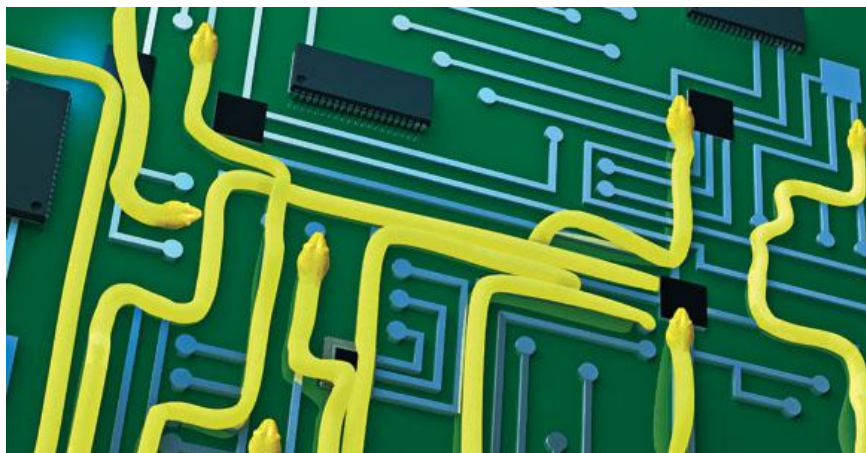


QUARTERLY
PRESS REVIEW
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

AUTUMN 2010



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QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW is an electronic magazine consisting of texts found in the public domain abridged for educational purposes.

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What's Your Problem?

Is it possible for your husband to come home from a business trip and have lipstick traces on his shirt collar and not be having an affair?

P. A., San Francisco, Calif.

Dear P. A.,

Yes, but only if your husband works for a lipstick company.

Have you noticed that most women, when they're pumping gas, which they don't want to do very often, will start pumping and then get back in the car and wait, especially on a cold day? My wife does this, and it drives me crazy because it's dangerous. When you get back in the car, you pick up static electricity, which can start a fire when you pull out the hose. I told her that she should discharge her static electricity before she finishes pumping, but she never listens. Why do women insist on getting in the car when the whole process takes two minutes?

A. T., Seattle, Wash.

Dear A. T.,

I'm trying to understand if this letter is in fact some sort of allegory about your sex life. If it is not, might I suggest pumping your own gas? If it is, what does "static electricity" stand for?

I fly frequently, and because of cutbacks at my company, I now fly with budget airlines. Have flight attendants always been so surly on these flights? One actually yelled at me for standing up to get something from my bag while the seat-belt sign was on. I'm a grown man. I don't appreciate getting yelled at by a flight attendant.

J. F., New York, N.Y.

Dear J. F.,

You have much in common with your senior senator, Charles Schumer. Recently, Schumer was on his phone while waiting for his flight to take off. A flight attendant told him to hang up. He refused. She asked again, and he muttered "Bitch" as she walked away. Unfortunately for him, he muttered "Bitch" within earshot of a Republican operative with media connections. His main sin, though, was to say aloud, when his phone rang again: "It's Harry Reid calling. I guess health care will have to wait until we land." I get the sense you believe yourself to be important as well. Perhaps you are, in your own mind, indispensable. But this belief, when acted on, will get you into trouble, particularly with people who earn less than you do but nevertheless believe themselves to be human beings, and worthy of respect. Next time, stay in your seat.

I have always enjoyed watching football on TV, and as a German, I found the last World Cup very satisfying. But maybe it's because I am getting older (I just turned 40) and have become picky or sensitive, but all the spitting in football is really getting to me. Is it just me, or is there more spitting than ever? It's going to ruin my appreciation of the game.

R. S., Dortmund, Germany

Dear R. S.,

I can't imagine that the amount of spitting in football has increased dramatically over the years. The key difference between now and then: high-definition television. I'm guessing you watched the World Cup on a 42-inch plasma HD screen. This was a mistake. Everything looks worse in HD, especially spit. Get yourself a small, bad television. Or better yet, a radio.

I collect antique Asian statues. Recently, my boss was over for dinner. In the past he has admired my collection, and two days after this dinner, I found that one of the statues was missing. I can't help but think that my boss stole it. What should I do?

T. R., Denver, Colo.

Dear T. R.,

I suggest employing what I call the Modified Tell-Tale Heart Strategy. Inform your boss that one of your prized statues has gone missing, and that you think it was stolen. Your heart is broken, you don't know what to do. Ask him, if he happens to come across one like it, to please buy it, and you'll gladly repay him. If your boss is a normal human being, your suggestion will work like a little guilt-worm on his conscience, and he will one day (four to six months from now, is my guess) give you a remarkably similar statue. If he refuses payment, then you'll know he stole it.

Every time I go to the supermarket, the checkout person asks me if I would like to donate an extra dollar for children with cancer. I want to support charity, but I don't want to be confronted like this when I go shopping. What should I say?

H. W., Arlington, Va.

Dear H. W.,

You should say "I'd love to, but I'm late for my massage." Or "I can't today, I have to get my Range Rover detailed." Or, alternatively, "How do I know that you and your fellow Safeway clerks aren't going to spend the money on hookers and blow?"

Why are women still more interested in marriage than men are?

E. M., Bayonne, N.J.

Dear E. M.,

Many women remain interested in marriage because they are under the impression that it guarantees them a patient, sensitive, and emotionally available conversation partner for life.

I'm in love with a guy. He is perfect in almost every way. Handsome, good earner, athletic, interesting, not a drunk. There's one problem: if we're in a crowded parking lot, he'll go for the handicapped spots. He says that there are always too many of them and that they're always empty. This makes me crazy. What should I do?

T. M., Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear T. M.,

Break his heart. ♦

A Wonderful World

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP in the United States was linked to an increase in abusive head trauma among children; a different study concluded that the winter holidays do not encourage Americans to abuse their children.

Doctors identified the gene responsible for urofacial syndrome, which causes those afflicted to leak feces and urine and to grimace when they try to smile.

Excessive burger consumption was correlated with wheezing in children.

Herpes continues to ravage France's baby oysters.

Sixty-one percent of African Americans, 40 percent of Hispanic Americans, and only 23 percent of white Americans use lubricants during anal sex.

Pond snails on crystal meth are better at remembering pokes from a sharp stick.

Scientists created crash helmets that stink when cracked and fruit flies to whom blue light smells delicious.

A giant grenadier, a gonate squid, and a pelagic eelpout, all native to the North Pacific, were captured in the South Atlantic, 9,300 miles from home.

In England, a rare shrew that stowed away on a ferry to Penzance was repatriated to the Isles of Scilly.

The male hedgehogs of Bristol were found to take greater risks than females in choosing their human yards, and the county

council of Leicestershire distributed 200 tennis balls as homes for harvest mice.

Scientists and customs officials, by reassembling the skeletons of butchered animals seized at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport, estimated that the airport annually receives some 300 tons of illegal bushmeat, including blue duiker, brush-tailed porcupine, cane rat, crested porcupine, giant pangolin, long-tailed pangolin, Nile crocodile, red river hog, slender-snouted crocodile, and unidentified species of *Cercocebus* and *Cercopithecus* monkeys.

French researchers reported that 52 percent of young women exposed to Francis Cabrel's ballad "Je l'aime à mourir" gave their phone numbers to an average-looking young man who hit on them, whereas only 28 percent of those exposed to Vincent Delerm's "L'heure du thé" did so.

Physicists recorded the "music" made by the sun's corona and described the sounds made by subatomic particles.

The moon may be 120 million years younger and much more watery than previously thought.

Sherpas warned that global warming was making it more difficult to climb Mt. Everest.

African leaders discussed plans to create a nine-mile-wide, 4,800-mile-long barrier of trees, spanning the continent from Senegal to Djibouti, to check the spread of the Sahara.

Male topi antelope who issue alarm snorts to imaginary predators in the presence of a female antelope in heat make the female more likely to linger in the male's territory and have sex; scientists estimated that male antelope gain, on average, 2.8 additional mating opportunities per female per episode of deceptive snorting.

Peru was found to have overtaken Colombia in coca production, heroin addiction in Afghanistan was determined to have risen by 140 percent since 2005, and roughly 80 percent of U.S.

cocaine was thought to be contaminated with a drug that causes skin tissues to rot.

Many Afghans continued using opium to placate their children.

The U.N. World Drug Report found that 3.7 percent of Scots and 0 percent of Romanians use cocaine.

Sudden oak death arrived in Wales.

English scientists determined that the proto-birds Archaeopteryx and Confuciusornis were not capable of flapping flight.

“These dinosaurs,” said Robert Nudds of the University of Manchester, “were rubbish at flying.”

Antisocial behavior among boys was correlated with both precocious puberty and delayed puberty; badly behaved teenage girls were found to have a hard time discerning anger and disgust on other people’s faces, though they showed no deficiencies in recognizing fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise; and poor children were found to be worse than rich children at catching, dribbling, galloping, hopping, jumping, kicking, leaping, rolling, running, sliding, striking, and throwing.

A study suggested that many American parents think of their teenage children as sexually uninterested and of all other teenagers as sexually hyperactive and predatory.

Male crickets raised amid the abundant song of other male crickets have more massive testes.

Baby corals looking for a place to live follow the sound of reefs.

Hermit crabs queue in long lines, ordering themselves from biggest to smallest, while awaiting a synchronous vacancy chain, wherein each crab moves to the next biggest shell.

In the Amazon, two-toed sloths, who usually visit the forest floor only once or twice a week (to defecate, and occasionally to

switch trees), were descending at night to climb into the latrines of primatologists and eat handfuls of feces, toilet paper, and urine.

Researchers who observed the behavior speculated that the participating sloths, among them a mother and her baby, may have been enticed by the promise of protein, salt, or larvae.

The researchers (who had intended to study not sloths but red titi monkeys) also worried that these sloths might fall ill.

A Welsh swan subdued and swallowed whole a large eel.

Spectacled eider ducks in the Bering Sea were being hunted by a walrus.

Canadian men, unlike most of the world’s men, grow fatter as they get richer.

Canadian scientists announced the development of a Mouse Grimace Scale, which will allow humans to determine, by a mouse’s facial expression, how much pain that mouse is in.

Mice may produce their own morphine.

In Japan, where 2 million honeybees were stolen last year and the price of bees continues to rise, a gang of bee rustlers struck in Shizuoka prefecture.

In the United States, a third of all honeybee colonies were found to have died during the winter.

In Kenya, elephants were found to use a special rumble to warn one another of the presence of bees.

Entomologists working in Iran and Turkey learned that a rare species of solitary bee builds brood chambers of brightly colored flower petals.

Two different species of orchid, each attractive to a different species of solitary bee, were found to have cross-pollinated and created a third species of orchid, attractive to a third species of solitary bee.

In Brazil, which was found to be worse for the environment than any other country, a fire destroyed the world's largest collection of dead snakes.

The carbon footprints of early Native Americans were much larger than previously thought.

Researchers revealed that a 30,000-year-old siltstone phallus discovered in a German cave had also been used to light fires.

A Tokyo couple were married by I-Fairy, a pigtailed robot.

Horticultural scientists reported progress in testing strawberries to be grown in spaceships.

"The idea is to supplement the human diet with something people can look forward to," said one of the scientists.

"Fresh berries can certainly do that."

Scientists performed surgery on the hoods of cobras to determine how ribs turned into hood bones and rib muscles turned into hooding muscles.

A number of the snakes awoke from anesthesia during the surgery, which the scientists found "disconcerting."

An escaped monocled cobra in Germany succumbed to exhaustion after being caught by double-sided tape.

After the roof collapsed on a rabbit show in Nyköping, Sweden, many of the rabbits – including British giants, dwarf hotots, Himalayans, and lionheads – mated amid the ruins.

A young Floridian bald eagle was recovering after being struck by a golf ball.

The Poultry Research Unit at Mississippi State University reported success in more efficiently heating the houses of broiler chickens.

The Welsh planned to continue killing their badgers.

Greek researchers tracked brown bears who rub against telephone poles and occasionally gnaw through them.

Zoologists revealed the existence of an Amazonian leech with giant teeth, tiny genitalia, and a preference for living in people's noses.

Otolaryngologists placed gyroscopes in the mouths of dolphins and on the horns of bulls.

Researchers discovered that horned-frog tadpoles scream in distress.

"We have," said the lead researcher, "definitely underestimated their abilities."

British researchers were using bee hotels to train bees as bomb sniffers, and biomaterials scientists reported progress in their quest to produce bee silk.

Beewolves use antibiotics.

The southern cuckoo bumblebee was seen in Scotland for the first time in fifty years.

Bumblebees have the fastest color vision of any animal, and sociable queen bees have bigger mushroom bodies in their brains than do solitary queens.

Swarming decisions among large honeybees are determined by an oligarchy, and flocking decisions among pigeons are determined by prestige-weighted votes.

Earthworms travel in herds.

The medial prefrontal cortices of women who claim not to care about body image are activated by photos of unfamiliar fat women.

Male fallow deer groan "honestly."

Mother birds warn unhatched chicks about the quality of their lives-to-be.

Entomologists described the technique whereby masked birch caterpillars proclaim leaf ownership.

British minorities who have many supportive relatives are likelier to fear death.

Alzheimer's sufferers who are made happy retain those feelings even after they no longer remember why they are happy.

Engineers found that lightning encourages the growth of mushrooms, physicists suspected a parity violation of the strong force, and geologists suggested that Earth's magnetic poles were once at the equator.

Lava lamps should work on Jupiter.

Astronomers photographed an eclipse of the star Epsilon Aurigae, attributing the occultation to "a thin disc of opaque dust trailed by a massive and unseen companion."

An island claimed by both Bangladesh and India vanished into the ocean.

China and Nepal agreed on the height of Mt. Everest.

