



## THE LIVE ONES

*By Constance McCutcheon*

*He had studied it with the minuteness  
with which a scholar studies a dead language.*

*— 1853 Lytton My Novel iii. xvi*

The Master sat behind his cluttered desk looking gray and dusty and inert, as if he had been asleep for a long, long time, but he was just waiting for Russell to identify the Hebrew figure in the text. It was a matter of pride that Russell come up with it himself, which is why it often took so long, but the Master had time.

When the Master had made his offer to teach anyone Greek within two weeks if the provision were observed that the student do nothing within that time but study Greek, an eager few had presented themselves for instruction. Each had received a two-week block of time, had come to the Master's office for the required four hours a day, and had learned to read the Greek characters, learned the different verb forms, learned the sentence structure. Russell came and in two weeks he also learned to read the Greek characters, identify the different verb forms, decipher the sentence structure. When Russell discovered the Master could read Hebrew, he asked to learn that language as well. So the Master taught him Hebrew. The Master was retired and had time. But that language and its characters were not as easy. Or maybe there was less room in Russell's head from all the Greek characters so recently stowed away there. That minor limitation notwithstanding, the Master admired Russell's diligence, praised his love of the scholarly, his love of books, and sat for hours with his pupil until the pupil moved away with his wife up to New England country.

Life in picturesque, peaceful New England did not go well for Russell. In the small country church he and his wife attended, Russell held a Sunday school class for adults, just as the Master had done in Cleveland, the class in which Russell had gotten to know the Master, the class in which he began to covet the Master's learning. Just like the Master, Russell translated from the Greek New Testament for his class, instructing them in the significance lost in the coarse King James and later, more modern, even worse translations. But Russell was slow. He wasn't sure of the words or tenses and the people in the class got impatient from time to time, reading out to him what was in their translations to help him along. Russell also tried to bring alive for the class the spirit and life of Biblical times as the Master had. But Russell didn't know those

times, had only listened spellbound to the Master's lectures, so vividly described and so ineluctably logical that Russell had believed the knowledge to be his own. Russell invited questions from his class, but when anyone did ask a question, he got bogged down in aimless explanations until the class members waved him back to his faltering translation, the lesser of the two evils. The country people seemed to resent him. That was Russell's impression.

"That god-forsaken church," he muttered to Madeline the evening of the day of the worst lesson of all. Patiently, to thoroughly depict the incident to her, he followed her about the house as she watered the nursling plants set out in their peat-pots on the living room floor by the east window, as she washed up the kitchen from Russell's lunch and prepared dinner. "That god-forsaken Sunday school class ... That god-forsaken Hank Bainbridge, he started it!" Russell finally thundered pointing accusingly at Madeline as if she were at fault. His voice was rough, but rang with satisfaction to have found its target. This partial appeasement was a far better state than what he had started out in. So progress had been made. But as the months dragged on, it was becoming clear that such indifferent progress was not enough, and there never was progress of any other kind. From years of living in this idyllic quiet country, Russell was becoming clinically depressed, something Madeline, a doctor in the emergency ward at a nearby hospital, saw with sober, steel-gray eyes.

"And to top it off I've got to write a letter to that mindless cousin of mine—who *you* never wrote to," he thundered again, again training his finger on his wife. "I got hooked by that writing idiot to save *your* face."

"You're always complaining that people don't write letters enough nowadays, that it's a television culture. Jeannie Marie writes letters to you. Why are you complaining?"

He just grunted and trudged up to the second floor study where he slouched in a beat-up apricot-colored armchair and stewed for over an hour, his cousin's letter lying in wait for him on his desk.

Russell had succeeded at nothing in New Hampshire in the five years they had been living there, although Madeline's painting had blossomed in that time. Russell had not become a powerful and influential member of that tiny, no-account church full of puny, no-account members. And because of his attempts, he had experienced the humiliation of a lifetime that morning: watching himself lose control in his Sunday school class, sneering at the members with a twitching face. He had also wanted to sweep into that local no-account community college and impress them with his worldliness, other-worldliness, and scholarliness, but had become so frustrated there that he found himself telling some cook with a wall eye in the student cafeteria the week before that he had a Ph.D. from Princeton, and then had been enraged enough to goad the innocuous-looking man by asking him if he knew what that was. The cook had stared at the inner side of his glasses without seeming to understand, then wished Russell a nice day 'anyway.' Then in answer to Russell's disgusted grunt, he added in a sympathetic voice that they were all Ph.D.s there, that he himself had specialized in research on the growth hormone and gently asked Russell if he knew what *that* was. Russell left without another word, his cheeks burning in humiliation. Being an unpublished ballet critic at the age of forty-five was also beginning to smart. Those homosexuals had gotten all the publishing slots in the New York magazines he had tried for. Even Madeline agreed with him there. Poetry was all he had left, but the stuff wasn't getting any easier to write, and he was too embarrassed to even mention the ignominious defeats he had suffered in that corner.

