

## Ramus

'How are you feeling today?' asked Ramus in a genuine way.

'Oh as usual. My chest hurts and my heart is playing hopscotch. I don't think that operation did a thing.'

That was a big boned old man, rich enough and well cared for. He was over middle age, but his red plumpness hid this well. He had his hands on his knees to support the straightness in his back and he looked as if he was going to launch into one of his more attentive boardroom speeches. But he was now in Oakford, his heart was giving way, and already he had spent his money on operations most would have feared more than death. He had given his money and in return he was repaired and left alone for periods that he wasn't used to. He was yearning to speak.

He shook his head again and said, 'No, I don't think that operation did a thing.'

'Well, Murray, that last one wasn't to stop the palpitations. It was to make sure they didn't lead to a heart attack.'

Ramus was a young doctor: tall and thin with a gaunt pale face. He looked green sitting next to his patient, though it was his pinkish patient who was convalescing. The weak fluorescent light had bleached his skin as much as the powerful sun bleached the white limestone walls of Oakford. He took a deep breath and held it, bracing himself to give bad news. His patient was looking down, speaking to his heart through a six inch slit, and telling it to shape up, to hold on. They sat for minutes, Ramus twiddling his thumbs and staring now at the floor, now at his patient who looked still at his stitched chest. I hope, thought Ramus, he doesn't ask any more questions. Why must people always ask questions. Ramus looked out the window at the blazing sunlight. It was heating the cars in the lot, but Oakford resisted it.

'So what can we do about those pal – those pal – those palpitations,' came the inevitable question.

'Murray, I have to be honest with you. We've been successful, especially if you think back to the first time you came here almost a year ago. Your surgery was one of the most successful, and I wasn't sure it would be. The operations since have given you relative freedom and energy. When you start feeling better, you'll get back to your regular life.'

'You call that LIFE!' came the shout followed by the whine, 'I haven't been able to leave this room. I can't even walk up a single step. I have to sit here and wait until my family comes to see me. And they're busy all the time.' Each new testament was like a snare drum wrap, the beginning of the death march.

Ramus sat and listened, stung by the sudden venom. He never said much to his patients unless it was about courses of action to be taken, but he felt a bilious rebuke rising in his gut. He thought about his patient. How could this man feel so bad about his own death, he thought. I'm saving his life and he's blaming me. When I go I will know how well I lived my life and I will not see any reason to be bitter, like Murray here. Poor Murray, he thought, poor Murray. What a dupe. Probably he was used and thrown away. Probably never gave a moment's notice to...

'I'm sorry Dr. DeOrio. It's not your fault.'

No, thought Ramus, the fault is his or maybe all of ours, but certainly not mine. Murray, thought Ramus, never asked questions, least of all about himself. He was always looking to the future, and he lost his roots. Or else he lost his roots and then was

always looking to the future. I suppose if that's the case, thought Ramus, then I can see why he would blame me. I wonder who is to blame, though? Certainly, he thought, not me. Isn't it amazing that the whole world could have cursed him and yet he holds the one man who has helped culpable. No, he thought, it isn't my fault and I don't mind the complaints. I won't pay attention.

'What should I do?' the inevitable question came with a sigh.

'You should do whatever you want, Murray. Stretch yourself as much as you can. Eileen will give you instructions on how to keep fit and how far you can go. Like I said, the operation was successful and you should soon be able to continue where you left off.'

'Thanks, Dr. DeOrio. Thanks for everything.'

'My pleasure, Murray, and if you need anything, just ask Eileen and she'll be sure to come get me. You'll be just fine, Murray, and you never know: some people figure out how to keep on chugging and they're the ones who went through worse than you. Just think about that.'

'OK, doctor. Thanks. Have a nice day, Dr. DeOrio and thanks again.'

'You have a nice day,' retorted Ramus, oddly victorious. 'You have a nice day.' He walked out of the sunlit room and into the hallway making his way towards the nurses' desk. He was looking down and thought about his last patient. I don't know, he thought, what makes a man cling to his own life. Hasn't he served his time here. He must have regrets. He must have done things wrong. I suppose he was never told how to do things. I suppose it's hard when nobody helps you, when nobody shows you what's possible. Still, he thought, that makes it easy: with nobody telling you what to do you can do anything. Why am I stuck in this hospital then? If I can do anything? I'd rather be strolling around all day. I haven't any desire to be here. Not really. I'm helping people, though. He stroked his beard and looked up to stretch his neck while he checked his posture. He was stooping, he realised. If I keep stooping, he thought, I'm going to be hunchback.

'Dr. DeOrio,' came the clogged voice of one of his fat nurses.

'Yeah, Edith, listen. Take care of Mr. Fonseca. I don't think he's going to cope very well.'

'I don't think I have the time to take care of him, Doctor, I'm pretty full.'

'We're all full, Edith. If you can't do it, get Eileen to do it.'

'Alright, I'll see who's free.'

Ramus walked off and was again looking down as he made his way to his next patient. We're always full, he thought. There is no shortage of people facing unexpected death. I wonder, he thought, how much a man can do in his life. Look at Fonseca, he thought, that man must have done an awful lot with his life. I wonder why he's so upset. Didn't he plan on this day? People live till they're seventy, he thought. Maybe seventy-six. Fonseca, he thought, poor old Fonseca. He acts like he never did one worthwhile thing in his whole life. I suppose it's hard when nobody shows you what's worthwhile, when nobody tells you what's worthwhile. Still, that makes it easy: nobody telling you what to do. It's like they've been promised something their whole lives and then, when nobody knocks on the door to deliver, they either get depressed or bitter and they end up in Oakford. We're the consolation prize.

He arrived at his next patient and opened the door. He looked in and found him sleeping. The old man was laying there with his head propped upright, forced back so he was facing the ceiling with his mouth wide open. My god, thought Ramus, he looks dead

already. Well, he thought, at least if he dies, I won't have to tell him he's going to die. He sat next to the man and looked down at the white linoleum floor as he clasped his hands. All around him was white. White walls, white floor, white ceiling, white door, white sheets. The only things that weren't white were the man's brown face filled with blue veins and red webs of capillaries. Shrivelled lips surrounded the gaping mouth. Hair sprouted from the ears and nostrils and from the sides of a shiny head. Outside the window, though, was bright sunshine that beat down upon the whole city and the trees outside the hospital. It was early summer and the sun was shining from a big blue sky.

Well, thought Ramus looking at the old man, what a shame. But at least I'm saving these guys. They must look at me, he thought, and think: damn...I should have done something great like this kid. He looked down. At least, he thought, at least I save lives.

## Florence and Julian

Florence was at home waiting for her son, Court. She sat in her living room on a wooden chair next to the window and looked through her lace curtains. It looks hot out there, she thought. I hope he hasn't been playing in the sun. The room where she was sitting was covered with blue wallpaper that was itself covered with darker blue tulip shapes in diagonal lines from floor to ceiling. The only noise that surfaced above the drone of the air conditioning was the occasional drone of a passing motor outside.

She spotted him walking down the street, looking down, hunching from the weight of his bag. He walked through the door and was struck by his mother's gaze.

'Hi, mommy.'

'Hi, honey, how was school.'

'Fine,' he said as he retreated to the kitchen. She watched him and then followed. He looked in the fridge and decided what to eat. He held his mouth as if to whistle but there was no sound.

'What can I make you, honey?' she asked. She stood by, arms crossed, and surveyed her son's desires.

'Nothing, I'm not hungry, I'm just getting a drink.' Court reached for the nearest bottle and took it to the table and poured himself a glass of something. The silence could be heard around the tinkling of the drink. 'I'm going upstairs.'

'OK, dinner will be ready in an hour or so.'

He vanished.

Florence busied herself with cooking. She wondered at her son's behaviour. She went over her words and actions. She had met him at the door, said hello, he had nearly run to the kitchen, and she had followed. She had asked him about school, whether he was hungry. He had poured a drink and run to his room. She wouldn't follow. She looked into the pots of food. In one there were broad beans mixed with peeled tomatoes. In another there was rice and in a third onions were frying. She looked at the highlights on the oily broad beans, hoping they might have an answer to Court's fear. The broad beans simmered among the tomatoes. She looked very closely at one and saw her own silhouette. Every highlight of every broad bean was actually a small oval of light with her silhouette protruding into the middle. Was Court's behaviour her own fault? She would not ask him. She heard the front door. It was Julian.

'Hello Florence,' he said as he walked over and hugged her. Julian was a stubby man of 41. He had a round face and broad square shoulders. He had stubby fingers and as he took off his glasses, he dropped them.

'Hi dear,' she said. 'How was work?'

'It's going fine.' Julian had a slow, rhythmical drawl, as though the words piled up in his head but were constricted by his mouth. They came out slow and slurred, the end of one sound overlapping the next. 'Mostly success,' he continued.

'Good,' said Florence, 'that's good to hear.'

'Where's Court?'

'Upstairs.'

Julian put his hand on the counter beside the burners. 'I got the report from his school and he had a terrible time. He's so smart I called up the teacher and asked what the matter was. She told me he doesn't do his work in class. I asked her what kind of work he wasn't doing and she said he wasn't really doing any of it. And I asked her what they were doing and she said: painting, reading, writing, storytelling. And I said, you call that work! She said they weren't expected to solve the world's problems, only show a degree of concentration, and I said if you give him something worth concentrating on, he might show that ability. Then she said the curriculum was as advanced as most kids could handle, including Court, and that for him to move on, he had to prove himself. So I started yelling and then she told me it was no good yelling at her, since she'd been teaching children for thirty years. I told her maybe it was time she quit. So then she said that she had taught many kids, and many smart kids who had done just well or better than Court and that they had no problem doing their work. Anyway, I told her that she was being unfair, but she said that was the way she did it. What a woman. Can you imagine?'

'Well, dear, maybe she just hasn't understood Court. He's very intuitive.'

'Haven't you been keeping track of his schoolwork?' Julian asked, flaring his nostrils.

'He doesn't let me help him.'

'Yes. Well,' he put his hands on his hips and looked at Florence. He calmed himself. 'Anyway, what's new?'

'Nothing really. We've been invited to Stefan's party.'

'Is Ramus going to be there?'

'I suppose.'

'Well, I don't know. Maybe.' Ramus was Julian's younger half brother. Julian took a deep breath. 'It smells great in here.'

'Thanks, dear.'

Julian sat and surveyed his wife stirring over the stove. The sauce was sizzling and his wife's profile was exaggerated by her long black hair. Julian looked thick and clumsy next to Florence. His grey hair was in contrast to Florence's black. They stood for some time with the sparse sounds of cooking, and Florence noticed that the oval highlights on the broad beans were further interrupted by the head of her husband.

'I'm going to talk to Court,' Julian said and he lurched from his place.

As Florence continued her dinner preparations, she let her mind wander. She thought of her husband and how they first met. She couldn't remember who spoke to whom first, but she thought it was probably him. They met at a dance. She was standing with her friend and he was standing next to her. They were speaking and he was so down to earth, so experienced, so gentle. He was speaking of that day and the day before and

tomorrow. He was going to go to the lake tomorrow and would she come along. Yes she would come along.

Court walked in and said hello. Florence said hello back and continued stirring. Did he want anything to eat right away. No? Dinner would be ready in an hour. Was that OK? Good. Was school OK? Good. What happened to his homework tonight? What did he want to do? There was another question. She asked him to repeat it. Court said something, maybe nothing, and then left to go upstairs.

Florence continued thinking of her romance with Julian. That day by the lake, he was talking about his work and his teaching. He was so gentle. He talked of what he knew, and he knew so much about the way things worked.

Florence continued her reverie of the solitary cook until everything was prepared. She set the table, arranging the plates on the table mats and the forks, knives, and spoons on each side. She put the napkins beneath the forks, then squared everything off. She stepped back to look at the table, then put the salt and pepper shakers down and a pitcher of water. She arranged glasses, then added a bottle of juice. She pushed the four chairs in under the table, then added the pot of broad beans and tomatoes. She placed the salad bowl, then added a small basket of bread. She mixed the rice with the onions, then placed the mixture next to the salad. She called the family to table. Court and Julian walked through the door.

They sat and began dishing up. 'This looks delicious, Florence,' Julian said, then they ate.

## Chorus

The party was in full swing and Stefan was rushing around saying hello and ensuring everyone felt at home. He was making introductions right and left and generally stirring things up.

'Julian, Julian! Welcome! And welcome to you too, Florence! You look lovely! So how are you two this evening! Great! Great! Julian, your brother is over there and he seems to be dragging his feet as the most eligible bachelor. Why don't you see if you can get him fired up!' The noise was tremendous, and people were shouting over each other. There were heads rolled back in laughter and smiles from ear to ear. The high ceilinged room, shouted out over the swimming pooled terrace, and nature listened from the hot darkness.

Stefan's house was a high ceilinged penthouse surrounded on all sides by glass windows with a mezzanine propped up in the middle of the lounge. It was comfortable and neat with only four visible finishes: steel, glass, wood, and white paint. There were people packed into the lounge and overflowing onto the terrace.

'So how's work?' Ramus asked Stefan. Ramus, Julian, and Stefan stood together.

'Oh, it's fine, you know. Actually it couldn't be better. I've got a half a billion dollar deal going with a company in Milan. If it works, I'll retire.'

'You're 27.'

'Maybe just take a year off! What about you? How is the hospital business?' Stefan asked Ramus.

'As usual,' he said. 'You try walking around a hospital all day.' Ramus crossed his arms and stood sturdily on his two legs. He was taller than Julian by a good way and

slightly taller than Stefan.

'Never been sick,' replied Stefan. 'All in the head,' he proclaimed, tapping his hair. Ramus bowed his head and smiled. He was about to speak, but left his lips closed. He would have said, wait till you're old, but he checked himself. He was sick of telling people they were going to die.

Stefan continued, 'When I kick the bucket it's going to be one clean sweep,' and he snapped his fingers and smiled.

Florence stood well behind Ramus, speaking with Stefan's wife. Julian looked at her. She stood holding a drink, speaking in subdued tones. Stefan's wife listened with crossed brows and crossed arms.

'Excuse me,' announced Julian as he walked to his wife. 'What are you talking about,' he asked the two women, interrupting the anxious dialogue.

'We were speaking about Court,' Marilyn said. 'Is he really so quiet? He's always spoken to me.'

'Quiet? No. Not with me,' said Julian. 'What brought him up?'

'I asked Marilyn if she ever thought about having children,' said Florence. 'She said maybe and I told her to plan.'

'What for?' asked Julian.

'Careful planning. That's all. I said it wasn't like getting married,' said Florence.

'Why were you talking about children?'

'I asked her why she looked worried,' said Marilyn.

'Well. Court's fine. He's introverted. The good thing is that he's intuitive. Very intuitive.'

Ramus had turned to see Julian's whereabouts.

'What's with your brother?' Stefan asked, 'He hasn't said a word,' and he crossed his arms to take a look at Julian's path. He leaned on his back leg and slowly clouded over.

'I'm not sure,' said Ramus as he turned to face Stefan. 'You know I think he's having trouble with Court at school. Looks to me as though Florence is suffering from it as well. I don't know, probably just tired. Anyway, what's going on with you? Planning any kids?'

'God, no! I mean, not yet, you know. Do you plan kids? I reckon when the time is right, you know - the way we got married - just out of the blue. Good luck, I guess.'

'Models. I thought they got bored of their work.' Ramus turned to look at Marilyn. She was beautiful. She was so beautiful she covered magazines around the world. He turned back and began, 'You've certainly done well, haven't you?'

Stefan smiled an even, bright smile. He had done well. Free at such a young age. Free to do as he pleased. He could give his money away to worthy causes. He could raise a family in comfort and educate them wherever he pleased. He could venture into new areas, fund new ideas. He could have parties and entertain in a high style. Evidence of his freedom was all around. He had sculptures abstract and figurative. He had paintings on the walls, large scale abstracts, large scale nudes. He knew the artists personally and enjoyed meeting and speaking with them. Some were in attendance tonight. He awoke from his trance and said to Ramus, 'I've done well, but you've done well yourself.'

'Maybe so, but walking around all day and seeing what I see isn't a day at the office.'

'Yes, I see why you would feel stressed. You know I think that having a man's life in the balance and being the one who must keep him alive is crazy. Can you imagine a surgeon sitting there thinking he might make the wrong cut.' He gestured as if to cut, using his wrist as the hypothetical patient.

'Well, no, I don't think that's worrying because nobody's going to tell you you're...'

'No, but I mean knowing that a life is in your hands and saying to yourself: Can't do this wrong, gotta do this right. I mean it would drive me crazy.'

'No, I don't feel particularly worried in that way, I think it doesn't happen like that because there's nobody to tell you whether you're...'

'Wait a sec. These guys are leaving too early. One sec.' He rushed off and began speaking to a parting couple, leaving Ramus quite alone.

He continued to himself: whether you're doing it right. He looked down into his drink. No-one's going to tell you whether you're doing it right, so there's no pressure unless you create it yourself. Why doesn't Stefan listen? Besides, thought Ramus, it's extra time - life extension - and no-one faults you for not adding extra-time, they only congratulate you when you do manage it. Of course most patients are bitter to learn they're not immortal, he thought, though I certainly can't be blamed for that. Julian approached with Florence and Marilyn.

'Need another drink, Mr. Ramus? That one seems to be worrying you.' Julian was smiling at his younger brother.

'Hi guys.' He leaned and kissed Marilyn's cheek, then continued, 'Great party, Marilyn, pity about the husband. I suppose the same goes for you, Florence.'

'So says Mr. Ramus. At least Florence and Marilyn don't have a gorilla rubbing up to them.'

'This is an expression,' Ramus said, rubbing his beard.

'I don't trust hairy men,' said Marilyn. 'They're all porn directors or bums.'

'And what do you know of the porn industry, Marilyn?' retorted Julian. 'Are you venturing into new areas of entertainment? Because, if you are, it seems your husband is going to be in the money soon. Perhaps he'll offer to produce. No doubt it's a huge market. Lucrative. Might have children that way too. What about that for careful planning?'

'How do you think we met?' Marilyn retorted. 'My aunt told me that to be a good wife, you have to be a slut.'

'And to be a good mother,' said Florence, 'you have to be a saint.'

'That explains Stefan,' said Marilyn, 'His mother was a slut in front of him and a saint in front her husband.'

'Don't we marry our mothers,' asked Julian.

'No,' said Marilyn, 'if your mother's a slut, then you marry a saint. And the opposite goes as well: if she's a saint, then you marry a slut. But of course, that's only true if the men pick the women.'

'And if not?' asked Julian.

'If the woman picks the man?'

'Yes.'

'Then she marries her father. Unless, of course, he was a bad father, in which case, she marries and then tries to kill her husband, who is of course the father.'

'And who does he marry?'

'He is married to his father,' said Marilyn gaily, 'or hers, perhaps. Of course it

could be her mother.'

'Nobody knows any better, at least in marriage' said Julian.

'And what,' asked Ramus, 'if someone doesn't get married.'

'Then she's lucky,' said Marilyn, 'unless she wants children. In which case, she's a slut.'

'And if she's neither married nor wants children?' asked Florence.

'Then she's a saint.'

'And if she gets married but doesn't want children?' Florence continued.

'That's a mistake, unless she had a bad father. Well, not really. In that case, she had a bad father, planned on killing her husband, then changed her mind. That is a woman's luxury.'

## Court

Court returned home on a hot Saturday afternoon and found his mother in the darkened living room with blue flowered walls. She was sitting on a wooden chair with her legs crossed.

'Hello, darling,' she said. 'How was John's house?'

'Fine.' He put his bag down and shuffled around the living room looking for nothing in particular, fearful of the possibility of an expectant gaze. The sun streamed through the two windows and light came also from the kitchen. Court snuck into the kitchen and looked in the fridge. 'Where's daddy?' he shouted towards the living room.

'He said he'll be back soon,' came a reply softly from the living room.

Court went out into the garden and picked up the hose. He sprayed himself from head to toe. From the kitchen window, Florence looked on. She wondered why Court didn't speak to her. Why was he so distant? She remembered how she used to breast feed him and how she used to look at him. She used to hold Court up in the air and look him right in the eyes and they would both be laughing at each other and anything.

'Do you want to go swimming ward?' Florence yelled out the window.

'Yeah, mommy!' shouted Court.

'Get your suit on!'

Court came ran inside to change then ran out into the garden to put on his yellow floaters. Florence was getting into the pool one step at a time and as she approached the last step she plunged herself in, swam to the other side of the pool and came back to carry ward in. From next door, the voices of her neighbours came floating through in soft bursts, overpowered by the strong silence. Court descended the first steps into the water and Florence reached to take his hand. As he reached forward and prepared to lunge, she moved backwards, forcing him to paddle so that he could reach her. He fought to keep his mouth above the water.

'Wow,' said Florence, 'you're swimming well, Court! Do you want to try without the bands?' He hesitantly accepted, steering himself slowly to the steps where he could stand. Florence approached as he took off his floats and threw them to the side. Florence took his hand.