War was making Iraqi children shorter.

People who feel powerful underestimate the time it will take them to complete a given task, and great apes understand that they sometimes make bad choices.

Studies of humankind's original states – in China, Egypt, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, and Peru – suggest that the emergence of bureaucracy catalyzed predatory imperial expansion.

Archaeologists in Italy unearthed a 1,700-year-old, 1,000-pound lead coffin whose contents remain unknown. ♦

Nobody's Detroit

by *Philip Levine*

I LEFT DETROIT in 1954. I was twenty-six years old and had a B.A. in English. I left a job I liked, "driving truck" – as they said then – for a company that repaired electric motors of all sizes; the job got me out in the fresh air – if you can call the air in a manufacturing town fresh – and it took me to the little machine shops, the small-parts makers, the tool-and-die outfits we serviced, and on the worst days to the empire of arrogance and monumental ugliness, Ford River Rouge, then the largest industrial complex in the world. The year before that I'd worked for Railway Express delivering trunks and parcels to the four corners of the city, so I knew the geography and the neighborhoods of the place. It was my town and I hated leaving; it was home to my family and all my friends, it was home to the little circle of poets I'd become a part of; its tree-lined streets and its street life, its humble houses, its libraries, theaters, jazz clubs, its birds, beasts, and flowers, and especially its people had nourished me and would as the years passed not only enter my writing, at times they would command it. So why did I leave? Let's just say it was for love, not money.

Twenty-eight years later I was invited back to read at the retirement party of one of my favorite English teachers at Wayne University (which in the meantime had become Wayne State). I was to be the surprise guest, a major player in the event. It was a short flight from Boston, where I was then living, and when the

plane landed I looked for my appointed driver. There was a young and attractive woman bearing a sign with my name on it. No, she was not taking me into town; she was from Delta Airlines and had a sealed envelope for me. Inside was a note from the chair of the English Department and in the note instructions for getting into town by bus and also a badly drawn map showing me where to appear that afternoon for the planned homage. Since Jay, my teacher, had no idea I was coming, I decided I would skip the catered meal and show up at the last possible moment, give my talk, read a poem, embrace my old mentor, and then escape. Hopefully my absence until the crucial moment would cost the chair as much anxiety as possible.

I had hours to kill. Coming in on the west side of town I got off the bus near the ballpark. Alas, the season had ended, and that year there was no post-season for the Tigers. Half a mile south of the stadium the plumbing-parts factory where I'd worked for a year was gone, and nothing was in its place except a field of nettles and weeds and three abandoned cars, their wheels gone. I walked farther south, toward the river, and to my astonishment I found a large fenced-in garden – tomatoes, corn, squash, and rows of exquisite zinnias, all those things I'd tried unsuccessfully to grow in my victory garden during World War II. The gardener appeared from nowhere and asked me if I wanted a closer look; he opened the gate – which hadn't been locked – and took me down the rows, named the various crops while boasting only the least bit about the perfection of his tomatoes – “so good they remind you what tomatoes taste like” – and finally showed me the area he'd reserved for his winter crop. No, he didn't have permission from the city, these days no one asked the city for anything. There'd once been a nice two-story house on this ground, but it was gone, just got up and left, and then the land was empty, so why not use it. The fence was here to keep the

dogs out; it was like the Depression years – which we both recalled – with packs of wild dogs cut loose by their owners and left to their own devices, foraging and wandering. “That's what we all do to survive here,” he said. The day had grown unseasonably warm, and so we removed ourselves to the shade of his front porch across the street. How he guessed I was from Detroit, I don't know, but he did, and he was curious to know when I'd left and why I'd come back. When I told him I was here to celebrate the retirement of my old teacher, he rocked back and forth a moment and said, “That's beautiful, that is biblical.” There are those rare times in my life when I know that what I'm living is in a poem I've still to write. As we sat in silence, I took in as much of the scene as I could until my eyes were filled with so much seeing I had finally to close them.

*On this block seven houses
are still here to be counted,
and if you count the shacks
housing illegal chickens,
the pens for dogs, the tiny
pig sty, that is half cave ...
and if you count them you can
count the crow's nest
in the high beech tree
at the corner, and you can
regard the beech tree itself
bronzing in the mid-morning light
as the mast of the great ship
sailing us all back
into the 16th century
or into the present age's
final discovery.*

My guide for that morning was named Tom; I gave him the surname of Jefferson and put him in the poem “A Walk with Tom Jefferson.” I left out a remark he made that seemed to encapsulate his vision of our city. After he catalogued the disappearance of all but the seven houses that remained on the block, for want of something better to say, I remarked, “Nothing lasts forever.” He turned his weathered face to me and amended my judgment: “Nothing lasts.”

That was neither the first nor the last time I returned to the city, but it was probably the most memorable, and in retrospect it was the last time I felt truly at home there, and of course that was due to the character of this aging black man, a retired autoworker, who’d welcomed me back. Before I took off for the English Department ceremony, I remarked to Tom that many people regarded me as a deserter for leaving Detroit for another life. He advised me to ignore such responses, they were petty and rose out of jealousy, and he added, “All the smart ones left.” What that return had in common with all the others was a mounting sense of change and seldom change for the better. Some things had improved: Wayne State had come up in the world with a new library and a clean and extended campus, there was less traffic on Woodward Avenue – no doubt because there was less reason to be there – the Fisher Theatre was restored, there was, on my last visit, a new baseball park. When I was invited back three years ago to read my poetry, I was assured things were improving, but when I got there my eyes told me otherwise.

The Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote of his native city, Alexandria, “My city destroys and annihilates itself from instant to instant.” He’d left in 1912 when he was a young, aspiring writer, but he carried the place with him for the rest of his life. For him it was already an ancient and mythic city, a great port risen out of a desert and founded long before its classic naming. Curiously, even

in his imagination the city revised itself, and for the rest of his life he relived his childhood and young manhood in an Alexandria that had transformed itself into something fabulous and dreamlike.

*I saw you, Alexandria,
Crumbling on your spectral foundation
Becoming for me a memory
In a spectral embrace of lights.*

He wrote those lines after a short visit home twenty years after his initial departure. By then the modern era, with its indifference to the geography of home, was well underway. I’ve wondered if even in 1932 when he returned was he able to see the city that was there, or had it been so powerfully displaced by the visionary city of his imagination that the hard facts meant nothing. In a poem written near the end of his life, he gives us a wild, hallucinatory vision of the city as it was on the day of his own birth:

*There was a squall, it rained heavily
At Alexandria in Egypt on that night . . .
A child galloped on a white horse
And around him in a throng the people
Clung together in the circle of the soothsayers . . .*

Quite suddenly in the poem his mother appears, an actual person, “a Lucchese,” no less (she was born in Lucca); she laughs and quotes an old peasant proverb: “If the lanes run in February,/it fills all one’s crocks with oil and wine.” The mother recites one of her bits of “folk wisdom” her son has never taken seriously, and the nightmare spell is broken. The transformation comes about not by any magic or special incantation, but by a

common saying in a common language. Now the poet is back in the constant flux of creation, or, to quote García Lorca, he has become witness to “the unending baptism of all newly created things.”

When Ungaretti wrote those lines he was almost as old as I am now. (He lived to be eighty-two.) He never again returned to Alexandria, but with some luck I’ll get back to Detroit, if you can call that luck. What will I find? I know the house on Pingree, the house of my earliest memories, is gone – that is, it’s not a house anymore. I saw it in a film of the town taken forty years after the great rebellion of 1967 (labeled “riots” by the papers). It had been pared down to brickwork, a flight of steps, and a blackened chimney. Each time I replayed the film it reappeared, a silhouette in black-and-white. It had become something historical, an anonymous ruin left by one of the century’s wars, something akin to the dwelling immortalized in the poem “Five Minutes After the Air Raid” by the great Czech poet Miroslav Holub:

*She climbed to the third floor
Up stairs which were all that was left
Of the whole house
She opened the door
Full on to the sky,
Stood gaping over the edge
For this was the place
The world ended*

Even if I looked for either of the two General Motors plants I worked in I wouldn’t find them; they’ve both been torn down. Mavis Nu-Icy Bottling Co., where at sixteen I earned a dollar an hour, was flattened and carted off, though I found the railroad spur that led to the loading dock. The home of Dolly Basil, who I

truly loved for two months, has given way to a six-lane highway. For certain I won’t find the little scenes of childhood I’ve carried in amber all those years like amulets against the inevitable, the images that once told me who I was and now belong in someone else’s biography or no one’s. ♦



Conficker, the Worm

by *Mark Bowden*

WHEN THE CONFICKER computer “worm” was unleashed on the world in November 2008, cyber-security experts didn’t know what to make of it. It infiltrated millions of computers around the globe. It constantly checks in with its unknown creators. It uses an encryption code so sophisticated that only a very few people could have deployed it. For the first time ever, the cyber-security elites of the world have joined forces in a high-tech game of cops and robbers, trying to find Conficker’s creators and defeat them. The cops are failing. And now the worm lies there, waiting ...

The first surprising thing about the worm that landed in Philip Porras’s digital petri dish 18 months ago was how fast it grew.

He first spotted it on Thursday, November 20, 2008. Computer-security experts around the world who didn’t take notice of it that first day soon did. Porras is part of a loose community of high-level geeks who guard computer systems and monitor the health of the Internet by maintaining “honeypots,” unprotected computers irresistible to “malware,” or malicious software. A honeypot is either a real computer or a virtual one within a larger computer designed to snare malware. There are also “honeynets,” which are networks of honeypots. A worm is a cunningly efficient little packet of data in computer code, designed to slip inside a computer and set up shop without attracting attention, and to do what this one was so good at: replicate itself.

Most of what honeypots snare is routine, the viral annoyances that have bedeviled computer-users everywhere for the past 15 years or so, illustrating the principle that any new tool, no matter how useful to humankind, will eventually be used for harm. Viruses are responsible for such things as the spamming of your inbox with penis-enlargement come-ons or million-dollar investment opportunities in Nigeria. Some malware is designed to damage or destroy your computer, so once you get the infection, you quickly know it. More-sophisticated computer viruses, like the most successful biological viruses, and like this new worm, are designed for stealth. Only the most technically capable and vigilant computer-operators would ever notice that one had checked in.

Porras, who operates a large honeynet for SRI International in Menlo Park, California, noted the initial infection, and then an immediate reinfection. Then another and another and another. The worm, once nestled inside a computer, began automatically scanning for new computers to invade, so it spread exponentially. It exploited a flaw in Microsoft Windows, particularly Windows 2000, Windows XP, and Windows Server 2003 – some of the most common operating systems in the world – so it readily found new hosts. As the volume increased, the rate of repeat infections in Porras’s honeynet accelerated. Within hours, duplicates of the worm were crowding in so rapidly that they began to push all the other malware, the ordinary daily fare, out of the way. If the typical inflow is like a stream from a faucet, this new strain seemed shot out of a fire hose. It came from computer addresses all over the world. Soon Porras began to hear from others in his field who were seeing the same thing. Given the instant and omnidirectional nature of the Internet, no one could tell where the worm had originated. Overnight, it was everywhere.

And on closer inspection, it became clear that voracity was just the first of its remarkable traits.

Various labs assigned names to the worm. It was dubbed “Downadup” and “Kido,” but the name that stuck was “Conficker,” which it was given after it tried to contact a fake security Web site, trafficconverter.biz. Microsoft security programmers shuffled the letters and came up with *Conficker*, which stuck partly because *ficker* is German slang for “motherfucker,” and the worm was certainly that. At the same time that Conficker was spewing into honeypots, it was quietly slipping into personal computers worldwide – an estimated 500,000 in the first month.

Why? What was its purpose? What was it telling all those computers to do?

Imagine your computer to be a big spaceship, like the starship *Enterprise* on *Star Trek*. The ship is so complex and sophisticated that even an experienced commander like Captain James T. Kirk has only a general sense of how every facet of it works. From his wide swivel chair on the bridge, he can order it to fly, maneuver, and fight, but he cannot fully comprehend all its inner workings. The ship contains many complex, interrelated systems, each with its own function and history – systems for, say, guidance, maneuvers, power, air and water, communications, temperature control, weapons, defensive measures, etc. Each system has its own operator, performing routine maintenance, exchanging information, making fine adjustments, keeping it running or ready. When idling or cruising, the ship essentially runs itself without a word from Captain Kirk. It obeys when he issues a command, and then returns to its latent mode, busily doing its own thing until the next time it is needed.

Now imagine a clever invader, an enemy infiltrator, who *does* understand the inner workings of the ship. He knows it well

enough to find a portal with a broken lock overlooked by the ship’s otherwise vigilant defenses – like, say, a flaw in Microsoft’s operating platform. So no one notices when he slips in. He trips no alarm, and then, to prevent another clever invader from exploiting the same weakness, he repairs the broken lock and seals the portal shut behind him. He *improves* the ship’s defenses. Ensnared securely inside, he silently sets himself up as the ship’s alternate commander. He enlists the various operating functions of the ship to do his bidding, careful to avoid tripping any alarms. Captain Kirk is still up on the bridge in his swivel chair with the magnificent instrument arrays, unaware that he now has a rival in the depths of his ship. The *Enterprise* continues to perform as it always has. Meanwhile, the invader begins surreptitiously communicating with his own distant commander, letting him know that he is in position and ready, waiting for instructions.

And now imagine a vast fleet, in which the *Enterprise* is only one ship among millions, all of them infiltrated in exactly the same way, each ship with its hidden pilot, ever alert to an outside command. In the real world, this infiltrated fleet is called a “botnet,” a network of infected, “robot” computers. The first job of a worm like Conficker is to infect and link together as many computers as possible – the phenomenon witnessed by Porras and other security geeks in their honeypots. Thousands of botnets exist, most of them relatively small – a few thousand or a few tens of thousands of infected computers. More than a billion computers are in use around the world, and by some estimates, a fourth of them have been surreptitiously linked to a botnet. But few botnets approach the size and menace of the one created by Conficker, which has stealthily linked between 6 million and 7 million computers.

