

Robert Cohen

The Next Big Thing

If it had been up to Howard, he'd have been there the first day it opened. That was how he saw it: arriving at dawn, glass doors flying open with a sigh, he and Bela strolling arm in arm across the virgin carpet, entering like lords. It would not exactly be a novelty—he'd been down to Atlantic City six or seven times over the years—but possibly it would feel like one. The senses were gullible that way. They received and received and received, and still at the end of the day there was this indiscriminate hunger for more.

But it hadn't been up to him, of course. There was a long list of things that weren't up to Howard Udovin at this point. He was sixty-nine years old and his business had failed. His stocks were precarious, his best friends were dead, his wife refused to take him seriously, and now there were two balloons in his chest just to keep his heart from collapsing upon itself. That was how things were. The balloons he was aware of all the time, two thin, colorless membranes upon which the unruly weight of his life depended. Children's toys. And yet to accommodate their presence required some very adult adjustments.

For instance, he'd had to liquidate the inventory. That was an adjustment. He'd had to give up smoking. More adjustment. Tennis. Coffee, scotch, red meat, peanuts, ice cream, shellfish, avocado—OK, a *lot* of adjustment. Even sex, which thanks to the blood thinners he'd had to give up, at least for a while, even that he'd had to adjust to.

Bad luck, yes. A difficult situation, to be sure. But where realities were concerned one learned to compromise. What *was* reality anyway? A leash around your neck that tightened as you got older. As for the sex, he hardly missed it. He was never very good to begin with, as Bela would be the first to tell you. Bela would say he was always more of a dreamer than a doer when it came to that.

And now, after that incident on the Triborough off-ramp last March, he'd had to give up his driver's license too, so if he wanted to go anywhere he had to persuade Bela to take him. This meant waiting until she was in the right mood, which it so happened was practically never. For a woman as moody as Bela, you'd think that every so often the law of averages would prevail and one of her moods would swing into harmony with one of yours. But no. Bela's moods remained obdurate; they swung on their own private hinge.

"Don't pester me," she'd said, when he approached her with his proposition. She

was out in the backyard, laying down bricks end-to-end, creating an enclosure for the herb garden. There was no reason to enclose the herb garden that Howard was aware of, but it was in Bela's nature to build walls, to make fine delineations. "I'm not interested."

"Arthur Pearle went up there last week. He says the place is first rate. The next big thing, he says."

"Then go with him."

"I don't want to go with Arthur. He makes those crummy puns all the time, and he'll bore me to death about the grandkids. I want to go with you, Bela."

"Long drives make me sleepy."

"So nap on the ferry," he said.

"I nap in the daytime, I can't sleep at night."

"So you won't nap," Howard said. "You'll read. You'll do a crossword. You'll look out at the Sound and tell me your dreams."

"Ha!" she said. "My dreams!"

"Fine. I was just talking. Do what you want."

"You want my dreams?" Bela put down her brick and looked at him.

"I was just talking, Bela." Suddenly the last thing he wanted was to go anywhere with this woman. How had they even traveled this far?

"In my dreams my mother comes out of the sky, sits on the edge of the bed, and sings to me in Russian. She sings, wake up you stupid girl, wake up. But I don't."

"Bela," he said, "I was just talking."

"Sometimes it's not my mother. Sometimes it's Aunt Ida who comes, also singing, in a black fur coat. Ida the widow: she was seventeen, practically a pauper. Where did she get such a coat?"

"Maybe she hit big at the casino, Bela. Why not try it yourself?"

Bela gave an aristocratic sniff by which to indicate deep thought. She took off one work glove and considered the back of her hand for a moment, where the skin was bunched and dry from exposure, like old coral. "I don't like to leave the garden right now," she said finally. "The weather's changeable. You turn your back and next thing it's gone."

"One day, Bela."

"Things happen in less time than that."

"Things? What things? What are you talking about? Do you even know, or are you just saying whatever comes into your head to make me mad?"

"Pish tosh," Bela said. "You were always an angry person, Mickey says. Now you're more so. That's it in a nutshell."

"You're the nutshell, Bela."