'I don't need it,' he said with a prideful pout. He swam with a look of strained concentration, eyes wide open and mouth tensed, paddling feverishly to cover the short distance. Florence stayed put and hugged him when he got there congratulating him with

a 'good job, Court!' He stayed himself then pushed off to swim back to the step. He was a little further away but he made it and turned around to come back. He started and as he approached, Florence distanced herself watching the focus on his face. What happened, she wondered? Why won't he talk to me. Why won't he kiss me like little boys are supposed to. Why doesn't he love me like a son? She was moving still and Court's look turned from focus to fear, though still prideful he dared not betray his stumbling heart.

Julian fumbled through the front door and put his case beside the sofa. To do this, he doubled over his belly, which was well absorbed by his general stockiness. He walked into the kitchen, and stopped to fill his glass. Through the window he heard a shout and he ran out back. He saw Florence holding Court as he hit her in the chest.

'I can't swim that far!' he shouted. He was crying.

'Yes you can, honey! Oh come on, don't cry. You swam almost half the pool!' But Court was pummelling her chest, pushing himself away and swimming back to the steps.'

'Hi Court,' said his father, but Court was out of the pool and stomping by. 'I've been meaning to talk to him about his grades.'

'You haven't done it yet?' she asked

'No.' He walked toward the door and stood on the balcony, hands in his pockets despite the clear heat. 'Court! Come here for a second, will you?'

'No!' he shouted back.

'Come on, Court.' His son walked out to the balcony, too tall for his age, arms hanging by his side.

'What, daddy?'

'Why haven't you been doing well at school? You're teacher says you haven't been doing your work.'

'It's boring. I do my work, she's just mad because I laugh a lot.'

'About what?'

'About other kids' work.'

'Why?'

'Because it's funny.'

'What's funny?'

'The other kids work.'

'Why?'

'It just is. Mommy!' shouted Court, 'tell daddy what's so funny.'

'About what, Court.'

'About the other kids.'

'The other kids are fine, Court,' said Florence, through the screen window.

'Not fine. Funny.' Court clouded over as he stared through the screen window. 'They're funny, and you're funny.' With that he ran into the house and up to his room.

'I'll go,' said Julian.

'Don't worry, dear, I'll go,' and Florence walked slowly up to Court's room. 'Court. Come on, let me in.' She pushed the door open and Court was lying with his head in his pillow. 'Come on, honey, what's the matter.'

'I hate you,' came the muffled voice.

'I love you,' she said.

'I hate you!'

'Court? Don't smile.' And he did.

## Catrek and Soloman

Catrek sat in the garden and sipped at a cool drink, condensation forming on the side. She was flipping through a magazine which might have been called 'Glamour: look at us.' She was admiring the skirt and hat worn by a particularly lovely model, who could have been Stefan's wife. She gazed cross legged at the lovely outfit, then flipped the pages and stopped again on another particularly lovely skirt. She flipped through several pages and stopped briefly, flipped through some more, stopped, and then flipped and flipped until the end. She took a sip of her cool drink, and then started from the beginning of the magazine.

Catrek was in her early fifties, and was the mother of two, Ramus and Julian. The beginnings of old age were showing as creases around her mouth, her cheeks and her eyes. She sat on this Saturday as she did on every warm day of the year, under her hat with a cool drink, reading the latest glamour magazine. But on this Saturday, her mood was not light, but overcast. She was not paying particular attention to anything, but was thinking about her life, a life which had left no visible mark, she thought, no signs of her own venture, she believed. She opened her magazine and continued flipping through the images. As she looked at the products brightly represented, she considered Ramus. She remembered giving birth to him so long ago and she pictured him and came up with an impression of a young man stooped as he sat upon a comfortable chair, his head and arms hanging before him. Nothing like the bright scenes displayed before her, page after page, and, page after page, she continued flipping, cursorily inspecting the goods.

She was often overcast, and she returned to the same source when she thought enough about it, or was overcome by it: where was her mark. As she pictured the globe, smooth but for the scars of man, she wondered why her own marks were never apparent. She looked around her own garden at the objects: plants, bricks, gravel, flowers, and trees and was left without the feeling of depth. She looked into her memories and saw them as a patchwork of others', without a distinction of her own. And when she wondered what kind of mark she would make, she could not come up with one besides the one that stuck in her head, the one she knew to be synthetic.

She thought of Ramus, and imagined the young man, without a will to perform his fate, a fate she understood to be distant from the course he was following. She thought with wariness of the difficulties she had in telling him this, but hoped he would understand. She knew his melancholia came from a belief in this course just as his happiness would come in its fulfilment. She regarded him as her one mark, and thought with elation at his eventual achievement, his eventual self-knowledge. She became giddy with the image of a future Ramus, backed by his own will that was once padded and nurtured in her womb. Not a man, but a god in a man's body, waiting to pronounce his word.

And so this was a cycle: a grey anxious self-doubt followed by a warmth of future certainties. Anyone seeing one aspect would doubt the other existed, and in the face of such a doubt, she had a tendency to become hysterical.

Soloman stepped out to the porch and looked out at Catrek. She was not facing him, so he put his hands back onto the railing. He watched his wife steadily and listened to the noises about him. It was still. The clouds passed slowly overhead, and shone in

the sun, making the sky look like a calm sea. He gripped the railing even tighter. 'Hello, dear,' he finally said, but Catrek did not hear. She crossed her legs and continued flipping her magazine as she moved her free leg back and forth in a nervous way. 'Hello, dear,' he spoke up so he could hear his own voice.

'Oh, hello, dear,' Catrek said as she turned to look at him, shielding her eyes as Soloman had done. 'How are you?'

'Oh, I'm fine, you know. Most things are going well, going pretty well. How are you?'

'I'm fine. I'm enjoying the sun and just thinking.' Soloman released his grip and walked down towards the garden. He walked and then sat uneasily beside his wife. He held his hands together and looked around. Soloman was older than his wife. He bowed his greying hair and played with his legs, moving them up and down and crossing and re-crossing them at the ankle. He kicked his heels into the grass.

'So, dear, what's new at the hospital?' Catrek asked.

'Oh not, much.' He almost clipped her words. 'Actually, I have received an interesting offer, but I'm not looking at it seriously.' He gripped his hands.

'Oh, yes?'

'Well, it's funny, but do you know Stanley DuFray?'

She flipped the pages of her magazine. 'I think I remember that name.'

'Well, Stanley has offered me work with his practice in the middle east. I don't know.' Again he clipped her words, but now he paused and played with his feet. 'It would be a change from this,' he said. 'It would be a change from the hospital. Fewer hours on my feet, more diverse patients, but it is far away.' He continued tapping his ankles and digging into the grass with his heels. He was mutilating a small patch, digging in his heels and twisting the grass out. 'But the position is interesting,' he continued, 'very interesting.'

Catrek was flying through the magazine and skimming now one, now another blurb on such and such a dress and such and such a designer. She let her crossed leg pump forcefully back and forth as she read.

'The pay is terrific. Probably ten times what I'm earning here.'

'Wow,' said Catrek. She didn't want to hear any more. She was bowing her head and hunching into the magazine as she looked at the page. She held the page for some time and then flipped to the next one, gripping the glossy pile so as to crimp it.

'Yeah, but it's far away.' He waited. During the whole of this conversation he had been facing forward, but now he turned towards his wife. He noticed she was frowning. He noticed the lines on her eyes and her tensed lips and he thought she looked old. Catrek's dark eyes burned under the shade of her hat. They burned the blackest of blacks even in the shade of her brow and even against her dark hair. Her whole head was astir and its workings could be felt as far away as the hospital, where Ramus was working diligently.

----- Chapter 2-----

## Ramus and Soloman

Oakford hospital was made by architects who would certainly end their days there themselves wondering why on earth it was such a bleak place and wouldn't it be possible to inject some cheer. Its bare white walls and square black windows were coupled with a rectangular shape whose proportions were based not on sense but on territorial restrictions. From the outside, it merely seemed stoic, resigned to the fates of those who entered, calmly efficient. Inside, atmosphere was provided mainly by fluorescent lights that cast not white but grey green light. The persistent smell of stagnation lingered all around, and the antibacterial wash killed whatever signs of life there were.

Ramus and Soloman both worked in Oakford hospital, that bleak white building. What a building it was, that hospital. It would have been a blight on a desktop had it been shrunk down to the size of a matchbox. Even a matchbox would have been a pleasant sight next to the mini Oakford with such uneasy proportions. When it was designed, and was a matchbox sized conception in the mind of a frustrated architect, it should immediately have been rejected because of its poor aspect. Perhaps the man was feeling disgusted and so vented his general nausea in the form of a new hospital. He spat it out and somehow the notion managed to pass through hordes of designers, approvers, financiers, contractors, and now it was serving the masses as a hospital at the cutting edge of patient care. So monstrous on the outside, but on the inside, the saviour of thousands of lives every year.

Soloman worked on the top floor of the hospital, which was the loftiest and brightest part, made up of large atriums and high ceilings with sky lights, as though one renegade designer had managed to amend the travesty of the hospital. Since Ramus worked on the first floor, they ran into each other rarely, if at all. There was no lunch hour, no unified coffee break, during which the two could organise to unite. If they were able to take lunch on the off chance that they both found each other in the cafeteria, one would soon be called away to perform a check up on a patient whose care had malfunctioned.

So Ramus was, though an observant and curious man, unable to grasp the extent of his father's predominant bitterness. Soloman was bitter and, as he put it to his colleagues, disillusioned at the medical practice. He was overly active and it was perhaps his haste which aroused suspicion as an ambitious or unhappy man.

He walked into his elderly patient's room without knocking. It was dark, with sunlight slicing in through the cracks in the blinds. He was used to the bright atrium and had difficulty seeing in the dark room.

'How are we today, Mrs. Essil,' he asked as he brushed aside a curtain and opened the blind to let the sun flood in. He leaned on the bed, pushing his crotch against the railing.

The old woman lay there and slowly comprehended her situation. She lifted her hand and rested it on her emaciated belly. Soloman noticed her wrinkled lips, her wrinkled eyes, and her sagging cheeks. He looked at her foot, which was a lumpy thing, bent out of shape in the middle. He saw the beginnings of all these failings in his own wife, Catrek. He saw in front of him the end of Catrek. He saw it as well as Catrek

herself saw it in the mirror each morning, but he did not take it as well.

'How are you feeling, Mrs. Essil!' he spoke up and pursed his lips, they were not crinkling yet.

'Oh I'm alright, doctor,' she wheezed. Her voice paralleled her shaking hands.

'Good,' he said as though talking to a small child. 'And there's no pain, is there?'

'No, doctor, but I am awfully tired,' she said.

'Well, perhaps you should try doing a little exercise,' he offered. 'I think we'll get a nurse to look after you, shall we.' She would not live much longer. She would die, figured Soloman, within the week. 'You keep chugging, Mrs. Essil! We'll see you out of here soon, OK!' He paused and once again saw Catrek in that bed. 'Can I get you anything before I go?'

'No, thank you, doctor,' came the grateful reply, the only bit of warmth in the whole room. 'Thank you, so much, doctor. I'm sorry to trouble you.'

'Don't be silly, Mrs. Essil. You've been a pleasure.' He walked towards the door and turned to say goodbye. He forgot to close the curtains and the blinds. He forgot Mrs. Essil and hurried back toward the bright atrium where the nurses were gathered. He eyed them up and down and admired them all, the fat ones, the slim ones. He walked amongst them and went to lean on the counter surrounding the station.

'What's all this gabbing?' he asked.

Dorothy, one of the prettier nurses, answered, 'oh nothing, doctor, don't you have work to do?'

'Exactly! What's all this then? Don't you know we've got a full ward? You should all be up and about. Shoo shoo,' said Soloman, flicking his wrists. 'Shoo, come on! Shoo.' He was smirking, and the nurses dispersed.

Ramus stood watching at the end of the counter.

'Ah hello, son!' said Soloman. 'How is everything. I haven't seen you in a while. Do you want to take a break? Come on, let's go.' Ramus followed him to the coffee room in silence.

'Coffee?' offered Soloman as he poured himself a glass.

'No thanks.'

'Tea?'

'No thanks. I'm going to have a cold drink.'

'Help yourself. Over there in the fridge.' He leaned over the counter pouring his coffee and then went to sit down on one of the couches. Ramus came over, unbuttoned his white coat and sat on the couch next to his father's. He cracked his cold drink and took a sip, then put it between his legs and looked at it intently. He was worried to the core of his soul. He thought about his father and the way his father was flirting with the nurses. I guess, he thought, he's always looked at passing women. I've always noticed that. There's nothing new there, he thought, but today it is insult to injury. This hospital, he thought, this whole day has been nothing but worry.

'So how's work going,' asked Soloman.

'Fine.'

'And how was Stefan's party?'

'It was pretty good. Julian was there with Florence. They seemed alright' He paused and twisted his tin can. 'I guess they were alright, though,' he added, 'in the end.'

'So have you spoken to your mother recently?' asked Soloman.

'Yeah. She called yesterday. She was saying something about you having some

offer to go abroad. What did she say? The middle-east, or something. What's that all about?'

'Yeah,' Soloman perked up. 'I got a terrific offer and the job looks like a lot of fun.'

'Where is it?'

'Over in Riyadh. It's an office that's run by the Royal Family and – you know Stanley DuFray, right?'

'Right. The surgeon.' Ramus was still looking at his drink. Dr. DuFray, he thought. DuFray! he thought, I never liked that guy.

'Well, there's an offer there I can't pass up. I don't know, though. I talked to him and he told me – he asked me to if I wanted to spend half the time there and half the time here.'

'And the hospital's alright with that?'

'I don't know yet. I'm looking into it.' He got up. 'I have to go, but as it stands, the offer is great, and I need to do something new, you know. I love this hospital – but – but I wouldn't mind separating from it, you know, just for a while. Maybe a year or two. I have to go.' He put his cup in the sink.

Ramus got up as well. I guess he's right, he thought, I guess he just feels like I do. He wants something new, he thought. 'Bye daddy,' he said.

'See you, son.' He left and Ramus followed him to the nurses station. He caught a glimpse of the nurse who was talking to Soloman. She was pretty, he thought. Sexy. Ramus walked down to his ward. He was looking straight ahead all the way there, thinking. I guess, he thought, that's why mommy was so upset. Of course she doesn't want to travel there. Who would she know? That's not my problem, though, and I guess I'll stay clear of it. I wish I knew what to do with myself, he thought. I'm feeling at a loss. Am I stuck? He bypassed the nurses with a wave of his hand as he approached the nurses' station. He walked directly to his patient's room and knocked on the door.

## Florence and Julian

'Florence!' came Julian's yell from the darkened living room. Smoke was filling the room, pouring in from the kitchen. 'Florence!' Julian ran in and pushed the door, only to find a dense smoke filling the kitchen, its only escape the cracked window. He waved and fluttered his jacket to make his way towards the stove, where he saw the smoke issuing in dense streams from the pot. He wrapped his hand in his jacket and pulled the pot off the stove, then walked carefully outside onto the porch. He placed the smoking pot on a paving stone, went back inside, and extinguished the burners on the stove. He opened the windows full force and turned the fan on. Maestro, Maestro, he said to himself.

'Florence!' he shouted and then hurried from the kitchen upstairs to the master bedroom. Florence lay sleeping on the bed. Julian stopped himself dead. She was on her side, her arms crossed at the wrists, her legs crossed at the ankles. She had lain atop the bed cover, and had put the other half over her, but it had slipped off. She wore a pale green knee length skirt and a pink t-shirt top, all of which hugged her rather thin body. Julian could make out her slight breasts. Her black hair came down the front of her neck and made her pale face into an oval, with her mouth just sealed in a line across it. The

fan was blowing and was the only noise in the room, hypnotically oscillating the noise and the breeze.

Julian came and sat beside her, between her arms and legs and brushed her hair from her neck.

'Oh my god!' she awoke with a start. 'Oh my god, I've left the flame on!' she jumped up and shot downstairs, followed slowly by Julian.

'Don't worry dear,' he said as he followed. 'I've taken care of it.' He walked in to the kitchen.

'Oh Julian, I don't know what happened. I was just so tired, I thought I'd take a quick nap, but I just fell asleep and dreamt.' She was rummaging through the kitchen and cleaning the stove with a sponge.

'Accidents happen,' he said.

'Oh Julian, I'm sorry.'

Julian watched her cleaning. 'How come Court's not back?'

'He's staying after school.'

'Why are you so tired?'

'Oh I don't know, no reason. I'm so ashamed.'

'Don't worry, accidents happen,' but Julian was worried. Florence was thin and she looked tired. Her eyes were sunken, her cheeks diminished. She was green instead of brown.

'I'm going to go and put something on the stove,' said Florence.

'Why don't we eat out?'

'I'm in no mood to eat out. I'm going to prepare something.'

'OK, what can I do?'

'You can do what you like. Why don't you see how the garden looks. I think it needs some work. I'll send Court out when he gets here.'

'Fine.' Julian retreated to the garden and surveyed it from the porch with his hands resting on his hips. He thought his garden looked just fine, but perhaps things were getting a bit out of hand. He went to get the pruning scissors and began chopping. He began with the most overgrown plant, a large bush at the end of flowering, and snipped some of its larger stems. Then he moved and kneeled beside his roses. He put his nose in each one and took a long sniff. His favourite, a densely petalled purple rose smelled so sweet and rich that he closed his eyes and enjoyed it. He carefully checked the leaves and the stalks and then continued with his other roses. He would have to talk to someone about Florence. He would talk to Ramus and ask his advice.

## Chorus

'Hey Ramus!' cried Stefan, waving from his table. It was a sunny Saturday at Café Downtown. 'Have a seat.'

'Julian's going to join us as well.'

'Oh yeah, great, great. So what's new?'

'Not much. What about you? Did you make your half billion.'

'Ha ha. No no. The half billion is the deal,' he said. 'I'll only make three percent of that. So, say fifteen million.'

'Man. That's the way to do it. Money for nothing and chicks for free.' Ramus

said, squinting as he looked up at the sky. 'How did I end up in a hospital all day?' He raised his hands in exultation.

'Yeah, man,' said Stefan. 'All that's left is for me to live a life of debauchery.'

'What are the chances of that.'

'Pretty slim. Marilyn said she wanted to go on vacation, though.'

'You're always on vacation. You were in Turkey when I called you last week...'

'Then I'm going to Milan next week, and Turin, and then Rome. Then I'm flying to Germany for the day, then to Paris, then back to Milan and then I'll be back again for a couple of days. Then...'

'Alright alright,' said Ramus.

Stefan sat smiling with his mouth as he nodded his head like a wind up toy. 'Not bad, huh,' he said.

'No.' He kept his mouth shut. He was going to say it sounded like a lot of travelling, and it sounded unsettling. He was going to say that, but he turned on himself. What is the problem with me, he thought? Where is the answer?

'What's wrong, Ramus?'

'Nothing.' Ramus bowed his head and looked at the ground beneath the table. They had been friends for many years, and though Ramus thought Stefan was a slippery man, he believed Stefan's heart was in the right place. He believed Stefan had made all that money for others. So he could have parties, he believed, and entertain. Ramus had said as much to a girl he met at one of Stefan's parties. A mousy girl, she had said he was so silly to have done what he did, such a braggart and a show off. No-one understands him, Ramus had said. He does all this for us, for you and me, Ramus had said. I don't know, came the reply, I still think he's slimy, she had added. Ramus had been interested in that girl in a peculiar way. He had found her refreshing because of her light-hearted mockery. He had had no luck with her, despite his efforts, and he found his advances jerky and momentous.

'Come on, man, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, man. I can't figure out what's wrong. If I could, I'd tell you.'

'Cheer up, man, look how beautiful it is. Sunshine all around, beautiful women walking everywhere. Look at those two girls. Come on. Let's make a move.'

'Come on, Stefan, I couldn't ...' but Stefan was up and moving quickly. Ramus got up and went to buy some drinks. He came back with hands full.'

'Can I offer you something?' he asked. The two men were invited to sit down and the conversation, though immediate, and relieving was not the elixir that Stefan had thought it might be. Stefan was a businessman, a founder of a company, an insurance company. Ramus was a doctor, a surgeon. The girls were visiting for a weekend. They were at university. Towards the end of the stuttering conversation, Julian appeared and motioned at the two to join him.

'Sorry to interrupt, fellows. I can put a damper on anything!'

'It was dying over there,' said Ramus. 'They were not particularly lively.'

'What kind of a judge are you? You were half dead!' said Stefan. He turned to Julian and continued, 'I'm trying to cheer the guy up.'

'Why don't you buy him a nice car? Topless, with a topless girl.'

'I'll throw Marilyn in as well.'

'You both seem to be at odds with your wives. Why did you get married?' said Ramus.

'Love at first sight,' said Stefan.

'After you'd seen her on the covers of all those magazines?' said Julian.

'Look at those two, Julian. What do you think?' asked Stefan.

'Not bad. Young.'

'Too young?'

'Not too young. Maybe too young for Ramus.'

'I'm not excited about them. What's wrong with that?'

'You need to watch more porn,' said Stefan.

'I have imagination.'

'It's not the same, is it.'