No, instead, he had to waste his days and energy with meaningless, tedious tasks like writing to his cousin, Jeannie Marie Whitmore, because she, annoyingly enough, kept writing to him long, detailed letters that stuck in his craw. Jeannie Marie had started the correspondence by writing to Madeline, but for some reason Madeline had not been interested in answering and Russell had taken over a post that had quickly become a terrible encumbrance. Within a short time, Jeannie Marie's letters were coming addressed to him, and Russell, always vain enough to adjust the length of his letters to match hers, ended up copying letters he had written to

other friends, important friends, to send to her. And what did he get for his trouble? Another letter from Jeannie Marie.

The struggle writing to Jeannie Marie posed for him did not mean that Russell's life was anything other than leisurely. He read his books in the morning between bites of toast, the treatment received by his reading less conscientious than that received by the toast. He always finished his toast. A bit of Latin, a bit of Greek, a bit of Hebrew, Russell extracted the words and phrases he would be able to use during the day, the thoughts he would try to develop for a piece of poetry he couldn't get to go anywhere. Then, partially-digested, the books would be abandoned somewhere until the following morning when he would come across them again, a fresh piece of toast in his mouth.

After his hour's contemplation, Russell decided that the only letter he could send to Jeannie Marie to dispatch his duties to her and thereby relieve his mind was the letter he had written most recently to a famous acquaintance of his. With it Jeannie Marie would be getting something special indeed: an eight-page description of his depression, full of complicated, carefully worked sentences, examining in detail the causes and development of the emotional and psychological decline he had been suffering, the impetus for his and Madeline's sudden decision to leave New Hampshire, that paradisiacal setting, and move back to Cleveland, Russell's home town, where he would have more to do.

Out of disgust, Russell decided he would not even change the salutation this time. He was too depressed and realized in the same moment that it was better not to give Jeannie Marie the false impression that he would compose such a letter for her. He did scribble a message in a corner of the copy, saying the letter accurately described his current frame of mind, adding that besides everything else he was in the middle of moving, stuffed it into an envelope, and sent it off.

Absolute impudence! Despite the move, the new address, and the uncertainty of the mail system in such situations, Jeannie Marie's response reached Russell in Cleveland within two weeks. She must have snooped around to find out their new address, sending the

letter with the return post out of a baffling but intense desire to scold him. Because in her letter she did scold him. So much impudence! She answered his exhaustive, sensitive treatment of his deep depression with the remark that life was hard! Of all the stupid things to say. Impudence and Teutonic insensitivity. As he scanned the first sentences, his apple-red face contracted. His short hair began to look as tufted as a bird's nest as, in his ire, he repeatedly thrust his fingers into it. The resulting thatch of dark hair made his face seem very small and even redder. He looked aside, remembering the monumental letter he had sent her, a work of art in itself, and what did he get in return? A pep talk from a woman who had been living in Germany too long, who couldn't feel anymore, who now responded to life in general with that chilling German lack of sympathy, and, well, a pep talk.

In her glib phrases and superficially clever observations—how could she think all that up in such a short period of time? had she nothing else to do?—she was basically telling him to get his ass in gear, that others had it worse, much worse. War-torn Yugoslavia she threw in his face, for God's sake! He knew all about that, and a good deal more as well. On she blathered, saying she had learned that depression was a luxury for those with the leisure and wealth to *enjoy* it and, what's more, that those depressed people considered themselves more sensitive and intelligent than the ignorant masses who had to work forty-hour weeks! That they considered those laboring masses benighted, possessed of dull minds too crude to detect the painful vicissitudes of the soul, something made too obvious by the fact that they were capable of dirtying their minds with work. Russell, Jeannie Marie well knew, did not have such a job. In that sense, he did not work, ol' Jeannie Marie was right, and Russell was thankful for it every single day.

