

AND THE SNOW LAY 'ROUND ABOUT

He was in a cavern, a descending cavern—some space black dark and dank, chill damp, with a dead flashlight—fingers against the slick sharp walls, and not knowing the way out, or which way to even turn, if a turn were even possible. He, indefatigable Bucky, was unable to navigate a path, paralyzed, lost in some black foggy void. The slick walls trembled beneath his grasping fingertips, and very distant a rumble seeped nearer causing a rustling in the dark thick-aired tunnelway. Black fish plopped against a pool. Pebbles dropped from the ledge, clattering with pings against the undecipherable wall; while far, far away there was the growing echo of a moan, a wailing, an undulating civil defense warning. The path dropped from beneath his feet, and he was breathless in bottomless black space, pumping his flightless arms like some deranged puffin. Bucky startled; his eyes flung open. They gaped vacantly wide. His startled green eyes tried—rattled as they were—to focus, to clear, to focus definitely until they

could rest on a dim, somewhat wavy, shadowy grey space tangled near the ceiling. Somewhere far below on the street an ambulance siren screamed out as it clanged by into the far chilly night. Bucky breathed in silent soft gasps. He tried quietly to regain the staidly measured breathing he remembered before his imaginary fall, the dreamy fall that had seemed at its time to be so very real. Now his bleary eyes could discern light wavering, barely, near the far overhead ceiling that angled into the lofty exposed brick wall. This ceiling was a forest thicket of shadows. Grey, some deep and densely dark, others iridescently pale, they rippled across the ceiling's painted surface. To Bucky, perhaps half still in some dream, perhaps only half awake, this ceiling was not familiar. It was perhaps reminiscent of others he had seen, or remembered, or was like even more to some others yet without being the same. Bucky, groggy, did not move even the tiniest tight muscle save for his eyes nor, but however startled by the shock of his dream-fall, would he move again now. His gasps rose and fell cautiously silently, short shallow intakes, muted by the surprise of being flung awake in a strange room full of dreams. Without turning

he was, of course, aware that he was not alone in this ample bed beneath the vaguely unfamiliar and shadowy ceiling, into which he stared, remaining absolutely motionless. The towering angle of the ceiling sloped down until it became a broad skylight, wide and smear-tinted and dusty, before the panes angled again into where it met the glass wall. The opaque night outside nestled down over the entire stony city, indeed over the entire hemisphere, including especially this island of bed floating in the middle of the room beneath a glass veil. Damn, nice bedroom, realized Bucky. High outside, boundlessly beyond the canopy of panes, a tumbled vista of wispy cloud underlined by a splash of reflected electric street glow expanded out ahead of the downy-soft muffler layers of overcast. The piercing blink of airplane traffic crossed undisturbed and silent until out of sight; the only other solid thing visible the inky dark bulk of the top floors of the building on the corner at Twenty-third Street, the terrace festooned with tiny sparkling twinklelights, and peeking out from its' place where hidden behind the far side seeped the reddish glow of light emanating atop the Empire State Building. Spread beneath, the ceaseless

banging ballyhoo of Manhattan danced on into the darkest hours of early morn—heedless to tally all of those who had tumbled off to bed. No matter what happened, coming or going, what wandering crowds surged into the alleyways, what shadows hovered, there were those young lizards, stalking cats of the night jungles, nocturnal denizens, who followed the canyon-y dense trails of Manhattan and continued the tango dance at hidden watering-holes in the city's darkest and deepest interiors. The insistently drumming music that spilled out of those volcanic caverns snapped the pulses that throbbed the grey city awake into the wee-est hours, in every season of the year, in summer steam, even now in the icy glaze of winter. A faint memory, a returning bouncing reverberating rhythm-music echo, came to Bucky as he, now, lay in this unfamiliar bed and meekly stared into amber and purple and grey mottled space encapsulated in the skylight. Recalling he had late been at one of those flash-glinted discos, and enjoying the drinks, relishing the stalking hunt, and undoubtedly so too had the heavily sleeping body beside him. That prone form made only the faintest dreamy stirring; and Bucky remained motionless, only