'Better. I'll tell you a story. When I first started working at the hospital, I used get these looks from the nurses. I figured they were eyeing me up – everyone knows about doctors and nurses. I was so hopeless at one stage that I started envisioning various scenes with them. Think of those pornos and you'll know what was going through my head. I came in one day after a weekend of desperate baiting and my head was rife with these images. Every time I spoke to a nurse, it unravelled into some bizarre storyline – she'd unbutton her blouse and give me a peek and then lead me to a particular room... So I arrived in the morning and every nurse was a potential accomplice in my little plans. Here's the trouble. I walked into one of my patients rooms, and, for the sake of clarity, let me describe her. She was skin and bone and she was balding. She was in for something, but I can't remember what. I came into her room and as she sat there, I started fantasising. I couldn't stop.'

'I don't watch those kinds of films,' said Stefan, 'but I've seen them on the racks.'

## Ramus and Julian and Florence

'I don't know Ramus. Just have a look at her for me, will you,' said Julian as they were walking towards Julian's house.

'Fine fine, but I saw her last week and she was fine.'

'Fine at the party, but something's wrong. I don't know! She's thinner, right?'

'A little.'

'Look at her eyes.'

Ramus thought of her eyes and remembered them looking alert and curious. He thought back to the party. She seemed just fine, just fine. Was she, he thought, thinner? He rubbed his beard as he walked along. He was looking down. This Julian, he thought, is really putting me in a tight spot. Oh well, he thought, if everything is fine then I have nothing to worry about. They were walking down Julian's street in silence and Ramus was still looking down. What a day, he thought. As though I don't have to look after people all day. And now I have to look after people all the time. And this is funny, he thought. I can't look after myself. All day walking around that awful place, he thought, and telling people how to do things, what's wrong with them, healthwise, and then I look at myself and that stuff I'm telling them is the tip of the iceberg. The very tip, he thought, and what lurks beneath that is the whole universe, everything that I don't know. How should I tell Julian and Florence what's wrong, he thought, when Julian seems to be so far ahead of me. What's wrong! he thought. How should I know?

Julian and Ramus approached the house and walked in silence to the door. They

went inside, walked through the dark living room and to the kitchen, then out on the porch. Florence was not out back. Julian told his brother to wait while he went inside. Ramus stood and waited in the shade of the porch. Julian walked back inside and upstairs to the master bedroom, where he found Florence asleep on the bed. He was home early with Ramus. It was noon and the fan was blowing in the room. Julian sat and gently shook his wife.

'Hello, dear,' she said. 'You're home so early. What happened?'

'Nothing, dear, I had the day off and so I stopped by to see Ramus. I went and picked him up and came over with him.'

'Oh really. Well, I had better get up and say hello.'

'We'll wait downstairs. I'll make him a drink and you come down when you're ready.'

Ramus stood outside and was looking all around the garden. What to think, he thought. I'm lost, he thought. Look at this garden. Look how organised Julian is. He's on the straight and narrow path. Have I strayed from that path. What was it that made my childhood so easy. I remember, he thought, when I figured out that I would never become a man. I remember looking at all the men of this world and wondering when the transformation would take place. Then, one, day, I realised nothing would change, I would simply continue as I was only I would grow older. Does that mean I'm still a child, or was I always a man? What, he thought, was I expecting? What transformation could I have been expecting? Why were decisions so easy. I never spent anything on them. Is that what makes me a man: difficult decisions. Decisions, he thought, decisions, decisions. They're so hard now. Is that what makes me a man? Should I leave the hospital? I don't want to stay there, but it hasn't done me wrong. What would I do if I did leave? Is it a difficult decision or is it simply that I have no choice. Is it an illusory decision? I am stuck! That's all! I have no choice! I can't leave the hospital. What would I do, he wondered. What made decisions so easy? It must be, he thought, that there were no real decisions to be made, merely choices. How is that? Either there were no decisions or else I had a choice? That doesn't make sense. Unless, he thought, unless real choice comes about when either decision is equal, so its insignificant which way you go: there is a choice but no decision. And that means that a decision occurs when a choice leads two ways, each with different outcomes. And those outcomes are difficult to determine, and so, he thought, and so the decision is difficult. And now, what have I to decide? Ah hah, he thought. Ah hah! I see. In my present situation, I have no choice. So I certainly have no decision. How terrible! How have I no choice? What is it, he asked himself, what is it that's changed since I was a child.

'She'll be right down.'

'Right,' said Ramus.

'What are you thinking?'

'Remember when we were kids outside our house in Quentin? We were in the garden and there were bees flying all around. Remember?'

'Hmm. No.'

'That's my first memory. I remember thinking, look at all these bees, won't they sting us? And I looked at you and I asked you if the bees would sting us. Or maybe I just looked at you and figured you weren't bothered, so why should I be. And so I just stopped worrying about it. But then, all of a sudden, you started swatting and you got stung.'

'Don't remember. What a weird memory.'

'Yup. Don't know why I was thinking about that. I was just thinking about being a kid again, and what's happened since then.'

'A whole lot.'

'Not really. Not much.'

Florence walked out and said hello. Ramus had never thought her attractive, but he thought, today she looked divine, with her long dress and her thin arms emanating. Like a ballerina she stood, her posture was erect, her black hair led in a line to her toes, and her pupils, encircled by grey, were the only thing blacker than her hair. They were infinite and drew Ramus's sight to their depths, spun him around so that he was looking out of those black eyes at himself standing on the porch. He saw himself and felt himself for the first time. He was stooping, he felt, and so he straightened up. He had his hands in his pockets, he saw, and so he took them out. He stretched them towards Florence. He left her eyes and was again in his own head. He was reaching out, so he put his head forward and kissed her.

----- Chapter 3-----

## Catrek, Soloman, and Court

It was a hot, high summer Saturday. Catrek sat in the garden in the bright heat of the mid-morning sun. The sun hit everything in the Garden, the bushes, the trees, the gravel, the grass, and the flowers and made it difficult for Catrek to open her eyes much beyond a squint.

She sat in a lawn chair and let the sun soak her skin as she went in and out of a dreamlike state and full consciousness. She had been working all morning while Soloman was at the hospital. She had been taking advantage of the relative cool of the morning to tend her garden, and now she rested before continuing her day's chores in preparation for Court's visit. For the moment she reminisced.

She thought of her circumstances – such a common pursuit that hardly anyone would condemn her. When Soloman had prophesied his new move in the name of professional adventure, she was furious. Now, she had contained it: since she could not reason the fury, she reasoned that it was baseless. She faced the sun with bright new eyes and a vague appetite, but this was a momentary feeling.

Though she sat so still in her chair, her mind cycled from fury to exultation at periods which were far too close together, which distorted her sense of time. She would wind herself up in a tangle of general disgust that would explode into randomly directed accusations, destroying or damaging her representations of her entire circle of friends, and family, though, curiously, her enemies, if there were such things before the moment of Soloman's declaration, escaped the blast, just as is dictated by the old maxim about bad friends and enemies. No-one of her loves or likes was spared completely, though, perhaps some escaped relatively unscathed.

Catrek's mind had turned mercenary, and then, all of a sudden, she would lapse into a new feeling, as though her sense of paradise were being stimulated. A feeling unlike anything she had ever experienced. All was warm and serene, the world became quiet and simple. She was feathery light and she might just get up and walk around and admire the lovely glow of the trees against the heavens, or the lovely way the poppy swung to and fro in the faint gust. She would gently lower her hand to shade the delicate pink rose from the sun, revel in its perfume as she planted her nose deep inside it. Was it freedom, she wondered. The warmth and denervation were miraculous.

Catrek would wander around the edges of her garden repeating these motions of a touching and feeling benevolence and then she would end up at the porch and look at the house. She would turn and look at the garden walls that surrounded on all sides and the sky that locked her in from above and she would turn again to the thorny black thoughts that tore through her memories, shredding and savaging them without regard. No single one was spared.

This was the cycle of life during her 'free' moments, the moments that were not filled with thoughts of what she had to do. So she took the whole repeating mess and shoved it away. She had preparations to make for the coming afternoon. She walked into the house and began tidying the kitchen. She spent some time stooping and moving, sponging and drying, sweeping and mopping, and then left the house to get food. Before she left, she fancied herself in the mirror, pouting her lips, adding some colour to her

cheeks, pouting again and, as she turned to take her bag, eyeing her profile as she turned from it, lips still pouting.

As she made her way to the market, she entered a dream again, and replayed the conversation she had had with Soloman. Soloman had told her he was going to take the offer of a position in his friend's clinic in Riyadh. He had told her that although she didn't have to go there with him, she would like it there. He was only going to work there one month out of every two and he was going to have a beautiful house with servants and a car and driver provided for him. She rejected the idea and told him she wouldn't take one step in that place, but she later told him, yes, perhaps she would help him get settled, if he really was set on taking the offer. She had felt sorry for him, imagining him all alone as he went to a new place.

He was decided, and he told her of all the beautiful places around the city. He had told her a story of how, when he visited, he went out to the desert and found fossils laying all around. He had told her about the drive to the sea and the way the sand changed from desert to beach without a dividing line. She had asked him about the city itself, and he had told her about the men walking around in shopping centres just like they did here and how the women walked around in these funny black outfits that covered them from head to toe, but, don't worry, he said, she wouldn't have to wear one. They weren't strict. She thought it sounded terrible, but what could she do? What could she do?

While Catrek wandered the aisles of her market, Soloman arrived home and found with relief that Catrek was neither in the house nor in the garden. He made his way to the fridge and grabbed a pitcher. He poured himself a cool drink and leaned on the counter as he sipped it. He took a newspaper and went to the garden, where he sipped the news and the drink at the same time. He had not the taste for the news, just then, so he threw the paper to the table and looked around, quickly surveying the garden. He got up and walked around, stopping to gaze at a particular flower. It set his mind to thinking about his decision for adventure, but no sooner had he come to some kind of conclusion or premonition than he forgot it himself, and was left with the feeling not that he had discovered something but that he had lost a moment looking at the flower. He jerked back into consciousness and walked back to the house, leaving his paper flapping on the table.

He was walking about in his house for some time arranging various official documents on his desk, when the door opened downstairs, and, with an unfamiliar dread, he walked downstairs, relieved finally by the sight of Court disappearing to the kitchen.

'Hi Court!'

'Hi grandpa!' came the shout from the fridge.

'Grandma's coming soon, I bet, so just help yourself.' Soloman was in the kitchen and bent down to give Court a kiss. 'Hi Court.'

'Where's grandma?' asked Court.

'I don't know, but she's expecting you, so she'll be here soon.'

Court took his drink to the Garden and was rummaging around in the shed when Catrek came back.

'Hi dear,' said Soloman.

'Hi,' she said as she walked in with some bags to the kitchen. 'Hi Court!' she shouted out the window. Court ran in and threw himself at Catrek.

'Hi Grandma! Where were you?'

'I was buying some treats,' she said, 'for you!' and she pulled some candies from her bag. 'Come on! Let's go outside and sit in the sun. We'll go to the swimming pool a bit later, OK?'

## Julian and Florence

That morning, as Catrek was facing the sun in her garden, Florence was facing the sun as well, though she found it too strong even at that early hour. She moved to the shade of her porch and lay there looking out over the trees. Even the drone of the passing cars was absent and so left the breeze to sound on its own, to shake the leaves at intervals which Florence recognised were irregular, enchanting.

She allowed passing thoughts, as irregular as the light gusts to come and go, not thinking very much of them. Court was gone for the day, and though she missed him, she liked the silence and stillness. It allowed her a comprehension that was impossible when faced with the motions of her family.

She imagined Julian at work in his laboratory, peering down some kind of instrument as he took notes. Then she remembered, imagined him sitting at her bedside calmly when she flew out of bed having realised she had left the food to burn. She remembered Julian had followed slowly behind. What had he said to her as she was rushing down? Was it some kind of taunt? She bedevilled Julian, imagined him taunting her as she descended. Then she felt guilty, but she could not let that image of a taunting Julian escape. She held onto it and looked at it. It seemed in opposition to a gentle manner that she had always known. Why was it so tempting? She would go back and remember Julian as she had met him. Who was it who spoke first? Who was it!

In fury, she flashed from her chair. The breeze brushed the leaves and as she heard them, she calmed and seated herself. There was no answer. So she overlooked the very first moment that they had met and allowed herself to continue with the romantic recollection that was her staple dream. Julian had spoken of his work in a laboratory. He was sure of his own progress and of the steps he was taking toward what he called understanding. She hadn't understood the concepts that he casually used, but as he meandered in thought and speech, his mellow complacency and forceful motions relayed a quality of reason. Then he asked her if she wanted to go to the lake with him.

At the lake, it seemed that Julian looked at everything differently from herself. Where she saw water, he saw millions of tiny animals and plants. Where she saw trees glowing in the evening sun, he saw an intricate network of veins and vents and elaborate collaboration. Where she saw a tree trunk, branches and leaves, he saw the whole tree mirrored underground like a reflection in the water. He saw the trunk go straight into the earth like a dagger and then branch off. So, she had said, what happens when you cut down the tree? Does that mean half of it is still there? Yes, he had said, that's right.

She took herself from the lake and thought of Court, the difficulty she had talking with him. He stood at arms length all the time. What had she done wrong? She had never once tried to do anything but love him. Where his father pushed and persevered, she simply stood by in case of trouble, and embraced him when he was most furious, most determined to smoulder with hatred, and most decided on solitary action. When he screamed with childish rages, she was always there to diffuse them.

She thought again of Julian. Who was it who spoke first? Why couldn't she

remember? She rose again and made her way to the house where she spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon tidying.

Then she went and sat in the shade, which is when, having failed to comprehend her own situation, she began to think of Ramus. She saw for the first time the hot, high summer day, and was startled by the bright green grass, the bright green leaves, the cool shade where she was sitting. She moved to the sun and let it heat her. She felt the heat on her legs, her arms and her face and she let it heal her pale skin.

She was like this for some time, fully conscious of the terrific power of the sun, when she was interrupted by Julian.

'Hello, dear!' he shouted from the window.

She feigned sleep, listening as Julian changed his clothing inside and made himself a cool drink. Finally, he came out in his shorts and t-shirt, ghostly pale. He walked along the grass to seat himself next to Florence, and he took several sips of his drink, looking over at her to see if she might wake up. She still feigned sleep, and so to convince Julian, thought she would do better if she did sleep. But the sun was burning her skin. It was burning, but caught in her ruse she could not allow herself to move. In agony she rested until, a few moments later, she was touched by Julian's gentle rocking. She opened her eyes, but could not yet allow herself to move. She looked at Julian.

'We have to go get Court,' he said, and she got up and moved to the shade.

## Ramus

Ramus was in the hospital. He had been unproductive and unwilling for most of the day. He made his way towards his patient.

He was looking down and handling his beard as he walked. I wonder, he thought, how it could possibly be that, despite the fact I am saving lives day in and day out, I have neither the satisfaction of Stefan nor the stability of Julian. He began to search for common denominators of Stefan, Julian and himself. Julian, he thought, has stability, not much money, a family, and he is content. His life, he thought, is centred on discovery, right? He is a scientist, right? And that, he thought, seems to provide him with satisfaction, or at least it does when combined with his family. But then, his family is having problems, right? So how can he be content? And Stefan, he thought, is married, and he seems happy all the time, right? And then, he thought, there's me, and I'm saving lives but I'm worried almost all the time. Probably, he thought, it is because I'm worried that I save lives. But it doesn't seem fair, does it? Why must I be worried? Look at Stefan. Look at Julian, he thought. Julian is not worried, but I suppose, indirectly, he's saving lives as well, right? I don't know, he thought. What's wrong with me? Is it possible, he thought, that I think too much? But how can I stop it? I can't have chosen to think too much just as I couldn't have chosen not to think, right? Stefan runs around and assures his success: he works, he thought, in insurance! And Julian, he thought, mostly sits around and debates some kind of essence. It's not like I'm not busy, he thought, ever since I was little I've been thinking. Now I think and work at the same time! Oh, man, he thought, I'm going to drive myself nuts!

He approached his next patient fully alert. He knocked and was beckoned in.

'Hello, Murray, how are you feeling?'

Ramus's patient sat there with his arms crossed, facing out the window at the

bright sun. 'I'm fine, doctor,' he said without turning around. Ramus stood behind him and clasped his hands. He wanted to walk right out.

'Well, Murray, as much as I want to see you on your way, I have to be sure that you're feeling well enough. And...' he stopped. 'And so – and so...' he said, disconcerted by the sight of the back of his patient's head. 'Well?'

'Actually, I feel pretty good, Dr. DeOrio,' said the old man, finally turning around. But Ramus saw not the staid and ruthless face he had imagined. His patient's eyes were red and his cheeks were flushed.

'I'm glad to here it. How good do you feel?'

'Well, I'm able to exert more and I feel much more – ah – what's the word – much less cloudy.'

'You're head feels clear?'

'Yes, my head and my body as well, you know.'

'So your heart feels good, then?'

'That's the strange thing, doctor. You know I've never really concentrated on my heart that much. It was always painful and I was thinking of it kind of like an open cut or something that I was afraid to finger in case maybe I hurt it more, you know? Just to think of it gave me a sharp pain.'

'Sure.'

'Anyway,' Murray looked down at his heart through the slit in his chest and concentrated for some time. Oh God, thought Ramus, Oh God don't cry, he thought. It was too late for the sentiment, because Murray's shoulders were already shuddering as he bowed his head. The shudder spread through Murray's body, and soon, he was a cupping his head in his hands and his whole body was convulsing slowly in mourning. Ramus forced his hand to hold Murray's shoulder.

'Oh God, I'm sorry, doctor,' and he tried wiping the tears from his face, though they were pouring down his arms and dripping from the elbows. He collected himself slowly, but continued speaking to his heart. He was sniffing and wiping his nose and eyes with his hands. Then he held his head like a melon in his hands.

'I was saying,' he continued. 'I was saying how I was afraid of feeling my heart. You know you – you know, you'd always ask me how my heart was feeling and I used to report back – well – I'd tell you – you know – about – well – about just the palpitations, cause that's the only time I knew anything.' He wiped his wet eyes with his wet hands. He tried to unclog his nose. 'You know - like everything was going to just stop working and that would be the end, so, when I had those palpitations, they would make me shudder and I stopped and took notice...' His voice faded away. He bowed his head and breathed a sigh and then breathed more and more slowly.

'That's it, Murray, just calm down and you'll feel better.'

'I was saying,' he continued, 'I was saying that now I really can feel my heart, and I can feel when it's going to start up and I've been...' he stopped and cleared his throat.

'What, Murray?'

'I've been telling it to just calm down,' he said and he lifted his swollen face. He was smiling. 'I've been telling it to just calm down and I'm telling you, I know it sounds crazy, but it's listening to me.'

Ramus looked him in the eyes and was swallowed to their depths, looking out at himself again, as he had done with Florence. He saw himself sitting with his elbows on his knees.

Murray continued, 'I know this sounds crazy, doctor, but it really is listening. I feel so much warmer and more relaxed, like I'm floating, looking up at the sky with my ears underwater. I just wanted to tell you this stuff so I could thank you for everything, you know. I mean, all that worry was no good.'

'I think it sounds good, Murray. I think it sounds like you'll be just fine.'

'I think so, doctor,' he said. 'Anyway, I'm leaving today and hopefully I won't be back.'

'I hope not, Murray,' he said and thought discreetly, yes, Murray, you'll be back, but by then it will be too late. Though he was alert when he came in, when he left he was steam headed and heavy. He got up slowly and, leaning on the chair, turned to leave. 'Bye Murray, see you soon.'

'Bye doctor, and thanks again.'

Murray closed the door behind him. He made his way back towards the nurses station. What was that, he thought, what was that? He pushed the thoughts from his head.

## Chorus

'Dr. DeOrio. Dr. DeOrio!' Edith tapped Ramus on the shoulder. 'Dr. DeOrio! Someone from the emergency room is asking for you, doctor.'

Ramus awoke from his reverie. 'Who is it?'

'Stefan.'

Ramus went through his rota of doctors and couldn't think of one named Stefan. 'Dr. who?'

'No no, doctor, it's a patient.'

Ramus ran down to the emergency ward and found his friend in one of the rooms.

'Stefan!'

'Ramus! Finally!'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm alright. I'm alright.'

'What happened?'

'Oh, I don't know. Nothing. Nothing.'

'What are you doing here? Did a doctor see you yet?'

'Yeah. Yeah. He said I'm OK? I don't know why I called you down here.'

'What happened?'

Stefan sat and fiddled with his feet. 'I thought – I thought I was having a heart attack or something. I don't know.'

'Come on, Stefan, it wasn't a heart attack, was it? Probably an ulcer or something, right?'

'They don't know yet, but, yeah, that's what the doctor who saw me said.'

'What happened?'

'Well, there I was speaking to Marilyn and then I just felt this terrible pain. Marilyn drove me down here. You should have heard me,' he was smiling now. 'I was,' he laughed, 'I was screaming like a baby. I was screaming,' he laughed. 'I was screaming "help me! help me! get the machine!"' Stefan and Ramus were both laughing. "'Get the machine!" can you believe that? Boy, I never thought I could be such a baby. "Get the

machine!”

'Right, come on, let's get out of here,' said Ramus. 'I'll get the test results later. Can you walk?'