Once created, botnets are valuable tools for criminal enterprise. Among other things, they can be used to efficiently

distribute malware, to steal private information from otherwise secure Web sites or computers, to assist in fraudulent schemes, or to launch denial-of-service attacks – overwhelming a target computer with a flood of requests for response. The creator of an effective botnet, one with a wide range and the staying power to defeat security measures, can use it himself for one of the above scams, or he can sell or lease it to people who specialize in exploiting botnets. (Botnets can be bought or leased in underground markets online.)

Beyond criminal enterprise, botnets are also potentially dangerous weapons. If the right order were given, and all these computers worked together in one concerted effort, a botnet with that much computing power could crack many codes, break into and plunder just about any protected database in the world, and potentially hobble or even destroy almost any computer network, including those that make up a country's vital modern infrastructure: systems that control banking, telephones, energy flow, air traffic, health-care information – even the Internet itself.

The key word there is *could*, because so far Conficker has done none of those things. It has been activated only once, to perform a relatively mundane spamming operation – enough to demonstrate that it is not benign. No one knows who created it. No one yet fully understands how it works. No one knows how to stop it or kill it. And no one even knows for sure *why* it exists.

If yours is one of the infected machines, you are like Captain Kirk, seemingly in full command of your ship, unaware that you have a hidden rival, or that you are part of this vast robot fleet. The worm inside your machine is not idle. It is stealthily running, issuing small maintenance commands, working to protect itself from being discovered and removed, biding its time, and periodically checking in with its command-and-control center.

Conficker has taken over a large part of our digital world, and so far most people haven't even noticed.

The struggle against this remarkable worm is a sort of chess match unfolding in the esoteric world of computer security. It pits the cleverest attackers in the world, the bad guys, against the cleverest defenders in the world, the good guys (who have been dubbed the “Conficker Cabal”). It has prompted the first truly concerted global effort to kill a computer virus, extraordinary feats of international cooperation, and the deployment of state-of-the-art decryption techniques – moves and countermoves at the highest level of programming. The good guys have gone to unprecedented lengths, and have had successes beyond anything they would have thought possible when they started. But a year and a half into the battle, here's the bottom line:

The worm is winning.

Twenty years ago, computers were bedeviled by hackers. These were savvy outlaws who used their deep knowledge of operating systems to invade, steal, and destroy, or sometimes just to tap into secure facilities and show off their skills. Hackers became heroes to a generation of teenagers, and had all sorts of motives, but their most distinctive trait was a tendency to show off.

Some had truly malicious intent. In his 1989 best seller, *The Cuckoo's Egg*, Cliff Stoll told the story of his stubborn, virtually single-handed hunt for an elusive hacker in Germany who was using Stoll's computer system at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory as a portal to Defense Department computers. For many people, Stoll's book was the introduction to the netherworld of rarefied gamesmanship that defines computer security. Stoll's hacker never penetrated the most secret corners of the national-security net, and even relatively serious breaches like the one Stoll described were more nuisance than threat. But the individual

hacker working as a spy or vandal has evolved into something more organized and menacing.

Andre' M. DiMino, a computer sleuth who is part of the Conficker Cabal, is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on botnets. He stumbled into his avocation on a Monday morning a decade ago, when he discovered that over the weekend, someone had broken into the computer system he was administering for a small company in New Jersey. DiMino has an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering with an emphasis in computer science, but he has mostly taught himself up to his present level of expertise, which is extreme. At 45, he is a slender, affable idealist who keeps a small array of computers in an upstairs bedroom. When I stopped by to talk to him, he baked me pizza. His day job is doing computer forensics for law enforcement in Bergen County, New Jersey, but he has a kind of alter ego as what he calls a "botnet hunter."

Back when he discovered the weekend break-in, DiMino assumed at first that it was the work of a hacker, a vandal, or possibly a former employee, only to discover, based on an analysis of the IP (Internet Protocol) addresses of the incoming data, that his little computer network had been invaded by someone from Turkey or Ukraine. What would someone halfway around the planet want with the computer system of a small business-management firm in a New Jersey office park? Apparently, judging by what he found, his invader was in the business of selling pirated software, movies, and music. Needing large amounts of digital storage space to hide stolen inventory, the culprit seemed to have conducted an automated search over the Internet, looking worldwide for vulnerable systems with large amounts of unused disc space – DiMino equates it to walking around rattling doorknobs, looking for one door left unlocked. DiMino's system fit the bill, so the crooks had dumped a huge

bloc of data onto his discs. He erased the stash and locked the door that had allowed the pirates in. As far as the company was concerned, that solved the problem. No harm done. No need to call the police or investigate further.

But DiMino was intrigued. He reviewed the server logs for previous weeks and saw that this successful invasion was one of many such efforts. Other attackers had been rattling the doors of his network, looking for vulnerabilities. If there were bad guys actively exploiting other people's computers all over the world, designing sophisticated programs to exploit weaknesses ... how cool was that? And who was trying to stop them?

DiMino set about educating himself on the fine points of this obscure battle of wits. He eventually co-founded the Shadowserver Foundation, a nonprofit partnership of defense-minded geeks at war with malware, effectively transforming himself into a digital Sam Spade – indeed, the graphic atop Shadowserver's home page features a Dashiell Hammett-style detective emerging from shadow.

Both sides in this cyberwar have become astonishingly sophisticated, operating at the cutting edge of programming theory and cryptography. Both understand the limits of security methodology, the one side working to broaden its reach, the other working to surpass it. Because malware has been automated, the good guys usually can only guess at who they are up against.

Rodney Joffe heads the cabal that has been battling Conficker. He is a burly, garrulous South African-born American who serves as senior vice president and chief technologist for Neustar, a company that provides trunk-line service for competing cell-phone companies around the world. Joffe's interest in stopping the worm did not stem just from his outrage and sense of justice. His concern for Neustar's operation is professional, and illustrative.

The company runs a huge local-number-portability database. Almost every phone call in North America, before it's completed, must ask Neustar where to go. Back in the old days, when the phone company was a monopoly, telecommunications were relatively simple. You could figure out where a phone call was going, right down to the building where the target phone would ring, just by looking at the number. Today we have competing telephone companies, and cell phones, and a person's telephone number is no longer necessarily tied to a geographic location. In this more complex world, someone needs to keep track of every single phone number, and know where to route calls so they end up in the right place. Neustar performs this service for telephone calls, and is one of many registries that oversee high-level Internet domains. It is, in Joffe's words, "the map."

"If I disappear, there's no map," he says. "So if you take us down, whole countries can actually disappear from the grid. They're connected, but no one can find their way there, because the map's disappeared."

A botnet like Conficker could theoretically be used to shut down Neustar's system. So Joffe helped form the Conficker Cabal. He scoffed when he read in late 2009 that the Obama administration's Department of Homeland Security planned to hire "a thousand" computer-security experts over the next three years. "There aren't more than a few hundred people in the world who understand this stuff."

Most of us use the word *virus* to describe all malware, but in geekspeak, it means something more specific. There are three types of the stuff: Trojans, viruses, and worms. A Trojan is a piece of software that works like a Trojan horse, masquerading as one thing to get inside a computer, and then attacking. A virus attacks the host computer after slipping in through a hole in its operating system. It depends on the computer-operator – you – doing

something stupid to activate it, like opening an attachment to an e-mail that appears innocuous, or clicking on an enticing link. A worm works like a virus, exploiting flaws in operating systems, but it doesn't attack once it breaks in. It generally doesn't have a malicious payload. Exactly like the most-sophisticated viruses in the biological world, it does not cripple or kill its host. It is primarily designed to spread. The instructions that will put a worm like Conficker to work are not embedded in its code; they will be delivered later, from a remote command center.

In the old days, when your computer got infected, it slowed down because your commands had to compete for processing with viral invaders. You knew something was wrong because the machine took 10 times longer to boot up, or there was a delay between command and response. You began to get annoying pop-ups on your screen directing you to download supposedly remedial software. Programs would freeze. In this sense, the old malware was like the Ebola virus, a very scary strain that messily kills nearly everyone it infects – which is another way of saying that it is grossly ineffective, because it burns out the very host organisms it needs to survive. The miscreants who created computer viruses years ago learned that malware that announces itself in these ways doesn't last.

So today's malware produces no pop-ups, no slowdowns. A worm is especially quiet, since all it does, at least initially, is spread. Conficker stealthily sets up shop without making a ripple, and – other than calling home periodically for instructions – just waits. Its regular messages to its command center amount to only a couple hundred bytes of data, which is not enough to even light up the little bulb that flashes when a computer hard drive is at work.

After Phil Porras and others began snaring Conficker in increasing numbers, they began dissecting it. The worm itself was

exquisite. It consisted of only a few hundred lines of code, no more than 35 kilobytes – slightly smaller than a 2,000-word document. In comparison, the average home computer today has anywhere from 40 to 200 *gigabytes* of storage. Unless you were looking for it, unless you knew *how* to look for it, you would never see it. Conficker drifts in like a mote.

It exploited a specific hole, Port 445, in the Microsoft operating systems, a vulnerability that the manufacturer had tried to repair just weeks earlier. Ports are designated “listening” points in a system, designed to transmit and receive particular kinds of data. There are many of them, more than 65,000, because an operating system consists of layer upon layer of functions. A firewall is a security program that guards these ports, controlling the flow of data in and out. Some ports, like the one that handles e-mail, are heavily trafficked. Most are not; they listen for updates and instructions that deal with a narrow and specific function, usually routine procedures that never rise to the notice of computer-users. Only certain very specific kinds of data can flow through ports, and then only with the appropriate codes. Windows opens Port 445 by default to perform tasks like issuing instructions for print-sharing or file-sharing. Late in the summer of 2008, Microsoft learned that even a system protected by a firewall was vulnerable at Port 445 if print-sharing and file-sharing were enabled (which they were on many computers). In other words, even a well-protected computer had a hole. On October 23, 2008, the company issued a rare “critical security bulletin” (MS08-067) with a patch to repair that hole. A specially crafted “remote procedure call” could allow the port to be used by a remote operator, the security bulletin warned, and “an attacker could exploit this vulnerability without authentication to run arbitrary code.” The patch Microsoft offered theoretically

slammed the door on a worm like Conficker almost a month before it appeared.

Theoretically.

In fact, the bulletin itself may have inspired the creation of Conficker. Many, many computer-operators worldwide – you know who you are – fail to diligently heed security updates. And the patches are issued only to computers with validated software installations; millions of computers run on bootlegged operating systems, which have never been validated. Microsoft issues its updates on the second Tuesday of every month. Every geek in the world knows this; it’s called “Patch Tuesday.” The company employs some of the best programmers in the world to stay one step ahead of the bad guys. If everyone applied the new patches promptly, Windows would be nigh impregnable. But because so many people fail to apply the patches promptly, and because so many machines run on illegitimate Windows systems, Patch Tuesday has become part of Microsoft’s problem. The company points out its own vulnerabilities, which is like a general responsible for defending a fort making a public announcement – “The back door to the supply shed in the southeast corner of the garrison has a broken lock; here’s how to fix it.” When there is only one fort, and it is well policed, the lock is fixed and the vulnerability disappears. But when you are defending millions of forts, and a goodly number of the people responsible for their security snooze right through Patch Tuesday, the security bulletin doesn’t just invite attack, it provides a map! Twenty-eight days after the MS08-067 security bulletin appeared, Conficker started worming its way into unpatched computers.

Conficker’s rate of replication got everyone’s attention, so a loose-knit gaggle of geeky “good guys,” including Porras, Joffe, and DiMino, began picking the worm apart. The online-security community consists of software manufacturers like Microsoft,

companies like Symantec that sell security packages to computer owners, large telecommunication registries like Neustar and VeriSign, nonprofit research centers like SRI International, and botnet hunters like Shadowserver. In addition to maintaining honeypots, these security experts operate “sandboxes” – isolated computers (or, again, virtual computers inside larger ones) where they can place a piece of malware, turn it on, and watch it run. In other words, where they can play with it.

They all started playing with Conficker, comparing notes on what they found, and brainstorming ways to defeat it. That’s when someone dubbed the group the “Conficker Cabal,” and the name stuck, despite discomfort with the darker implications of the word. Here are some of the things the cabal discovered about the worm in those first few weeks:

- It patched the hole it came through at Port 445, making sure it would not have to compete with other worms. This was smart, because surely other hackers had seen security bulletin MS08-067.
- It tried to prevent communication with security providers (many computer-users subscribe to commercial services that regularly update antivirus software).
- When it started, if the IP address of the infected computer was Ukrainian, the worm self-destructed. When in attack mode, searching for other computers to infect, it skipped any with a Ukrainian IP address.
- It disabled the Windows “system restore” points, a useful tool that allows users with little expertise to simply reset an infected machine to a date prior to its infection. (System restore is one of the easiest ways to debug a machine.)

All of these things were clever. They indicated that Conficker’s creator was up on all the latest tricks. But the main feature that intrigued the cabal was the way the worm called home. This is, of course, what worms designed to create botnets do. They settle in

and periodically contact a command center to receive instructions. Botnet hunters like DiMino regularly wipe out whole malicious networks by deciphering the domain name of the command center and then getting it blocked. In the old days, this was easier because malware pointed to only a few IP addresses, which could be blocked by hosting providers and Internet service providers. The newer worms like Conficker bumped the game up to a higher level, generating domain names that involve many providers and a wide range of IP addresses, and that security experts can block only by contacting Internet registries – organizations that manage the domain registrations for their realm. But Conficker did not call home to a fixed address.

