, tossed away without even carrying its listed accomplishments home from the theatre. After an aborted attempt at a new play, Peter had headed for a more immediate—golden—opportunity: Hollywood, or at least

Venice Beach—which sojourn had some pitifully sustaining but less than breakout results, lapsed options, script revisions on a few independents, narrator’s script for a Disney nature film, less than stellar films that went straight to video, a quirky script that might have been better as a play, one that did receive a Los Angeles film critics’ nomination, and the latest disaster, literally, an over-budgeted three-quel to an action movie that had opened so weakly that it sent Peter’s credit back to the bottom layers of the D-lists. Peter, his hands slapped for having reached into the cookie jar, stepped back, and in an effort at solitude and re-organizing his writing projects, with his agent aflutter on the sidelines, Peter had slunk away to this acquaintance of an acquaintance’s house, just off the main road, though hidden aside in a tangled country. Wandering now among the terraces, while still observing the surf from various angles, he attempts to push into order his thoughts into some coherency of a storyline, or even better the conciseness of a plot, that would eddy itself into

a tidal pool, reflective, contained, yet teeming with life. Nothing satisfactory collected; always it shifted into splashed clumps like strewn seaweed or like the battered sandcastles scattered with the moving surf. Eventually Peter would give in to his mind's wandering, letting the undertow take him noiselessly flailing out into the deep and stifling sea. Morning coffee did not really help, nor did actually sitting down intently at the keyboard where he sat unmoving as a laden anchored barge. If schools of thoughts had come accompanying cabernet evenings they had flitted away into the rock caverns of the morning, where the sunlight pierced only so far into murk. The sun was moving into the dome of the sky just above the distant hazed tops of the Santa Lucias when Peter began his ritual walk to the mailbox. Only the dry thump of disturbed insects accompanied him along the path, a percussion backdrop for the crooning of his march; and the only mail: a notice from PG&E that the electric was being debited from the owner's account, a penny-saver classifieds and an unidentified

picture postcard marked Seattle. Peter looked slack-eyed at them in his hand, tossing them into a straw basket on a table near the door.

For a while vacillating as the patch of sunshine crept toward him, Peter, fruitlessly thinking, had once again been at the keyboard which rested on the wrought iron table under a tremendous canvas umbrella, staring, but not typing. Even the coffee cup sat untouched while Peter, his eyes falling closed, drifted seaward. And why not? Drift? Float? Could Peter no longer marshal his thoughts into a coherent attempt at creative output, or wrestle craft into a tight corner of hardlined subdued orderly pages? What difference did it really make? Other people's dialogue was written, other moving pictures cast, other movies captured on film? Life passed by, without him? Is daydreaming, ultimately, not as useful as anything else, its own weak accomplishment, at all that it approximated yet just still some other reel projecting in an empty theatre—

perhaps in its' fantasy more useful than lots of more tangible memorable other things?

Short while later he was roused from his reverie by the sound of the gate buzzer, which he answered, remembering it was the day for the pool service which occurred twice a week. What minute but blessed event descended from the heavenly blue! When he heard the arrival of the rattle-y pickup truck as it halted noisily near the garage, Peter rose, while pushing aside the keyboard, to look over the low flower wall to the aqua pool that shimmered below. Eventually, the pool boy entered as scheduled, dragging his poles and buckets through the side arbor into the green garden bordering the pool terrace, and arranging his supplies and equipment in the shade of the other arbor, as he turned and with a practiced casualness began methodically, almost deliberately, scintillatingly, to remove his tee shirt. Slightly exotic, he was an Asian pool boy—as Peter believed him too light while spending hours in the sun to be Mexican, or even a Pacific islander, for he was only half-tan

and yet withal good-looking, as all are when they are twenty-two years young.

For weeks now, silently, Peter had been watching the young man clean the pool, slowly and gracefully, raking and skimming and sanitizing, the semi-golden workman with a wet cold towel draped over his head, shining water dripping down over his shoulders and his slim rippled back. He manipulated his chore with a certain studied grace, languid, possibly knowing at which houses he was watched. Peter never said more than “hello” or “nice day”, more often he said nothing and lounged seemingly preoccupied a little way somewhere in the shade. He watched the skimming workman now moving through his chore’s routine, slowly and methodically, rather balletically, gracefully; Peter noting each flex of deltoids and shoulder blades, scrutinizing the splash of sunshine across shoulders and the play of shadows that fell down under the arms and into the waistband of the faded jeans. While he, Peter, affirmed himself tumbling uncontrollably inside his

pants, nodding from one side to the other with a shift of burgeoning weight, yet he did not hoist himself from the indolence of the chaise longue nor did he speak aloud. He did not move another muscle of his own, willed himself to not; to amble toward the pool boy would have entailed an incautious mistake, like touching hot iron. His voice might have disturbed irretrievably the delicate ballet, dissipated the dreamy golden morning into an ordinary dry day filled with ordinary chores.