She went on to describe the lives forced on the people in East Germany, the fathers who had disappeared in the post-World War II socialist takeover in that miserable land and the conditions under which the families had to live: the daily stress of getting to the bakery to find the bread sold out, of having to be at work at 6:30 a.m. every day because, as the Socialist fathers severely reminded them, the farmers began their days early. But there was

nothing to do in the offices and factories because there *was* no work, there *were* no supplies—there wasn't even enough bread to go around, and yet it was an act against the party to be late and seem to have nothing to do there at 6:30 a.m. This rotting of fresh and potent lives was a daily hell for the people who had to live them, she wrote, and was trying to tell him he had it good. The bitch. What did she know? And then for her to mention, only hint at the fact that life wasn't easy for her either with her own 40-hour-a-week harness, but she, too, was still trying as hard as she could to strike a balance between work and her artistic pursuits. Russell knew very well that she aspired to be something in her life, and that whatever that was, she had fallen far short of it so far.

And besides that, she sniveled on, Russell had to take into consideration—

Why bother? Russell thought, interrupting his reading and letting the letter fall to the floor between the couch and the bookshelves of the yet unfamiliar, but comfortable living room. Jeannie Marie just didn't get it.

He didn't reply for over a year, feeling so peeved that his nose almost swelled up in his face when he thought of her, feeling so peeved that he expected people to ask him what the matter was with his nose when he went out. His nose wasn't swollen, but if he could have inserted it into a vice and squeezed it to make it swell to accurately express his disgust of her so the world would know how disgusting she was, he would gladly have done so. Where did she come off thinking those god-damned things? Then the idea occurred to him to reread the letter he had sent her. What in the world was in it? Perhaps ... could she have resented its masterly, intense, slightly intimidating rhetoric? The letter was easily retrieved from the files he carefully kept of copies of what he wrote. In case anyone ever wanted to collect and publish his letters, his files would make it an easy task, providing his complete correspondence and therefore an accurate record of his personality and intellectual expression.

The letter he had sent to Jeannie Marie had been written to his literary critic friend at a famous university. It was a friendship

Russell flaunted without knowing it: the man's name came up so often whenever Russell discoursed on what people thought in general. But nothing surprising was in the letter. Hadn't his friend sent him a sensitive and sympathetic, if brief, response? Russell had given lucid insights into the workings of a country church, told of how even the littlest people are politically hungry and turn into power maniacs when they think they have the slightest chance. Russell's attempt in the church had only been to bring a little learning, a little scholasticism to the congregation. But his modest offering had provoked envy, his very presence igniting an incredible power struggle. The knowledge of Greek Russell had offered, though, had left them cold.

Russell felt a flush as he recalled those mornings. His performance had not been the best. Just at that time he had been, for some reason he no longer remembered, oddly pressured and his translations had been rather slow, so slow that Barbara Bitch—as he felt he must, in all justness, call her—had offered to give her interpretation of the passage in the meantime. Then control was indeed lost, and Russell stalked out of the room leaving the little frogs in their own pee-puddle. When he arrived home and sat protected in the lovely country house with the surrounding gardens and beautiful New Hampshire birch trees, their slim trunks flashing white against the powder blue sky, he had had a mild collapse.

His letter spent a good half of itself picking apart the whys and wherefores of the church confrontation that ended with the Sunday school class being dissolved and no one asking for its like again. The next part of the letter mused over the discouraging turnout for the literature class he had offered at the local college. The one person who had signed up for the course had done so because he desperately needed a literature credit in order to graduate. The only evening literature course offered was Russell's. Russell cancelled the course when he found himself alone three weeks in a row in the appointed classroom. Not to say that he didn't see his wayward student; as he was leaving in a great huff the third week, he caught a glimpse of him in the classroom opposite where Russell's rival was teaching New Testament times. Now why was that class packed? Russell wanted to know. It was exactly what he had offered the god-



damned congregation, but they hadn't wanted it in church. On arriving home that evening, he had had another mild collapse. As he dwelled on it now, Russell again felt the curious sensation of his nose swelling.

Then the third great disappointment: the lack of public enthusiasm for his poetry, and here Jeannie Marie had hit him hard. Jeannie Marie had always read his poetry, encouraged him to send excerpts from his mammoth works composed of the long phrases which weren't quite hexameter, but with the graceful incorporation of the modern language into living poetry, how could they be? And why should they be? No one nowadays knew what hexameter was anyway. Russell knew the difference between poetry and perfume though: poetry could not be manufactured and put into a bottle with the same little bird on top each time. Poetry, he continued the thought eagerly, reaching for a pen and notepaper, unfolded like the petals of a flower, the source of all perfumes, to reveal its own inherent essence time after time. But Jeannie Marie, after silently receiving his poems for years, and in response to his insistence that she now hold up her unstated end of the bargain and say something about them, finally had, and in that most impudent of letters.