Shortly after it was discovered, the worm began performing a new operation: generating a list of domain names seemingly at random, 250 a day across five top-level domains (top-level domains are defined by the final letters in a Web address, such as *.com* or *.edu* or *.uk*). The worm would then go down the list until it hit upon the one connected to its remote controller’s server. All Conficker’s controller had to do was register one of the addresses, which can be done for a fee of about \$10, and await the worm’s regular calls. If he wished, he could issue instructions. It was as if the boss of a crime family told his henchmen to check in daily by turning to the bottom of a certain page in each day’s *Racing Form*, where there would be a list of potential numbers. They would then call each number until the boss picked up. So it was not apparent from day to day where the worm would call home.

With the *Racing Form* trick, if you were a cop and were tipped off where to look, you might arrange with the paper’s publisher to see the page before it was printed, and thus be one step ahead of the henchmen and their boss. To defeat Conficker, the geeks would have to figure out in advance what the numbers (or, in this case, domain names) would be, and then hustle to either buy up

or contact every one, block it, or cajole whoever owned it to cooperate before the worm “made the call.”

Michael Ligh, a young Brooklyn researcher employed by the computer-security company iDefense, is one of several people who went to work unraveling Conficker’s methods. Ligh and others had seen algorithms for random-domain-name generation before, and most were keyed to the infected computer’s clock. If new places to call home must be generated every day, or every few hours, then the worm needs to know when to perform the procedure. So the malware simply checks the time on its host computer. This provided the good guys with a tool to defeat it. They turned the clock forward on their sandbox computer, forcing their captured strain of the worm to spit out all the domain names it would generate for as long into the future as they cared to look. It was like stealing the teacher’s edition of a classroom textbook, the one with all the answers to the quizzes and tests printed in the back. Once you knew all the places the malware would be calling, you could cordon off those sites in advance, effectively stranding the worm.

Conficker had an answer for that. Instead of using the infected computer’s clock, the worm set its schedule by the time on popular corporate home pages, like Yahoo, Google, or Microsoft’s own msn.com.

“*That* was interesting,” Ligh said. “There was no way we could turn the clock forward on Google’s home page.”

So there was no easy way to predict the list of domain names in advance. But there was a way. The first step was to set up a proxy server to, in effect, intercept the time update from the big corporate Web site before it got back to the worm, alter the information, and then send it on. You could then tell the worm it was a date sometime in the future, and the worm would spit out the domain names for that date. This was a tedious way to

proceed, since you could generate only one set of new domain names at a time. So Ligh and other researchers reverse-engineered the worm’s algorithm, extracted the time-update function, and wedded it to a piece of code they could control. They instructed their copy to generate the future lists in advance. They could then buy up or block all the sites, and direct all the worm’s communications into a “sinkhole,” a dead-end location where calls go unanswered. Conficker’s creators had deliberately made the task so onerous and expensive that *no one* would go to the trouble of blocking all possible command centers.

Or so they thought. The cabal, through a determined and unprecedented effort, did manage to cordon off the worm. By the end of 2008, Conficker had infected an estimated 1.5 million machines worldwide, but it was on its way to full containment. In the great chess match, the good guys had called “Check!”

Then the worm turned.

On December 29, 2008, a new version of Conficker showed up, and if the geeks had been intrigued with the original version, they now experienced something more akin to respect ... mingled with fear.

One of the early theories about the worm was that it had slipped out of a computer-science lab, the product of some fooling-around by a sophisticated graduate student or group of students. They had loosed it on the world inadvertently, or maybe on purpose as a prank or experiment without realizing how effective it would be. This hypothesis appealed to optimists.

The new version of the worm, Conficker B, exploded the benevolent-accident theory. It was clear that the worm’s creator had been watching every move the good guys made, and was adjusting accordingly. He didn’t care that the good guys could predict its upcoming lists of domain names. He just rejiggered the worm to spread the new lists out over eight top-level domains

instead of five, making the job of blocking them far more difficult. The worm had no trouble contacting all of these locations. If it received no command from one, it simply tried the next one on its list. Conficker B could go on like this for months, even years. It had to find its controller only once to receive instructions.

“That’s a high number,” Rodney Joffe, of Neustar, told me. “The cops will get sick and tired of knocking on 250 doors a day and finding there’s no one there. And if I’m the chief bad guy, all I have to do is be behind one of those doors on one of those days.”

There were other improvements to Conficker. Among them: besides shutting down whatever security system was installed on the computer it invaded, and preventing it from communicating with computer-security Web sites, it stopped the computer from connecting with Microsoft to perform Windows updates. So even though Microsoft was providing patches, the infected machines could not get to them. In addition, it modified the computer’s bandwidth settings to increase speed and propagate itself faster; and it began to spread itself in different ways, including via USB drives. This last innovation meant that even “closed” computer networks, those with no connection to the Internet, were vulnerable, since users who cannot readily transmit files from point to point via the Web often store and transport them on small USB drives. If one of those USB drives, or a CD, was plugged into an infected computer, it could deliver the worm to an entire closed network.

All of this was impressive – but something else stopped researchers cold. Analysts with Conficker B isolated in their sandboxes could watch it regularly call home and receive a return message. The exchange was in code, and not just any code.

Breaking codes used to be the province of clever puzzle masters, who during World War II devised encryption and code-breaking methods so difficult that operators needed machines to do the work. Computers today can perform so many calculations so fast that, theoretically at least, no cipher is too difficult to crack. One simply applies what computer scientists call “brute force”: trying every possible combination systematically until the secret is revealed. The game is to make a cipher so difficult that the amount of computing power needed to break it renders the effort pointless – the “thief” would have to spend more to obtain the prize than the prize is worth. In his 1999 history of code-making and -breaking, *The Code Book*, Simon Singh wrote: “It is now routine to encrypt a message [so securely] that all the computers on the planet would need longer than the age of the universe to break the cipher.”

The basis for the highest-level modern ciphers is a public-key encryption method invented in 1977 by three researchers at MIT: Ron Rivest (the primary author), Adi Shamir, and Leonard Adleman. In the more than 30 years since it was devised, the method has been improved several times. The National Institute of Standards and Technology sets the Federal Information Processing Standard, which defines the cryptography algorithms that government agencies must use to protect communications. Because it is the most sophisticated oversight effort of its kind, the standard is determined by an international competition among the world’s top cryptologists, with the winning entry becoming by default the worldwide standard. The current highest-level standard is labeled SHA-2 (Secure Hash Algorithm – 2). Both this and the first SHA standard are versions of Rivest’s method. The international competition to upgrade SHA-2 has been under way for several years and is tentatively scheduled to conclude in 2013, at which point the new standard will become SHA-3.

Rivest's proposal for the new standard, MD-6 (Message Digest – 6), was submitted in the fall of 2008, about a month before Conficker first appeared, and began undergoing rigorous peer review – the very small community of high-level cryptographers worldwide began testing it for flaws.

Needless to say, this is a very arcane game. The entries are comprehensible to very few people. According to Rodney Joffe, “Unless you're a subject-matter expert actively involved in crypto-algorithms, you didn't even know that MD-6 existed. It wasn't like it was put in *The New York Times*.”

So when the new version of Conficker appeared, and its new method of encrypting its communication employed MD-6, Rivest's *proposal* for SHA-3, the cabal's collective mind was blown.

“It was clear that these guys were not your average high-school kids or hackers or predominantly lazy,” Joffe told me. “They were making use of some very, very sophisticated techniques.

“Not only are we not dealing with amateurs, we are possibly dealing with people who are superior to all of our skills in crypto,” he said. “If there's a surgeon out there who's the world's foremost expert on treating retinitis pigmentosa, he doesn't do bunions. The guy who is the world expert on bunions – and, let's say, bunions on the third digit of Anglo-American males between the ages of 35 and 40, that are different than anything else – he doesn't do surgery for retinitis pigmentosa. The knowledge it took to employ Rivest's proposal for SHA-3 demonstrated a similarly high level of specialization. We found an equivalent of three or four of those in the code – different parts of it.

“Take Windows,” he explained. “The understanding of Windows' operating system, and how it worked in the kernel, needed that kind of a domain expert, and they had that kind of ability there. And we realized as a community that we were not dealing

with something normal. We're dealing with one of two things: either we're dealing with incredibly sophisticated cyber criminals, or we're dealing with a group that was funded by a nation-state. Because this wasn't the kind of team that you could just assemble by getting your five buddies who play Xbox 360 and saying, ‘Let's all work together and see what we can do.’”

The plot thickened – it turned out that Rivest's proposal, MD-6, had a flaw. Cryptologists in the competition had duly gone to work trying to crack the code, and one had succeeded. In early 2009, Rivest quietly withdrew his proposal, corrected it, and resubmitted it. This gave the cabal an opening. If the original Rivest proposal was flawed, then so was the encryption method for Conficker B. If they were able to eavesdrop on communications between Conficker and its mysterious controller, they might be able to figure out who he was, or who they were. How likely was it that the creator of Conficker would know about the flaw discovered in MD-6?

Once again, the good guys had the bad guys in check.

About six weeks later, another new version of the worm appeared.

It employed Rivest's *revised* MD-6 proposal.

Game on.

By early 2009, Conficker B had infected millions of machines. It had invaded the United Kingdom's Defense Ministry. As CBS prepared a *60 Minutes* segment of the worm, its computers were struck. In both instances, security experts scrambled to uproot the invader, badly disrupting normal functioning of the system. Conficker now had the world's attention. In February 2009, the cabal became more formal. Headed initially by a Microsoft program manager, and eventually by Joffe, it became the Conficker Working Group. Microsoft offered a \$250,000 bounty for the arrest and conviction of the worm's creators.

The newly named team went to work trying to corral Conficker B. Getting rid of it was out of the question. Even though they could scrub it from an infected computer, there was no way they could scrub it from all infected computers. The millions of machines in the botnet were spread all over the world, and most users of infected ones didn't even know it. It was theoretically feasible to unleash a counter-worm, something to surreptitiously enter computers and take out Conficker, but in free countries, privacy laws frown on invading people's home computers. Even if all the governments got together to allow a massive attack on Conficker – an unlikely event – the new version of the worm had new ways of evading the threat.

Conficker C appeared in March 2009, and in addition to being impressed by its very snazzy crypto, the Conficker Working Group noticed that the new worm's code threatened to up the number of domain names generated every day to 50,000. The new version would begin generating that many domain names daily on April 1. At the same time, all computers infected with the old variants of Conficker that could be reached would be updated with this new strain. The move suggested that the bad guys behind Conficker understood not just cryptology, but also the mostly volunteer nature of the cabal.

"You know you're dealing with someone who not only knows how botnets work, but who understands how the security community works," Andre' DiMino told me. "This is not just a bunch of organized criminals that, say, commission someone to write a botnet for them. They know the challenges that the security community faces internally, politically, and economically, and are exploiting them as well."

The bad guys knew, for instance, that preregistering even 250 domain names a day at \$10 a pop was doable for the good guys. As long as the number remained relatively small, the cabal could

stay ahead of them. But how could the good guys cope with a daily flood of 50,000? It would require an unprecedented degree of cooperation among competing security firms, software manufacturers, nonprofit organizations like Shadowserver, academics, and law enforcement.

"You can't just register all 50,000 – you've got to go one by one and make sure the domain name doesn't already exist," Joffe says. "And if it exists, you've got to make sure that it belongs to a good guy, not a bad guy. You've got to make a damn phone call for any of the new ones, and have to send someone out there to do it – and these are spread all over the world, including some very remote places, Third World countries. Now the bar had been raised to a level that was almost insurmountable."

The worm was already running rings around the good guys, and then, just for good measure, it planted a pie in their faces on, of all days, April 1. By playing with the new variant in their sandboxes, the cabal knew that the enhanced domain-name-generating algorithm would click in on that day. If the update succeeded, it would be a game-changer. It was the most dramatic moment since Conficker had surfaced the previous November. Apparently, at long last, this extraordinary tool was going to be put to use. But for what? The potential was scary. Few people outside the upper echelon of computer security even understood what Conficker was, much less what was at stake on April 1, but word of a vague impending digital doomsday spread. The popular press got hold of it. There were headlines and the usual spate of ill-informed reports on cable TV and the Internet. When the day arrived, those who had been warning about the dangers of this new worm were sure to see their fears vindicated.

The cabal mounted a heroic effort to shut down the worm's potential command centers in advance of the update, coordinating directly with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and

Numbers, the organization that supervises registries worldwide. “It was our finest hour,” Joffe says.

“I don’t think that the bad guys could have expected the research community to come together as it did, because it was pretty unprecedented,” Ramses Martinez, director of information security for VeriSign, told me. “That was a new thing that happened. I mean, if you would have told me everybody’s going to come together – by *everybody*, I mean all these guys in this computer-security world that know each other – and they’re going to do this thing, I would have said, ‘You’re crazy.’ I don’t think the bad guys could have expected that.”

Much of the computer world was watching, in considerable suspense, to see what would happen on April 1. It was like the moment in a movie when the bad guy at last has cornered the hero. He pulls out an enormous gun and aims it at the hero’s head, pulls the trigger ... and out pops a little flag with the word BANG!

Conficker found one or two domain names that Joffe’s group had missed, which was all it needed. The cabal’s efforts had succeeded in vastly reducing the number of machines that got the update, but the ones that did went to work distributing a very conventional, well-known malware called Waledac, which sends out e-mail spam selling a fake anti-spyware program. The worm was used to distribute Waledac for two weeks, and then stopped.

But something much more important had happened. The updated worm didn’t just up the ante by generating 50,000 domain names daily; it effectively moved the game out of the cabal’s reach.

“April 1 came and went, and in the middle of that night the systems switched over to the new algorithm,” Conficker C, Joffe told me. “That’s all that was supposed to happen, and it happened. But the Internet didn’t get infected; it was just an

algorithm change in the software. So of course the press said, ‘Conficker is a bust.’”