Soon, his both acknowledged and unacknowledged jobs done, the meticulous pool boy packed up his equipment and left, the pool raked and smoothed, sparkling in the sun and freshened. What dwindle would remain of the day, a long placid yet-to-be unfolding, rippling out from this center splash of noon, crested atop the meridian point. A wedge of sunlight crept by half-inches to undulate slowly up Peter's legs where he lounged. Peter re-imagined, in the laze of a tepid gaze, once more the sinuous fall of shadows from the curving pulling arms down the torso again stroking the absent pool boy, with his

drooping eyes precisely measuring those caressing angularities, until he stumblingly awakens enough to once more contemplate the widening wedge of advancing sunshine and, on the far side of the terrace under the shadow of the umbrella, his unaltered waiting sheaf of blank pages. He wondered if lunch would be worth the effort, or a viable excuse to prolong yet again one more morning of tedious scaling up the treacherous bare cliffwall of time. The rustle of breeze had ceased, leaving a heavy stillness over the house.

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It was in the middle afternoon that the buzzer churled, at just about that hour when inside the house need of after-siesta activity resumed. It must have been a mistake. The pool boy had not forgotten behind one of his work tools, nor was it Matinita's schedule, certainly not the habit of anyone to visit, most especially unexpectedly. Peter considered ignoring the

buzz, but tentatively so, finally relenting to the intrigue of its insistence. Who in hell could it be? Who knows or imagines to come looking here?—at the end of the earth? Peter looks out a kitchen window, waiting, until he sees a car appear up the driveway. It, a creamy yellow vintage Mustang—'66, maybe '65—with a white vinyl roof, restored in remarkably adoring detail, shiny as a slice of lemon meringue pie, coming to a tentative stop in the turnaround, wheeled around now to face the exit road again . No one got out for a time, a long and silent time. Peter determined, in only a moment, a boiling moment of irresolute panic accountable sometimes to those who live alone, not to let them come, although now too late a thought, to the door; instead he will go out to investigate whomever it is, heading them off in the open driveway. He grabbed a robe. Walking into the sunlight Peter could see a man—boyish haircut, sunglasses, crisp open-neck shirt—emerge from the Mustang. At that moment, little did he know, Peter was unsuspectingly re-traversing a familiar terrain, once

charted and familiar terrain of a valley where now overrun by *shades*, apparitions from out the past. Peter slowed transfixed, sourish and prickily startled, struck dumb. Hurling as if the world spinning on its axis hit a rough spot, and bobbled just a bit, jolted, unused to such an abrupt shock, for when the man raised his head Peter could see, slowly recognize, that the momentary strangeness of the figure reassembled into Tod—yes, indeed, startlingly unexpectedly—double damnation—Tod. Could that really be?—Tod? Peter sensed the heat rise up suddenly and slam his face, like knocking his breath away. If he were not careful he thought he might faint. A sliming slick bead of perspiration ran down from his spine into the soft small of his back. What in bloody hell could this be? Here sequestered was Peter, in effect, hiding out exiled from the world, distancing its jab-quick poking, and now here was Tod Sleff—damnation—appearing like a zombie from a half-opened crypt. That Peter had spent countless hours—years upon years of them in fact—conjuring such an unattainable

event was beside the point, now that it might be happening; but perversely not of Peter's timing or stage directions. Tod—Peter had to admit like a fool—still had, as one might expect, the boyish charm of his looks, and his bashful and diffident walk; he still smouldered, still in all unaccountably “hot!” in the flesh. He, silently and a bit pokily, approached Peter who was standing, stunned like a nocturnal animal caught in intense light, at the end of the walkpath. Tod raised his eyes, that beam of light, to look directly at Peter's frozen face; while the awkwardness of the moment skittered onward he smiled, shyly. There was once again, hazed in a filmy shroud of the past, the old Tod, all duplicitous charm proffering a handful of daisies. Old time, like a wounded bird, fell from the sky. Tod tapped Peter, a searing touch still, on the arm, searing enough to anticipate a nearly visible mark, “Hello.”

Peter found his voice, barely, “I suppose you're coming in?”

“If I—yes.” As Peter stepped aside—and too late to run hiding—Tod crept toward the door. Inside the shady stone walls the unmoving air was grey, cooler, stilled, tinged with a damp earth fragrance from the recently watered jardinières of greenery. Tod gazed about the glass walls, “Very nice; a spectacular view.”

“Yes. It is.—And yourself, too, quite a sight. I really had no idea...of the surprise. So unexpected...you didn’t let me know you were coming. Of course, you wouldn’t. I’m stunned. I’m a bit surprised you could find me, or had a wish to.”