Mickey the big shot. Twenty years ago he took a survey course at Brooklyn College, and ever since he's Doctor Freud. But you had to tread carefully around the subject of Mickey. He was Bela's one and only, and if he hadn't moved to California she'd still be cutting up his chicken for him every night. Also, as Bela would be quick to remind him, Howard had no children himself. The reasons for this were not entirely clear. His first wife, Fay, had wanted a family, but he was just starting out then, long

hours, weekends, eating lunch at his desk so as not to miss any calls, all the time conscious over his shoulder of the cold clear eye of the bank. He said, wait. Give me a chance to get established; let me make a name. In truth his feelings on the subject had been vague, half-formed; it was possible, if challenged, they'd have taken a different shape. But Fay did not challenge. Poor amiable Fay, who could barely heat up a pot of coffee without encouragement, never challenged.

They waited, all right. They waited until she was dead in the ground.

Anyway, what difference did it make? At their age, even children weren't children any more. They were grown up and gone, with complications of their own. Take Mickey. Thirty-eight years old and already bald on top, already seeing doctors for mysterious ailments, already divorced. No, children didn't solve anything. Children were just a passing phase, a diversion. They were children for a while and then they turned into something else. Meanwhile you were still just you.

"Look around, old woman," he said. "We have money and time and a big car from Detroit. We're free."

She waved her wrist. "You don't know the meaning."

"Arthur Pearle knows. He's been to Cancun, Hawaii, Santa Fe. He says this place out in the woods tops them all. State-of-the-art facility, he says. There's even a museum on the premises."

"Museum?" Bela, who in her capacious and neatly ordered wallet carried membership cards for the Whitney, the Met, the Modern, the Guggenheim, the Jewish, and the International Center for Photography, perked up at this. "What kind?"

"Historical," Howard said authoritatively, though in truth he could not recall what kind of museum Arthur had said it was. "You know, Indian stuff. Native peoples, Bela. A rich and valuable heritage. It's time we stop thinking like immigrants and learn the history of the land."

"Learn your own," she said. "That would be plenty of history right there."

It wasn't going to happen, he realized that, but he could not keep himself from shouting, "I'm not talking about me, damn you. I'm talking about this country. I'm talking about opportunity, free enterprise. I'm talking about open space, Bela, about *loopholes*." She blinked at him coolly as if she had never heard this word before, as if he were making it up. It was a common and terrifically unfair theme of their marriage that he was not as bright as she was, and thus less entitled for some reason to speak his mind. "That's right," he persisted. "Loopholes. Every empty space is an opportunity. The Indians, they've figured this out. You get beat up and shoved aside for hundreds of years, you learn how to interpret the laws. Work the margins. Like us."

That blink again.

"They say the Indians might be the missing tribe. You know, the one that got lost in the Bible. Arthur read a theory in *Book-of-the-Month*."

"What book, I'd like to know. The *Moron's Almanac*? The *Stupid Person's Guide to Life*?"

"The point is," Howard kept his voice steady, "you've got to work around the limits. Take charge, change your luck. Otherwise you're just treading water."

"Dummy," she said. "My luck is right here. Why should I run off to Connecticut? I'm happy right here."

She was, too. Bela was happy right here with her bricks and short spade, her crocuses and lilies, her tarragon, chives, rhubarb, and carrots. There was no reason he could think of why she should run off to Connecticut, other than the dreary but unavoidable fact that he could not get there without her. It was a classic conflict of interest. Marriage, in his experience, was often a conflict of interest. Arthur Pearle was a widower; he could go where he wanted. Arthur had no conflict any more, only interest. Bela and he were just the reverse. Possibly they had more conflict than most. Possibly so.

Then something occurred to him. A loophole. He *could* get there without her. He'd go the same way Arthur went: on one of those cheap minibuses the Casino sent around, the ones they advertised in the paper every Sunday. It would not really be his style to travel in a big group that way, but it would do, he thought.