I get it, Ramus thought, I get it now. It's about sacrifice, isn't it, he thought. He was smiling as he walked out, holding his hand on Stefan's shoulder.

----- Chapter 4-----

## Ramus and Florence

Julian had gone to a conference on the other side of the country. Florence stayed with Court. Having been relieved of his education for the summer, Court spent his time at friends' houses. It was rare that he would come home for long. Julian had asked Ramus to stop in as much as possible to keep an eye on Florence. He had related the story of the burning pot and had expressed worry.

It was again a hot day, though the air was clear, and Florence had found herself alone in the Garden, awaiting the arrival of her husband's half-brother. She found herself in the sun and was enjoying the tingling it produced on her skin. She had not much to do and so found herself quite happy to be lost in her own thoughts, when Ramus arrived and came to the porch.

'Hello, Ramus!' she shouted from the back of the garden.

Ramus lifted his hand in salute as he made his way down the back. He sat beside Florence and said hello, though he was careful to avoid looking at her. Florence was sitting upright and, when she realised she was not going to be given a kiss, she sat back in her chair.

'So how is everything?' she asked.

'Fine. Fine. How are you?'

'I'm fine as well,' Florence declared as she tilted her head away from Ramus.

Ramus turned and looked at her profile, and once he started he simply could not stop. Florence had cut her hair to her shoulders and had put a hair band in to keep it back. Her eyes, though not looking at him, had still the black pupils surrounded by grey which had the all the sharp and captivating energy of a beast. He could not stop looking, and yet he felt he would have to.

'What's new at the hospital?' she asked.

'Nothing much. What's new with you?'

'Oh not much.'

'Julian is worried about you,' said Ramus, resorting to the first safe thought that came to him.

'Oh is that so?' she retorted.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.' She calmed and settled into her chair.

'Well, when you're bored, why don't you come by the hospital.' He held his breath and prepared for his next suggestion, but he didn't make it. He would wait before he allowed that suggestion to surface.

'Well, I'm sure you're too busy.'

'Yes, but I can get you a white coat and you can look around if you like,' said Ramus. Florence continued with her sideways glance and held her hands together over her belly. 'Come on!' said Ramus, 'I'm not busy now, so why don't we walk towards the hospital?'

Florence stood and walked across the yard and the porch to the kitchen, and Ramus got up to follow. When Ramus came, Florence walked from the kitchen and went upstairs, leaving him standing in the darkened kitchen while light shot in through the

windows.

'So are you coming, Florence!' he shouted out the kitchen door. He wasn't quite sure who he was speaking to. He stood bemused, but was unable to go back outside the house, where the heat and sun beckoned. Ramus put his hand to his beard and looked at the floor. I wonder, he thought. I wonder what's happening. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She stood there and I was absolutely incapable of taking my eyes off her, and yet I am not allowed to look at her like that, he thought. But my God, he thought, my God she looked like a wolf child sitting in that garden. He looked out to the garden and decided to go outside.

He stood in the sun and was still looking down, thinking now about Stefan's recent visit to the hospital. What a madman, he thought, as he smiled to himself. Can you imagine, he thought, can you imagine a grown man screaming 'get the machine!' and 'help! help?' Can you imagine, he thought, can you imagine a man in his prime screaming to those around him for help, when he is, at the same time quite possibly the most successful of all those around him? That emergency room, he thought, that emergency room. Now he was smiling full force and nodding his head up and down as he laughed. That room, he laughed, is full of the most decrepit, wretched people on this earth all sitting quietly and biding their time, when along comes this Stefan, a young millionaire with a wife who has, he thought, been accepted as one of the most beautiful, the most desirable of creatures. And so, he continued to himself, and so along comes this man screaming at the top of his lungs for someone to help him, to get the machine. Get the machine! Now Ramus could not help but put his head in his hands and rock with gentle laughter. Of course, he thought, of course now I understand a little better. I understand that it's about sacrifice. I'll sacrifice myself and save my fellow man and I'll be happy about it because that's all, he thought. That's all that matters. All that matters is that I understand. I've been doing it right all along.

'So are you ready, Ramus?' Florence asked as she swung slowly on the porch. She had changed and was wearing a dress. Ramus could look at her from there without offending himself.

'Ready.'

Together, Ramus and Florence walked towards the hospital, and at the start, Ramus was bowing his head and holding his hands behind him as he went.

'So what is it like being at the hospital?'

'Well, it's been easier, you know, recently.'

'Yeah?'

'You're a parent.'

'I'm a good mother.'

'Why have been so upset lately?'

'You mean Julian?'

'Julian says you've been upset.'

'I don't know,' she said. She looked down as she walked, and swung her thin arms to and fro as she stepped. 'I don't know. I don't know...I mean...I don't know...really,' she said. The two were walking along, Ramus, tall and thin with slightly receding black hair and a strange beard staining his pale face, and Florence, pale skin and bone with black hair. They could have been brother and sister, bemoaning their unified history. 'How come,' continued Florence, 'how come you were upset?'

'I don't know, really.'

'But now you feel better, right?'

'Yeah, I just feel like it's all a little lighter, less worrying, as though something clicked and it just feels OK where before I was worried.'

'I don't know,' said Florence. 'If nothing's changed then how can you feel better?'

'It's a question of understanding.'

'Understanding what?'

'I just understood that there I was worried about everything, worried without really knowing why, when all of a sudden, I figured out I had nothing to worry about. I figured out selflessness, you know, giving up myself. I sat in the hospital and decided that I was happy giving up my life to save others who were in greater need, who were facing questions that I have a special insight into. Everyone I see at the hospital is dead worried, you know. All of a sudden, all they're thinking about is how precious life is, because the end is facing them square on. It's like I'm walking around the hospital with the grim reaper and the change that comes over people is like nothing you've ever seen. Some patients just sit there quietly. Some go nuts, and start running off about everything and nothing. But the worst ones are full of regret. Like they've just wasted their entire life and now they're upset because they've only got such a small part of it left. So I figured that I should just stop worrying otherwise I'd just end up like one of those guys. I figured I would just start doing the right thing, which was helping these guys get a little extra time to enjoy themselves. That's what I mean about selflessness. I feel like if I can give these guys a little extra time, then my time becomes my own because...because...because...I don't know exactly why, but I think that by giving up myself so that these guys can just have a few extra days or months or years that somehow I've also gained that time, you know. It's not just for them, but for me as well.' He stopped and sat on some steps. 'You know what I mean?' he asked.

'I don't know, but it sounds good. It sounds like it helped.'

They sat for some time on the steps and people who walked by were thinking of things so far removed that it was difficult for either of them to empathise. So they just looked and wondered in their turn about whether any of it was of particular interest to anyone who happened to stroll by. Here an old man shuffling by, here a young mother walking and a toddler skipping along the paving stones. Then a group of teenagers looking for trouble. A couple of professional young women sped by followed closely by a hurried man.

'You're happy because you give up your life.'

'I have to give up my life. Everybody does. But I'm not giving up anything, because now I can focus on other things. I'm giving up worrying about what I'm giving up. Think about all those people I help that go off with new eyes, a new era in their lives. Thinking about the extraordinary possibility of their new lives is far more interesting than thinking about how much I'm losing. And what am I losing after all? Only time. But time is lost for everyone, no matter what they do. Time has no favourites. So why dwell on that time that I lose, even if it is a huge amount. I will have spent most of my conscious life in that hospital and I just don't want to waste anymore of it worrying. That certainly isn't good for anyone. So, if there's some great thing that happens, then I'll take note and bask in the glow of the good deed. It's win or win. All I can do is end up ahead because everybody wants more time. And I'll give it to them. So now, when I get out of the hospital, I'm going to go out and walk around. I'm going to go visit my family and friends. I'll go and do volunteer work. I'll go travelling when I've got the weekend off.'

Maybe I'll go see some of my patients at their houses. Maybe I'll learn an instrument. I'll get married and have children and then I suppose I'll have to give them the rest of my time.'

'And when you do that, you won't have anymore for yourself.'

'But that time is my time, because I choose to give it to others, and it isn't as if I'll never have a moment to meditate and appreciate the fruits of all my effort!'

'And in those moments, won't you wonder what happened to all the time you used to have?'

'In those moments, like in this moment, I will know that my time is only a small contribution to eternity.'

'But this moment isn't? That's not a nice thing to say, you know.'

'Well!' he said, 'that's why I'm telling you this, because you can contribute to eternity just by understanding this! That's what's great, you know. That's the wonder of this moment right here. Even this moment is not my time, technically, of course, because I'm recounting to you this – this – this – knowledge. I think it's a wisdom. People always have known it, but it just surfaces at some point.'

'How does that apply to me? I've given all my time to Court, and what's not his is – I guess I've given it to Julian and Court.'

'That's it. So, since you've got Court, and, more importantly, you're really all he has, that means that the only one to whom you can give is him.'

'How?' she asked now looking at Ramus with empty eyes. 'He'll take it and he won't know what to do with it.'

'You never know what to do with it. That's what makes for a good child, one who doesn't know what he's being given. He'll figure that out later.'

'I don't know. Court would take everything.'

'That's how kids figure out life, by seeing what they can get. And if they get everything, then they give it all back. It's the ones who don't get everything that never give anything back. See, that's why you've been so upset, I figure. Parents are unhappy because they don't give themselves to their kids, and when they do, they can be happy and their kids can be happy, too. So...I don't know...I just figured this out when Julian was telling me how upset you were. I figure you must just be misunderstanding the whole great thing about being a mother. The thing that really gives you time.' Ramus stopped. He needed something, some sugar, but he left it.

'Having time and being happy are same?'

Ramus looked straight ahead.

'Right?' she beckoned.

'Happiness gives people time, right?'

They sat for some time before Ramus raised himself and lifted Florence by the hand.

'But Court is my life,' she said.

Ramus nodded as he plodded ahead.

'I've given him everything. I love him.'

'Do you? Why are you unhappy?'

'I never told you I'm unhappy.' They walked to the hospital in silence.

When they arrived, Florence put on a white coat to do rounds with Ramus. They walked together to his first patient.

'How are you Mrs. Neel?'

'Fine, fine, doctor.'

'So I understand we're going to have to put in a new line because the other one's dried up, huh?'

'Yeah that's right. That's what the nurse says.'

'Mrs. Neel, this is Florence. She's a nurse in training and she's following me around. Is that OK?'

'Fine, fine. You know, doctor, you're looking like that famous actor, what's his name, you know, in that movie about the inspector...'

'John Thompson?'

'Yeah! That's it, you look just like him, especially with that beard!'

'I'll take that as a compliment.'

'Sure! He's very handsome.'

Ramus examined Mrs. Neel and began showing Florence the bruised arm. He looked for a vein but found none.

'See, sometimes the veins just dry up,' he said to Florence. He started searching her foot and Florence looked on with interest, peeping over Ramus's head. Then Ramus began poking a needle into Mrs. Neel's foot. Repeatedly trying and failing to get the needle into an obscure vein. He was poking away, Florence was cringing, and Mrs. Neel was staid.

'Sorry about this, Mrs. Neel, but it seems really hard to find one. I know this is hurting.' He continued poking her foot with the needle, but the vein was squirming away. 'Sorry,' he said as he got up. 'I'm going to go get some tape. I'll be right back.' Florence was left alone with Ramus's patient.

Mrs. Neel started, 'You see, I came in with this coughing and so they put this tube in my lung,' she said to Florence. 'They're trying to figure out what's wrong, you know.' Florence saw the tube coming from under the blouse and saw a tank filled with yellow liquid at the end of the tube.

'They don't know what's wrong?'

'They're trying to figure it out.'

'You seem to be handling it well. And I don't know how you can stand having that needle stuck into your foot. I'm cringing more than you are. You're very brave.'

Ramus returned and was able, finally, to stab the needle through the vein. A drop of blood came out and Ramus attached the line.

'Sorry about that, Mrs. Neel, but it looks like it's in there. See you later, OK?'

'Fine. Thanks doctor.'

After they left the room, Florence said to Ramus, 'so they still don't know what's wrong, huh?'

'What do you mean?'

'She said they were trying to figure out what was wrong.'

Ramus continued walking and then said, 'No. That's not right. The doctors told her what's wrong. She's going to die pretty soon. She's got cancer and a massive clot in her artery right here,' he said, pointing to his inside leg. 'When it breaks apart, she's probably going to have a heart attack.'

'Why hasn't anyone told her?'

'They did.'

'That's not what she said.'

'She's in shock, I suppose.'

'You mean she doesn't believe what's happened?'

'What's happened?' he asked, and shrugged. 'She isn't dead yet.'

## Ramus, Catrek and Soloman

Quite by surprise, Ramus found his father at the hospital. He was not expecting his return for some two weeks. Ramus was standing at his nurses station, smiling and flirting in new bravura motions with a new mild nurse. He could be seen flailing and gesticulating before a somewhat sceptical nurse, vague exaggerations of motions that he had seen exercised with more restraint by his father some weeks back. He heard with surprise a general announcement for his father and stopped his motions at once. He excused himself and made his way to the top floor, where he saw Soloman hurrying across the bright atrium.

'Hey! Hey there, doctor!' he said, hurrying towards the ghostly apparition.

'Son! How are you? I'm in a hurry, so walk with me. What's new? How's the hospital?'

'Fine. Great. I thought you were due back in a couple of weeks.'

'Yes, Son! But plans changed a little, nothing serious. One sec...' he walked through a door. Ramus stood outside, crossing his arms. With one hand on his beard, he looked down the hall and noticed the smell he had once known and forgotten, the smell of stagnation, of decomposition.

'So, son, what's new? Your mother hasn't called?'

'No. What's new with you?'

'Well, there was a slight upset over there so I figured I would come back, you know – you know I don't think I had quite prepared myself. They were all fine about it over there, anyway, so I decided that nothing was at stake, really. So here I am! Aren't you glad to see me?'

'Of course, of course. So how was it?'

'Oh fine, you know. As I expected it really. Seems a lot of patients have piled up here, huh? Figuratively speaking. I haven't stood still since I came.'

'They can always use another doctor.' Ramus and Soloman rushed along side by side.

'Why don't we meet later on, at home. When are you off?' Soloman asked.

'Not late.'

'OK. See you there, OK?'

'Right. Bye.'

Ramus walked around in a stupor for the rest of the day until, when the sun was still hot, he made his way towards his parents' home. In the strong wind, he walked from the hospital, unable to remember his patients. Who he had seen and what he had said were lost, as though he might not have said anything to anyone at all. Well, he thought, well at least I'm not worried about that. I suppose I solved that problem, didn't I, and he remembered Florence with her open black eyes, not the eyes she had in her garden, but those she had on their walk. He remembered speaking of sacrifice, of selflessness, of the now and eternity. Yes, he thought, I certainly seemed to have surmounted that.

He walked through the front door of his childhood home and felt too tall. He made his way through the kitchen and then out to the garden, where Catrek was sitting

amongst the overgrown and untended plants shooting out from their places. The longest branches were whipped about by a strong and gusty summer wind, and Catrek sat amidst the fury of flailing branches, her hair dancing with them.

'It sure is windy,' said Ramus as he approached. 'Hi mommy.'

'Hi, Ramus, how are you?' she asked as she got up and kissed him.

'I'm good. So you guys are back early. What happened over there?'

'Didn't you see your father at the hospital?'

'Yeah, he was in a great hurry, though. Rushing about. He didn't seem to have a moment. We decided to meet here.'

Catrek seated herself and Ramus stood there. It was as fast that day as any day since the beginning of the earth. The sky was marching overhead and bringing with it a wind that taunted the trees, making them seem as though they clung absurdly to their leaves, when they would have had an easier time just letting them fly away. The two staid inhabitants of the garden seemed, in comparison to the trees, trunks that had already let their branches go.

'Ramus,' started Catrek. She looked at him with a furrowed brow.

'Yeah.'

'Nothing.'

'What?'

'Oh nothing.'

'Look, mommy, I know it must have been hard out there, but don't worry, you know. Don't worry. I'm sure if it's no good, you guys will come back. Look! You're already back.'

'Oh I don't know.'

'What's it like out there?'

'Oh it's fine, you know, but I miss you guys a lot and it just seems crazy. The whole thing.'

'Well, don't worry about it.'

'I know. I know. Don't worry. I'm fine, I'm fine.'

Ramus sat and looked out onto the garden. He put his hand on Catrek's arm but she sat and looked forward, her hair shooting around and outlining now her profile, now the back of her oval head.

Soloman appeared on the porch.

'Come on inside, guys! This wind is terrific!' he shouted.

'We're alright!' Ramus shouted back. 'Why don't you come and sit out here?'

'I'll be inside!' he shouted back.

And it remained like that, Ramus and Catrek sitting in the powerful wind and Soloman sitting in the darkened house, until Ramus got up to go to his house. He said goodbye and left his mother. Don't worry, he told her as he left, and he thought, don't worry, don't worry.

## Chorus

It was another midsummer party at Stefan's house, and the usual were in attendance, with the addition, at Ramus's request, of Catrek and Soloman.

'My god!' said Florence. 'You mean you actually said that? You actually said Get

the Machine! Which machine was it you wanted?'

'Thanks for this, Ramus,' said Stefan.

Ramus waved it aside.

'So, anyway, how was the Middle East?' asked Stefan to Catrek and Soloman. Soloman was shifting about and had his hands in his pockets. 'Bad, huh?' he asked Catrek.

'Oh I suppose it's alright. I never thought I'd envy those women dressed in black, but when you get there and confront those hungry eyes, you're tempted to go to the nearest tailor and have one fitted.'

'And you can't drive,' added Stefan.

'Well,' retorted Soloman, 'who needs to drive when you have a chauffeur.'

'I don't have any luck with chauffeurs. The last time I was driven anywhere was to your hospital.'

'Yes, well – women can drive any man to the hospital,' Soloman said. Stefan looked at him and plastered a smile on his face, oblivious to the surrounding attention.

'Where's Julian,' asked Marilyn.

'Oh he's still gone on a conference,' replied Florence.

'Is that what he told you?' said Soloman.

'Maybe that's just what she's telling us,' said Ramus.

'Why bother?' asked Catrek.

'No use spreading the news around for the hungry to gobble up,' said Soloman.

'Unless, of course, it relates to my embarrassing outbursts!' said Stefan.

'Nothing new there,' said Marilyn.

'Well at least I keep my mouth shut most of the time,' said Stefan.

'I wish you could give Ramus some lessons,' said Florence.

'Who me? I've been taking lessons from you!' said Ramus.

'I've heard more from you two tonight than I have in my whole life!' said Stefan.

'I'm only sticking up for myself!' said Ramus. 'I don't know what's got into her!'

'She's probably sick of you guys talking away as though you're the only one with anything to say,' said Catrek.

'Yeah!' said Marilyn.

'Here she goes again,' said Stefan.

'We're not the ones talking!' said Soloman. 'We go to work everyday and there's no chatting there!'

'So you figure you can get it all out here?' said Marilyn. 'I work all day, too, and you don't see me trying to take charge!'

'If only you would speak and forget about taking charge,' said Stefan, motioning to the ceiling, 'I would be a lucky man.'

'Who doesn't work all day,' said Catrek. 'You men think you're the only ones working just because you get paid? And I suppose you think that if I go stand on a street corner and pull in a few hundred a day, I'm entitled to take charge.'

'A few hundred,' said Stefan, 'would only be an hour's work for such a lovely woman.'

Court

'Hey Court! Ramus is coming over and he's going to take us to the lake!' shouted Florence.

'Can we go sailing!' shouted Court.

'Maybe he'll teach you!' cried Florence. Court was jumping up and down and doing handstands in the garden.

When Ramus arrived, he helped the two pack their bags, then drove towards the lake.

'How's work?' she asked.

'Great. No problems. Funny having Soloman around again.'

'He wasn't gone for long, was he?'

'It seemed interminable.'

'Probably because you were so happy. Thanks for taking me to the hospital. It helped, you know. I feel better, more awake, you know.'

'Just this summer sun. What about you Court. You want to go sailing?'

Court was sitting in the back, looking out the window at the passing trees, the passing buildings. The wind rushing in his ears prevented him from hearing.

'I guess not.'

'He's dying to go. He wants you to teach him.'

'I'll give him the rudder.'

'Thanks, Ramus.'

The three of them made it to the lake and spent the day sailing its expanse. With green covered hills rising up the sides and a cloudless blue sky, the breeze carried the little boat all over until the sun finally seemed as though it might bow out for the day.

----- Chapter 5-----

## Chorus

There was, at the height of the summer, a party held in a sumptuous park which gave directly onto the water. This park stood at the divergence of a river, and from its tip, Ramus watched the waves and the current splitting around the land. In the distance, he could make out the expanse of the sea to one side and, leading into it, the river. He stood gripping the black metal railing, awaiting the arrival of his friends.

'Beautiful, isn't it,' said Julian. 'There really is a draw to the water?' Julian said.

'Yes.' They stood for some time, and then Ramus, leaning back from the railing, said, 'I suppose it's because that's where we come from.'

'Yeah, I suppose, although some would say not.'

'Yes, some would say not. Where's Florence?'