Peter searches Tod’s eyes, as he looked across the room, certain they were the same softly brown cold they had always glimmered, but now dampered somehow duller, obscurer, darker.

Tod said only, “I live in Seattle now, for five years or more, really. Out of touch with the Californians somewhat. I’m on my way to San Diego. Found you here, apparently a recluse, through your agent. It seems you’ve gone into hiding.”

“Me? Hiding? Hardly completely—but not all that hard to accomplish.” Peter spread a hand over his forehead, smearing a damp film that had sprung there. “It’s hard to believe you’re here. Might never...I could be only imagining it, like some delirious fever perhaps.” Peter seized another grip at Tod’s eyes; until, withering, Tod turned to face the other way. “I’ll show you the grounds. There are more terraces and paths than anything else.” Stepping through one of the glass doors Peter and Tod found their way into the upper west terrace overlooking the several levels, surveying the broad expanse of open sea. “There’s the ocean, as you can see. It’s the Pacific, this time.” Peter points out the pool, the rock garden, various arbors and alcoves. Tod listened, silently, his hands shoved into his pockets.

Then the tour ramble was suddenly jettisoned, and a familiar expanding silence fills the canopy of the blue afternoon. When Tod, lost under a frown, looked up he saw that Peter was staring off into the distant sea, a wandering

seaman peering into the horizon. At once silent and stiffened Peter left the wall, slinking back to the pool where he slumped onto a chaise, draping a hand over his forehead and covering his eyes. After what seemed an interminable drip of time Tod approached round close to the edge of the pool, which rippled in the sunlight, and sat also, silent as ever, without offering a word. The pulsing rhythm of the surf, like a slowly ticking clock in a distant room, climbed the hill to then become faintly overpowered by the imperceptible puff of wind rustling the leaves. At last Peter sat up. “There seems to be no chance of rain today”, he announced. “Would you like a drink?” At the serving bar he sliced limes into wedges, the faint tart smell clinging to his fingers, and clumped ice into a blender; while Tod slowly wilted to sink a bit, a blue-edged rasping nettle of stain, into his chair. The blender pulsed. What was it? What was the ability, even while lying in decades of dormancy, that Tod possessed that inexplicably could cause Peter’s internal organs, his interior being, to writhe like the whipping blades?

“It’s rather a shock—well, I’d say that for me, at any rate—seeing each other again, now. It must have been twenty years—yes, I’d say twenty-four years—since the last...departure. Though the circumstance remains that it doesn’t truly seem one really departs by telephone. Still, the line does go dead, when the talking stops.” The blender pulsed; then whirred. “What a time then, those days. I...we,...were young then. Oh, god, I was fresh, and so uncluttered. What a long time ago.” Peter set the glasses on the table. “And a long time since.”

“Yes.”

“Can you remember? What *was* that feeling? Just to be young, working for any job, a purpose that seemed to be a dream, to be in the incredible ultimate big city—what a time—it was freedom and adventure, as new as pristine November snow. And then to find you there, too. God...God! It’s an old old story... but who knows that it’s so, the first time one hears. How timid I must have come near when I first met you. It was like an awake dream, waking to such possibilities when I first saw

you, yet dreaming that we would not let waking disturb our touch. So I then thought...dreamed. Once upon a time I thought—I believed—knew—you were the most beautiful boy—that’s what you were, the most beautiful boy—in the whole world. What a vision you were. And who can explain what it is, that spark of electrical current—for that is what it must be: a synaptic electrical charge—that attracts to another, emanating from one body out into the path toward another. I couldn’t resist to want you. You were beautiful; and you smiled at me, just that, nothing more, that is all it took, across that path at that moment in time.”

Peter set down his glass, to keep it from shaking, to keep the ice cubes from clunking. Tod did not allow himself nor anyone a smile now; unindulgent, he was silent still, unmoving, only holding the frosty glass. He was mute; mute as a stone, solid as a wall.

“Oh, I was hooked—netted, ready to be pinned like a specimen on the wall.” Peter paced, closely pent agitation,

hampered, fluttering, unable to gasp while sitting immobile. “And to what end? You didn’t really want me. You simply played. You stripped me, and crushed me. Why do you not understand? I actually wanted to love...actually loved you, once. And you couldn’t even care enough to tell me you were a cheater’s game. Oh, I would have played anyway—I wanted you so much—played all in to have you, all my cards on the table, even if I had known the outcome was rigged. That’s how fools ante their hands.”

“It takes two to play a game.” Tod turned his stern face, with brown eyes dull, to the sea, not meeting Peter’s melted eyes. “You wanted a romantic dream. It was not me.”