Why were they poems? she had asked, emerging from her mild glow of pleasing politeness Russell had enjoyed but always been suspicious of. If he wrote them in prose format, she elaborated, they would be very nice treatments of a subject. But the physical form he used, that of a poem, she persisted in her tired argumentation, only taxed the patience because the reader expected something different. "... my experiment being to put all the lines together, with the result: a very nice description of thoughts. Why don't you just do that? You could more than likely get them published that way. I don't understand why you call them poems." So she had phrased it, not quite reassuming her customary mantle of obsequious civility. What impudence! He knew what she was saying, another reason he didn't respond to her letter for over a year. It took a year for the swelling in his nose to go down. In the meantime, he enjoyed contemplating the fact that she resented his pampered life and prodigious talent just as all the others did.



After their marriage twenty years before and while Russell taught in a girl's school to support her, Madeline had attended medical school, the goal being eventually to provide Russell with the freedom he required to work fulltime as an artist. Madeline had also wanted to become a doctor, something Russell wanted no one to be mistaken about. Once she became established as a doctor, as according to their arrangement, his time was his own. He went to the theater, ballet, art exhibitions, concerts. He studied erudite works and became more erudite himself every day. He had the best of everything, including the wife that supported him in a lifestyle they both considered necessary for an artist of significance, which both felt Russell was. But the life of an artist, he found out, was a curse, the biggest curse on the face of the earth. Worse than starving, worse than living in a war-torn country, yes, worse than growing up in the poisonous trap of East European socialism.

What oppressed Russell was his gift. It was too great, so great and so weighty that he couldn't move out from under it to saddle it up and ride away on it, that is to say, he had never been able to exploit it for its locomotive power. He seemed to be pinned under a hoof. His ninety-three-page poem wouldn't come to an end. In reading it through over and over again, he was unable for the life of him to find the spot where it *should* come to an end, but he had an uneasy feeling that ninety-three pages was too long. The novel he had been working on for the past eighteen years would not come to an end either. And at this point he realized the final form would have to be a masterpiece if he was not to look a fool when the thing was finally done. But it remained a recalcitrant chaos.

Jeannie Marie had to work for a living and, although interested in literature, had no chance to learn all the ancient languages he knew, to become acquainted with the great poets, to wallow in mental sensuality as he did. She spoke German, perhaps, because having

moved to Germany years ago, she would have had to become familiar with the language, but beyond that she possessed—evident from her letter—a mean mentality. He had been so tolerant of her; she had always admired him so. Now it was clear that she only resented him and his privileged life style.

Of course the reaction of the others was hardly better. At first Russell had been surprised not to be openly admired as an artist. Then he gradually became aware of the snide disdain with which his mode of existence was regarded by friends and relatives alike. But the Master had advised him, soothed him, explained to him that the life he led was indeed an unconventional one, easy and good, and that Russell should not expect others to understand or applaud it; he should be prepared to detect rage, even disgust, in their reactions.

And so, Russell came to realize, that all lack of acceptance he found in the world was due precisely, though ironically, to his possessing a great gift. He was meant to translate the sufferings and joys of the puny people into poetry, but he should never forget that those very people would never be bright enough to profit from the fruits of his labor or generous enough to acknowledge them, if bright enough. Worse, they resented the life that yielded those fruits. Well, he would tell those glintless people should they ever ask, that his being an artist made it impossible for him to simply live; he was forced to maneuver constantly in the service of his art. In telling them this, he would enjoy letting them know that he would brush them off like pigeon shit to continue along on his exalted way. The insult, too obscure for most to understand, would be their just desert. Tit for tat. His greatest revenge, he knew now, was to visibly enjoy. A clever phrase, perhaps, but ...

He always abandoned the train of thought there, feeling more discouraged than before he started. He didn't enjoy revenge. Yet he could never force the contemplation to any other conclusion. It became just one more item he abandoned time after time in defeat.

Just the same, no one was publishing his poems, and he had become, from a conflation of all three areas of failure, a victim of clinical depression, something he couldn't hide from Madeline.