Now that he'd been liberated from Bela, now that he did not require her for his expedition after all, now that he felt, to be honest, somewhat superior to her, more farsighted and ambitious, the way he used to feel on the road sometimes, driving a big rental car past a small industrial city over a wide gleaming elevated highway—Howard hesitated for a moment, confused. What was he doing? It was the way he'd felt after that procedure at the doctor's, the one with the balloons. This strange new pressure in his chest which was more like the absence of pressure. This strange new life to get used to. And this sense of having been ready, ready a long time, without even knowing.

The first disappointment was the minibus, which turned out to be a lot more mini than he'd supposed—just a narrow ten-seater van with a sliding door, atrocious shocks, and the casino's mauve moon logo painted on one side. When it pulled up in front of the stationery store, idling noisily and belching exhaust, Howard could see it was already full of old people from other stops, other towns. Not old like him, but *old*. Nine in the morning, he's wearing his good blue blazer and gray slacks, and he has to scrunch into a seat between two of the world's oldest, most annoying women.

Bela's revenge, he thought: everywhere you go you're walled in.

"You've been?" one of the women says to him. White frizzy hair piled up on her head like a helmet. Pink-rimmed glasses. Breathing hard, as if at her age even sitting down was too much exercise. She appeared to be checking out his wedding ring.

"Been what?"

"You know. Been."

"No," he said. "First time."

"We went yesterday, Charlotte and me. Yesterday was a very good day, wasn't it Charlotte?"

"Oh, *yesterday*," said Charlotte dreamily.

"Won over fifty dollars at Keno. Fifty-*five*. Then we played the slots. Then we went and heard that black singer, what's his name, Smoker—"

"Smokey Robinson," said Charlotte.

"Yes, that's right. They let you in to watch the afternoon rehearsal if you ask, and it's free."

Howard nodded. What had he done yesterday? Argued with Bela in the backyard. Listened to the radio. Read a mystery.

The woman on his left sighed. "A very good day. That's why we're going back. The first rule, you know, is not to mess up a good streak."

"Oh?" He waited to hear the second rule.

"And the buffet," Charlotte put in from his right. "Don't forget the buffet."

"My god." The woman on his left shook her head with a reverence that bordered on sorrow. "I swear I've never eaten so much in my life. Charlotte had the popcorn shrimp, I had prime rib. Chile con carne. Chicken with pesto. Five kinds of pie for dessert. Plus the chocolate mousse. You tried the chocolate mousse?"

He could see there was no use in repeating how this was his first time. She had switched on her tape and it was going to loop around to its conclusion no matter what he said. So he leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes, listening to the thrumming bass notes of the tires. The road, the road. He missed it terribly. Of course he'd have preferred to be the driver, not the driven, but it was pleasant to be going somewhere for a change, just sitting back and surrendering to the machine. You could, he supposed, surrender too much. Like that time last March, on the Triborough bridge. A warm night, warm enough to roll the windows down even before he got to the toll plaza, and though he'd spent most of it receiving bad news from his accountant at an overpriced Mexican restaurant on Eighth Avenue, Howard had felt, driving away, curiously cool and detached, as if now that the thin rope that bound his fortunes to the earthly plane of balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements had been severed for good, they were free to ascend, to seek out new homes in the vastness of space. Behind him in the rearview the city lay shuddering with light. There was a mild trickling noise in his head which, after the heavy meal and thunderous rock music and the five-dollar margaritas, sounded like a smattering of light applause, the kind an arm-weary starting pitcher might hear late in the game, two runs behind, reliever strolling in from the bullpen—OK, it said, enough for now, you've tried, you've tried, you've tried. And then coming off the bridge he threw in his token, and the gate arm clicked and rose, and he stepped on the accelerator and roared the hell out of Manhattan as he used to, god, forty years back, in his golden Ford, after a night at Roseland with Fay, the car swerving beneath him as Fay herself would swerve, later, beneath the fake Utrillo in her parents' living room, and though Fay was long gone now and Howard not far behind he succumbed all over again to the softness that seemed to lie at the center of things, the perfume that rose like breath from Fay's skin, her trembling, already-halfway-to-zaftig thighs, her clumsy and reticent mouth, and for a moment it was no longer clear to him where he was going, which way was forward and which way back, though the issue was resolved when his enormous humming front end—the Buick's, not the Ford's—plowed directly into the trunk of the Saab ahead of him.