Public concern over the worm fizzled, just as the problem grew worse: the new version of Conficker introduced peer-to-peer communications, which was disheartening to the good guys, to say the least. Peer-to-peer operations meant the worm no longer had to sneak in through Windows Port 445 or a USB drive; an infected computer spread the worm directly to every machine it interacted with. It also meant that Conficker no longer needed to call out to a command center for instructions; they could be distributed directly, computer to computer. And since the worm no longer needed to call home, there was no longer any way to tell how many computers were infected.

In the great chess match, the worm had just pronounced “Checkmate.”

As of this writing, 17 months after it appeared and about a year after the April 1 update, Conficker has created a stable bot-net. It consists of anywhere from hundreds of thousands of computers to 12 million. No one knows for sure anymore, because with peer-to-peer communications, the worm no longer needs to check in with an outside command center, which is how the good guys kept count. Joffe estimates that with the four distinct strains (yet another one appeared on April 8, 2009), 6.5 million computers are probably infected.

The investigators see no immediate chance or even any effective way to kill it.

“There are a bunch of infected machines that are out there, and they can be taken over, given the right circumstances, by the bad guys,” VeriSign’s Martinez says. “Will they do that? I don’t know. So it’s a potential threat. It’s something that’s out there, sitting there, and it needs to be addressed, but I don’t think, honestly, that we know how. How do we address this? If it was

sitting in the U.S., it would be a fairly easy thing to do. The fact is that it's spread out all around the world."

Ever since the paltry Waledac scam, the worm has been biding its time.

"They are watching us watch them," says Andre' DiMino, the botnet hunter. "I think it's really either that or somebody let this thing get bigger, and it's advanced bigger and further than they ever dreamed possible. A lot of people think that. But in looking at the sophistication of this thing and looking at the evolution of this thing, I think they knew exactly what they were doing. I think they were trying something, and I think that they're too smart to do what everybody figured they were going to do. You have to remember, the world was watching this thing and waiting for the world to end from Conficker on April 1, 2009. The last thing you'd want to do if you're the bad guy is make something happen on April 1. You're never going to do that, because everybody's watching it. You're going to do something when you're least suspected. So these guys are sophisticated. They have good code. And just even seeing the evolution from Conficker A to B to C, where there's the peer-to-peer component, which ... strikes fear into the heart of botnet hunters because it's just so damn difficult to track – these guys know exactly what they're doing."

SO WHO ARE they?

One of the things Martinez's team does, patrolling the perimeter at VeriSign looking for threats, is dip into the obscure digital forums where cyber criminals converse. Those who are engaged in writing sophisticated malware boast and threaten and compare notes. The good guys venture in to collect intelligence, or just out of curiosity, or for fun. They sometimes pretend to be malware creators themselves, sometimes not. Sometimes they engage in a little cyber trash talk.

"In the past you were just sort of making sure they didn't steal your proprietary information," Martinez says. "Now we go in to engage them. You talk to them and you exchange information. You have a guy in Russia selling malware, working with a guy in Mexico doing phishing attacks, who's talking to a kid in Brazil, who's doing credit-card fraud, and they're introducing each other to some guy in China doing something else."

Martinez said he recently eavesdropped on a dialogue between a security researcher and a man he suspects was at least partly responsible for Conficker. He wouldn't say how he drew that connection, only that he had good reasons for believing it to be true. The suspect in the conversation was eastern European. The standard image of a malware creator is the Hollywood one: a brilliant 20-something with long hair and a bad attitude, in need of a bath. This is not how Martinez sees his nemesis – or nemeses.

"I see him, or them, as a really well-educated, smart businessman," he said. "He may be 50 years old. These guys are not chumps. They're not just out to make a buck."

The eastern European, backpedaling from further dialogue with the security geek, wrote, "You're the good guys; we're the bad guys. *Bacillus* can't live with antibodies."

"Now, I didn't grow up in a bad neighborhood or anything," said Martinez, "but the few thugs that I saw would never use a word like *bacillus* or make an analogy like that."

One of the early clues in the hunt was the peculiarity in the Conficker code that made computers with active Ukrainian keyboards immune. Much of the world's aggressive malware comes from eastern Europe, where there are high levels of education and technical expertise, and also thriving organized criminal gangs. Martinez believes Conficker was written by a group of highly skilled programmers. Like Joffe, he sees it as a group of creators, because designing the worm required expertise

in so many different disciplines. He suspects that these skilled programmers and technicians either were hired by a criminal gang, or created the worm as their own illicit business venture. If that's true, then the Waledac maneuver was like flexing Conficker's pinkie – just a demonstration, a way of showing that despite the best and most concerted effort of the world's computer-security establishment, the worm was fully operational and under their control.

Will they be caught?

“I have no idea,” Martinez says. “I would say probably not. I'll be shocked if they're ever arrested. And arrest them for what? Is breaking into people's computers even illegal where they're from? Because in a lot of countries, it isn't. As a matter of fact, in some countries, unless you're touching a computer in their jurisdiction, their country, that's not illegal. So who's going to arrest them, even if we know who they are?”

Ridding computers of the worm poses another kind of overwhelming problem.

“There are controls, or checks and balances, in place to limit what police can do, because we have civil liberties to protect,” he says. “If you do away with these checks and balances, where the government can come in and reimage your computer overnight, now you're infringing on people's civil liberties. So, I mean, we can talk about this all day, but I'll tell you, it's going to be a long time, in my opinion, before we really see the government being able to effectively deal with cyber crime, because I think we're still learning as a culture, as a nation, and as a world how to deal with this stuff. It's too new.”

Imagining Conficker's creators as a skilled group of illicit cyber entrepreneurs remains the prevailing theory. Some of the good guys feel that the worm will never be used again. They argue that it has become too notorious, too visible, to be useful. Its

creators have learned how to whip computer-security systems worldwide, and will now use that knowledge to craft an even stealthier worm, and perhaps sell it to the highest bidder. Few believe Conficker itself is the work of any one nation, because other than the initial quirk of the Ukrainian-keyboard exemption, it spreads indiscriminately. China is the nation most often suspected in cyber attacks, but there may be more Conficker-infected computers in China than anywhere else. Besides, a nation seeking to create a botnet weapon is unlikely to create one as brazen as Conficker, which from the start has exhibited a thumb-in-your-eye, catch-me-if-you-can personality. It is hard to imagine Conficker's creators not enjoying the high level of cyber gamesmanship. The good guys certainly have.

“It's cops and robbers, so to speak, and that was a really interesting aspect of the work for me,” says Martinez. “It's guys trying to outwit each other and exploit vulnerabilities in this vast network.”

In chess, when your opponent checkmates you, you have no recourse. You concede and shake the victor's hand. In the real-world chess match over Conficker, the good guys have another recourse. They can, in effect, upend the board and go after the bad guys physically. Which is where things stand. The hunt for the mastermind (or masterminds) behind the worm is ongoing.

“It's an active investigation,” Joffe says. “That's all I can say. Law enforcement is fully engaged. We have some leads. This story is not over.” ♦

Side by...

Francis Silver

by *Hal Porter*

ONE GROWS RELIEVEDLY older and less an amateur: the high noon of middle age is free of the eccentricities of the innocent, one's senses are correctly disposed, one does not permit oneself the pleasure of discreditable actions; altogether, reality has no frayed ends. One can, at worst, fortify oneself with memories. Nevertheless, there is one disconcerting, even disenchanting, thing: what one oneself remembers is not what others remember. In this, women as annalists are terrifying. One expects them to get their recollections as exact as the amount of salt in Scotch Broth. Beyond the practical area, of course, one has no illusions: if a woman talk about democracy or eternal peace or disarmament one sees instantly and with the most telling clarity that these things are pure nonsense. One does not, however, expect a handful of salt or no salt at all in either Scotch Broth or memories, but what one expects, and what one gets – oh, dear. Take my mother for example.

As eldest son of a family of seven I got the best of her memories, partly because mothers of that period had time to make their special offerings to first-born sons, partly because her enthusiasm and salesmanship were fresh. Among her recollections the most recurrent were of Francis Silver.

Right here, I must indicate that mother was multiloquous, gay

...by side

Francis Silver

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

AHOGY A KOROSODÓ EMBER lenyugszik, egyre kevésbé követ el amatőr hibákat: a középkorú férfi élete zenitjén már mentes az ártatlan lélek különcségeitől, az érzékei helyrebillenek, és nem engedi meg magának a dehonesztáló tettek örömét. Számára a valóság nem hordoz elvarratlan szálakat. Az ember legfeljebb felvértezheti magát emlékeivel, jóllehet egy apró, illúzióromboló körülmény mégiscsak zavarólag hathat: amire mi magunk emlékszünk, nem azonos azzal, amire mások emlékeznek. Ebben a nők mint krónikások félelmetesek. Hiába számítasz rá, hogy emlékezetük olyan pontos lesz, mint ahogyan a sót mérik a levesbe. A dolgok gyakorlati részén túl persze nem lehetnek illúzióink: ha egy nő demokráciáról, világbékéről, leszerelésről beszél, azonnal látnunk kell, méghozzá kristálytisztán, hogy ez számára mind csupa képtelenség. Végére is nem várható, hogy egy marék só vagy egy csipetnyi se ízesítse a levest, és ugyanígy vagyunk az emlékekkel is, de amit az ember elvár, és amit végül kap – hogy is mondjam... Vegyük például anyámat.

Hét gyermeke közül, legidősebbként, én kaptam a legtöbbet az emlékeiből. Részben, mert az anyáknak abban az időben még futotta az energiájából arra, hogy az elsőszülött fiút elárasszák adományaikkal, és részben mert az anyai szeretet élménye számára még új volt. Emlékei között leggyakrabban Francis Silver

and romantic. Whatever else a large family tore from her, it was not her vivacity. She sang all the time, particularly, I think I remember, on ironing day. The pattern of this day was that of a holy day; there was an inevitability, a feeling of religious ritual. It was always Tuesday, always Shepherd's Pie day. To mother's heightened singing the kitchen-range was stoked with red-gum until a mirage almost formed above its black-leaded surface on which the flat-irons had been clashed down. The piled-up clothes-basket and the kauri clothes-horse were brought into the kitchen; the beeswax in its piece of scorched cloth was placed ready. These preparations over, and while the irons were heating, a tranquil overture began. Mother and the washerwoman took each bed-sheet separately and, one gripping the bottom edge, one the top, retreated backwards, straining the sheet taut in a domestic tug-o'-war, inclining their heads to scan it for signs of wear then, this done, advancing towards each other with uplifted arms to begin the folding. These retreatings, advancing, inclinations and deft gestures, repeated sheet after sheet, had the air of an endless figure of a pavane in which, sometimes, I attempted to represent the absent washerwoman. It was while thus engaged, and later, while mother was ironing, and between her ironing-songs which were more poignantly yearning than, say, her friskier carpet-sweeping- or cake-mixing-songs, that I recall hearing much about Francis Silver.

As a young woman mother lived in a middle-class seaside suburb of Melbourne. Plane-trees lined the three-chain-wide streets from which cast-iron railings and gates, and paths of encaustic tiles of Pompeian design, separated two-storeyed brick houses overtopped by Norfolk Island Pines exuding sap like candle-grease. These houses had such names as *Grevillea*, *Emmaville*, *Dagmar* and *Buckingham*. Stucco faces of gravely Grecian cast stared in the direction of the beach on to which oranges thrown

szerepelt.

Itt jeleznem kell, hogy anyám bőbeszédű, vidám és romantikus természet volt. A nagycsalád sok mindentől megfoszthatta, de az életkedve megingathatatlan maradt. Emlékeim szerint állandóan énekelt, de vasalás napján mindenképpen. A vasalás ünnepi rendben zajlott, az eseményt szinte egy vallási szertartás érzése lengte be. Mindig keddre esett, és anyám rendre töltött húst sütött. A tüzet gumifa hasábjával megpakolva addig izzította, lelkes énekléssel kísérve, amíg a vaslap fölött – amin a vasalók forrósodtak – valami vízió alakot nem öltött. A ruhákkal teli kosarat és az új-zélandi fenyőből készült vasalódeszkat behozta a konyhába, a megperzselődött rongyba tekert méhviasz pedig karnyújtásnyira hevert. Mindeme készültek után, és amíg a vasalók felforrósodtak, nyugodt előjáték vette kezdetét. Anyám és a bejárónő minden egyes lepedőt megfogtak – egyikük a tetejét, a másik az alját –, elhátráltak egymástól, a házi kötélhúzás szabályai szerint kifeszítették az anyagot, és fejüket csóválva, az elhasználódás jeleit fürkészték, majd magasra tartott kézzel megindultak egymás felé, hogy a hajtogatás műveletét végrehajtsák. Az összes lepedővel elvégzett kihátrálások, hajlongások, egymáshoz közelítések ügyes mozdulatai egy végtelen pavane tánclépéseire emlékeztettek, amelyben néha én jelenítettem meg a bejárónőt. Mindeközben, majd később a vasalás aktusa alatt és az éneklés szüneteiben – ezek a dalok élénkebbek, sóvárgóbbak voltak, mint, mondjuk, a dinamikusabb szőnyegporolás vagy tortakészítés közben énekeltek – hallottam emlékeim szerint a leggyakrabban Francis Silver történetét.