How else could the affairs be explained? Affairs with those small-town women, women of no interest to him, women wanting homes and families, the last having insisted that the two of them discuss with Madeline his inevitable divorce from her. Of course, talk did come, but surely not as the small-town gal had envisioned, certainly an unpleasant surprise for Madeline, and nothing Russell dealt with well. Undeniably depressed, clinically depressed: that was the medical tarpaulin only Madeline could toss over it and she did toss it. Bless her, she did. Russell lay very quietly beneath it while they, in all hurry, almost panic—Madeline's panic, made their move back to Cleveland.

Russell needed culture, was starved for it. In Cleveland he could be near family again and cultural centers. He would even be near the Master again, who had fallen victim to a stroke two years before, but whom Russell had never been able to visit because of perpetually tangled travel plans. The Master ill, the Master lying for years in a nursing home bed. The Master no longer able to keep awake long enough to read scriptures. The Master, his brow now as delicately dry as an onion skin, had to be heaved up out of his bed like a wet hammock by two practiced nursing aids to poop in the pan kept under his cot. The Master had even more time now.

But Russell didn't. In Cleveland, a day was hard to wrestle into shape. To find time for a life of writing and reading required great muscular finesse, especially now that so many cultural enhancements were luring him away. In the weeks after their move, he did manage, between the departure of one work crew and the arrival of the plasterers, to get a fair amount of reading done: a part of *The Bacchae* in Greek, a part of *Exodus* and *Leviticus* in Hebrew, some Proust in French. He was also able to get through the last sixteen pages of his third translation of *Beowulf*, but it was all a desperate fight, and it became clear that his determination to visit the Master twice a week was, unfortunately, unrealistic. Just as he was getting ready to enjoy a rare free day, boom! It was time to visit the Master again. A visit knocked out an entire afternoon with the thirty-minute walk there and back. It didn't really take the whole afternoon, it just seemed to, which was the same thing. And Russell resented the fact that he was the only one who visited the Master so

religiously. Except for a few people who were almost always there and the Master's wife who never left his side, Russell seemed to be the most dedicated visitor he had. But necessity was laid upon him, and he had to go. Had to go and see the Master.

To support him in his writing, which both he and Madeline now regarded as a private pursuit that would never interest the world, Madeline purchased a computer system for Russell with a laser printer, complete with Greek and Hebrew fonts. The fonts were an essential addition, something Russell required for the ancient words that kept cropping up in his poems. He began closing his letters with a Hebrew Amen as well, his way of saying peace be with you, you pieces of pigeon shit, may the peace be a harmonious, if nauseating one. He delighted in seeing his Amen in the laser printer's neat and perfect Hebrew characters, they looked so cryptic, a secret code reserved for those who already knew, of which there were few, precious few. The characters put him in mind of the long and arduous history of the Jews and of their scholastic character, two things with which he strongly identified. He too was sensitive, had a passion for books, and lived a life of rejection. No one wanted his services as lecturer, scholar, or wise man, which, he humbly realized, was all he could offer. Barely forty-seven years of age, he realized with clarity that no one wanted anything from him, except Madeline who admired him and his artistic pursuits, needed his conversation and learned outlook for intellectual support as she battled to cope with the dreary mentality that dominated the medical profession.



In the response Russell wrote to his cousin after the year's delay meant to chastise her for her pep talk and ignorant remarks about his poetry, he explained frankly that the tone of her letter had peeved him, the reason he hadn't responded sooner and, after giving general information about the new life in Cleveland, closed

his message with the fancy-font Hebrew Amen. Jeannie Marie didn't respond immediately, but when her letter came, Russell saw it also closed with a cryptic phrase, but in a language he didn't recognize. It annoyed him tremendously. His first thought was that she had copied out his own Amen perhaps to mock him, but on looking closely at the script, he saw that the figures were completely different. It was a scrawl and a scribble: a joke, he decided. She *was* mocking him. In the letter, she thanked Russell for being honest with her and apologized for not having been sympathetic enough with his situation. These remarks only increased Russell's annoyance: she was treating him like a moral invalid with her gentle tone and simple style. Then she came up with another of the horrible sentences Russell wished he had written himself: she said she herself found "sympathy deadening. It perceives the depression, accepts it, commiserates in such a way as to affirm it..." And another: her attempt "... to offer a distracting diminution by way of comparison, such as 'say, look at those people over there held prisoner in East Germany.'"