'Standing over there,' he said, pointing to a group of people congregated at the entrance of the park. 'She seems a lot happier, Ramus, you know.'

'You can call me doctor.'

'Yes. Doctor Ramus.'

'Now you look worried!'

'No no, just tired, you know.' He played with his square fingers, swinging them by each other in imitation of the passing waves.

'You can't fool me.'

Julian put on a lopsided smile.

'You need a vacation.'

'Well, you know, I am planning one for a few weeks from now, but...I don't know.'

'Look at this place,' said Ramus. 'It's so lovely right here that I don't think I ever want to leave.'

'No that's not it. It's just...!' Julian smiled again and stepped up to lean against the railing with Ramus. They stood looking out over the river in the light of the late afternoon, the sun still hot, though more yellow than white. The brackish air made their hair stringy and gave Ramus's black hair a shiny quality.

'Florence was telling me she went to the hospital with you.'

'Yeah. I took her on some rounds.'

'Rounds with Ramus, excuse me, Rounds with Doctor Ramus. And you guys went sailing?'

'All the way around the lake. From one end to the other. All day.'

'Something about the water, huh?'

'Come on, Julian, what's the matter?'

'I told you! I'm tired.'

'He says, flaring up.'

'Hey guys,' said Florence, as she approached from garden. 'Hi Ramus. What are you two doing?'

Ramus leaned over and kissed her beneath her wide open, black eyes. 'Julian's worried about something,' he said.

'Oh come on, Ramus!' Julian said.

'Did he tell you about our vacation plan?' she asked.

'No.'

'Yes,' she said, 'We're off for a few weeks. Going to go down south to the beaches with Court.'

'Well, well, Julian. Like I said: Time for a vacation.'

'Hasn't he invited you along?'

'Oh I see!' said Ramus, 'It's clear now! You want me to come along and baby sit while you guys go out, huh? Doesn't sound like much of a vacation to me.'

'What are you going to do anyway?' said Julian, 'It's not like you've much happening in the way of hot dates. Besides, I'm not much for going out. Why don't you just come along and hang around.'

'Tempting,' said Ramus, 'but the hospital smell is more attractive.'

'Come on, Ramus,' said Florence, 'come along for a little while. Look how pale you are.'

'You're one to talk. I have an excuse. I'm inside all day.'

Ramus hopped down to the ground followed by Julian and, with Florence, they made their way to gardens. Catrek stood there speaking with Stefan.

'Where's daddy?' asked Ramus.

'Oh he's off somewhere, upset.'

'What happened?'

'He and Stefan were speaking about something. I don't know, I wasn't even listening, what was it anyway?'

'I don't know. He asked me how work was and I told him it was bad – you know,' to Ramus, 'that deal didn't go through – but I said I still had enough in the bank. What did he say then? He said lucky for some and I told him luck had nothing to do with it. What did he say then? Something about doctors working 24 hours a day and not making enough. And then...what did I say? They're not the only ones working, and then he said: when was the last time you stayed up all night, and then – then I said: doing what? And then he just shot off holding his hands in the air! Man guys,' he said to Julian and Ramus, 'I don't know about those genes...although I suppose one out of two isn't bad,' and he nodded to Catrek.

Catrek, though laughing with the rest became distracted and stood with a tense smile.

'Come on, guys, lets make a move to the tables, shall we,' said Ramus, leading the way. Julian and Catrek lagged behind, son's arm around his mother, and then walked off towards the river. Ramus walked towards the table and sat beside Florence and Stefan.

'Where's Marilyn?' Ramus asked.

'Off in the sun.'

'Working?'

'Vacation.'

'Left you here, did she?'

'I'm busy.'

'Busy losing deals, huh?'

'I don't know what happened. Deal fell through.'

'There'll be more.'

'I don't know. I messed that one up pretty badly.'

'What?'

'Malfunctioned.'

'What happened.'

'Let's leave it at that. Anyway, Marilyn's been saying I should get out of the office, you know.'

Soloman approached the table and sat down.

'So, what's happening with that job of yours?' Ramus said.

'It's still there, son, but I'm not.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing serious.'

'Going back?'

'Yes. Soon.'

'And mommy?'

'I don't know. I guess so.'

'Why don't you just leave her here for the summer. Bring her there when it's cold.'

'We'll see. Anyway, son! I've heard you're in good spirits at the hospital. Some good news, is there? Some pretty nurse caught your eye?'

Stefan butted in. 'Are you kidding,' he said, 'Last time I went and tried to sit with a couple of nice girls, this guy could hardly look them in the eye! Didn't say a thing! I know he's on his feet all day, but come on! It's a woman! What else is there?'

Soloman continued, 'So Ramus,' he said, 'is there some girl that's stolen your heart?'

Stefan insisted, 'I'm beginning to wonder,' he said, 'whether the guy even has a pulse.'

'Some people' said Soloman, 'care about things besides girls and money.'

'Like what?'

'Like helping others.'

'I help others. I employ fifty people. I've made them all rich.'

'Well,' Ramus interrupted, 'we help anybody, not just fifty people. You saw those guys in the emergency room. I doubt you'd give them a job.'

'Maybe, maybe not.'

'Ok, maybe, maybe not,' Ramus said. 'This sun is making me hot.'

Soloman took up his napkin and spread it across his lap, then poured himself a glass of wine.

In the distance, Julian was hugging his mother, rubbing her back in consolation. Ramus saw them from the table and watched them approach. After they sat down, there was quiet series of shufflings as they arranged the drinks.

'So, Ramus, how is the hospital?' Catrek said.

'Fine.'

'What's new?'

'Nothing. It's cooling down for the summer.'

'And what about vacation? Julian says you might be going away with them for part of it.'

'Maybe.'

'You need to break away from that hospital at least a little bit, otherwise...'

'I know, I know. I'm going on vacation, I just don't know where.'

'The hospital isn't so bad,' said Soloman.

'You're the one who wants to get away from it,' Catrek said.

'It was a difficult offer to refuse.'  
'I've heard that already,' she said.  
'I left one hospital and went to another.'  
'You call that a hospital?'  
'It may be small, but it's a hospital. The sick come and they get healed.'  
'Is that why you went?'  
'I went because I get paid more for doing the same thing! What's wrong with that?  
It's only half the time!'  
'How's Court,' Catrek said, 'has he been having a good summer?'  
'Yes, very good,' said Julian.  
'And how is work going for you?'  
'Well, I've been showing off at a conference for the past few weeks, and I think I  
might be heading in a good direction.' He had an avid complacency, a victorious smile.  
'What about you, Florence?' Catrek said.  
'Well, the summer's been good. Ramus took me around the hospital one day and  
then we went sailing on the lake with Court.'  
'And what is it you do,' Catrek said to Stefan.  
Stefan, pouring his wine, said: 'Whatever I want.'

## Chorus part II

Night had fallen in the splendid park, and the blackness was made blue by the  
shining moon. The sound of the waves splashing and the chattering of the party was  
joined by the jazzy sounds dancing from the gazebo.

As coffee was being served, Florence turned to Julian and said, 'Let's dance,  
Julian.'

'You've seen me dance, dear.'

'Not once.'

'That's right,' he said. He had crossed his legs and was holding his hands with his  
fingers laced. 'Dance with my brother.'

Ramus got up and took Florence to the dance floor. 'We've danced before, haven't  
we.'

'It doesn't feel like it.'

'We danced at your wedding.'

'I don't remember my wedding.'

The two were dancing a two step and had wrapped their arms around. Florence,  
fatigued by the table stress, laid her head on Ramus's chest, as they went out of sight in  
the midst of the throng. Ramus thought of his policy of giving himself for his friends and  
took solace there as he held Florence close, his chin on her silky black hair.

'Shall we go for a walk?' Ramus asked. Florence nodded and they walked from  
the music to the water's edge, drawn by the lapping of the moonlight-peaked waves.

'How is the hospital?'

'I haven't even noticed it.'

'How has it been?'

'I haven't been thinking about it. I can't remember what I did today. You want to  
come by again?'

'What about vacation? What are you going to do?'

'I'll just stay around here, I think.'

'Court would love it if you came, you know. He has such a good time with you. Julian doesn't seem to excite him as much. Why don't you think about it.'

'How is Court?'

'I don't know. He hardly speaks to me. I do try.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'I've always been there. He never spoke.'

'Well?'

'I would like to go to the hospital again.'

'Tomorrow?'

'OK. Tomorrow.'

They stood among the sounds surrounded by the night. The band played for them, the crickets and cicadas sung, and the waves clapped as the breeze touched their hair. Amidst the symphony, Stefan stepped over and joined them.

'Sorry, Ramus.'

'I don't know what has gotten into him. Or you. I know you lost a deal, but don't take it out on my dad.'

'I thought he was taking it out on me.'

'Why don't you show some restraint?'

'Don't you start.'

'Alright, alright. What was going on over there anyway?'

'I was playing with my napkin, your dad was playing with his wine glass, Julian was looking out at the dancers, and your mom was smiling at me like she was apologising.'

'What happened with this deal of yours?'

'I blew it.'

'How?'

'I didn't want it, man.'

'Give it to me, then.'

'You're welcome. Marilyn was breathing down my neck every day. She wanted to blow off on vacation and I told her when I was finished, we'd go. My God, when I told her I blew it, that I wasn't going, she just started packing and then left. She just went to the airport. I don't even know where she is. She hasn't called. I don't know. Now I can't work anyway – and I can't take a vacation. I'm stuck. Stuck, man.'

'Why don't we all go down to the beaches?' said Florence. 'Let's all go!'

'What do you say, Stefan?'

'Sounds good to me. When are we going!'

'Guess what,' Florence said to the approaching Julian, 'Everyone's going to go down to the beaches!'

'Everyone plus my mother.'

'What?'

'Looks like Soloman is heading back to his new job, and my mom said she wasn't going to go...I invited her.' He looked at Florence and said, 'Well? I couldn't just let her stay here all alone. What do you think?'

'You're right.'

'Ramus?'

'We'll see. What about you, Stefan?'

'What do you mean, we'll see. What's wrong with Catrek coming along?' Stefan said.

'We'll see,' Ramus said.

'What happened to giving your time for others?' asked Florence.

'What's this?' Stefan asked.

'Fine,' said Ramus. 'Fine.'

## Ramus and Florence

Ramus was back at Oakford. His father was working upstairs. Florence was expected later.

Ramus finished with his morning patients and decided to visit his father. As he walked towards the uppermost floor, he wondered what he would see and what to say. His morning patients had gone the way of all of his patients of the past few weeks, that is: gone completely from his conscious. I'm curious, he thought, very curious about my father's whereabouts. I believe, he thought, I believe he's planning to leave again soon. As I see it, he thought, he and I will both work here for a couple of weeks, and then he and I will both go on vacation – or rather: I'll be going on vacation, he, to work elsewhere. That seems to be the case, he thought.

'Doctor?' came the voice of Eileen. 'Doctor? Before you go away, I just have a quick question.'

'Yes, certainly. Eileen.'

'Doctor, it's about the patient in room G. You've written this order here but it seems to me that it's contra-indicated by your previous order here.'

My God, thought Ramus. My God she's right. 'Ah, right, Eileen! Good work! I remember having changed that order. I am glad you double-checked! Here, let's change that.' He walked to the elevator. That would have cost something, he thought, maybe my job. I suppose, he thought, nobody would have taken notice. Nobody notices another old man dead. They would cry, he thought, but they were waiting to cry anyway. Still, he thought, I've never made a mistake before. This vacation, he thought, I need this vacation. And, he thought, and I can't possibly go with Julian and Stefan. That would be no vacation.

'Hello, Son! How about a cup of coffee?'

He followed Solomon to the coffee room, and made himself a cup. He sat on the soft couch and took a sip. The bitterness met with approval and he noted with sweetness the light coming from the ceiling window.

'So, daddy, what's new?'

'What's new with you, Son? I'm off again soon. Seems things are under control on this end. Nobody will miss me here.'

'Maybe the nurses.'

'Oh, one doctor's as good as the next for them. What about you? What are you going to do this summer?'

'Summer's halfway gone. I'll probably just hang around here. It's peaceful here in the summer. Maybe I'll go sailing.'

'Good! Find yourself a nice girl, why don't you! Take her around! I'll tell you a

funny story. One of the nurses on a ward, I won't tell you which one, of course – confidentiality, you know: protect the innocent. Anyway, one of the nurses has been trying to attach herself to a doctor – can't tell you which one, of course. This doctor was married, one of the sweetest fellows you're likely to meet. You probably know who I'm talking about now – damn!

'There are lots of sweet doctors,' Ramus said.

'Oh well, anyway – it's Doctor Rusyt, but you mustn't tell a soul, understand? Anyway, this doctor is happily married with a very sweet little girl, you know, but that doesn't stop this nurse –stubborn little one, piercing blue eyes – shoot, you know her too, I bet! So this nurse has been working on this poor guy for – I don't know – years and finally she sees the light at the end of the tunnel. Doctor Rusyt is getting divorced, you know, probably that little witch stuck some foolish notion in his head. It stuck there like a burr in wool, you know. And so finally he's getting divorced, and, what's more, this wife of his is so stupid she thinks it's all her fault, so she refuses to take the guy to the cleaners – he's rich, you know, his father was rich, something to do with oil. So it's all clear for this nurse to come around and edge her way in, and, I think, I think they've been doing something on the side. Of course she's amazed, to say the least, when she finds out Doctor Rusyt doesn't want the time of day from her, much less you know what! What does she do! She goes and tells the wife she's been seeing the husband for years. The wife goes on a rampage, and starts demanding everything the poor guy's worth. Everything. Dr. Rusyt, poor guy, has conceded. The nurse, thinking herself out of the picture because of her stunt, finds, to her surprise that the poor man wants her after all. But she doesn't stop there. She tells the guy she doesn't want anything to do with him. Well, then he went to get her fired, but he was told he doesn't have a leg to stand on. So here he is walking around the hospital all day utterly fuming. And she just puts her nose up at him. I've seen her, the little witch. Won't be long before one of them cracks, I guess.'

'Poor guy.'

'What's going on down near you?'

'Nothing like that. Quiet. Summer seems a natural healer.'

'Great isn't it! Anyway, you find a nice girl, huh!'

Ramus got up and Soloman followed him from the room. They said good bye in the bright atrium before Ramus headed to his own ward. He saw Florence as he walked from the elevator and followed at a distance as they moved in union to the nurses' station. He looked at her arms swaying like stalks in her walk's breeze. He saw her black hair loosely fall down her back and then, as she turned to look askance for Ramus, he saw her gentle nose and black eyes. He approached and touched her shoulder.

'Hi Florence.'

'Hi. I'm free.'

Ramus turned to the curious nurses and said: 'Ladies, this is Florence. She's thinking of becoming a nurse here, so I'm going to show her around and maybe one of you can show her around a bit later. How does that sound?' The declaration met with murmurs of approval but no outright volunteers. 'Come on, I'll get you a coat.'

As they walked away, Florence took Ramus's shoulder and whispered to him, 'what was that?'

'Well you can't really walk around, but if you're checking out the profession, it's fine.'

'What about becoming a nurse?'

'I was going to mention it. What do you think? You could train part-time and then work part-time. They're desperate for nurses. Can't find enough of them.'

'If you come on vacation, I'll think about it,' she said.

They fell upon the first patient, and Ramus went about his business of prodding and feeling. While checking a pulse, he said to Florence, 'You wouldn't become a nurse if I didn't go on vacation? It was for your own good, I figured.'

'Oh did you, Doctor Ramus? For my own good? And I think you should come along also for your own good.'

'You're fine, Miss – Miss. You're fine, Miss. I'll send a nurse down later. How do you feel? Good.' He walked from the room with Florence in tow and went to the next room. Once inside, he found his patient sleeping. He went about checking his chart.

'So?'

'Maybe I'll come.' He finished with his patient and took Florence to the tea room. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's walk around outside.'

Outside, the sun was white, and the heat rose in currents from the grey tarmac. The two went to the shade of one of the large leafy trees that inhabited the lot, and sat below it, looking at the white washed walls of Oakford hospital. It shone in the sun so bright that the sky looked not blue, but the smooth blue grey of the dark sea, and nowhere was there a cloud to streak it. The air was clear and clean: so dry that the view all around lacked any kind of distance: so dry that each breath was a sharp edge that cut as it descended.

A few people arrived in a car, and two got out to help the other one limp towards the hospital. Then it was silent again. After that, silence, until another car arrived. There would be a brief spell of bustle as the cars arrived, as though they came from a place where things moved too quickly, where they moved quickly and people got hurt. Then they would move quickly all the way to the hospital, where, in accordance with hospital procedure, they would be told to wait, please. Invariably they would claim urgency and invariably they would be told to wait. Ramus could feel them by their tens in the waiting room.

A couple that had gone in now came out, with the addition of an older man. 'Murray!' shouted Ramus. His patient turned his head and waved, but his guardians led the way and he dutifully followed. He waved goodbye and shouted something across the parking lot. 'Bye!' shouted Ramus as he waved.

'There he goes.' Ramus dismissed him with a nod. 'There he goes to live out the rest of his life. I saved that man's life, you know. You see,' he said to Florence. 'Now I can just sit here in the shade of this lovely tree and, meanwhile, good old Murray is going to go and live some for me. Isn't that great!'

Florence was leaning back on her sinewy arms. 'How can I be a nurse, Ramus. I'll have to go to school.' Her dark eyes opened towards Ramus and sought his collusion.

'Of course good old Murray will probably be thoroughly neglected and he'll be back here and he'll have seen...'

'What?'

'God knows what he will have seen. Who am I to say? Anyway, I suppose he'll just meander about the parks like hundreds of others. I've seen them skirting around, you know, or at least I think I see them. They're just sitting around looking at the trees, looking at the kids, looking at the families and the birds, maybe looking at their wives, or

their own family. I wouldn't mind doing that. I'd like to admire those things.'

'But you are.'

'Is that what I said?'

'Isn't that what you meant?'

## Florence

Florence came home and found it empty. It was late afternoon and she had almost danced home from the hospital. She hardly remembered the patients but had found the hospital exhilarating. She waltzed through the dark living room and left it as dark as it was when she arrived. She went to the kitchen and began boiling some water. It was to be an easy dinner tonight. She stepped out to the garden and looked at the growing shadow of the house. Soon it would envelop the entire garden. She thought she would catch the last of it and she moved to the grass and set up a chair in the far end, where the sun was yet cajoling the flowers.

She sat and let the sun heat her, but thought too much to sit at such a time. Stirring herself, she upped and stepped to the flowers that were just beginning to glow. She held the leaves of one rose, one in each hand and led her nose to its blossom to be greeted by a soft perfume. In return, she caressed its petals and found their silky touch a presence she had never known. She held the rose, but was distracted by the blossoms all around. She felt kinship for the rose, and would not let it go, for so it was: the rose had introduced her to the rest of the blossoms and she was not one to let a favour go unpraised. She held the rose and thought it was the rose that was the best. Well, she thought, if I must forsake the rose to enjoy the other blossoms, then I will forsake the blossoms and the rose.

The Sky was readying itself for night and had become a darkened blue especially in favour of the orange glowing trees. The sky looked down upon a twirling Florence and was itself content – cold, but content to watch the warmth of the soul below and fancying it might defend itself from darkness by that soul's light. The sky fancied it had been ignored by everyone on that day, but this soul was praising it enough for all the others, this dancing firefly of a soul.

What's this, asked the sky, as it saw a man come from the house. He's waving his arms frantically about and he seems to be shouting about something. Hello there! shouted the sky, don't shout at her!

'I forgot,' said Florence. 'I forgot!'

'You forgot!' shouted Julian, with his hands on his hips. 'How could you forget! I finally got a call from the station! He's been sitting there for hours, you know! And I don't have the car, so I tried calling here! And no-one was here! No-one's ever here! So I had to come back to get the car so I could go get him! And now I come back and I find you here! Where were you!'

'I was out – walking. I was out,' she said calmly, twisting the rose's leaf, now, tearing it from the stem. 'I was out for the afternoon. I thought he was staying longer. It must have slipped my mind. I don't remember him saying anything about being dropped off there.'

'Well, he's there now. I'll go get him. I'll go and get him. You just stay here.' Julian turned and walked back to the house. He flailed his arms again and was mumbling

something as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Florence turned away and looked at the rose in its silky ignorance. It had nothing to offer her fury.

----- Chapter 6-----

## Chorus

Stefan sat on the soft white sands of the beach in the orange light of the sunrise. From his room he had heard the waves crashing and had decided, since he couldn't sleep and since it was light outside and since the crashing sea offered a sight better than his bedroom wall, he would go outside. He had silently removed the sheet that was covering him, and he had silently moved through the bedroom, careful not to wake Catrek, who was sharing the guest room. His feet had slapped down the board walk and he had come to the beach.

The waves were crashing all around and the piper birds were already having breakfast in the form of some tiny animal that lived at the waters edge down very small holes. The birds would move up and down with the edge of the sea, and groups of them created a comical effect as they now chased the water's edge down, now ran away as it made an offensive. Couples walked by and bowed their heads in respect of the meditative Stefan, in respect of the sun that was facing him in an early morning conversation. Lone walkers bowed their heads as well. The elderly convalescent didn't bow his head, he was focused on his path, and was using his entire alertness in the act of walking. Then Stefan bowed his head, not wishing to obstruct another's serenity.