This was followed by an interlude of loud, acrimonious, not-altogether-rational screaming, some of which Howard contributed himself. And then the tedious wait for the patrol car, the embarrassment of recounting what happened, the ticket, the endless shuffle of insurance papers, and subsequent suspension of his license, and so on. And then having to explain it all to Bela. Very unpleasant.

As for the chocolate mousse, he didn't want to think about that. He did better with

these dietary restrictions if he didn't think about them. He did better with most things if he didn't think about them. But how to stop thinking? There was nothing he could think of to stop him from thinking.

In Port Jefferson the passengers had to get out of the van and stand around for a few minutes while they loaded the ferry. In the shade of the terminal awning, Charlotte brought out a cigarette from deep in her purse. She must have rolled it herself—it was sloppily and anemically constructed, twisted at both ends.

“Poor thing gets nauseous all the time,” her friend confided in a whisper. “The chemo.”

He nodded, not quite comprehending. Chemo: a shame. But what did that have to do with smoking a cigarette?

Charlotte, it turned out, had a peculiar way of smoking. Inhaling noisily from a short distance, she'd pull her head in fast, like a pigeon, to gulp back the smoke. Possibly this bizarre choreography had something to do with the tobacco itself, which smelled sickly and sweet and had a faint blue cast to its smoke as if the product of experimental lighting.

The sky was clouding, the wind sweeping off the Sound. As they tramped onto the ferry, Charlotte began to hum a little tune.

“Who's Smoky Robertson, anyway?” he asked.

Charlotte giggled.

An hour later they were off the high violent seas and deep in the Connecticut woods, pulling into the circular driveway of the casino complex. Arthur Pearle wasn't kidding: the place really was magnificent. Teal and white, eight stories high, it rose from the profusions of the surrounding forest like an immaculate floating city—Oz, Shangri-la—glimpsed in a dream. Limos and buses were idling in the parking lot. A crane bowed in the distance. Bulldozers were at work in the woods, pushing stubbornly at the tree roots, turning things over. The whine of the motors made Howard feel coiled, itchy; his seat with its two short arms was like a straitjacket. The sight of people streaming through the revolving doors gave him a pain in his chest—a tiny flutter of the heart's wings, a kind of rising.

Trooping across the parking lot, Howard saw the box of cigarettes fall out of Charlotte's shoulderbag, bounce onto the macadam, and come to rest on its side. “Hey,” he called, but nobody heard him. Old people. He stooped to pick it up: only two cigarettes left. Still, he hated to let them go to waste; he could give them to Charlotte later, he thought, for the trip home. So he slipped the box into his shirt pocket and followed the old people inside.

The Indian Casino, he saw at once, was neither so glitzy nor so vulgar as the other casinos he had seen in his life, but was more like some prosperous and efficient suburban mall. The marble floor was as smooth as a mirror. There was a gift shop, a newsstand, a hair salon, a bowling alley, a number of restaurants. In the center of the concourse an enormous waterfall thundered over an artificial landscape of rocks and ferns. Howard

looked it over thoughtfully. At the bottom was a small pool in which a constellation of coins, pennies mostly, shone. Howard considered throwing in a quarter, a bribe to the Fates, but that seemed wasteful. The only other indoor waterfall he had seen was in the lobby of the Hyatt Regency in San Francisco—had he thrown in a quarter that time? Probably so. His first coast trip, it had already paid for itself ten times over. He'd called Fay from the bar that night, he remembered, full of that jittery excitement of anonymity he got from the road, charging large sums to plastic accounts. He wanted to share it with her. The waterfall, the rustle of fine suits and dresses, the soft glow of the candles in their deep glazed bowls, the low murmur of lovers in their obscure assignations, the green vines dangling down the walls, just out of reach—he had to share all this with Fay, he thought. That would make it real. He felt it in his power that night to make things real, to give all that was formless in his life shape and definition, to reach across the miles and hinge them together in the great revolving world of actual things.