his mind wandering, he trying to remain camouflaged inside his thoughts like beside a sandy rock. The fine rumpled sheets, so very soft and warm from the radiance of the two bare bodies, swaddled him, so airily caressing his pure nakedness with such a light touch whispered like a fresh breeze. He did not look to find them, though he knew his clothes must lay wantonly discarded nearby on the floor. Free from them, unencumbered totally, without their definitions and restrictions, purely naked was the most seductive and blissful feeling in the infinite world. Bucky knew precisely the transient power of looking trim, an innate energy inside that when charged up shone out through the glow of heavy shoulders curving into the full carved chest, the abdomen flat as a wall, the sturdy muscled legs, every inch young, so fresh, and so vital and commanding and beautifully alive. Bucky was not vain, no more so than any other young man at the top of his form, but he did know certainly the power of attraction—the trim and elegant form, the dark black hair and the faded green eyes the colour of Irish moss frozen in ice, an appreciatively-noted combination so winning that it caused heads to turn and willed eyes to follow him.

The quick and angular grin was more icing on the cake. Glances would pour over him with liquid pleasure, as so now the light touch of the cottony caressing sheets coaxed him down into the comfy softness of their most inner folds. His yearning muscles longed so to stretch, but transfixed as still as an alert cat, he refrained from disturbing the unconscious sleeper beside him. Bucky did sigh inaudibly to himself. This was certainly a warm dilemma in which to find oneself awakened. Perhaps at most he lay relaxed and softly immobile, but that was certainly not true of rigid parts of his anatomy somewhere below the goose-downy counterpane. Restlessness stirred within him. Bucky focused in, willing each tense group of muscles, calf, thigh, derriere, a drum-taut lower belly, sleek tawny-pelted pectorals, silent jaws and neck—to contract and relax without stirring the sheets. He dared not disturb this extreme and perfect moment—alone, but not alone—quiet and warm and content in an unfamiliar bed. It was, after all, the arcadian bed of a stranger, an intimate stranger, but still a stranger. The clubs were filled always to the rafters with strangers, wandering the velvet ropes, shedding their layers of winter coats like adolescent

reptiles, sidling onto the hot dance-floors; from Magique to Xenon to Mudd Club, Palladium to Underground to Les Mouches the delirious dance swayed on, steam rising into ceilings of rotating coloured lights. Hoarse-throated laughs, brittle as sheer ice, were shouted above the frenzy of drumbeats, intense secrets were whispered in crowd-packed hallways angled into the night. The hours, in these dark-walled noisy chambers overlaid with the bouncing confetti of swooping gel-coloured light, froze in time—stood still as a prismatic drop suspended at the sticky point of a tendril. The moment, shimmering and thudding, the movement and moment of the dance was the *only* time that mattered. Bucky, circling the floor, bumping past the clots, in a dim moving shadow had noticed a silhouetted figure, electrically half-outlined in red glow, moving with the music through the rotating shadowland world. He edged closer. Attempted conversation, half-lost in the raucousness, haltingly tumbled toward some shy laughter; and the unfurling look in the eyes, quick, darting, tremulous, reaching out, melted like the ice in a glass into some stumbled-upon deep warm liquid hidden inviting pool—an happenstance stranger, who had

willingly clasped his anxious hand, and followed him out of the strobing shadows of the undulating frenzied dance-room cavern and into the broad dense Manhattan night. They plunged into the crisp air, only palely illuminated by the wan streetlights, clasped together as a duet still by enquiring hands, and walked the slick wet cobble-stoned streets toward the distant avenue, as dimly and only nudgingly-with-a-chortle noticed by the shivering owl-y workers of the neighborhood as the leaning couple itself was giddily heedless of the rubber-booted grimy-apronned butchers and meatpackers whose hands held only grappling hooks and steaming deli cups of coffee, light and sweet.

Manhattan's wind-scrubbed city streets were dozing, a quick and gentle catnap, eyes languorously closed but ears twitching. Windows were dark, silent, except for the rare frozen gleam seeping from some third or fifth or ninth floor and the scattered cold glare from the maze of distant chilled snoring towers of the Battery or mostly already abed tourist-besotted midtown. Haven was a cuddling walk, with arms entwined snugly about each others waists, toward quiet waiting dim flats and a cozily welcoming bed, and that where