Fiatalabb korában anyám egy átlagos melbourne-i tengerparti kerületben élt. Platánfák szegélyezték a sétatér szélességű utcát, amelyből égetett Pompeji-mintás járólapok alkotta járdák nyíltak, és kovácsoltvas korlátok, kapuk különítették el a kétszintes téglaházakat. Az előkelő nevű házak – *Grevillea*, *Emmaville*,

from P. and O. liners rolled in with sea-lettuce, bladderwrack and mussel-shells. A bathing enclosure advertised HOT SEA-BATHS and TOWELS AND BATHING-DRESS FOR HIRE. Mother strolled the Esplanade, tamarisk by tamarisk, or sipped Lemon Squash Spiders in the Jubilee Café with the apparently numerous young men who were courting her. Of these beaux, two young men, one from the country, one from another suburb, were favoured most. In marrying the country wooer, my father, and darning his socks and bearing his children and darning their socks, mother left the suburb for a country town set smack-flat on the wind-combed plains of Gippsland. She also left behind Francis Silver, whom she never saw again, at least not physically. He lived on, remarkably visible, in a special display-case of her memories.

Since the time of mother's young womanhood was pre-Great War there had been a conventional and profuse to-and-fro of postcards. She had garnered several bulging albums of them. The most elaborate cards, in an album of their own, were from Francis Silver. These had a sacred quality. In my eyes they belonged to Sunday. My parents were pagan enough to regard the church merely as a setting for wedding, baptism and funeral services, but, largely for us children, I suspect, though also because of what had been dyed into the texture of their late-Victorian childhoods, they were firm about the sanctity of Sunday. On this day mother played on the piano, or sang, hymns only. We were forbidden to whistle or go barefoot. Reading was restricted to *The Child's Bible*, *Sunday at Home* or *Christie's Old Organ*. Apart from meals of great size and gorgeousness the only permissible secular pleasures were to look through the stereoscope at Boer War photographs or at Francis Silver's postcards.

Hypocritically careful, we resisted licking our fingers to turn the interleaves of tissue paper because mother hovered wrestling

Dagmar, Buckingham – fölé Norfolk-szigeti fenyők nőttek, amelyek úgy csorgatták a gyantát, mint gyertya a viaszt. Az óceánra néző homlokzatot komoly, görög arcok, leanderrel körbevett gyümölcsök, tengerparti növények és kagylók stukkóábrái díszítették. Egy elkerített strand forró tengeri fürdözést, bérelhető törülközőt és úszódresszt reklámozott. Anyám tamariszkusz-tól tamariszkuszig korzózott, vagy préselt citromlevet kortyolgattott a Jubilee kávézó teraszán, nyilván számtalan fiatalember társaságában, akik neki udvaroltak. E lovagok között két fiatalúr különösen kedvelt volt, egyikük vidéki, a másik egy melbourne-i kerületből való. Amikor anyám hozzáment a vidéki kérőhöz, apámhoz, magára vállalta, hogy megstoppolja a zokniját, gyerekeket szül neki, és megstoppolja azok zokniját is, és maga mögött hagyja a nagyvárost egy kis településért, amelyet a szél csak úgy odakent a gippslandi síkság térképeré. Maga mögött hagyta Francis Silvert, akit soha nem látott viszont, legalábbis fizikai valójában nem. Azonban a férfi tovább élt, feltűnően és láthatóan, anyám emlékeinek egy kitüntetett tárhelyén.

Mivel anyám fiatalsága a háború előtti években telt, a kapcsolatok bőséges képeslapváltások jellemezték. Anyám jó néhány tömött képeslapalbumot őrzött; a legigényesebb lapok, külön albumban, Francis Silvertől érkeztek. Ezeket a lapokat kegytárgyként tiszteltük, nekem a vasárnapokat jelentették. Szüleim elég hitetlenek voltak ahhoz, hogy a templomot csupán az esketések, keresztelők és temetések színhelyének tekintsék, de gyanítom, többnyire miattunk, gyerekek miatt, és talán mert késő viktoriánus neveltetésükbe beleivódott, a vasárnap szentségében szilárdan hittek. Vasárnap anyám zongorázott vagy énekelt, kizárólag egyházi énekeket, nekünk tilos volt füttyülni vagy mezítláb járkálni. Olvasmányainkat csak a Gyerekbiblia, az Egy vasárnap otthon vagy a Christie régi orgonája című könyvekből választhattuk. A nagyszerű és bőséges ebédeken túl az egyetlen

with herself. Invariably, at last, she could resist herself no longer. Perhaps a postcard of stiffened lace, *moire* rosettes and spangles would set her off. Her eyes and her voice would detach themselves in focus and tone from the present.

“Yes,” she would say in this unique, entranced voice, “Francis Silver sent me that after we’d had a tiny tiff near the Williams-town Time-ball Tower. We had gone for a stroll to St. Kilda to listen to the German Band. When we got there the ferry-boat to Williams-town was at the pier – the dear old *Rosny*. It was such a perfect day we decided to go across to Williamstown. There was a little man on board playing a concertina. I had on – oh, I remember it so well – a white *broderie anglaise* dress, and a hat with enormous peach-coloured silk roses on it. And a parasol of the same peach with a picot-edged triple flounce. I’d made Francis Silver a button-hole of Cecile Brunner roses. And when we were on our way back, he threw it from the *Rosny* into Port Phillip Bay because I wouldn’t talk to him. It was all because I refused to give him my lace handkerchief as a keepsake. How silly it all was! I’d have given him the hanky if he hadn’t said he was going to sleep with it under his pillow. And the next day he sent me this card. But I was quite firm, and didn’t send the hanky. It was mean of me, I suppose, but I was terribly well-brought-up.”

All mother’s memories of Francis Silver were of this vague, passionless kind. The time seemed eternally three o’clock in the afternoon of a deliciously sunny day, band-music drifted cloudily in the background, no one hurried or raised voices, there were no inflamed rages or cutting malices. It was a delicate game of teasing played in Sunday clothes and while wearing mignonette. It had its fragile rules no one would be untamed enough to break. As people walking on the fresh boards of a new floor soil it in gingerly and gentle fashion, so did mother and Francis Silver serenely walk the floor of their affection.

megengedett világi öröm ezen a napon az volt, hogy a búr háborúról nézegethettünk diákat vagy Francis Silver képeslapalbumát lapozgathattuk.

Betegesen óvatosak voltunk; ellenálltunk a kísértésnek, hogy megnyálazzuk az ujjunkat, mielőtt a hártavékony közlapokat átfordítottuk, mert anyánk fölöttünk lebegve az érzelmeivel viaskodott. Egy idő után mindig megadta magát: talán egy csipkézett szélű képeslap rózsácskái vagy csillagpora indították meg. A tekintete és a hangja tónusában elszakadt a jelentől.

– Igen – szólalt meg ezen az egyedi, átszellemült hangon –, Francis Silver azután küldte ezt a lapot, hogy volt egy apró nézeteltérésünk a williamstowni Time-ball toronynál. A St. Kilda-partra akartunk sétálni menni, hogy meghallgathassunk egy német zenekart. Mire a parthoz értünk, a williamstowni komp, a jó öreg Rosny, épp kikötött. Olyan csodálatos nap volt, hogy úgy döntöttünk, átmenyünk Williamstownba. Egy apró termetű ember harmonikázott a hajón. Ó, tisztán emlékszem: a fehér francia ruhám volt rajtam, fejemen a barackszínű, selyemrózsákkal díszített kalapom, és a kezemben a hozzá tartozó barackszín napernyő, horgolt, tripla szegéllyel. Francis Silver gomblyukába Cecile Brunner-rózsát tűztünk. Ám azt visszafelé jövet a Rosny fedélzetéről a Port Philip-öböl vizébe dobta, mert nem szóltam hozzá. Mindez csak azért, mert nem ajándékoztam neki a csipkekendőmet zálogul. Micsoda butaság! Odaadtam volna, ha nem mondja, hogy a párnája alá teszi, míg alszik. És másnap küldte ezt a lapot. De én nem inogtam meg, nem küldtem el neki a kendőt. Biztos bántóan viselkedtem, de engem szörnyű szigorúan neveltek.

Anyám Francis Silvert érintő emlékeit mindig ilyen szomorú, szenvedélytelen modorban adta elő. Az időpont örökre három óra, egy lágy, napsütötte délután, tánczene gyűrűzik elő a háttérből, senki sem siet, senki nem emeli meg a hangját, nincs izzó

From accounts as lame as this, of incidents as small, flat and pointless as this, it amazes me, now, that so vivid and important an image of Francis Silver became mine.

As I saw it, Francis Silver was extraordinarily handsome in a certain way. He had a shortish, straight nose, a little black moustache with curled-up ends, lips clearly cut as a statue's, white teeth, small ears with lobes, definite but not untidy eyebrows, tightly packed black wavy hair, and an olive skin. His hands were hairless and supple; the half-moons showed even at the roots of his little fingernails. He had a light tenor voice he exhibited in such songs as *Only a Leaf*, *After the Ball*, *Neath the Shade of the Old Apple Tree*, and *She Lives in a Mansion of Aching Hearts* – songs laced with misunderstanding, regret and tears. He was a picture-framer go-ahead enough to have his own business. In the sense of handling Christmas supplement oleographs and “art photographs” of Grecian-robed women holding water-lilies or bunches of grapes he was artistic and sensitive. He smoked Turkish cigarettes, did not drink, was popular with other sensitive young men, wore a gold ring with a ruby in it, was very proud of his small feet, and loved the theatre. Throughout the years, mother had provided these and many more details, partly by anecdote, partly by a system of odious comparisons (“Mr Willoughby’s eyebrows are much untidier than Francis Silver’s”), partly by setting a standard we fell far short of (“You must press back the quicks of your fingernails each time you dry your hands: the half-moons on Francis Silver’s nails, even on the little fingers, showed clearly”). It was incredible what we children knew of him: he disliked mushrooms, tomatoes and ripe apricots, he had cut his hand at a Fern Tree Gully picnic, lost his father’s gold watch in Flinders Lane, had four sisters, used Wright’s Coal Tar Soap, and was double-jointed.

During all the years of talk not once did mother call him any-

harag, szűrő rosszindulat. Finom incselkedés zajlik vasárnapi kosztümben, a gomblyukakban virág. Neveletlenség lett volna a törékeny szabályokat megszegni. Ahogy az ember vigyázva, óvatosan frissen lakkozott parkettára lép, úgy sétált anyám és Francis Silver ártatlanul szövődő szerelmük parkettjén.

Csodálkozom, hogy Francis Silverről bennem – ilyen suta beszámoló, ilyen jelentéktelen, unalmas, céltalan események nyomán – mégis élénk és fontos kép alakult ki.

Ahogy elképzelttem, bizonyos tekintetben Francis Silver kivételesen jóképű lehetett. Rövidke, egyenes orra volt, apró, kunkorodó fekete bajsza, a szája tiszta vágású, mint egy szoboré, fehér fogai, kis füle, határozott, de nem rendezetlen szemöldöke, tömött, hullámos fekete haja és bársonyos bőre. A keze kifinomult lehetett, szőrtelen, a félhold még a kisujja körme tövén is szépen rajzolt. Lány tenor hangja volt, amely olyan dalok éneklése közben mutatkozott meg, mint a Csak egy levél vagy A bál után, Az öreg almafa árnyékában és a Fájó szívek kastélyában él a lány – csalódások, félreértések, könnyek horgolta dalokban. Képkerevezőként dolgozott, és elég jól ment neki az üzlet ahhoz, hogy saját vállalkozást vezessen. Legalábbis a karácsonyi kiegészítő olajnyomatok és a liliumot vagy szőlőfürtöt kezükben tartó, görög nimfákat ábrázoló „művészfotók” szintjén érzékenynek és műértőnek bizonyult. Török cigarettát szívott, az italtól tartózkodott, egyéb érzékeny fiatal emberek között népszerűnek számított, rubinköves aranygyűrűt viselt, büszke volt kisméretű lábfe-jére, és szerette a színházat.

Anyám éveken át szolgált ilyen és hasonló részletekkel, részben anekdotázva, részben rossz májű megjegyzések formájában – Mr. Willoughby szemöldöke sokkal ápolatlanabb, mint Francis Silveré –, részben azért, hogy olyan mércét szabjon számunkra, amelynek mi nyilvánvalóan nem tudtunk megfelelni: minden kéztörlés után igazítsd meg a bőrt a körömháton, Francis Silver-

thing else but Francis Silver, never Mr. Silver, and certainly never Francis, despite the fact that, seemingly to us, she had given him every consideration as a possible husband. This possibility was never directly expressed. We presumed from constant obliquities. At one stage of my early adolescence, when I was sullenly inclined to regard father as the malice-riddled offspring of parents like Simon Legree and the Witch of Endor, I yearned to be the son of a merrier, more handsome and talented father. I knew exactly whom, and spent much time practising in various ornate handwritings names I greatly preferred to my own... Hereward Silver, Montmorency Silver, Shem Silver, Fluellen Silver.

My placid actual father (it was his placidity I regarded as a sinister malice) was as aware as he was of anything of mother's indestructible interest in Francis Silver. It was a sort of joke with him which, as children, we loved: Francis Silver was so often a bore.

"Woman, dear," father would, for example, say, seeing mother and some of us off at the railway station when we were going for a few days to Melbourne, "if you are not back by Friday, I'll assume you've put the children in a comfortable orphanage, and have run off with Francis Silver. I shall, therefore, set up house with Mrs. Tinsley." This, to us, was hilariously funny: Mrs. Tinsley was a gushing woman who irritated father so much that he went and talked to the pigs when she appeared. If mother displayed herself in a new hat or dress, badgering father for an opinion, he would say, "Now, woman, dear, you know you look very nice. You must have a photograph taken for Francis Silver."

"Jealous beast," mother would say.

This light-hearted chyacking about Francis Silver made him appear for ever twenty-four, for ever dashing, for ever harmless. He was the legendary Gentleman first to his feet when Ladies entered; he daily cleaned his shoes, and the *backs* of his shoes.

nek még a kisujján is szépen kirajzolódott a félhold. Szinte hihetetlen, mi mindent tudtunk róla mi, gyerekek. Nem szerette a gombát, a paradicsomot és az érett sárgabarackot. A kezét megvágta egyszer a Fern Tree-árokánál, egy pikniken, elvesztette az apja aranyóráját a Flinders streeten, négy lánytestvére volt, Wright-féle Coal-Tar szappant használt, és hihetetlenül laza ízületekkel rendelkezett.