'Hello, Stefan,' came Catrek's voice from behind him. He turned to say hello back and noticed she was already wearing a bikini. Catrek had a slim shape and though tall for a woman had excellent proportions. Her face was yet youthful and old at the same time. She had wrinkles around her eyes and her cheeks had started to fall towards her mouth, but her eyes were alive with youthful confrontation. Black rebellion. She had thin legs and a long back with well tapered shoulders. She was starting to sag, though, around her belly, her thighs, and her breasts. Her body was similar to her face, though on a grander scale. There was the playfulness of lanky youth and the stiffness of death.

'What are you doing up so early?' Stefan said.

'I couldn't sleep either. Those waves crashing all night. I feel like I'm dreaming. I thought I was wide awake, but now that I'm outside, I'm very sleepy.' She lay down on the sand with her knees pointing to the sky and her head in her hands. In front of her was the quickly yellowing sun admiring itself in the shiny sea. Above was a sky turning from dark purple quickly to blue. Behind were the sand dunes emerging from the white sand, but covered with a green, scrubby beard. Stefan and Catrek were like eyes of the earth on the beach's white face.

At the house, Florence was still sleeping, even though Julian had risen soon after Catrek. He prepared breakfast while Court was searching around near the edge of the dunes. He called for Florence as soon as he had finished, but there was no response. He worried as he called her name again and then went to search in her bedroom. She was there, still sleeping on the bed. The sun was shining on her face and it was well into the morning. Already the beach that had been empty when Julian spied his mother walking with Stefan was now crowded. He went up to Florence and touched her shoulder. Florence, he said, Florence, breakfast was ready. She lay still, her eyes and mouth gently closed, her long black hair falling around her neck.

He lifted her arm from the bed and gently shook it. He brushed her hair with his

hand and moved it forward slowly to touch her forehead as well. He knelt to give her a kiss, and finally she opened her eyes. Breakfast was ready, he told her, and she mumbled something. She was not hungry, he asked. No, she mumbled back, not hungry. Was she still tired, he asked. Yes, she nodded now, still tired, leave her alone. He got up and walked from the bedroom and ate breakfast alone.

Stefan and Catrek had moved from their spot once it became apparent that the tide was moving in. The piper birds had finished eating and the pelicans were now flying overhead and diving for food. The two began walking toward a pier in the distance. It had become hazy and they could only just make it out.

'I love this place,' said Catrek. 'It is full of people, but still peaceful. Everything is in motion but still so natural, as though there weren't anything but this. Don't you think?'

He looked around, at the kids and their castles, at the ones with buckets collecting shells and water. 'I've never been one for scenery, really. Now that you mention it, I can see what you mean, though. I never went to the beach much. That's why I came, you know, to see the beach. There's so much I've missed out on,' he was looking at the white sand, feeling it between his white toes.

'You've got time to see it. You're seeing it now.'

'I don't feel it sinking in, though.'

'You can't help it. It will sink in.'

'I want it to sink in now. I suppose I'm just tired.'

'That's when it sinks in the most, you know. You'll see when you wake up. Bright colours and loud noises and jostling people, surfers going out and back. You'll see it all.'

Stefan smiled and looked around him. He hadn't taken a vacation for years. If Marilyn were there he would have everything he wanted. The thought of his wife left him cold, though, and he bowed his head. If she were there, he wouldn't be there at all.

'I could live here forever, you know,' she said. 'I could go walking every day on the beach. I could get up and watch the sunrise and the animals shuffling about the dunes. And you haven't seen the storms yet! These torrential downpours with thunder and lightning! You can shower in the rain! I have showered in the rain!'

'I missed out on everything,' he said.

'You'll see it all now!'

They were approaching the pier and could see the fishermen packing up and heading back to shore. The giant wooden pier seemed to hold hundreds of them. They stopped and negotiated a route through the dunes to get to the beginning of the pier and after they had walked to the end, their attention was drawn to a sea turtle that was being pointed out by a small crowd of fishermen. It was a mirage beyond the rippled waves of the sea, a dream distorted by the sea's surface. Its motion toward the deep looked jagged, but anyway constant. Stefan admired the blue clarity of the water made green by the sun reflecting off the white sand. He saw the sparkles of the ripples and could almost ignore the turtle, as he would have done in his past. He would have seen only a flatness, but now he saw and felt the bulk of the turtle made light by the weight of the water.

'Now you've seen a sea turtle! I've never even seen one!'

They walked back down the pier, trod with care through the sand dune's dense scrub, and then made their way back towards the house.

'How come your husband didn't come?' he asked.

'He was working,' she said, 'at least that is what he calls it.' She refused to be clouded over and resolutely pointed her chin forward.

'You mean he doesn't work there?'

'He works, alright, it's just...well...it's nothing, really. It's very strange. Anyway, this place is better than anywhere. It's the greatest place on earth. He's silly for going off there at the end of the summer.'

They were approaching the house and Julian and Court were seated on the beach at the end of the board walk.

'Where's Florence,' Catrek asked.

'She's sleeping. There's something wrong with her.'

'It's almost lunch time!'

'I don't know. I just don't know what's wrong with her. Ever since she left Court stranded – I shouldn't have yelled, you know. I just shouldn't have yelled. Look at him. He's fine anyway. She was getting better, too, you know.'

'Don't be silly, Julian, just because you scolded her doesn't mean it's your fault. Everybody blows up, you know. I'll go see what's wrong.' She left and walked back to the house. At some distance, she turned and saw Julian, Stefan, and Court sitting on the beach. She loved this place.

Upstairs, she went to see Florence, and found her yet asleep on the large bed, a pile of bones decorated with black hair. How thin she looked. How inert, though facing the heat of the morning sun.

'Come on, Florence. Let's go and have some lunch,' said Catrek. 'Come on. Up you get.'

'Oh, Catrek, I'm fine here.'

'What do you mean? You can't go on sleeping all day. Come on, we'll go prepare some lunch, OK?'

'I'm not well, Catrek, I'm sick. I must have a fever. I can hardly move. You go, Catrek. I'll get up.' She looked ahead the whole time. 'Tell Julian to come over.'

Catrek left and walked back to the beach admiring the rhythmic chorus of the waves and the smell of the sea. She saw the trio as she had left them. Julian looked at her as she approached. He was standing next to Court with his hands on his hips.

'It's bad, isn't it?' he asked.

'She's sick, Ramus. She must have caught something, she thinks maybe a fever. Just give her a day or two.'

'She's not eating.'

'Wait a day and see if she gets better. If not, we'll call a doctor.'

'I'm going to call Ramus. He'll come down.' He walked off talking under his breath. 'Look after Court,' he shouted as he walked down the board walk.

## Chorus part II

Ramus came down to the beaches. He was feeling decidedly bored on his own. He wandered around his house as a homeless man wanders about the streets, wondering how he had ended up without a soul to talk to. And so he made his way south, in direct opposition to the learned advice of the birds. They would have waited at least another couple of months for their move south.

As he was driving towards the beach, Julian was seated by his wife on the bed, this being the third day that she insisted on sleeping through the day. Court peaked

through the door. What was the matter, he asked, and Julian motioned for him to come in. Court looked at his mother and saw her for perhaps the first time. She lay there with sunken eyes, refusing to open them more than a squint. Refusing to close them more than that either. So she lay there with her wrists and ankles crossed, her knees bent, and her eyes open a slit. Her mouth was slightly open as well. That was the first time Court saw her. He asked if she was OK but she remained as she was without even the faintest sign of comprehension. Julian told him to leave. He told him she would be fine.

Ramus is coming, he told Florence. He's going to come down and stay with us for the vacation, he told her. He left the room and waited on the porch, where he could see his mother and Stefan swimming in the waves. They would swim out and then try to catch the waves back in. He saw that maybe a dozen times before he heard Ramus walk in the front door.

'Oh Ramus, am I glad to see you. Something's wrong Ramus. Just tell me if she's sick.'

'God, Julian, you look pale. Haven't you noticed how sunny it is here? Look, even I have some colour.' He walked to the bedroom door. 'You just wait here, OK?'

'Florence?' He walked up to her and put his face to hers. He kissed her and waited for her to awaken. 'Florence. What happened.'

She opened her eyes and put her hand on his face, feeling his hair and then resting her hand on his neck. She smiled. 'It's nothing Ramus, I keep telling them I've got a fever. I'll get up soon.'

'I'll be waiting,' he said and he got up to leave the bedroom. 'She's fine, Julian, she's got a temperature. You call me down for a fever!'

'She didn't feel hot.'

'Everyone feels hot down here. You've got to use a thermometer. It feels good to be back, Julian. I'm going to go swimming right now. Come on, we'll give Florence a little space, shall we.'

'Yes, doctor.'

On they way down, the two pale bodies made their way over the dunes and onto that soft sand. 'Is that mommy swimming out there? With Stefan?'

'Yeah, they've been out on the beach since we got here.'

'That's the spirit, huh.'

Court met them on the beach and Julian and Ramus took him to the water and swum. All five were floating with the swells, Catrek, an accomplished rider of waves, Stefan, her apprentice, Julian and Court, wading in the shallows, and Ramus floating on his back further out, where the swells began to crest into waves, with his arms stuck out and his eyes closed, bobbing up and down.

When the group came from the water to sit on the beach, Catrek got up and asked Ramus to accompany her on a walk. They would head away from the pier, towards the endless southern expanse.

'Ramus, I have something to tell you. Its your father.'

'You know he just wants a change, you know. I don't think – I don't think you should condemn him just because he wants to move to a new place.'

'That's not it, Ramus, you know, he's done a bad thing.'

'Everybody does bad things, mommy.'

'I don't know. I just thought I'd tell you that things aren't going well.'

'They'll get better.'

Catrek put her chin out and walked on. The noonday sun hitting the beach had created a haze so thick that it seemed to be in some kind of struggle with the sun itself. It had formed as if to protect the beach from the sun's burning rays, and though the haze did block the directness of the sun's light, it left the place hotter. The two walkers did an about face and went to see the others.

'I don't know how you do it, doctor Ramus. I don't know how you do it,' Julian said as they approached. He pointed to the water. The tide was out, the sand bar had become a blockade against the waves, and it left a calm strip of water. In the strip was Florence, wading with Court. She had tied her hair back into a pony tail and was submerged to the neck with Court on her belly. She supported him gently as he practised his swimming.

## Florence and Ramus

'Let's go this way,' she said motioning towards the infinite sky.

'No let's go that way,' he said pointing to the blackened pier.

It was dawn and the stars were being slowly masked by the sky. Crabs scurried to and from the water from holes by the dunes' edge. Ramus and Florence had not yet slept, and while the others had discovered how late it was and decided to sleep before the light came, Ramus asked Florence if she wanted to watch the dawn from the shores of the beach.

'The night isn't long is it?' he said, 'but I can't believe we need to sleep through it. It seems like a terrible loss.'

'Why do we sleep, Ramus?'

'We sleep so we can dream, and we dream so we can live the next day. You've been sleeping for the last three days.'

'I know, I just couldn't get up. I don't feel like I lost the days, though. I remember everything that happened like it was a dream. But Ramus, it was a terrible dream. I had lost control of everything. There was no reason and there was no urge to do anything. There was no happiness in the dream, there was only necessity, but then, there was no necessity either. There was only a mild urge on the part of everyone. Everyone was telling me to get up, but what they were really saying was: stay right there, nobody needs you for anything. It wasn't a dream, Ramus, it was a never-ending nightmare. Julian was telling me to get up and come and eat and come and play with Court, but he was just telling me to be the way I have always been but the way I have always been all of a sudden didn't mean anything except a set of actions. He wasn't telling me he missed me, he was just telling me that he was worried that things were not going as they did before.'

'What about Court, didn't he see you?'

'Yes. But Julian wouldn't let him come close, as though I was sick, as though I would infect him. And then I did feel sick. And Julian would stay there as though he were helping me. And your mother would come in and tell me to get up and come out with her. She always said the same thing, Ramus. But she said it without any expectation in her voice, like it was a duty. I just stayed in bed and for all that I had I couldn't move. I was frozen and it just kept getting worse, like every day was a repeat except for the nights. During the first night, I got out of bed. I couldn't hear anything and I thought I was going deaf. I tapped the side of the bed and I heard the taps like

drum beats it was so quiet. I couldn't believe it so I got up and went out to the balcony and the water was still and smooth like the water in a bay, and there wasn't a breeze and there wasn't a moon and there wasn't a single noise at all. And I realised how hungry I was. I had forgotten about food. But the thought of eating seemed vulgar, like it was an appetite demanding attention. I don't mind those things. And then I thought of Court, and I had to see him right away, so I went to his room and looked at him sleeping but I was afraid to touch him. I wanted to touch him, but the thought of it was vulgar, like the thought of eating. I watched him for a while and then I went back outside, but when I got there, I was overwhelmed with fatigue. I thought maybe I had never ever slept and that would be the first time. I felt metallic, clean, like a chrome pipe. I went back to the bed and the thought of getting in bed next to Julian made me lose that sharp sense of sleep. I was disgusted again, but even that was an appetite, so I just walked back to bed and lay down, not tired, not awake. Do you know what it's like never to feel awake and never to feel tired either?'

'A dream. How did you finally awaken?'

'When you came.'

'I rescued you.'

'When I saw you, I was afraid. I thought you were the hand of death coming to take me away. You scared me out of bed. I only realised it was you later, when I saw you walking down the beach with your mother. And then I remembered who it was that had kissed me awake. Then I realised I hadn't dreamt of death, but had seen you. Ramus, I'm glad you came. Everything was turned around on me. Remember when I went to the hospital with you? Do you remember I told you I wanted to be a nurse? I was so happy that day that I forgot about Court. I left him stranded at the lake and the people he went with became furious. I overheard our neighbour speaking with Court in the garden. She was asking him if he was alright. She was asking him where I was and whether anyone was watching him. I was standing in the kitchen window. I made a mistake, Ramus, and she just wanted to let Court know that I was a bad mother, so that he would be more careful. Can you imagine? But I didn't even get angry. That was before we left. That was when I started sleeping. Instead of getting angry with her, I thought maybe she was right, and I just let the fury go, like it was an appetite. That's when I started thinking everything was an appetite, Ramus. I told you I couldn't eat. I couldn't touch anyone, and I couldn't move because if I was going to deny my appetites, then I certainly wasn't going to let any one else's get the better of me. It was easy Ramus. I thought I could just let myself go, but when I saw death's hand and his face, I decided I would reject him as well. I thought that was the final appetite. I was left with me. I came down to the beach and I just took Court by the hand and we went swimming. It felt the way it used to when I first had him. No questions asked, no cravings, no worry, no reproach. Then I saw you and it all came down to you. I thought you were death, but you had lifted me out, Ramus.'

'And Julian?'

'And Julian just stood by, the way he used to. While I was in bed, I thought back to the time we had met. I remembered the very first time we spoke. Do you know what he said? He asked me why I looked down. That's what he said. Why did I look down? You know I never remembered it until I saw death. I always remembered everything else, right down to the very last detail, but, somehow I had forgotten what it was he said to me, the first words that came from his mouth: Why are you down? You know what

the worst thing is? The worst thing is that I can't remember what it was I was thinking about before he said that. As soon as he said it, I forgot what it was I had in my own head. Those words had rattled around and made such a noise that everything else was drowned out. But I remember what I was doing that day. I remember that as clear as any photograph. It was the hottest day of the year and it was a Saturday and I had gone with my best friends to play all day by the lake. It was one of the most carefree days I can remember. I can't remember a day so free in all my life. Until today.'

'Until I came.'

'Yes. Ramus, I am scared.'

'Look at us,' he said, 'look at us. I don't know what's happened.' He looked at her, at her profile, at her gentle nose and her black and grey eyes. He could see her black silhouette but he wasn't to look at her directly. He couldn't stop looking at her, yet he couldn't suggest to her that he was looking at her. He walked a fraction of a step behind, so that his stare would not be noticed.

'Let's go swimming,' she said, undressing as she stepped down to the water's edge. Ramus saw her thin body trailed by black hair, and, following her, undressed as well. The two went to the water, they were not far from the pier and could see its silhouette extended by a couple fishermen. The sky was brightening and their eyes, used to the dark, saw each others skin as white as cotton. They waded through the little waves that tickled their ankles and then they were swimming to the deep, with the water slapping their necks loud because it was so close to their ears. All they could here was breathing and the lapping of water, water that was still black below the advancing horizon.

## ----- Chapter 7-----

## Ramus and Florence

At the end of their time at the beaches, Ramus and Florence found themselves walking in the wet heat of the afternoon. The suffocating stillness of the atmosphere made it difficult to stay still. To feel any kind of wind on his sweat soaked skin, Ramus had decided to take a walk. Finding everyone to be in a kind of sated stupor, he announced he would walk alone, and that he would be heading down the beach, away from the pier, should anyone wish to join him.

The beach was sparsely populated, more bare than full and certainly quieter than on any day so far. He walked along the edge of the water and found it covered with shells. Just as he hadn't seen so few people, he had not seen so many shells. Of course, he stooped occasionally to examine the most interesting ones and on looking closely found that even the smallest shells had great variety of shape. The limpets were shaped like shallow cones, with a hole in them, or not. There was one called an olive shell, that resembled its namesake in colour and shape. There were double sided clams with an infinite variety of colours and striations, scallops with scarlet stripes. There were long and tapering shells with a sharp point. The most beautiful shell he found was no bigger than his thumbnail. It was pure white, helical in structure, but the rounds of the largest helix had a further helix superimposed in a sharp ridge. He picked it up and continued stepping slowly, head stooped, searching for others. When Florence touched his shoulder, he looked up and realised with surprise that in the many minutes of his walk, he not gone far from the house.

'Hello,' he said.

'I saw you from the house and thought I'd take Court out to come search with you.'

'Look at all these shells – Look what I've found.'

'Isn't that beautiful.'

'Keep it. Why didn't Court come?'

'Tired.'

'No-one's moving in there.'

'Your mother went on a walk with Stefan.'

'And Julian?'

'Resting.'

'It has been restful.'

Over the dunes and over the land, the sky was blackening quickly. The air became stifling hot and saturated with moisture, as though it might suddenly become drops. For the sound of the waves crashing all the time, the two walkers didn't notice the approach of the storm until they heard the remnants of a rumble, a snip of a far off disturbance, the sound of which just rose above the surf. Ramus looked towards the house and could see it already engulfed in darkness. There was a streak of lightning beyond the house, and then, the clap of thunder.

'It's raining over there. Come on!' He started running towards the house, but looked over and saw Florence remained. 'What are you doing! If we run, we won't get caught!'

'I don't mind getting wet! Come on, we'll go swimming!'

'Are you joking! What about the lightning! Come on, let's go!' He took her hand and they ran towards the house, but she dislodged his grip at the boardwalk, and shot underneath it. Ramus turned and followed, and the two crouched below the steps of the boardwalk as the rain began pelting down. The torrential rain was a sight to behold. The entire sky was muted by a layer of burgeoning cloud, and the rain fell so hard and fast that rivulets formed immediately. The wind blew in gusts and pushed the rain through the cracks in the boardwalk and gaps in its side. Ramus and Florence were soon wet to the skin, and the coolness that blew in with the storm front made them cross their arms for warmth.

Teeth chattering, Ramus offered to make a run for the house, but Florence took him in her arms and held him. He lay his head on her chest and she caressed it. And the wind whistled in their ears. Ramus lifted his head and they began to kiss, but he drew away.

'Come,' she said, 'we'll go swimming. It'll be warm in the water.' She undressed him and then undressed herself and led him to the water. It was warm as they danced in each other's arms amidst the gentle surf. And the rain hid them from view and hit the ocean water as though it were no more than a very big pond.

## Chorus

That was at the end of their time on the beach. Ramus and Florence were left stranded in the midst of a summer storm. As those storms go, it was a long one, but the two came back when it had calmed. They returned to an empty house, but soon after, Stefan arrived with Catrek, Julian with Court.

'Did you see the storm?' Ramus asked. 'We were looking for shells and then it caught us out. We hid underneath the boardwalk.'

'We got caught as well,' said Catrek, 'but we were over by the pier and they have a little cabin at the end where the whole area gathered as soon as they felt the storm coming. Didn't you feel it coming? Did you notice how it became still and thick? All the fisherman seemed to know before anybody. They were sitting there drinking beer by the time most people figured it out. What a storm, though. Did you guys stay inside?'

'Court wanted to go get candy, so we drove over to the store,' Julian said. 'By the time we got there, we saw the storm coming and we raced it back. We won, too, didn't we? Court wanted to watch it from the car, so we just parked out in the lot and let it fly over us. It was a great storm, wasn't it?'

'I love the air after the storm,' Catrek said. 'Who wants to go for a fresh air walk? Ramus, let's take a walk down the beach.'

'I've just come from the beach.'

'Well, then let's walk down towards the pier and see if we can get some fish for dinner. How does that sound?'

'Sounds fine.'