Bucky and partner were dizzily headed. Luck, *Fortuna*, had smiled. Manhattan's nightly playground lay before those longing-to-be-fortunate questing wanderers, deep-night playground littered with pleasures, glittered with diamonds numerous like the chips of mica shine embedded in the new-smoothed sidewalks. How many the fortunate? How indefinite the number of those who smiled sheepishly back into *Fortuna's* lowering eyes, who reached out to timidly take the offered hand? Near innumerable were the tribes who wandered and hunted the thick tangled groves of towering New York City's lush growth, from the scamperers who clattered across the penthouses and various Park Avenue aeries, from the trekkers and bearers whacking through the maze of offices and agencies, the traders in cluttered markets and shadowy souks, to the crawlers who scurried into every available cranny in the dark damp rocks at the bottom of darkness. Each hunter, tribal or alone, carried his own spear, or perhaps poison darts. And they searched continuously, like bees for pollen or newts for water, looking for their prey: the hottest spot, the most theatrical event, the exhilarating refreshment, the most faceted

diamond-like body, the most potent hit, the most thrilling companion, the next *big* thing, the prize, the glimmer of volcanic flow, looking under every stone into every dark crevice. The very juice of youth sustained them—whether natural or bought—propelled them, their unquenchable youth forcefully directing them to all the pleasurable haunts. Listening fervently to the arpeggio-istic music that careered the spaces between the gossamer stars, the score that spun loopily about lives and carried them along on a tingling melody above the beat, the young and restless wandered, dancing—sometimes in place in the sacred places, sometime moving on to new groves. Undeniably—ancient but ever-renewing—it was an equation: *young* equaled *for pleasure*. Could elusive love, if that is what it was—certainly what the lusty vibrance of the youthful called it—or at the very least a comfortable self-propelling companionship, be even found there? Love—the mythic dream, the lacy heart, red and tender and beating—was an elusive totem. Only the *most* lucky snared it. But the hunt went on, round every turned corner.

Meanderings through the twists and turns of grey chilled streets, through the dense crowd-pack of pulsating darkened undergrounds, sprinkled with the seeds of whispered conversation and intensely expectant laughter, had guided Bucky and conquest to this warm warm bed so satisfyingly placed beneath this resplendent expansive skylight, facing upwards the glowing ether of New York City. Bucky, aware far in the corridor recesses of his mind awaking by small degrees, began to count the secretive slumberous breaths of his bed-cosseted companion, more sensed than audible, trying to attach them to the rhythm of his own—a quiet game to lull the advancing hands of the insistent luminous clock. The tension of not moving welled up like a crest of sea inside him. He ever so quietly slid a hand lightly across the compliantly firm nipples of his bared chest, and rolled only enough to shift his inner weight ever so slightly, so cautiously, stealthily and reticent. Another's hand flopped incomprehensively on his shoulder, and rested there like a blown kiss, with only the faintest moan, dreaming. Bucky wondered, with an aside curiosity, how many others, those night hunters, trekking ceaselessly had, too, found

strange but accessible beds, had mined the ore of however momentary companionship, across this black forest of city, stalkers intent and a-rush from neighborhood to neighborhood. Slowly, as in the slowest motion of a trained acrobat, Bucky so carefully slid from the bed, extricating himself from the mellow down of the comforter and the caress of the sheets, to stand, silently, stretch himself, naked as the unblushed night. He glanced over the room. It was a nice room, home-y and casually lived in, with scattered books and some dried flowers and a poster for Valrhona on the wall, a room where one could sit comfortably by the lamp or lie contentedly safe upon the bed. Bucky stepped without a sound over the discarded clothes and with a flexing opulent yawn reminiscent of some purring cat, one foot still in its' white sock, eased through the pale greyness of an unfamiliar others' uncharted space toward the skylight wall. Hands on hips, a sailor surveying the swell, he stared out into the feeble light above the pavements, across the dark and damp back-gardens, the outlined roofs, the hundreds of other dark windows where unknown curtained people slept, untouched by wondering eyes. The air by the frosting

glass was cool. Bucky could look back to the bed and realize, sprawled amidst the rumpled mounds, a sleeping form and the glowing memory of particularly shining heat. Sometime a movement shook the landscape, a soft eruptive twist and a dreamy settling. Bucky smiled. He could not help himself. The playground of the bed was a vibrant picture postcard, inviting, full of scenic vista: the glow of coppery hair, the jutting curve of the naked shoulders, the long sensuous curve of the naked hip. Like that purring kitten, deliciously warm and creamy, the memory of desire licked at him with its' insistently rough tongue. Only hours since had the jubilant hunters danced around its' crackling victory fire. But now the fire only an ember, still glowing but spent; the dancers drowsy and exhausted and pulled apart to cast an eye toward a new day. What partners they had been. But who tomorrow would they be—would they care to be? Had fate turned up an ace, a deuce? Bucky might say that any hand was a winning hand. To draw no card was to not be in the game at all; and Bucky remembered his own bed, distant, now empty and cold. Bucky shivered. That sleeping body, warm, comforting, slightly fragrant, glowing, the body—as he