But he had forgotten the time difference. At the sound of her voice, sleep-fogged and timid, his urgency faltered, and his exhilaration dissolved. The water rushed down around him, merciless, impersonal. He'd hung up the phone without identifying himself. A thought occurred to him: half his life was spent on the road; no matter where he was, half of himself would be missing.

Then, as if such things naturally followed, he'd ordered himself, or whoever this new self was, a double martini. A double martini for Howard Udovin! Six bucks, and so dry it made him gasp. But the feeling was gone.

Fay, alone in that big house, a dead receiver in her hand.

Still, here in the bustle and hum of the Indian Casino, with a thick roll of twenties in his pocket, maybe the feeling could be lured back. Certainly he would not begrudge himself the money this time. Four or four hundred—what was the difference, when any minute a balloon could go pop in his chest and that would be that?

The room was long and low-slung, almost cavernously dark. Soft pop music floated down from hidden speakers. Cocktail waitresses sailed by on their impossibly long legs. Much of the acreage was given over to slot machines, hundreds of them, laid out in cheerful winding lines and clusters, like some noisy and prolifically illuminated subdivision. Perhaps because they were mindless and cheap, or because there was something in the crank and release of the lever that fooled the cardiovascular system, made it think it was in fact engaged in hard industrial work, *making* something, the slots were very popular. But Howard steered clear. He thought he saw Charlotte and her friend at the video poker, staking out stools. Good: that's who the slots were for, old ladies. He himself was here to play blackjack.

Because his instincts on fiscal matters remained conservative, Howard reflexively looked around for a five-dollar table. As it happened there were only two of them, both full. All the ten-dollar tables were occupied as well. The only vacancy to be found in the low-rent area of the casino was a fifteen-dollar table squeezed into the northwest corner of the room. Well, he thought, so be it. He pushed his way over, insinuated himself onto the stool, and handed the dealer three twenties, in exchange for which he received an alarmingly short stack of ships. He jiggled them in his palms. Not money, but almost-money. Virtual money. Arthur Pearle, the explorer, was hot on

virtual reality—a promising investment, he said, the next big thing. Virtual stupidity, Bela would say. You've got enough problems with what's right in front of you; why run around chasing phantoms?

But weren't phantoms better than nothing? Wasn't it better to chase than to sit at home?

The dealer, a pleasant-looking young man with blonde hair and small, expressionless eyes, cleared his throat.

"Oh. Right." With the flat of his hand, Howard pushed three chips out into the placid sea of green felt. Immediately he was hit by a wave of regret. The first play, he recalled from previous outings, was always lost; it was God's and the Gaming Commission's way of telling him to go home, stop trying to turn nothing into something. Too late now. Already he was regarding the chips through a haze of nostalgia, waving a mental farewell.

But in fact he was dealt two kings. Which meant his chips were returned to him, in the company of friends.

The second game he won with a ten and a nine. In the third he squeaked by with seventeen on a dealer fold. In the fourth, blackjack. Fifteen minutes, and he had won over a hundred dollars. Another half hour and he'd doubled it.

The waitress came by with her expression of perky forbearance and a tray full of drinks. She was wearing a kind of Peter Pan outfit that emphasized the musculature of her thighs and the precipitous tilt of her chest, the sight of which struck Howard like a blow. He took a scotch, neat, and, as appeared to be the protocol, replaced it with one of his chips. He was so intent on not staring at the young woman's marvelous breasts that it never occurred to him to ponder the meaning of a free drink that cost five dollars. The chip was just a chip, he thought, a little toy, like the balloons that were doing such a commendable job in his chest. Besides, it was a good drink. There was hardly any water. He drained it and signaled for another. He was beginning to calm down a little, beginning to feel as if the whole adventure was happening to someone else. The someone else, this Virtual Udovin, was having a pretty good time too, what with the scotch and the friendly cards and this smiling, attentive young woman whose presence was evoking the first vague stirrings of what might become, if the opportunity arose, a hard-on.

Here it was, just like he told Bela: a loophole. An open space, exempt from the usual laws of luck and gravity, a narrow window you pried your way through and escaped into another, better life. And now the best part of himself, the winning part, the Hyatt Regency part, the roaring-down-Moshulu-Parkway-after-a-night-at-Roseland part, was at last able to operate freely.