Az évek során anyám egyetlenegyszer sem hivatkozott rá másként, mint Francis Silver; sohasem mint Mr. Silver és még kevésbe mint Francis, holott – számunkra úgy tűnt – anyám komolyan számolt vele mint lehetséges férjjel, bár ez a lehetőség sohasem volt nyíltan kimondva, csak az állandó célzásokból következtettünk rá. Volt olyan időszakom, amikor konokul hajlottam afelé, hogy apámat rosszindulatú ősök leszármazottjának tekintsem, Simon Legree vagy az Endor boszorkánya leszármazottjának, és sóvárogtam, bárcsak egy vidámabb, jóképűbb, tehetségesebb apa gyermeke lehetnék. Pontosan tudtam, kié, és rengeteg időt töltöttem a kívánt nevek míves leírásával: Hereward Silver, Montmorency Silver, Shem Silver, Fluellen Silver.

Valóságos és kimért apám – éppen a nyugodtságát tartottam a leggonoszabb rosszindulatnak – tudott minderről, mint ahogy az anyám emlékeiben kitörölhetetlenül élő Francis Silverről is. Visszatérő tréfáiban, amelyeket mi, gyerekek, imádtunk, Francis Silvert unalmas alakként állította elénk.

– Kedves asszonyom – mondta például, amikor kikísért minket az állomásra, ha néhány napra Melbourne-be utaztunk –, amennyiben nem érkeznek haza péntekig, olybá veszem, hogy a gyerekeket biztonságuk érdekében elhelyezte egy árvaházban, kegyed pedig megszökött Francis Silverrel. Jómagam ez esetben összeköltözöm Mrs. Tinsleyvel.

Ez számunkra hallatlanul viccesen hangzott. Mrs. Tinsley

Once only did this image of him take on sootier colours, and throw a disturbing shadow. This happened the one time I ever heard my parents really quarrel. What the quarrel was about I shall never know. To my alarm I was trapped in its orbit without the nous to consider flight let alone perform the act of flight. There mother and father were, upbraiding each other ferociously, in the glare of kitchen daylight, she songless and shrill and stripped of her vivacity, he loud-mouthed and stripped of his dry-tongued placidity. At the height of heat mother dashed a colander of French beans to the linoleum and, crying out, "I wish I'd married Francis Silver!" rushed from her kitchen, slamming its door, then the vestibule door, next her bedroom door. Horrified as I was at the quarrel itself which seemed the disreputable sort of thing poor people, common people or drunk people did, I was more horrified at this vision of Francis Silver as a mother-stealer. I had the impression father was startled; the framework of his being somehow showed; he seemed much less a father, nuder of face, younger, like nothing so much as a bewildered man. I began to pick up the beans so as not to look at him directly, but I absorbed him foxily. He was, as it were, reassembling himself and dressing his face again, when the kitchen door opened quietly. The slam of the bedroom door had scarcely died but mother had done something neatening to her hair.

"I have," she said, "just caught a glimpse of myself in the glass." It was a girl's voice. She tried a smile. It was too weighed out of balance with uncertainty and rising tears to succeed. "I was quite hideous with temper. I'm sorry, Henry. Of course I didn't mean honestly..."

"Woman, dear," said father, "Francis Silver would have been a lucky man if you had married him. Out to play, boy, out to play," he said, crossing to mother who began to cry. I knew he was going to sit her on his knee. That night we had festive jelly

ömlengő asszony volt; ha megjelent, apámat annyira irritálta, hogy inkább kiment beszélgetni a malacokkal, mintsem elviselje a társaságát. Ha anyám felpróbált egy új kalapot vagy ruhát, és apám véleményét akarta kicsikarni, apám csak annyit mondott:

– Kedves asszonyom, tudja, hogy nagyszerűen néz ki. Csinaltasson egy fényképet Francis Silver számára is.

– Féltekeny bolond – válaszolta anyám.

A könnyed évődés nyomán Francis Silver örökre huszonnégy évesnek hatott, örökké energikusnak, de örökké ártalmatlannak is. Ő volt az az úriember, aki tisztelettel vigyázzba vágta magát hölgyek jelenlétében, aki mindennap kikéfélt a cipőjét, még a sarokrésznél is.

Csak egyetlenegyszer vetült árnyék a róla kialakult képre. Ez akkor történt, amikor – egyetlen alkalommal – szüleim közt valódi nézeteltérés támadt. Soha nem tudtam meg, miről vitakoztak, de rémületemre a vita keresztüzében találtam magam, és a menekülésnek még a gondolata sem merülhetett fel, nemhogy a menekülés maga. A konyha déldei fényességében szórták a szitkokat egymásra; anyám daltalanul, életkedvétől megfosztva sivítózott, apám hangoskodva, száraz nyugalomból kikelve. A vita hevében anyám a zöldbabot szűrőstül a linóleumhoz vágta, és felkiáltott: „Bárcsak Francis Silverhez mentem volna feleségül!”, majd kiviharzott a konyhából, becsapta az ajtót, aztán az előszoba ajtaját és végül a hálószoobaajtót is. Elképedtem, hogy egyáltalán vitakoznak – ez a szememben csak szegény, közönséges vagy ittas emberek között volt szokás –, de még inkább megriadtam amiatt, hogy Francis Silver ellopja tőlünk anyámat. Úgy látszott, apám megrendülve áll, lényének kerete valahogy megmutatkozott, sokkal kevésbé hatott most apámnak, mint inkább egy meztelen arcú, fiatalabb, megbabonázott férfinak. Elkezdtem felszedegetni a zöldbabot, hogy ne kelljen közvetlenül ránézniem, de magamban titokban átéreztem a lelkiállapotát.

with bananas and a dash of port wine in for pudding: a sure indication that, although he wasn't mentioned, Francis Silver was still in the house. Nevertheless, it was several months before I forgot him as a peril and could see him again as the eternal charmer.

When mother died at the age of forty-one I was eighteen.

Several hours before she died, her singing forgone for ever, her gaiety tampered with by the demands of dying, I was alone with her for a while. After saying what, I supposed, all dying mothers say to eldest sons, most of it trite, she asked me to take Francis Silver the album of postcards he'd sent her twenty-odd years ago.

"I know what the girls are like," she said of my sisters. "They'll marry and have children, and let the children tear them up. I'm sure he'd like to have them. He's still alive, and still in the same place, I think. I've looked in the obituary notices every day for years."

I began to cry.

"Stop that," she said, as though I were breaking some deathbed rule, "and listen. There's something else. In my handkerchief-drawer there's a pink envelope with his name on it. It's got a lock of my hair in it. Before I married your father I was going to give it to Francis Silver. But I decided against it. Burn it, throw it away, anything. Don't tell your father. About the album doesn't matter. Not about the envelope. Be a good boy, and promise."

In agony I promised.

It was not until several months after the funeral that I told father of mother's wish about the postcards.

"Yes," he said, "your mother told me she'd spoken to you. Women," he said, giving me that two-coloured look which at one and the same time questioned my knowledge and informed my

Majd mintha megkísérelte volna összeszedni magát, hogy új arcot öltjön, amikor halkan kinyílt a konyhaajtó. Alig halt el a hálószoobaajtó csattanásának zaja, de anyám már megigazította a haját.

– Megpillantottam magam a tükörben – mondta lányos hangon. Mosolyogni próbált. A mosoly nem volt összhangban a bizonytalansággal és a kifakadó könnyek lehetőségével. – Csúnya vagyok idegesen. Sajnálom, Henry. Természetesen nem gondoltam komolyan... Igazán...

– Kedves asszonyom – szólalt meg apám –, Francis Silver szerencsés ember lenne, ha ön hozzáment volna. Nyomás kifelé játszani, fiú, nyomás – szólt nekem, ahogy anyámhoz lépett, aki sírni kezdett. Tudtam, hogy apám most a térdére ülteti. Aznap este ünnepi zselatinos banánt kaptunk és egy korty portói bort desszertnek: határozott jeleként, hogy – ámbár nincs említve – Francis Silver köztünk járt. Mindazonáltal hónapokba telt, amíg szememben megszűnt rosszakarónk lenni, és újra az örök hódító szerepében tetszeleghetett.

Tízennyolc éves voltam, amikor anyám negyvenegy éves korában meghalt.

Pár órával a halála előtt – az éneklése már örökre megszűnt, vidámságát kioltotta a haldoklás terhe – egy ideig kettesben maradtam vele. Miután elmondta, amit, gondolom, minden haldokló anya elmond a legidősebb fiának – ezek jó része közhely –, megkért, vigyem el a tömött albumot Francis Silvernek, vagyis azokat a képeslapokat, amelyeket az húsz-egynéhány évvel azelőtt küldött.

– Tudod, milyenek a lányok – mondta a hűgaimra célozva. – Férjhez mennek, gyereket szülnek, azok meg összetépkedik a lapokat. Pedig ő biztos szívesen megtartaná. Még él, és azt hiszem, még mindig ugyanott. Évek óta mindennap végigböngészem a halálozási rovatot.

ignorance, “are strange, strange mortals, and this is a strange gesture. He was very devoted to your mother, and may like to have them as a memento.”

“Would *you* like to take them? It might be better if you took them – more – more suitable.” I was trying a man-to-man briskness.

Father looked me over, and came to his decision about what I was up to.

“Why?” he said. “Why on earth would it be more suitable? I’ve never met Francis Silver in my life. Anyway, you promised your mother, didn’t you? Which issue are you trying to avoid?”

That my father did not know Francis Silver astonished me. Reading between the lines of mother’s tales I had pictured Francis Silver and father, stiff-collared, in pointed button boots, carrying heart-shaped boxes of chocolates in their hands, and arriving (often) at the same moment on the basalt doorstep of mother’s front door.

“I’m not avoiding anything,” I lied. “Are you sure... are you absolutely sure you’ve never met him?”

“I am absolutely sure.” He looked me over again. “I’ll be looking forward to hearing about him. And, although I’ve never met him, I think, in the circumstances, it could not be considered too much if you conveyed my kind regards.”

Despite my death-bed promise, I had had hopes of finding father willing to return the postcards to Francis Silver. I’d justified these hopes by telling myself that Francis Silver would be more touched by receiving the album from his widower rival than from the son of the woman he had hoped to marry, from the son he might have had himself. My father’s defection meant I should have to keep my promise. About this I was not really happy. At eighteen I conceived myself cynical; disillusionment was daily bread.

Elsírtam magam.

– Hagyd ezt abba – mondta, mintha megszegnék valami virasztási szabályt –, és ide figyelj. Van még valami. A zsebkendő fiókomban találsz egy rózsaszín borítékot az ő nevével. Egy hajtincsem van benne. Mielőtt hozzamentem apádhoz, Francis Silvernek akartam adni, de aztán elvetettem az ötletet. Égesd el, dobd ki, csinálj vele valamit, de apádnak ne említsd! Az album nem érdekes, de a borítékot ne említsd! Légy oly jó fiú, hogy ezt megígéred.

Nagy keservesen megígértem.

Hónapokkal a temetés után mondtam el apámnak, mi volt anyám kívánsága a képeslapokat illetően.

– Igen – mondta. – Anyád szólt nekem, hogy beszélt veled erről. A nők – tette hozzá azzal a kétértelmű pillantással, amely egyszerre vont a kétségbe az ismereteimet és oszlatta tudatlanságomat – furcsák. Furcsa halandók, és ez egy furcsa gesztus. Az a férfi nagyon odavolt anyádért. Lehet, hogy örül majd a lapoknak.

– Szeretnéd te elvinni? Talán jobb lenne, ha te adnád át... talán helyénvalóbb lenne – próbáltam úgy beszélni, mint férfi a férfival.

Apám végigmért, és rájött, mi van a szavaim mögött.

– Hogyan? – kérdezte. – Hogy az ördögbe lenne helyénvalóbb? Soha életemben nem találkoztam Francis Silverrel. Egyébként is, megígérted anyádnak, nem? Miért akarod kikerülni a feladatot?

Elcsodálkoztam, hogy apám nem ismerte Francis Silvert. Anyám történetének száalai közt Francis Silvert és apámat mindig együtt képzeltem el, keményített gallérral, hegyes orrú, gombos csizmában, amint szív alakú dobozban csokoládét visznek anyámnak, és gyakran egyszerre érkeznek a bejárat kőlépcsőjéhez.

– Semmit nem akarok kikerülni – hazudtam. – Biztos vagy

The next time I travelled to Melbourne the album went with me. As well, I took the pink envelope which I had not destroyed – there had been no moral pause, no sense of treachery in the betrayal. On her deathbed, I told myself, mother had tangled her values, her judgment had been marred. I... *I* considered that the anguished man I would be meeting would be doubly consoled by this more personal memento.

I had no sooner arrived at the Coffee Palace in which I was staying in the city than it became imperative to set about handing over the album and the envelope: mother had been dead for four months; the cards with their velveteen forget-me-nots, their sequins, and intricately folded and embossed layers, the envelope scented from its long secret life in the handkerchief-drawer, were too precious and unfitting to lie about for even an hour on the public furniture of a room that had been occupied by unknown, impermanent, maybe sinful people. As though preparing to meet God or have an accident, I had a shower, and cleaned my teeth, for the second time that day, put on all my best clothes, my new shoes and tie, and took much trouble with my hair. With the envelope in a pocket, and carrying the album as though it were frangible time, and dreams of finest glass, I set out for Francis Silver's.