reflectingly turned the thought over in his head, accustomed to think, now, of that other—was warm, inviting as a heated pool, the apex of admirable—form exquisitely molded to function, and aspect, and alluringly gentle warm persona—how pungently admirable. A stunning portrait--one hip thrust toward the air, the long sensuous curve of the rising pale loaf arching to its' summit where the hipbone's knob punctuated the crest like a dollop of cream and softly slid away to the front into a soft hollow which slipped down into the fuzzy shadows of a secret and often sacred place. Finding a someone who knew the sharing of the secret ritual of this profoundly desirous place, this was the dream. This was the desire, the culmination, the at times attainable mount of the dream. Perhaps he was still dreaming. A glop of wetness splotted the skylight, then another, and another. Huge wet flakes of snow fell suddenly from the darkly iridescent sky and alighted soundlessly against the hard glass. The atmosphere quickly filled with them, inundated, with huge white floating globs, whirling in frenzy. Bucky scrutinized them, staring, as if it seemed he were inside

a New York City snowglobe like the ones sold in the shops. Someone had shaken it.

Bucky crept, gingerly, to his clothes and slid into the crushed jeans. He dressed slowly; he thought frantically. What am I doing?, he thought. What am I going to do? Why must anything “be done”? Was this not simply just another day’s adventure? Was it? Or could this be the magic moment, the one-in-a-million chance, the dream-glow to which all the hunt and search led. He stood again at the glass wall. The snow whirled down, continuing its silently cold assault. It began to stick on the ledge, accumulate on the mullions, drift on the top of the skylight. The spuming layer of clouds almost imperceptibly glowed in the east. Dawn, as well the recurring eternal hunter, reached out for the tops of the city. The sun—cheerless, pale as a moon behind grey mufflers of cloud—would soon, if it showed itself at all, be peeking tentatively over the horizon and shivering among the white-black water-tank-strewn rooftops, scaling the steely hard edges of the Chrysler Building. In the still half-light Bucky watched the tempestuous snowflakes colliding, whirling, bedding down into the

crevices of the city, silent and settled, eventually sleeping on windowsills and high wires and scraggly bare trees. He stared into the riotous frenzy of the colliding pale snow. There was, he felt, a danger of being mesmerized. The dance outside the window so filled his eyes.

A low slow tentative moan, a sigh, arose from the bed, and a groggy hoarse voice: “Ummm...hello?...uh,...B—Bucky?”

“Sshhh,” whispered Bucky. “Go back to sleep.” He stood still, and the breathing he listened to again fell into a quiet peace. His own breathing remained deep and rapid, long pulling draughts into fluttering lungs. He pulled on his warm shirt, cloaking the gooseflesh that had arisen along his arms and ribs. It might be foolish to let a moment of panic chase him into the cold streets. Was it a solid fear?—or some transparent shadow?—or as pliant as the silent snow? Was it even at least explainable? The streetlamp glow was fading, shadows still lay discarded about the room as the weak new day seeped through the glass wall, frosting now, and reflected from the soft luminous layer of snow shrouding the top of the skylight. Bucky glanced down at the telephone thinking there might be an exchange

and number listed there, but beyond the prefix it was unreadable. There *was* a notepad. He began to jot a number on it, then crumpled the top page. Straightening out the page again, he smoothed it down, and for a long moment stared at the crumpled paper. The numbers huddled there in a scrawled little arc, bloody red ink, making him think of a roulette wheel. Mentally, he considered the chips on the table. Round and round.

Bucky gathered his coat, and checked the pocket for his hat. Once again he looked out the glass wall to where the snow was spinning uncontrolled, flying in any direction, floating. He turned and moved ever so cautiously to the door. Facing it, he stood for what seemed an eternal moment. Slowly, thoughtfully, he reached out to touch, wrapping his fingers around the doorknob. It was as cold as white marble.

--J. F. Lowe