Two tens. The next: nineteen. The next: a dealer bust. The next: twenty-one. His bladder had begun calling for attention, but he tried to ignore it. A jack and a nine. Two aces, doubled down. The other players were exchanging looks. What had been an amusing business at first had turned grave, conspiratorial. After all they'd been present when Howard had arrived out of nowhere, uninvited; weren't those their cards, their money, he was taking? "Canadian Club," the man next to him said wearily to the cocktail waitress. "Double."

Never once in his sporadic and unpromising career as a gambler had Howard Udovin

ventured so far into the black. And yet now that he'd arrived a dull irritation was setting in. The procession of kings and queens, aces and jacks, this extravagant royal family who kept appearing in the palm of his hand—he regarded them with suspicion, even loathing. It was late in the day. Too much of his life he had toiled under the shadow of fortune's moon while others went about their business bathed in light. Too much reminding himself that things could be worse: that his parents might not have escaped Europe; that the lung cancer that took Jack Dow in 1971, the brain tumor that got Herb Feldman, might just as easily have claimed him; that he had known the love of two good women, however inadequate he had been to the task; that perhaps the compromises and half-steps and mediocrity that were his life, this not-quite-this but not-quite-that-either, this interminable *middleness*, was, when all was said and done, his destiny. And now it should change? Now he and the Indians should see how easily it could have turned out another way altogether? This was their consolation? Their restitution?

"Excuse me," he said brusquely. "I need a break."

The other players watched him scoop up his chips with expressions of bitter amusement. It was as if by leaving he were insulting them, flaunting that first rule they lived by: never mess with a good streak. But the money, now that he had accumulated so much of it, did not quite scratch where the itch was—he still felt restless—and his bladder was painfully asserting itself. The body followed rules of its own.

Already a young man in a baseball cap, turned backward for some reason, was squeezing into his seat.

In the bathroom he emptied himself and took a long indulgent look in the mirror. All things considered, he was in passable shape. His hairline, which had given ground for years, seemed to have dug in to defend its remaining territory; his complexion was ruddy, perhaps from the ferry ride, but in no way pre-stroke; and as for the battle of his waist, that was not yet entirely lost either. There was, however, a small bulge in his shirt just above the heart that gave him a fright—was it one of the balloons gone mad?—but no: the infrastructure, a patch-job, was still holding, it was just that box of cigarettes he had picked up out in the parking lot, where Charlotte had dropped it.

He had one in his mouth and lit before he could stop himself. That scotch had done its work all right. The borders were crossed, barricades falling.

Funny, maybe because it had been so long, the tobacco tasted odd to him—some weird old-lady's blend, no doubt—and made him cough in a deep racking way that seemed to jar something loose inside him. And yet, once it was over, he did not feel at all bad. In fact, he felt rather light on his feet, a dandy musical-comedy version of his old self. Exiting the men's room, pop music swooning around him, he wanted to dance a polka, embrace a woman, make a sale. Failing that, he wanted to eat. He was ravenous. His mouth was bone dry.

Across the corridor a sumptuous buffet, a cornucopia, awaited as if summoned. He got into a line with a tray. The line moved, if at all, with maddening deliberation, and because he had nothing to do and no one to talk to Howard indulged himself in a little philosophy. The world, he reflected, could be divided neatly in two—those who stood meekly in lines and those who crossed them. The floaters and the swimmers. Bela was a floater, and so were these people all around him. He and the Indians, on

the other hand, were obviously swimmers. This was nobody's fault, just the natural order of things, ordained in the genes. Still, it made you wonder.