They walked from the house and down to the beach, Ramus with his head bowed and Catrek slumping forward. Their feet slapped the wet boardwalk and the air was cooler now and clear. Everything the sky had to say had been said and evidence of its expression covered everything. The white buildings that ran up behind the dunes were

now dark grey, their porous stucco had collected the water. The edges of the structures were already drying out, even though the sun was well past its zenith.

The beach was almost empty. The coolness and the weakening sun made it inhospitable to all but a few adventurous children come to take advantage of the waves while the water was empty of people. They had come with boards and would swim out over the breaking swells to ride them back to shore.

'After the storms,' she said, 'the beach is always empty. Look at how the sand has pock marks from the rain and rivulets that run all the way down to the water. But down there the water's edge will have smoothed it out.' They walked down to the edge, where the shells had disappeared into the tide. Just as Catrek had said, there was a line demarcating the most ambitious advances of the water, a line made up of very long curves, testaments to the waves that had advanced the most.

'I wonder where those shells will go.'

'They disappear. They don't come often.'

'I know. It was the first time I've seen so many. I found a great one, a pure white spiral with another spiral around the first.'

'Ramus, what do you think of your father?'

'He's fine.'

'I don't think things are working out.'

'You haven't given it a chance, mommy. You can't just expect everything to be normal after such a big move, you know.'

'It's not that Ramus.'

'That's the only thing that's changed.'

'That's not true Ramus, there's a lot you don't know, and there's a lot that has happened. Not just recently, but over the years.'

'And now, when he most needs support, you don't want to give it to him.'

'Oh Ramus, you don't understand.'

'I'm only saying this stuff for your own good, you know.'

'I know, I know, Ramus, but – oh, I don't know – I don't know anymore.'

'What's the matter.'

'Nothing. How is the hospital?'

'It's fine.'

'I was thinking that maybe you should try something else if you're not happy there.'

'Who said I'm not happy.'

'Don't you think I can tell.'

'Well, it was true. It was true, but things have changed. It's better now. Things are going better there.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing in particular, I'm just feeling better about the place.'

'I don't know Ramus, you know, you have to do what's in your heart, and I always thought you were pressured into being a doctor. That's all. That's all I was worried about.'

'Well, it's a bit late, you know.'

'What are you talking about, darling? You're still young. You can do whatever you want. You should take advantage of your time. I'm not saying you should just get

up and quit, maybe do something else part-time or something, maybe do some kind of thing that combines medicine with something else. I wish I could help you.'

'I told you things are fine at the hospital. I've been feeling fine there.'

'I don't know. Stefan was saying how upset you were. He said he was feeling so upset with his own work that maybe you and he would be able to do something together.'

'I used to talk to Julian about that, but we didn't think it was interesting.'

'You and Julian are different.'

'Of course we are. Why are you worried about the hospital, anyway?'

'Well, you're dad doesn't seem to be happy there and I just don't want you to end up like he has.'

'He isn't unhappy there.'

'He is, Ramus, he just doesn't tell you, you know.'

'Come on, I see him all the time and he's just like any other doctor, or any other person who works. You can't expect to be happy at work, you know, but there are good things and I'm sure he knows that.'

'Then why go and get a job on the other side of the world?'

'He just wants to make sure he has enough money. I don't know. Maybe he wants to work there a few years and then do something else. There isn't anything wrong with changing a few things. You can't be upset because of that.'

'I am upset, Ramus. He's disturbed something for no reason, and...that's not what I'm upset about. He's done something bad.' Catrek stopped and looked at him with the serious complicity of a child who had discovered something that she thought might have been better left unknown.

'What do you mean, he's done something bad?'

'Well, what do you think I mean?'

'I don't know. How bad could it have been?'

'Pretty bad, honey.'

'I think he needs your help, maybe.'

'I can't help him.'

'I don't know. You have to make your own decision.'

'I don't know what to do. I just wanted to tell you what was happening.'

'It will calm down. It will pass. Don't worry,' he said as he turned and started walking towards the house. Don't worry, he thought, don't worry.

## Chorus part II

The six left the beaches together. Almost together. Ramus drove with Stefan and his mother while Julian drove with his son and his wife. As Ramus drove, his passengers looked at the houses that lined the beach. They were to continue for some time along the coast, watching people who moved mindless of the comings and goings of the busy road. The roads to the beach were filling up with their usual crowd, as though the storm were forgotten. Men and women plodded lazily toward the beach. For those that stayed, each day was as long as a day could be, so the natural pace was slow. For those that left, the day was planned ahead, and they moved quickly, attempting to extract slightly more of the day than they had planned.

Ramus's car was an exception, catering, as he was, to his two passengers wistfully watching what was within their reach as though it were not. He drove slowly, waiting for a fraction of himself he had left at the beach. Together with all the sand that collected over the course of the vacation, his car was a very small patch of beach that was being moved along.

'What's waiting for you, Stefan?'

'Good question. What about you?'

'Hospital, patients, nurses, the fall, the winter.'

'The office, Marilyn. I hope that vacation made her feel better.'

'If it did, you have to wonder, don't you. And if it didn't, then your out of luck, huh.'

'Either way I don't care.'

'What abandon. Not healthy, you know. The beginning of all bad things. Abandon all hope you who enter here.'

'What?'

'Signposted over the entrance to hell. When you abandon hope, you are in hell.'

'What have I got to hope for. I'm fine without it. I can't abandon it if I never had it. Besides, it isn't as if I had a choice.'

'Who crossed you?'

'Nobody crossed me. Nobody gave me anything.'

'You've got thousands of empty days waiting for you to fill them. Someone gave you that.'

'Accident.'

'You've got what people dream about.'

'I haven't got anything. I only realised it here, at this beach. I never had anything – everything I have is on credit. I'm going to move down here, Ramus, what do you think. I'm going to come down here and live for a while.'

'What about Marilyn? What about me.'

'You can visit. Imagine a nice house on the water, a morning swim, evening sunsets.'

'I won't get in the way. In this little scene of yours, where are all the people, where's all the fun, where's the love?'

'That would come.'

'You're going to run away and expect those to follow?'

'I don't care if they do or not.'

'Now that you have them, isn't it easy to leave them?'

'That's exactly it. It's easy to leave, so what do I have? Nothing.'

'No, you have two things, everything and nothing. All the good you know and all the bad you don't know. All the good that's there and all the bad that hides it from you. The bad, that's your problem.'

Ramus was crawling along, when he was passed by Julian's car. He sped up and pulled alongside.

'What's the rush!' he shouted. Court waved from the back and Florence watched Ramus. 'You wanna pull over and go for one last swim!'

'I thought we'd make it in time for lunch!' Julian shouted.

'When is that!'

'When we get back!'

Ramus waved and then let his car drop back.

'You need to have some kids.'

'What about you?'

'I'm not the one complaining about what I have to go back to.'

'You said the hospital, the patients – what's so great about that.'

'I didn't say it that way, I said it with resolve.'

'Resignation.'

'Whatever. It isn't my life. My life is outside the hospital.'

'You work more than I do.'

'I'm helping people.'

'You like your work. You're not married.'

'I'm free.'

'Exactly. You're free. You like your work. I'm stuck, I do my work for the money. I'm married.'

'You're rich. Go do something else.'

'It's too late.'

'Too late! You know how many of my patients would put themselves in your position!'

'Your patients are half dead. There is no comparison. If I compare myself to them, sure I've got everything in front of me, but it's fucking meaningless. Looking at it from the eyes of the dead! What the hell is that!'

'I'm only trying to cheer you up.'

'Comparing me to a fucking stiff!'

'Alright. I'll compare you to myself. If I had all you have, I'd be happy.'

'I'm telling you! I have nothing! That's what I've been telling you!'

'And I'm telling you you've got everything.'

'Your word against mine. I vote for me.'

'That's your problem. You don't listen to anyone.'

'What?' he said, 'I can't hear you!'

'And your humour is elementary.'

'At least I try. How come you're so happy? I remember not even weeks ago you had your head in the dumps. Are you on drugs?'

'Drugs? Drugs give you withdrawal.'

'When they wear off. I'll tell you a story. It's called My Crappy Life.'

'Go on.'

'I was never good at anything. I'm still not good at anything.'

'When did you figure that out.'

'Since I came here.'

'And it's here you want to stay!'

'It's opened my eyes, Ramus. It's opened my eyes to the world that's been evading me.'

'So just go out and conquer it.'

'But it's too late, man, that's what I keep telling you. I would have had to start years ago, when I was a fucking little baby, and now, now it's all slipped by.'

Ramus slowed the car down and steered it over. He pulled into a road that led to a little patch of sand, surrounded by rocks that jutted out and formed a shallow bay. He jerked to a stop, opened his door and ran to the water. He ran into the shallows then dove

into the deep. As he was swimming, he turned and saw Stefan standing on the sand with Catrek. He did summersaults in the water and then swam out further and he kept swimming until he could see the whole coast stretched before him, his friend and his mother just dots blended in with the rest of the dots, smaller than the pelicans that flew in lines overhead, smaller than the sharp waves that rose and fell around his stationary head. Below was dark, blue, the colour of huge sapphire. The irregular splashes and slaps of the water were his only company, and to quiet them, he floated flat in the water and let his ears be covered. Now his company was the clear blue sky and to quiet it he closed his eyes, and then his company was the salt that stung his mouth, first, then his eyes. He spat and swallowed his salty saliva, squeezed his eyelids tight as he could, and then his company was the tickle of the water that traced a line bisecting his front and his submersed back, his sink and his buoy. He exhaled and let himself sink. He was left with just the cool – at least there was the cool.

When he opened his eyes, he could make out the rays of the sun, green from the water's screen. He swam along with them until he surfaced and then went to shore.

'Where were you!' shouted Catrek, 'we lost sight of you! Don't swim out so far.'

'I was only testing what Stefan had said.'

'I was only joking,' Stefan retorted.

'What did Stefan say?'

'Oh he was talking about how he had nothing. Go on, Stefan, swim out there and you'll find what you have.'

'I can't swim out past my shoulders.'

'And you say you've got nothing! Maybe it's true after all.'

'Who put that crazy thought into your head, Stefan. And you,' she said to Ramus, 'don't get so serious!'

The car continued now with more vigour, determined to reach its journey's end, and Ramus, who had decided to be its leader rather than its unwilling follower, was driving on, carrying his begrudging passengers in committed silence. It was not long, at a point when the sun was still hot, when they passed Julian's car, still moving at the same speed with which it had begun. As they passed they waved and motioned for the others to pull over.

'Let's get lunch,' said Ramus. 'Who's in?'

'Sounds good,' said Julian. 'Edwards getting hungry.'

'Let's stop here and set up in one of those pizza shacks,' said Ramus, pointing a little along the tributary road. They walked over and sat around a scratched plastic table, each with a differently fashioned chair. A thin young girl walked over and placed a tablecloth and then listed the specials. The group ordered, then sat back to admire the clear ocean view. The sky seemed to have been cleared by a demented wind. It blew the bamboo covering of the seating area and caused concern that the scaffolding might not support much gustier. Nor might the shack where the pizza's baked. Nor might Florence, more ragged than either.

'What's wrong Florence,' said Catrek.

'Why must there be something wrong?' she said to the hair blown across her face.

'The end of holiday,' said Julian.

'The end,' said Ramus, 'the prelude to the night, the overture of dawn. Who wants to walk? Come on!'

'Pizza's coming.'

'There will be more, but days like this are numbered.' He took Florence and Court by the hand and led them along a path to the water. Walking through the twisted air holding hands they reached a rocky beach and stood looking to the horizon.

'See that? How long do you think it would take you to walk to the edge of the world, Court?'

'All day!' he yelled, just audible over the roughened surf. 'Forever!'

'Eternity! That's eternity! Want to go!'

'Let's all go!'

'Maybe next time!' They headed back and found the table covered with food.

'What's over there, Ramus?'

'Tell them, Court.'

'Eternity!'

----- Chapter 8-----

## Chorus

Ramus left Stefan at his house, and the latter walked from the car to his front door with his bag in one hand, his other hand in his pocket and his head struck forward. He may well have been facing his maker, preparing his last request, unwilling to acknowledge those he left behind. It left the impression that those left behind were part of the plan, more than that: those left in the car were the originators of the plan sending off another devoted follower to his end. Stefan had said goodbye in the car with the gravity and dogma reserved for religious fighters, and then he left as though he had begun his mission. So on his walk, he declared himself free of his makers by not looking back.

Ramus and Catrek looked on from the car, ensuring he reached his destination. It was courtesy to ensure he had remembered his keys, otherwise he would be stranded. As he fumbled for his keys and finding them unlocked his front door, he turned and waved a last goodbye. Then the car continued, Ramus driving and Catrek still occupying the back seat.

'Wasn't that fun,' she said.

'Yeah.'

'Stefan is very sweet, isn't he?'

'Not usually.'

'What was wrong with Florence?'

'When?'

'At the beach.'

'She had a fever.'

'I hope you think about what I told you.'

'The hospital is fine.'

'About your father.'

'When is he back?'

'He's back now. Ramus, I don't know if its just me, but he did something terrible. I don't know if I should tell you, but I feel like I should, just so you understand.'

'I understand already, you just need to give it time.'

'He's had an affair.'

'What do you mean?'

'He had an affair with someone.'

'Who?'

'A nurse.'

'At the hospital?'

'He's been having an affair for a while.'

'All men have affairs.'

'He's had a baby with her. Or she's pregnant. Oh Ramus, I don't know if I should be telling you this. I just heard about it when I was in Riyadh. He brought her over. Can you believe it. He brought her over from here and he didn't even want me to go with him. He wanted me to stay here and he wanted to go over there and raise a second family. We

were at a dinner party and he told me about it. He told me in the middle of dinner. I left and took a plane back the next day.'

The car was pulling up to Soloman's house. Ramus stopped and sat there, waiting for some kind of instruction.

'I don't know if I should have told you.'

'Of course you should have.'

'What do you think?'

'I don't know what to think.'

'What should I do.'

'I don't know.'

'Should I forgive him. That's what you've been telling me.'

'I guess so. I don't know, though. I'm going to head back. Do you want to stay here or go back with me.'

'No, I'll stay here. I don't know if he's back. Don't say anything about this to your father.' She got out and walked to the house, turning and waving goodbye as she did. Ramus watched her to the door, then got out and took her bag from the trunk.

'You forgot your bag!'

'Oh, God, Ramus, I hope I can manage.'

'You'll be fine.'

'I don't know if I should have told you.'

'Well it's too late now, but I'm fine, anyway.'

'Take care, dear. I'll see you soon, I hope.'

'Yeah, I'll be around.'

'Don't talk to your father about this.'

'Don't worry,' he said, and walked to car. He drove, but was undecided on direction. He had planned to go home, but he changed his mind and would instead go to his brother's house: he didn't want to turn in circles by himself, and the stability of his brother's home was inviting. Or was it tempting, he wondered. Perhaps he wouldn't go there: it was tempting, not inviting, and he would rather be by himself than give to that appetite. A warmth rose inside of him and enveloped his senses. He thought himself, bare, like a metal cage. And then he thought of himself by himself. What would he do at home? At least if he went to his brother's home, Florence's home, they would be in a certain state of ignorance which was tempting. It was tempting, and he wouldn't give in, so he would change his course to his house, and ignore the longing for the company of those who were as they had been when he last saw them, while he was certainly not the same. He was the wiser for hearing of this affair of his father. What was he to think at this stage. Where would he go: stew in his own juices or allow the refreshing, open face of Florence to comfort him.

In his indecision, he ended up at Oakford hospital. As it happened, travelling from his parents' home Oakford was directionally the mid point between his own home and that of his brother. In all the turns he had made, at each one having changed his mind as to his destination, he ended up in the middle: the hospital. It was the right decision, he thought. He walked from his car and made his way to the ward on the first floor. He said hello to the nurses, and took up his patient list and did his rounds, not wishing to entertain questions about his early arrival. He was not due back for a few days, days he had planned to enjoy by himself. Now he was with his patient, his first patient. How suddenly it had come upon him. In disbelief he took readings and made

recommendations, made smalltalk, but the voice came from somewhere else, as though it came from his gut and not his mouth at all.

The hospital was all he had, but he had nothing. It was with neither respect, nor empathy, charm, nor humility, well wishing, nor spite, hatred, nor disgust that he treated his patients. He simply treated them, one after another, one series of complaints after another, one diagnosis after another, and one recommendation after another. And then he left to go to the cafeteria, not because of hunger pangs, but because he knew he would find his father there.

'Hello, son!'

'Hi daddy.'

'How was vacation? You're back early, I wasn't expecting you for some days? Did you all come back together? Don't tell me you got called back!'

'No, I just thought I'd come in instead of sitting around my house by myself. I dropped mommy back at home. I thought you'd be there.'

'Oh no, you know, when I'm back I have to stay around the hospital.'

'So how was Riyadh.'

'Good, good, fine. And how was the vacation. Who went? Let me see...you and your brother and of course Florence and Court, your mother. Did Stefan go?'

'Yeah. All of us went. We missed you out there.'

'So how was it? The beach as nice as ever.'

'Great. How's the hospital been?'

'All the same. Nothing changes around here.'

'I don't think Dr. Rusyt would agree with you.'

'Dr. Rusyt? He's gone. I told you one of them would crack. He almost killed that nurse. Poor girl. You wouldn't believe it. She showed up at this emergency room with almost no face left. Dr. Rusyt's been jailed. The nurses told me a few days back and they were almost hysterical. Can you believe it.'

'Why not.'

'Why not? The man should have known there would be trouble right from the start. He should have prepared for it. He only made it worse.'

'I'm going back to work.'

'Alright, I'll see you later.'

'Right.' He saluted and headed back to his ward. He passed the nurses station and was stopped in the atrium.

'Doctor?'

'Yes?'

'You've got a call from Florence.'

'Tell her I'm with a patient.'

'Are you well, doctor? You look very tired.'

'I've just driven in today.'

'You weren't due back until after the weekend, though.'

'Yes, I thought I would just stop in beforehand in case anything had come up.'

'Everything's fine here doctor, but I'll give you a call if there's an emergency.'

'Right. Tell Florence I'm with a patient but that you've given me the message.' He walked to the door of his patient's room and opened it. Finding it dark, he switched the light on and saw a comatose old man, his mouth wide open. He stared at the flesh before him and turned in horror to make his way back to the bright atrium, bypassing the nurses,

striding through the reception, where he saw tens of people, all of whom seemed wretched in their helplessness. And then he was in the sun, and he could feel its sharpness accompanying the dull thuds of his footsteps. There wasn't much else, in fact: thud thud and a vibrant light. And he noticed all the sounds, all the white noise like the sound of faraway surf. He only noticed it because it was fast disappearing, and in its place there rose a sharp note, like a tuning fork held to his ear while all else faded away. This had happened before, and had left him lost, but now he concentrated on the long note, the perfect pitch that sung in his ear, listening to the one note message from somewhere else. No sooner had he begun to listen than it faded away and left him reassured.

Where was he going now? He was walking without direction, but he noticed with surprise that he was nearing neither Florence, with whom he had intended to meet after receiving her message, nor his own house, where he would go normally at the end of his working day, but Stefan's house. He was walking directly to Stefan's house! Of course, he thought, this is the place where I can rest assured, without the persistent buzzing of my own head. He knocked. Marilyn came to the door.

'Ramus! What a surprise! What are you doing back already.'

'I came back with everybody else. Where's Stefan.'

'He hasn't been back yet. Come in and wait for him.'

'Wait for him?' he uttered, 'No, no, I must be getting back. Just tell him I stopped by, will you?' He reverted to his original choice. It was either back to his house or back to Florence's. He had told her he would call. He would go there. Some minutes later, he arrived at his own home, and reached for his keys. His house keys were in his luggage! Of course! He made his way round the back of the house and searched for a key, but he had not left a spare. He looked in through the window and, in despair, he lay on the swinging seat that covered his tiny porch. He slept.

## Ramus and Florence

'It isn't a matter of preparation!' he shouted. 'It's a matter of fidelity!' He was screaming at his nurse as they stood outside the door of one of his patients. 'If you can't keep track of each patient, then something will go wrong!'

'You can't expect me to remember every single detail! Even you look at your file before you go in!' said the Nurse.

'Of course. Of course. Sorry, Eileen. I don't think I've slept all weekend. Of course you're right. Of course, it's happened a thousand times before. And it's never made a spot of difference, has it?'

'It's nothing, doctor. We sometimes need vacations from our vacations. I know the feeling. Why don't you just – just leave this with me.'

'Of course. It's the end of the day. I'm going to head home.' He walked out to the atrium and saw Florence seated in the waiting area. With a jerk he disappeared into the doctors coffee room and made his way to the fridge. He stared at the snacks and drinks that had been tucked away by members of his ward, mostly half eaten. Half sandwiches, half bowls of salad, half drunk bottles. He closed the door and walked back to the atrium.

'Florence. What are you doing here?'

'I couldn't get hold of you.'

'I've been away all weekend.'

'Well you should have told someone because no one seemed to know where you were. I called your father and he said you weren't at the hospital. I talked to your mother and she hasn't seen you since you dropped her off. I talked to Marilyn and she said that the last time she saw you, you looked sick. I asked Julian and he hadn't heard a word from you. He kept telling me not to worry.'