Her letter wasn't as conciliatory as it at first seemed. She hadn't taken one step backward. But the closing phase in her own secret code was perhaps her olive twig to him. He stared at the script again. It was basically horizontal layers of squiggles framed in a carefully drawn box. He had enclosed his laser printer Hebrew in the very same way. He took the letter in to Madeline who was typing in the study.

"What language is that, chum?" he interrupted her, holding out the letter and rubbing her shoulder.

Her blond brow contracted and her light eyes looked fierce as she trained her vision through the thick lenses of her glasses onto the sheet of paper. "That's a good one. Dunno. Something like Sanskrit, I'd say."

"Sanskrit it is!" Russell whisked the sheet away from her. "I can translate anything." He drove to the huge central university library. After quite some time looking, he finally asked a librarian where he might find an example of Sanskrit text. He was involved in a study, he explained, which could only be furthered by looking at an

original text of Sanskrit, but to the librarian's question came the unexpected answer that it didn't matter what original text it was, just as long as it was Sanskrit. With no clue as to what kind of a study it could be, the librarian directed him to the third floor where another librarian led him through the Persian halls to a plain circular room with sky lights and an impressive circular lectern at the center. Books were packed away in dim, wedge-shaped rooms off the bright central core. It was in one of these dim rooms that Russell was instructed to stay to peruse his Sanskrit text. Ruffled by this, Russell replied that he was aware of how old texts were handled. Unruffled, the librarian left him in the wedge-shaped room, having pulled a Sanskrit volume out of a shelf for him.

Staring at the Sanskrit text and feeling the pages of the strange, unbound book filled Russell with a kind of ecstasy. Studying for his degrees had been a blissful time, full of this ecstatic feeling. A clear, short-term goal trained before his young eyes and off he would go! He had been a good student, a scholar. And ancient, mysterious, dead languages attracted him compellingly. They were so manageable, their scope defined and limited, the set of knowledge finite and unmoving. No one could tell how proficient he was either. He rarely met people who knew the languages he studied and read. And there was never the embarrassing challenge of having to speak to anyone in that tongue. They were all dead.

Sanskrit did not seem to be the correct language. He pored over the characters, but failed to match a one with the writing at the bottom of his cousin's letter. After two enjoyable hours, he had to admit that the characters were not Sanskrit.

He called on the Master, the man whose role and reputation Russell expected to inherit when the man died. Now that the Master was so sick, it was easier for Russell to frankly admire what the old man's powers had been. He didn't have them any more. The Master had been able to translate the old texts without the pile of lexicons that always surrounded Russell; reading Virgil for pleasure, quickly, fluently, and finishing volumes within a day or two; shifting back and forth between Hebrew and Greek texts, pointing out semantic differences and etymological relationships. Perhaps in his weakened

condition the Master wouldn't be able to identify the text, and for that reason, Russell hurried over to ask him. He hoped the Master wouldn't be asleep so he could find out right away that he didn't know. The Master's wife greeted Russell softly at the nursing room door, and faded back, saying that the Master was indeed awake and feeling pretty strong.

"Oh, my, now!" the doctor of the ancients exclaimed feebly, holding his shaking hand up for the letter. "You say this is from Jeannie Marie! She's something, Jeannie Marie."

"She wrote the letter to Russell," Mrs. Pogue said to her husband firmly. Sometimes the Master only heard his wife's voice. "Russell wants to know if you can identify the script at the bottom of the page."

"Uhh? Oh. Script. Yes, well, she's come up with something here, hasn't she? Jeannie Marie writes wonderful letters. Wonderful."

The emphasis on Jeannie Marie, also a friend and former pupil of the Master, irritated Russell. It was beside the point. "Do you recognize the script, Dr. Pogue?"

Mrs. Pogue helped her husband on with his glasses.

"No, no. Oriental I would say. Yep."

"I couldn't find any similarity to Sanskrit."

"No, no. Not Sanskrit. Similar alphabet, maybe, but no. Not Sanskrit. Now, Jeannie Marie's spent a lot of time in China these past years, hasn't she, Mildred?"

"Yes," Mrs. Pogue said, smiling at Russell. "She sends the most intriguing postcards. Here's one from her," and she went to the wall opposite the Master's bed and pointed to one of the postcards that filled the corkboard.

The Master's voiced piped up again, feeble but with a stringy toughness. "She was there for three months year before last, and then she went back again. You've got to pinpoint where she was. Here, I've got her letters ..."