In time he could contain this nature of his no longer and began swimming his way past the salad bar, where the congestion was the thickest, and heaping what were arguably obscene quantities of prime rib, fried chicken, lasagna, and shrimp scampi onto his plate—all the while struggling, as he gripped the heavy ladles, to conceal his contempt for those pale dog-paddlers behind him. Here they were flailing around at the shallow end with their cherry tomatoes and cottage cheese, their little rubbery florets of broccoli, their sensible cartons of yogurt, their quivering pastel mounds of Jell-O—picking over that lousy hospital food here, amid the plenty of the Indian Casino! In the end it required two plates filled almost beyond carrying capacity with the richest, fattiest foods imaginable, plus coffee, caffeinated, with half-and-half, *plus* chocolate mousse with its own little dollop of whipped cream, before he pulled over to the side of the pool, sated. He did not feel the least bit guilty, either. Though he went ahead and emptied a packet of Nutrasweet into his coffee, somewhat rhetorically, in lieu of sugar.

"Well, well," came a voice behind him as he licked his spoon. "The man from the bus."

Howard turned. It was Charlotte's friend, the poodle. She sat alone at a table, drinking iced tea with lemon and reading a paperback.

"You're having a good day, aren't you?"

"It so happens, yes. And you?"

"Me?" She frowned. "Not so good. Yesterday was better."

"And your friend?"

"Who, Charlotte? Poor thing's lying down in the bus. She left her medication somewhere, she says. Without it she gets headaches."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh, she's very fragile. You can only do so much with Charlotte." She looked at Howard's table, the ravaged bones and scraps, the crumpled napkins and empty cups. All at once she was smiling. "You tried the mousse, didn't you?"

"Delicious," Howard averred.

"Ach, I told you. The best."

"My wife used to make some almost as good."

"Almost is almost," the woman said mildly. She cocked one eyebrow. "She didn't come with you?"

"Long drives make her sleepy. She'd rather be outdoors."

"A sensitive nature," the woman said. "You should cherish her. Show her and the children nothing but love. You'll be gone someday and at least they'll have that."

Howard nodded. It occurred to him that she must be a widow. It also occurred to him that he would in fact be gone someday. These two thoughts made him feel rather sentimental about them all. "She's better than I deserve," he admitted.

"Why not call her and tell her?"

"What?"

"Go," the woman said. "Go call her right now. There's a phone near the cash machine."

“But,” said Howard, half-rising, “what do I say?”

“Tell her the truth. Say you cherish her. Her and the children. You cherish them with all your heart.”

After a big meal the blood leaves your head in a rush and goes down to the digestive tract. Obviously it was this phenomenon, Howard thought—the whoosh of enzymes, the flops and swings of body sugars, the recessive waves of acids—that accounted for his astounding state of exhaustion at that moment. Even as he extricated his bulk from the table his limbs felt rubbery and stupid, and there was a strange woolly taste in his mouth, a dryness that persisted as he walked around, pockets saggy with winnings, looking for a phone. Where were they? He found totem poles, animal skins, murals, mandalas, and canoes; he found slot machines, cash machines, fax machines, a computer that connected you, via the Internet, to Gamblers Anonymous—but he could find no phone.

Too late, he remembered to ask her about the second rule, the one she hadn’t told him, the one that came after the rule he’d already broken.

One of the Peter Pan girls was hurrying past with a tray of drinks. “Excuse me,” he said, desperate. “A phone?”

“Pay or house?”

She was obviously speaking some kind of code he had no time to decipher. “A phone,” he repeated. “To call my wife.”

She made a gesture with her head that could have meant anything or nothing. He interpreted it to mean that he should descend the stairway on his left to the lower level. There he found no pay phones at all, though he did find the museum, the one Arthur had suggested might be a good selling point for Bela. A good idea. Maybe it had just been his execution that was lousy. He’d been off his form that day. That month. Still, it was worth having a look, if only so he could make a convincing report to Bela about the educational nature of his trip.

Given that he had yet to encounter an actual Indian here at the Indian Casino, perhaps it should have come as no surprise that the tribal museum was without question the loneliest and most desolate museum he’d ever set foot in. There was a small, skeletal wigwam in the center of the room which was surrounded by a few halfhearted displays of arrowheads, pottery, clothing, and jewelry. Against the back wall a slide show clicked on and off, depicting in monochromatic black and white the long, miserable history of the tribe.

“Hi,” chirped the woman behind the desk. “How are *you* today?”