'Why should you worry. I don't stray far from this place.'

'What's wrong?'

'I was away. I went to the lake for the weekend.'

'And you didn't invite me?'

'I had a date.'

'A date?'

'I had a date for the weekend.'

'Is that so? Well, I thought I would come by and talk to you about starting a nursing course,' she said as she crossed her arms. Her black eyes looked at Ramus.

'Of course. It's been busy today, that's all.'

'I called you. Didn't you get my message today.'

'When?'

'When we got back. And today.'

'Who did you leave it with.'

'I'm going to head back.' She rose and as she was waiting by the elevator, Ramus joined her.

'I'm leaving as well. What's the matter?'

'What's the matter! What's the matter with you!'

'Nothing. I've just had a hard weekend.'

'At the lake?'

'No, no. I just stayed around here, but I've got the blues, you know.'

'Is something happening at the hospital?'

'At the hospital? I don't know. I don't what it is.'

'Come on, we'll go back and have dinner at home.'

'I'm not up for a family dinner.' Ramus walked that same fraction of a step behind her, unwilling to let himself watch the women possessed by the wolf. He faced ahead and looked askance at the determined eyes sunken beside the rise of the nose. At the black hair that created her profile. He looked at the willow arms and then saw with astonishment that they were holding hands. He wondered if it was he that had done this. Was it he that had reached for her hand? Where was she taking him? He took his hand away and continued walking alongside.

'I need to stop over at my place and get changed.'

'Let's go.'

'I don't know, maybe I'll just go as I am. How do I look?'

'Fine.'

'I'd feel better if I could take a quick shower. Is there time for that?'

'There's no hurry.'

'Isn't anyone waiting for you?'

'I don't think Julian's back yet. Court's over at his friend's.'

'Alright, well, I think I'd rather get changed.' They adjusted their course in the direction of Ramus's house, but Ramus was charged with escapist energy. Of course he continued walking with no evident display of the duress of the entire situation, but he remained decided on indecision, and was steadfastly clinging to his wish to go neither to his own house with Florence, nor to Florence's house. He wanted to go to his house by himself, and he was bewildered at his incapacity to enforce his true desire faced, as he was, with a woman who would not allow such a course of events. His house was not his own anymore. He had done something which had moved ownership of all the events of his life into some kind of mutual trust. The two reached his door. Ramus reached into his pocket with foreboding associated with an imminent crime. His keys were not there! His keys were not in his pocket!

'I've left my keys at the hospital!' he shouted with a gleeful surprise made bitter only by will. 'I can't believe it. That's the second time this week I've left them there! Look, you go back to the house and I'll meet you there in say an hour.'

Florence turned and he followed her up the walk. They parted at the end, Ramus to return to his refuge of the hospital and Florence to continue home. She said nothing as she walked away. Perhaps she felt Ramus watching her go. Perhaps she didn't feel anything. Ramus stood thinking he might just follow her rather than let her go, but he had forgotten the keys and there wasn't much to be done about accidents. He turned and walked to the hospital in a complicitous limbo.

An hour later, he was at the house of Florence, and he started with fear at the front walk. He stopped himself, and thought he had left the hour behind, lost it. He had thought so much but there were no answers, not even at the hospital, where he had adopted the demeanour of an unwelcome visitor, keeping people at bay through the self-effacing means of the stranger. Now he was facing his actions which seemed as immense as the house itself. Conscious that he was perhaps being watched from behind the grey haze of the window screens, he stood pretending he had not thought of that possibility, so that he might explain his nonchalance once inside. Already he was creating excuses: he was looking at the paint work, the lawn, the colour of the shutters which had certainly not changed since he was last there. Perhaps he had made a mistake helping Florence. Certainly he should not have allowed his actions to stray as far as they did. Where had they strayed? Had they fallen in love? It had not had the immediacy of love. It had the foresight common to all decisions, and nobody took more care in deciding than Ramus. Certainly there was the first encounter where he had sunk into her eyes, but it he was swallowed also by one of his patients: Murray had provided such a glimpse of himself as well! No, it was not love. But perhaps Florence thought otherwise.

Ramus walked up the front step and Florence opened the door.

'What were you thinking about out there?'

'I thought perhaps I should have brought something along. Papers. Nursing papers.' He did not take a step towards the inside of the house. 'Julian back?'

'He should be back anytime now.' She beckoned him towards the house and closed the door behind him. 'What's wrong?'

'Oh I don't know. I had some bad news.'

'What happened?'

'Something at the hospital. One of the doctors there was jailed for battering one of the nurses. Hear anything about it?'

'No. Was he a friend?'

'Well. All the doctors are friendly.'

'What happened?'

'He fell in love with a nurse. She told his wife about it and then left him as well.'

'That's what's bothering you?'

'No, everything's fine. Who said something's bothering me.'

'How's the hospital besides?'

'Fine.' He walked to the garden through the kitchen. Florence stood beside him and held her hands together. Ramus spied her from the side of his vision and saw how thin she was, how terrifyingly thin. Barely weighty enough to hold herself down, much less a husband and a son. Such a thinness was not self sufficient, but Florence was never given anything, always being taken from. She moved timelessly over beside Ramus and took his hand. It was as fragile as Edwards, or perhaps more fragile because of its brittleness. He thought he had given her so much, he thought he had rescued her so many times. He was there at the party when he made her smile. He was there at the lake when he showed her how to be free, carefree. And he was there at the promenade, where they had danced when Julian would not. He saved her at the beach, when she would have wasted away had he not come, even in the form of the death. He would not give her more. He withdrew his hand, standing, watching the shadow encroach on the far bushes.

Then he took her hand. Was it not she that had given him everything after all. What had he really given her? He had talked. Certainly he had spoken. He had led her in his dances. But wasn't hers the smile of an angel, sent to console him? Weren't her ears opened for him as a special favour from the sky? Wasn't his descent to the basins of loss, his transformation into death, wasn't his countenance of death the only thing that really drew her back, gave her reason to remain: to save one last soul? It was not he that had rescued her that day at the beach, but she that had rescued him. Just as she had said she thought he was death and that is what brought her back?

But then, why his soul? Why was his soul worth saving? What of Catrek, Stefan, Julian and her own son? Were they not reason enough for her to remain? Perhaps it was he that gave to her after all. Of course it was! But what did he give her? Purpose! And where had he found that? He could not determine where. Or why. Ramus took Florence in his arms and they kissed.

## Ramus and Soloman

Ramus heard from Julian that his father wanted to see him. Julian had come back home and made the announcement. Ramus had left the house soon after, not wishing to comprehend further his entanglement, especially in the company of his half brother, whose boundaries he believed himself to have crossed. It was odd that he was unhindered by guilt. It was not that he may have crossed his half brother. It was that it was not certain that he had crossed him. In his purgatory he remained an unwitting witness, an absent accomplice in what he may or may not have done. As such he could hardly make a stand one way or the other with his half brother. In fact, he could not even decide whether a stand should or should not be made.

In such a state, he walked towards his parents house and found Soloman alone on the porch, watching the clouds cascade, efface, and reform.

'Here he is!' said Soloman. 'Where is your mother! I've been waiting here for days. You know I haven't seen her since... I haven't seen her for a while.'

Ramus nodded and sat looking at the sky alongside his father.

'So!' Soloman shouted.

'What?'

'Have you seen her?'

'I doubt she's gone missing, daddy.' He spat his father's name out. 'What did you want to see me about?'

'I just told you!'

'What?'

'I'm searching for your mother!'

'I haven't seen her since I dropped her off.'

'Neither have I.'

'Since I dropped her off? That was before the weekend.'

'Exactly. In fact, I haven't seen her since I left for Riyadh. Where is she?'

'That's a very good question. You haven't seen her since we got back?'

'What's the matter with you!' Soloman shouted. He gritted his teeth and carved the rest out with tight lips. 'I told you I haven't seen her since I left.'

'That was weeks ago.'

'You too!'

'What?'

'Never mind,' he said and he waved it all away with a grimace.

'I wonder where she is,' said Ramus.

'Thanks, son, you've been a great help.' He was rocking with each word.

'Right, well, I'm off, then.'

'What? You just came.'

'I thought you wanted me for something.'

'I want to find out where your mother is.'

'Why are you concerned?'

'Are you not listening to me? I said I haven't seen her for weeks!'

'I'm sure she hasn't gone missing.'

'What! She has gone missing. That's why I asked you over here and that's why you can't leave!'

'I told you I don't know where she is.'

'Neither do I, but together we might figure it out, right!'

'How can I help.'

'Don't sit there and ask dumb questions, son. Propose some solutions, would you!'

'Why are you so concerned?'

'My God! Leave! Would you! Leave!'

'Yes, I'm going to go now.'

'I'm worried. Where could she be.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing!'

'Why has she disappeared?'

'How do I know?'

'Something must have made her disappear. You didn't see her once since she came back?'

'I talked to her.'

'What did she say?'

'She's gone crazy, you know.'

'Is that what you said? No wonder she left.'

'No of course I didn't say that. You have to talk to her.'

'About what?'

'She's got some crazy idea about leaving.'

'Why's that?'

'She's crazy.'

'Alright, I'm going to go look around for her.'

'You have to help her if you find her. I'm worried about her.'

'Don't worry.'

## ----- Chapter 9-----

## Finale

Ramus left his father's house in the late evening and made his way directly back to his own house. In disgust he contemplated his father whose behaviour entirely lacked any kindness. In disgust, loaded with facts as he understood them, and he understood them better than his father knew he did, he had the dilemma of the righteous: either he was right or everything was wrong. If his mother had presented him with the truth, his father had impregnated another woman, then declared his former wife to be thenceforth half time. He had no choice but to reel at the force of such a blow to his very core of human understanding. On the other hand, if what his father did was not such a terrible thing, then certainly everything was terrible. This flaw in the grander structure was untenable. Is everything terrible?

On the other hand, the results of his father's actions – the disappearance of an imprisoning ball and chain, a wife – was an intentional outcome of intentional acts. A formal declaration would hardly have been more clear. And so to punish such an act would require the reversal of the state of the whole affair. Ramus would have to find his mother and forcibly return her to her patrimonial house!

Ramus walked on with his head bowed to the advancing walkway. Why did Catrek deserve such a thing? To return her to the place where she was hurt would punish her as much as it would punish her husband, if it punished Soloman at all, that is. It was possible after all the Soloman wanted to retain his position of caring husband and impresario. Not possible, definite! Obvious! He would certainly have to remove his mother from that place where all composite, resolved thought had fled. No, not remove her, for she had already decided upon such action herself: keep her out.

But was it in her interest? Forget punishment. And forget intention. What was best for the two people: his mother to face the world bereft of barriers, his father to be left without his familiar bosom for a pillow? Certainly not! Amends would have to be made! How though? Tell his father to discontinue his decomposition? Tell his mother to forgive and forget, to make the best of what remains rather than rejecting it as an entirety. To cast a part of herself to oblivion? What part? What remains? The only thing that she had was a vow, now broken. Could he hand her the pieces of something that was once beautiful and tell her to imagine it as it had been. She would have remembered it as having been rather ugly. In retrospect. Could he tell his father: be someone else, someone resolved, someone great, someone...young! Do not decompose! Do not accept death!

He got to his house and fell asleep to be woken not by the sun outside, nor by the sweat pouting from his forehead, but by the terrifying dream that if he did not do the right thing, everything would go wrong. He became conscious of the very same thoughts with which he had slept, advanced to a point. And the point was...if he didn't do the right thing, everything would go wrong! But that was no answer! Merely to say that if he didn't do the right thing everything would go wrong was not to give any course of action, it was merely to repeat the question he had asked himself when he first discovered his mother had left and his father was the cause: what should he do. Of course he should do the right thing, for the wrong thing was not proper.

What was the right thing. He looked at the clock and noticed that he was due in the hospital before he could possibly make it. He called up Oakford, put himself through to his ward and told them he was suffering from some kind of fever. He wasn't quite sure if he could make it in. He turned on his side and resumed his half-sleep.

He heard a knock at his door and rose to see who it was. The voice of Florence came muffled through the door. Ramus opened it.

'I'm sick.'

'What's wrong?'

'My mother's gone missing. Left my dad's house. He hasn't seen her since we got back. Thinks she's crazy.'

'With you, I mean. What's wrong with you?'

'I'm sick. Fever,' he said as she faced him numbly at the threshold, holding her thin arm in her bony hand. Ramus continued, 'You don't look too good either. I'm going to go back to bed.'

'Where's your mother?'

'Lost.'

'You're not going to look for her?'

'I don't know where to start.'

'Can I come in?'

'You better not.'

'OK. I'll see you later.'

'Right. That sounds good.' He didn't need her. Certainly she had taken from him. He couldn't see her anymore. Look at what his father had done. He had to control himself. He said goodbye, shut the door, and made his way to his room. He lay there, but his eyes were open. He felt better. Better, yes. Certainly Florence had taken from him and now that he had said goodbye, he felt better already. What a terrible thing his father had done. He got up, showered and dressed and saw himself in the mirror, thin black hair like a sheet over his white face. He had not had any sun at all on the beach. He wondered at the black beard that was claiming great patches of his white skin. He pictured his smooth skin beneath it and was horrified at the vulgar growth that had appeared, a great ugliness, a great weedy scourge on the proud sands of the desert. He found some tiny nail clippers and began cutting it away with persistent snaps of the scissors. When he had clipped it to a point where bunching and snipping was no longer possible, he reached for the blade and began razing it. His smooth skin had swelled, protected for so long from the elements, in defiance of the harsh treatment. To the touch it was like wet dough, a subcutaneous wetness, sensitive and raw. But it was not smooth, for the roots remained and for all the razing, what was left was sharper and tougher. For unity of tone he had sacrificed sensual equilibrium.

He left the house and made his way to the hospital. He thought of the predicament of his father and mother. What was it he had decided upon waking? The right thing to do is the right thing? No, that wasn't it. He must do the right thing otherwise all would go wrong. What a solution! He would have to find his mother. Where could he start.

When he arrived at the hospital, he was weighted by the presence of his father many floors up, and though he looked forward, his mental compass pointed to his father's ward and as an insulatory measure, he clasped his hands over the top of head. This gave him the appearance of one of the hysterical patients housed somewhere between himself and his father. With resolve and without direction he made his way through the hospital

until he found himself in an elevator going to the top of the hospital. As he anticipated another meeting with his father, he took his hands from his head and smiled at the visual self ignorance that had allowed him to wander deliriously from reception. He found Soloman waiting in reception.

'Ah, son! You got my message? That was quick!'

'What message?' he said as he followed his father to the doctor's rest area.

'I heard from your mother last night. She's gone back to the beaches. She's gone crazy!'

'What happened?'

'She's upset for nothing.'

'That's what I told her. She must have reason.'

'She's gone nuts. She's hurting herself, you know. She said she wants to move out.'

'Why?'

'You try to understand your crazy mother. What have you done with yourself? Did you get rid of that beard finally.'

'This morning.'

'Well done.'

'But I'm letting it grow back.'

'You look better like this.'

'So you heard from mommy. Well that's good. And she says she wants to move out. There must be a reason.'

'There's not always a reason for everything. Some things just happen. You think everyone in the nuthouse has a reason they're nuts? They just go crazy. People just go crazy. Like that.'

'Why bother with them then?'

'Exactly.'

'I suppose we should rid the hospital of them altogether?'

'No, there are treatments, of course.'

'Shots in the dark, I suppose.'

'Of course not. Anyway, we're talking about your mother here.'

'Yes, and your wife.'

'Where could she have gone.'

'You said she was at the beaches.'

'But why?'

'You're asking me?'

'For help, for God's sake, for help.'

'You need help?'

'She needs help!' Soloman shouted.

'She hasn't asked me for help. You're the one who keeps asking for me.'

'Forget it!' He got up and walked to the door. 'When you want to be constructive, come back!'

Ramus took it in for a few moments and then walked to his ward. He checked in with the nurses and began treating his patients. Each one disappeared behind the next and behind his preoccupation with determining the right thing to do. Of course his father had acted terribly, but what was the best way out of the mess? Simply to ignore the fact, banish it to oblivion? Perhaps. But such an act is a symptom of a greater illness, and so

must be taken as fact. Not punished, perhaps, but understood and if once understood, treated with punishment, so be it. But what was the greater illness? Decomposition, dissolution! And what treatment? None! But this posed the very same dilemma as the one he had started with! Do the right thing! Do something. Act!

He was interrupted by his nurse. She gave him a message that Florence was waiting to speak to him urgently. Thinking her in the atrium, he went to face her once again, but found she was on the end of a telephone line. She asked him if she could come in and speak to him. He said he was busy. She insisted it was important. He insisted he was busy.

'But I thought you were sick!'

'I was sick and then I felt better. It isn't uncommon.'

'Ramus, I have to speak to you.'

'I'll stop by when I'm finished.'

He thought perhaps he was sick. He should not have promised her to stop by. Where had he left off? Ah yes. He must act! He must do the right thing! But he was not in possession of the facts. Of course, he was not in possession of the facts! And so the right thing was to do nothing! Of course, that was what he had understood that morning when he awoke. Do the right thing or everything will go wrong! That's what his very first memory of the bees was about! He had done nothing and everything had been fine. The delicate balance that exists had not been not upset. Even the suggestion that there were bees at all had disturbed the balance enough to get his brother stung. Bringing it to the attention had disturbed it. What was needed was ignorance! And inaction. Ramus would do nothing.

He thought about the unwillingness of his father to recount a more factually detailed account of what had happened: he had omitted details of his new family. All the better! What was the need to understand but a full hearted attempt at discovering the infinite, resolving the infinite to be merely the absolute? Let it be infinite!

He was feeling ill again, as he had that morning accompanying his discovery. He told the nurses and walked clutching his belly back towards his house. He vomited and went to sleep, and when he awoke in the evening, at twilight, he heard someone at the door. It seemed early for it to be so dark, and this was the sun's signal that it was approaching the end of the summer. He rose and found Florence in the doorway.

'I can't do it Ramus,' she said, her eyes reflecting the darkness of the room, 'I can't let you disappear like this. Don't you understand that you're suffering? Don't you see I'm trying to help? You're going to hurt both of us.'

'I'm not going to hurt both of us. I'm coming right now.' He walked in and heard the phone ringing. Marilyn was hysterical on the other end. Stefan was leaving her. Ramus said he would come right over. 'I'm going over to Marilyn's. Stefan's leaving her. I'm going to see what's happened. I'll come over afterwards.'

'I'm going to be swimming with Court,' said Florence. 'You'll come over?'

'Of course.'

'Don't forget, Ramus.'

'Of course not.' Florence walked away and Ramus soon left to head towards Stefan's house. He arrived in good time and Marilyn opened the door for him.

'What happened?'

'Oh, Ramus! He left.'

'Why?'

'He wouldn't say. We were arguing about having kids and he just said he told me he didn't want to stay with me anymore. He blamed me for missing out on everything and said if I didn't want to have kids then there wasn't any point. He said he didn't want to miss out on that too. He said he had nothing, and if I didn't want children then I was hurting him. I don't know, Ramus.'

'Where is he now.'

'He's at Hotel Central.'

'I'm going to go speak to him.'

'Tell him I want him back and I'll do anything he wants. Tell him I'll give everything up if he wants me to.'

'Right.' No sooner had he disabused himself of the first problem than another was thrust in his face. Had he asked for it? It was dark, now and his slim figure topped with a sheet of black hair ambled toward the hotel. And what about Florence? He had promised to come over, but at least he understood the love that had hidden between them for so long, between the one who posed problems where there were none and the one who resolved that problem.

He came upon the well lit hotel, majestic in its white stonework, although it seemed a façade without the promise of substance, a great white veil of stone. He walked through the reception and enquired after Stefan, to be told he was dining in the restaurant. He walked through the creaky wooden double doors of the restaurant and past the maître d' and saw Stefan seated at the side opposite a woman whose brown hair he could just make out below her hat. He sauntered up to the table.

'Hello, there. Already at it, I see?' He turned to introduce himself to Stefan's guest and was confounded by the face of a woman who looked like his mother. It was his mother! He turned and left the restaurant without further jest, mysteriously placated. Of course, he thought, of course he's sitting there with my mother. Of course, he thought, of course mommy is sitting there with Stefan.

On his return home, for he had already abandoned the idea of seeing Florence, he saw himself as a naked man, wandering the woods where people took the place of trees. He was bumped and jostled by passing pedestrians. Their images bounced through the empty halls of his intellect. Once home he slept.

Confounded by the pounding of his door piercing the darkness, Ramus mumbled to himself, cursing the maddening thud as a figment of a dream. Again came the pounding, and this time it was there, alone in the night. He rose and walked to the door, stubbing his toe on the way, and he found Julian on the porch.

'He's dead.'

'Who's dead?'

'Court!' He lurched forward and threw his arms around his half brother, his belly pressed against Ramus's ribs.

'What happened?'

'They were swimming together...' he stopped. 'They were just swimming together and, I don't know, Florence is in shock – she won't say anything.'

'I'm coming over.'