“No, dear, we don’t have them here.”

“She sent me an itinerary,” he continued without interruption.

“Nepal, Tibet, silk road, back through Tibet. And then the year following, two months in Sikkim. That’s also a Buddhist land. Their texts were copied from the Sanskrit into Tibetan. Give the Tibetan script a try, Russell. That’s my advice to you. She took a course in Tibetan, I know because she was showing me her hand at it. Problem is, I don’t know anyone here who specializes in Tibetan. She’s got you there.” He laughed feebly, but the stringy toughness rang out for a long moment.

Mrs. Pogue turned to Russell gratefully. “I haven’t seen him this enthused for I don’t know how long.”

Russell left the nursing house quickly, the information he got pinching a little. What Jeannie Marie did in her spare time did not interest him. He had asked once in a letter for her to please be specific about her daily lifestyle, reproaching her that her letters never really gave a flavor of her life in Europe. But he had been peeved as he had written the request and had been forced to come to the conclusion that he didn’t like Jeannie Marie, not for any particular reason, but that there were certain people that other people didn’t like, for deep, mysterious, instinctive reasons. Surely it was impossible to change that, and wise to respect it.

Back at the library, Russell got his hands on a reproduction of Tibetan scriptures and began searching through the short, wide pages. Sure enough, the squiggles looked like the right kind of squiggles. Nevertheless it was a hopeless task to match up the squiggles, because they had so many hats or accent marks piled on top of them and sometimes below. They never matched. The collar on Russell’s shirt began to irritate him. Damn soap, he thought. He had told Madeline he was allergic to that soap, but she hadn’t believed him. Her wisecrack response had been that his twenty-year-old shirts, the best to be bought anywhere at that time and not to be equaled by anything on the market today, were too small.

After only twenty minutes of unsuccessful deciphering, Russell simply asked at the librarian’s desk for a name of someone who

might be able to help him translate a short Tibetan text. The librarian, a man dressed in a black dress shirt and wide black trousers anchored with a narrow, black belt, pulled out a register with silent intensity. His eyebrows rose into high, perfectly round arcs and his eyes became fixed and alert, as if he were used to staring into long, dark pipes to find things. He had the name on his lips, when he stopped unexpectedly and asked instead to see Russell's student identification card.

"I don't have one," Russell said, smiling crookedly. "I'm a scholar of ancient European texts looking for scholarly assistance in translating an ancient Asian text ... well, not ancient—"

Then he had a faculty identification card and was on the list himself, the man in black concluded, cutting him off. What was his name?

"I'm not employed at the university," Russell answered shaking his head, although he wanted to strangle the proper young man of black-haired, black-eyed intensity with his own black belt, grab the faculty list, and run.

He had special status then, the man said.

"Yee-es, you could say I had special status," Russell agreed.

"At what institute are you employed? Your name must be here somewhere."

"Is all of this really necessary?" Parrying the question gave just the slightest hint that Russell was indeed employed at some other institute and was being modest in trying to avoid revealing his celebrity status.

"Yes, it is," came the flat response. "You can't infringe on the faculty with requests for work unless you're a paying student or a colleague. But then you should know yourself who the Tibetan scholar in our community is."

"Look, let's be reasonable about this," Russell tried anew. "I am not employed at the university. I am not employed anywhere. I am a student of ancient texts in my own home, which by the way is *in* this community and I can show you an ID card and a letter addressed to

me that I happen to have with me which will prove it.” He waved Jeannie Marie’s hated letter briefly but with relish before the picky man’s nose. “I need to translate the last part of the letter, which is in Tibetan. My acquaintances, for example, Dr. Clack—”

The intense, black-eyed man began to search his lists.

“Oh, *he’s* in there,” Russell assured him, amazed to hear the thick swagger in his voice. This was turning out to be a very bad life.

“He’s here. I’ll call him.”

“Please do.”



Sitting in front of a dewy-eyed, dark-skinned, round-headed man—a Tibetan! was the most pleasing reward Russell could have asked for in exchange for his unpleasant day-long efforts. He had been directed to an institute for Tibetan studies in a lovely, quiet part of the city. Huge oak trees, upwards of eighty years old, for which the neighborhood had been named, graced the avenues with their majesty and serenity. The institute itself was a mansion donated to the monks by a rich Western devotee who more than likely had many other houses just as worthy for his own residence, giving the monks perhaps that which pleased him least: a two-story gothic structure of pale stone and arched windows.