“You know nothing. I wanted you. I wanted a chance. I wanted, so boldly shy, to ask, ‘Will you be my love?’ You refused to even show me honesty. How very much like the coward you were, still are, remained for all these years. I remember, yes remember like the scar of a burn, like it was only yesterday, in a May night long ago you touched my hand,

you kissed my mouth, with your arms you lifted me off the floor to hold me against your chest before you took me to the bed, your fragile bed, and to you it meant nothing, no more than a bored cat playing with a toy. But it overwhelmed me; I was frightened to love you so much....and...or frightened not to. I would have done anything I could to make you keep wanting me.”

“Perhaps that was the problem.”

“I didn’t know if there was some difference. Is there a difference? Or are the synapses really the same? Is love sex—or, is sex love? You led me to believe that that time was the beginning, but you made it the end. So you obliterated me. You denied my very existence, as if I had been a bad nightmarish dream; and told me to go away, pretend nothing had happened. After that you saw me as only a stranger, a stranger from the street who you would choose not even to speak a ‘good day’ to. You flung me into the hell of oblivion.”

Peter gasped., and sighed “Why?...why did you never speak to me again?”

Tod, his lips in a thin line, brown eyes now black-dark and silent, only stared; his eyes hardened, receded, retreating back to a distant place where there were only cold shards of dead icebergs slipping into the icy sea. Finally, in a frozen hoarseness, he managed to cough up, “I wasn’t able to make a move then; not able to walk into it, nor perhaps even now.” Tod paused. “Guilt...fright...fear...fear after that time...after this much time.” He paused once more. “That future was a forest with no path. Why did you have to care? Why didn’t you just say ‘Screw it’, and move on?” aimed at the rambling Peter, who flails in a riptide of emotions, the sand of the ocean’s floor sweeping from beneath him, overpowering current towing him out into the surging crash of swells, “Find another life?”

“Life?. You’ve had another, no doubt happy, life...You took *my* life when you left”, said Peter. “I couldn’t not care.

Who knows? I wanted to love you so much. You were so startlingly beautiful. I was captured.” Peter reached out to support his faltering uprightness with hands outspread on the table. “How could I expect you, who didn’t even know me—or care to know—to understand the torturous suffering shoveled onto me? I don’t know...wasn’t allowed to know. I didn’t understand; but if you had shown only the least compassion even, or not to mention if nothing else to remain friends, perhaps it would not have ruined my life for all these years. Oh, that’s no blatant exaggeration. Not when *every* day has its residue of pain. What had I done to make you want to hurt me so, so callously, so viciously? What entices me to bare this hurt before you now? In these later years no matter how much I believed—knew—that it wouldn’t possibly have perhaps lasted anyway, it did not help. What can I say? Much as I have withered under the intensely irrational hate with which you have looked upon me for the last many years, nevertheless I, somewhere in the darkest corners of my mind, still think of

you—and fail to understand what fault of mine provoked your death-dealing silence and excruciating distance. There’s only one thing I know; once I loved you, thought I would love you, and now my only satisfaction in this abyss is knowing that you, undeniably, you will flame in hell for all eternity for the way you treated me—and, still, I helplessly desire you still.”

Tod rose from his chair, a menace, darkly, and flung the rest of his drink into the pool; appearing for a moment as if he might speak, but he found no sound of words came from his mouth, only the sighing of his breathing. Stalking among the chairs and tables and plants, kicking at the table leg and flagstones of the terrace, finally he hissed, “I don’t know that I believe hell is an option. I can’t listen to this.” Looking for a way out, blindly, he finally recognized a path toward flight.

“Yes. Run,” sputtered Peter. “That’s what you’re good at. Coward.” He hears a hampered distant Tod inside thumping against walls and slamming doors; Peter lax and unable to muffle out the echoing sound of Tod’s escape. It had

not gone well. The bitter temper of hurt remaining unhealed, unreconciled, raw as it ever had been. Peter collapses into a chair, his head in his hands, the scream in his throat turning into a wracking sob. Wretched damnation—how long could it bore its way into the heart? Forever? Forever. For past Peter had never been one to contemplate ending life by choice; it was too precious, even if intolerable. As long as there was breath, there would be yet another scene, another reel un-spooling, yet another fraught serial with episodes of sequels. However, Peter, exhausted and wrecked, falls aware suddenly of being weighted with a great and oppressive weariness, reminiscent of someone who had been swimming too long in great pounding waves. He felt another sob batter him. His heart rattles like an aging and rusty wheezing machine. Perhaps if he could remain very quiet, calm; and uncorks a bottle of wine tonight the unearthed apparitions of these heartthrobs would remain comatose at tomorrow's waking time.

The western sky, blue-blank as a silver screen while the theatrical ripples of a drape descendant across it, bellies suffused with a gold flaring glow. One more day was sinking into the vast sea. In a moment, if the wind over the sea is calm, could be heard the tinkling sounds of the little dance orchestra tuning up—not yet music but a discordant cacophony of sound—on the pavilion that sat over the water next to the hotel down the beach below.

--J. F. Lowe