She was tall and redhaired, about twenty-five, her round face complicated with freckles. A name tag on her blouse read *Sarah*. They exchanged pleasantries. He allowed Sarah to give him some pamphlets and a cheerful if unfocused little spiel. The museum, she explained, was still in progress. She herself would only be here two weeks. Then she’d be moved back upstairs to deal blackjack, which was how she made her living when she was not afflicted, as she was now, with tendonitis of the wrist.

Howard nodded thoughtfully. Sarah’s syntax confused him somewhat; she had a habit of ending statements with an inquisitive upward lilt to her voice, as if much of what came out of her mouth was dubious and questionable even to her.

“It’s funny,” he said when she was finished, “but you don’t look Indian. I thought the place would be full of them.”

“Actually,” she said, “they’re kind of down on gambling? I think it like goes against their religion?”

“Oh. So then who runs the place?”

“Professional people. From Atlantic City? They’re really good too. Another one’s going up like ten miles away. The Narragansetts? It’s going to be the next big one. All my friends are like let’s get jobs *there*.”

He nodded vaguely. The conversation, the day, the food, his life—he was beginning to feel run down. He managed one lap around the room, then sought relief on the bench along the rear wall. There he sat in a slump, alone, watching the slide show flick dully past. Massacres, poverty, disease, land grabs, violated treaties, forced relocations . . . the suffering of the people, the degradation of land and spirit . . . endless. No loopholes in sight. He wondered if the Indians really were, as Arthur Pearle claimed, the lost tribe of Israel. Wanderers through the desert, across Asia, over the Bering Strait, and then down, down, down. He wondered if history ever got tired of inflicting itself on people. He wondered if it ever took a break. He wondered if that roaring in his ears was the waterfall upstairs or the bulldozers outside or some great hidden generator beneath the floor. He wondered if the museum was kept open as the casino itself was, all night, the slides running on and on, unattended, a ghost chronicle scrolling in an empty room, a parade of transient, flickering shadows like those Bela saw wafting through her dreams, singing *wake up, wake up*. . . .

“Hey.” A presence was hovering over him, distant and moon-like; he struggled up through his exhaustion to reach it. “Are you OK?”

The girl from behind the desk. There was concern in her face, but he thought he saw a number of other emotions too, whirling through the cosmos of her freckles. “Maybe you should like run on home? You look kinda tired.”

“I’m good,” he said vaguely.

“They don’t really want people sleeping on the benches.”

“I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Whatever. You want me to call someone?”

“I can make my own calls, thank you.”

“Whatever,” she said again. “I was just trying to be nice.”

It occurred to him that this was in fact the case. *Don’t mess with a good streak*. “Come upstairs with me,” he mumbled, trying to rouse himself. “We can have a drink and look at the waterfall.”

Sarah’s eyes turned hard. “Look, don’t hit on me, all right? You’re like older than my father. *Way* older. Also I’m having a bad day.”

“That’s OK,” Howard said, pulling chips out of his pockets, “see? I’m having a good one.”

“Not any more you’re not.”

“Do you like drugs, Sarah? I think I’ve got some. For a minute back there I think I even had a hard-on.”

“That’s it,” she said. “I’m calling Security.”

He got out of there fast. Chips spilled from his pockets as he made his way back up the stairs, past the waterfall, and into the crowded concourse. Finally: a pay phone.

With trembling hands he fed coins into the slot. Then he stood listening to the tired, familiar music of his own number. He would not tell Bela about the money, he thought. Neither would he tell her about the lunch, of course, or the scotch, or the cigarette, or the girl with the freckles. What was left, he wondered? What in the world was left to tell her?

“Hello,” came Bela’s voice, after the third ring. “Hello hello.”

When he closed his eyes he could see her standing at the kitchen counter in her gardening gloves—looking protectively over the backyard, fretting over things left half-complete. It was as if she had forgotten him already.

He saw in that moment what was coming for them all. The next big thing.

“Bela,” he said, but his voice came out a whisper.

“Hello? Hello?”

“Bela—” and he was aware of the hardware in his chest, the bloody pump and clotted channels, laboring on blindly in the darkness, “Bela,” he said, “I’m here.”