In the entranceway, a receptionist had asked Russell whom he sought and then led him to a large, plain room where one dark-skinned Tibetan dressed in a red robe and showing tawny, muscular bare arms was joking loudly in a language Russell didn’t understand to his like-skinned companion, also dressed in a sleeveless red robe. As Russell entered the room, encouraged by the woman who kept indicating with her outstretched hand that he should do so, the two men stopped their laughing and stared at him, their smiles gone and

their full attention focused on him with the serious attentiveness of two startled chipmunks.

Russell apologized for intruding, held up his letter and mentioned his plight. "I probably just need one word translated," he said loudly, in case the two did not understand English.

"Please, come to the desk and sit down," the younger of the two men said severely as if chiding him. Russell did so. As the man seated himself opposite Russell, his older companion simultaneously seated himself right next to him so that their bare arms pressed up against each other. The younger man did not move away. Russell slid over his letter, his finger positioned just above the Tibetan text. The younger man looked at it. The older man looked at it. They looked at each other and began to smile, but not joyfully, rather in shame or embarrassment. Their dark eyes shot to Russell, then to each other again. The older one fingered the edge of the letter thoughtfully. Russell was feeling uncomfortable.

When neither of the men spoke, when no offer was made to explain or translate the text, Russell risked what he thought might be received as a natural comment:

"I think it's supposed to be a joke." He tried to smile as if he already shared their understanding. He just wanted to know what the god-damned thing meant and be gone. The very next thing he did would be to throw away the damned shirt he was wearing and put on a tee-shirt.

"A joke!" they cried. "A joke!" With the mystery explained, they went off into peals of laughter, grasping each other's elbows and jostling each other, having apparently forgotten all about Russell. It did Russell's heart good to see men enjoying a joke so thoroughly. It was not something he saw every day. In fact, it occurred to him that he had never seen anything like it before, this boundless joy. He waited, finding it curious that they laughed for such a long time. Presently, they dried their eyes and turned their gazes to him, full of apologetic embarrassment. The younger one then asked with sudden gravity: "Do you want to know what it says here?" And he showed Russell his own letter, pointing to the Tibetan markings.

“Well, of course I do! That’s what I came over here for. I’ve waste— been spending the whole day on it.” He forced a smile which he felt was a horribly weak variant of the dark-skinned men’s pure exuberance. “What does it say?”

The younger man leaned toward him, training his dark eyes on him as if the information would stream from pupil to pupil. Russell trained his eyes back, in case that was how the secret was, in fact, to be transmitted.

“Do you really want to know what it says?” the man repeated gravely.

“Yes!”

“It’s written in a very nice handwriting, I see.”

“What does it say?”

The man uttered sounds Russell didn’t really hear, then held firmly onto his friend to help restrain the laughter that started bubbling forth again. Russell presumed the sounds spoken were Tibetan.

“Yes,” Russell encouraged, risking another observation based on bluff. “I don’t know what that means.”

The man turned to him, joviality wiped away and grave once more, but he hesitated, his eyes flashing only once towards his companion for reassurance: “It is not a very polite expression ... ”

“What—does—it—say?” Russell asked as even-temperedly as he could.

The man leaned forward, again staring hard at Russell, and Russell witnessed the transformation of the gleaming, joyful, exuberance of those eyes to grave, to haggard, to bloodshot. The man lowered his gaze in humility, then raised it again as he explained carefully: “It refers to a talkative simpleton. Someone who holds forth but does not present matters as they are.”

“A bullshitter?” Russell asked, his words clipped.

“Your equivalent,” came the answer, “in English would be ‘bullshitter.’ Yes. We have no exact equivalent in our language.

Excuse me.” On glancing at each other, the two men became helplessly engulfed in joyous laughter once more, clung to each other, forgot their surroundings altogether until they simultaneously straightened up to stare through their fingers in startled apology at Russell rising from his seat, at Russell stalking out the door.

Unobserved in the hallway, Russell turned towards the two impudent Tibetans and lifted a hand, finger poised pedantically: “Up yours,” he whispered, eyebrows high. A thoughtful pause and the finger strayed towards his chest: “Up mine.” Then ceilingward: “Up ours all.” And with bowed head, he effected his inconspicuous exit.

སྐད་ཅེང་ཚ་པོ་

གད་སྟོབས་