Since all this happened before World War II and post-war vandalism, the picture-framing shop had not been contemporarized: it was still turn-of-the-century elegant in a slightly abraded way. These etchings with the enormously wide creamy mounts and narrow black frames fashionable at the period were disposed behind the plate-glass on which, in Gothic gold-leaf, was the name I had heard all my life, the name in my mother's handwriting on the pink envelope containing the piece of her hair she'd called a lock. I went into the shop. There was no one behind the counter. The sound of elfin-cobbler hammering came from

benne, száz százalékig biztos vagy benne, hogy soha nem találkozotatok?

– Száz százalékig. – Újra végigmért. – De kíváncsi vagyok, mit mondasz majd róla. És, habár soha nem találkoztunk, talán a jelen körülmények között nem esne nehezedre, ha üdvözléd a nevemben is.

Anyám halálos ágyánál tett ígéretem ellenére reménykedtem, hátha apámnak lesz kedve visszavinni a képeslapokat Francis Silvernek. E reményemet azzal próbáltam megindokolni magamnak, hogy Francis Silvert nyilván jobban meghatná, ha az egykori rivális özvegy kezéből veszi át az albumot, mint annak az asszonynak a fiától, akit ő akart nőül venni, és aki fiú az ő fia is lehetne. Apám elzárkózása azt jelentette, magamnak kell az ígéretet beváltanom. Ennek nem örültem túlzottan. Tizennyolc évesen cinikusnak gondoltam magam, mindennapi kenyerem volt a kiábrándultság.

Legközelebb, amikor Melbourne-be utaztam, magammal vittem az albumot. Nálam volt a rózsaszín boríték is: nem éreztem morális akadályt, nem éltem meg csalásként az árulást. Azt mondtam magamban, anyám a halálos ágyán nem volt tisztában a dolgok értékével, az ítélőképessége hiányt szenvedett. Én úgy gondoltam, hogy a gyötrődő férfi, akivel majd találkozom, kettős vigaszt talál ebben a még személyesebb emléktárgyban.

Amint megérkeztem a Coffee Palace-hoz, szálláshelyemhez, szükségét éreztem, hogy mielőbb átadjam az albumot és a borítékot. Anyám már négy hónapja halott: a képeslapok bársonyos nefelejcsikkel, a flitterek, a bonyolultan hajtogatott, dombornyomásos rétegek, a hosszú, titkos, kendőfiókban töltött élete folyamán illatossá vált boríték túl értékesek és oda nem illőek voltak ahhoz, hogy akár egy óráig is egy közönséges szoba bútorain feküdjenek, egy olyan szobában, amelyet ismeretlen, átmeneti, netalán bűnterhelt emberek béreltek. Mint aki utolsó útjára

behind plush curtains, black, on which were *appliqued* pale gold lyres, and which obviously concealed a workroom. When I rang the small brass bell attached to the counter by a chain the tiny tap-tapping continued for a few moments, and then ceased. I heard no footsteps, but the curtains were parted. A short, fat man stood behind the counter.

“And what,” he said in light and somehow wheedling voice, “can I do for *you?*” His small eyes (beady, I said to myself) stitched over me in an assessing way. He was the most strikingly clean-looking man I had ever seen, composed of the blackest black (his suit and tie and eyes and semi-circular eyebrows) and the whitest white (his shirt, the handkerchief protruding from one sleeve, the white slices of hair curving back from his temples).

“I should like to speak to Fr . . . to Mr Francis Silver, please.”

He lowered his lids while pretending to pick something languidly from his sleeve, and to flick delicately with finger-tips at the spot nothing had been picked from.

“You are,” he said, interested in the fact, “thpeaking to that very perthon.”

I was not prepared for this, a disillusion not cut to my template.

My face must have run empty.

“I athure you,” he said, “I *am* Franthith Thilver. Have I been recommended? You *mutht* tell me by whom. You want thomething framed?”

“My... my mother...” I said, and placed the album on the counter. “My mother sent this. Postcards.”

“To be framed?”

He opened the album.

He turned over several pages. “My dear,” he said. “My dear, how thcrumptious!”

I saw on his hand the ring with the ruby mother had told us

indul, vagy egy istennel készül találkozni, lezuhanyoztam, fogat mostam – aznap másodjára –, felvettem a legjobb ruhám, az új cipőm, nyakkendőöt kötöttem, és a hajamat hosszan igazgattam. A borítékkal a zsebemben megfogtam az albumot – mintha az a törékeny idő vagy egy hajszálvékony üveg álmaim rejtené –, és elindultam Francis Silverhez.

Mivel mindez a II. világháború előtt történt, a háborút követő vandalizmust megelőzően, a képkeretező bolt még nem volt korszerűsítve, még mindig a századforduló kissé fakult eleganciáját mutatta. A kirakatban az akkor divatos rézkarcok vékony fekete keretben, túl széles, krémszínű passe-partout-val, fent a név aranyozott gót betűkkel, a név, amelyet egész életemben hallottam, és amely anyám kézírásával a néhány hajszál – anyám megfogalmazása szerint hajtincset – tartalmazó borítékot jelölte. Beléptem a boltba. A pult mögött senkit nem láttam, de egy fekete plüssfüggöny mögül, amelyre halvány aranylantokat applikáltak, és amely nyilván a munkateret takarta, cipészkalapács hangja hallatszott. Miután megkondítottam a pulthoz láncsal rögzített kis rézharangot, még néhány pillanatig folytatódtek az apró kalapács hangok, aztán megszakadtak. Lépéseket nem hallottam, de szétnyílt a függöny, és egy alacsony, kövér ember állt a pult mögött.

– Mit tehetek önért? – kérdezte könnyedén és kicsit mézesmázosan. Apró szeme – pitykeszemű, szólalt meg bennem egy hang – vájkálva fürkészt. Rendkívül tiszta, pedáns benyomást keltő férfi állt előttem; egyrészt mélyfekete: az öltönye, a nyakkendője, a szeme és a félkör alakú szemöldöke, másrészt pedig szikrázóan fehér: az inge, a zakó ujjá alól előkandikáló zsebkenője és a halántéka mögött megjelenő őszülő haj.

– Fr... Mr. Francis Silvert keresem, tisztelettel.

Szempilláját leeresztve úgy tett, mint aki tétován leporolja a zakója ujját, és mintha felcsipentene valami szöszt onnan, ahol

about. I saw the fingernails with each half-moon, even on the little fingers, unmistakably revealed.

“Jutht look! I’ve theen nothing like thethe for...” He pushed out his lips in a depreciating smile, “... for more yearth than I care to thtate publicly. I uthed to have a pothitive mania for them.”

“They are yours,” I said. “They *were* yours. You sent them to my mother. Years ago,” I finished uncertainly.

“I did? Gay, reckleth boy I wath! May one have little lookieth?” He took one of the cards and examined its back. “Tho I did! My handwriting hathn’t changed a bit. How ekthordinary, how very ekthordinary! And now they are to be framed?”

“No,” I said. “No, not framed. Mother thought you’d like to have them back.”

I knew I was expressing mother’s wish very badly, but could do nothing else: the situation had become bewildering not only to me but also to Francis Silver who said, “Oh!”. There was, moreover, something beyond the bewilderment of a clumsy social situation; there was something wrong. Francis Silver had not asked me who had sent the postcards. Some film clogging natural curiosity, even polite enquiry, some flaw in his humanity, made him seem careless and carelessly cruel.

I did not want to say it but I said it: I told him my mother’s maiden name.

He became fretful: the past was not for him. Nevertheless he acted good manners of a sort. “Now, let me thee,” he said, and he put the tip of his forefinger on his forehead in an absurd thinking posture. He pouted.

“My dear,” he presently said, “the mind ith blank. Abtholutely! Nothing thtirs in my little addled brain. I’m very, very naughty. But you muthn’t tell your mother. I thould be *tho* humiliated. You mutht tell her I loved *theeing* them but I couldn’t *deprive* her of them. It’th a wonderful collection and in *fauntleth* condition.

semmi sem volt.

– Én vagyok asz – szólalt meg felélénkülve –, parancoljon.

Erre nem voltam felkészülve. Az illúzióvesztés nem szerepelt a forгатókönyvben. Üres tekintettel bámulhattam magam elé.

– Biztoszíthatom – mondta –, én vagyok Francic Silver. Valaki dicérte a munkámat? Kérem, árulja el, ki volt asz! Keretesztetni ceretne?

– Édesanyám – mondtam, és a pultra helyeztem az albumot. – Ezt édesanyám küldte. Képeslapok.

– Keretesztetni? – Kinyitotta az albumot. Átlapozott néhány oldalt. – Nahát – mondta. – Codálatosz.

A kezén láttam a rubinköves gyűrűt, amelyről anyánk beszélt. A félholdak a körmei tövéénél tisztán kivehetően rajzolódtak, még a kisujjakon is.

– Nahát. Évek óta nem láttam ilyet. – Az ajkát előrebiggyesztette, mint aki számvetést készít. – Több éve, mint asz nyíltan elárulható. Régebben egyenesen mániám volt a képeslap.

– Ezek a magáéi – mondtam. – A magáéi voltak. Ön küldte őket anyámnak. Évekkel ezelőtt – itt elbizonytalanodtam.

– Valóban? Nyughatatlan, vidám fiszkó voltam. Beleolvashatok? – Kivett egy lapot, és a hátulját tanulmányozta. – Cakugyan én írtam. A készírászom szemmit sze változott. Micoda élmény, micoda élmény! Ész keretesztetni ceretné?

– Nem – mondtam. – Anyám úgy képzelte, ön örülni fog, hogy visszakapja őket.

Éreztem, hogy anyám kívánságát ostobán tolmácsolom, de nem volt mit tenni: a helyzet kínossá vált nemcsak számomra, hanem Francis Silver számára is.

– Ó – mondta.

De sajátos és különös kapcsolatunk kényelmetlenségén túl még valami zavart. Francis Silver nem kérdezett rá, kinek küldte

Oh, if only my friend Rekth were here... he *adorth* pothcardiana, if I may coin a phrathe, abtholutely adorth.”

Scraps of the past were blowing about my brain like the litter at the end of a perfect picnic.

“And you don’t remember my mother?”

He could have smacked me.

He tossed his eyes heavenwards, but not too high.

“Be reathonable, *pleathe!*” “More than twenty yearth! One would adore to remember, of courthe. But too much water under the bridge. There’ve been too many people, too many, many people. I *thaid* I wath terribly humiliated. I couldn’t akthept them now, could I? You take them back. And thank your mother very, very much.” He smiled a conspirator’s smile, grasped my wrist and squeezed it boldly yet furtively. “I know you’ll keep my ghatly thecret, just *know*. You’ve got a nithe kind fathe, haven’t you? But there’ve really been too many people. I’m thure your mother ith ath charming ath you. But I don’t remember her at all.”

I detached myself. Without a word I left the shop.

The album of cards remained with whom I’d promised to give it.

By the time I had returned to the Coffee Palace through the sort of exquisite day I used to imagine a pretty mother and a jaunty Francis Silver flirting through along the sea-front, I had made up an outline of lies to satisfy and comfort my father for whom I felt the truth, as I saw it, to be of the wrong shape. By the time, days later, I was home with him, I hoped to have filled in that outline with unassailable detail: I dared not shock him. As my first adult chore, my initiation task, I would make a fitting Francis Silver for him, one that matched the Francis Silver of mother’s recollections.

In the room at the Coffee Palace I looked at the pink

a lapokat, mielőtt kivett egyet. Valami derengő természetes kíváncsiság vagy udvarias érdeklődés helyénvaló lett volna, de emberi mivoltának valamilyen fogyatékosága érzéketlenné és érzéketlenül kegyetlenné tette őt a szememben.

Nem akartam, mégis megtettem: felhívtam a figyelmét anyám leánykori nevére.

Zavarttá vált, a múlt számára elveszett, de azért illendően töprengést tettetett. – Várjunk cak – mondta, és a mutatóujját a homlokához biggyesztette abszurd, gondolkodó pózban. Csücsörített.

– Nahát – szólalt meg végül –, üresz az agyam. Tictára! Szemmi szem mosszan a buta fejemben. Nagyon szajnálom. De meg ne mondja az édesanyjának! Megvetne érte. Mondja aszt, hogy nagyon megörültem a lapoknak, de nem focthatom őt meg tőlük. Gyönyörű kollekszió, kifogásztalan állapotban. Bárcak a barátom, Rekc láthatná. Ő egycerűen imádja a régi képeslapokat.

A múlt foszlányai lebegtek az agyamban, mint a szemét egy tökéletes piknik végén.

– És ön nem emlékszik az anyámra?

Pofon vághatott volna.

Az égre emelte a szemét, de nem túl magasan.

– Legyen écnél, kérem. Több mint húc év telt el. Bárcak képesz lennék emlékeszni, de szok víz folyt már le a folyón. Túl szok ember volt körülöttem. Mondtam, hogy cörnyen szajnálom. Nem fogadhatom el őket. Vigye hasza, ész köcönje meg a nevemben. – Összeesküvésszerű mosollyal megfogta a csuklóm, és ravaszul megszorította. – Tudom, hogy megtartja a titkot, tudom. Cép, kedvesz arsza van. De cakugyan, túl szok ember vett engem körül. Édesanyja bisztosz ugyanolyan helyesz, mint maga. De egyáltalán nem emlékcem rá.

Kiszabadítottam a karom, és szó nélkül hagytam el a boltot.

envelope older than I. For one weak moment I felt like making a film-actor's gesture and kissing it. I remembered in time it was not mine to kiss. It was no one's. In that room with its Gideon Bible on the glass-topped bedside cabinet, its ecru net curtains, its oatmeal wallpaper and petty frieze of autumn Virginia Creeper, I burned the envelope. In its first resistance to flame it gave up its ingrained scent. It twisted, fighting the flame and itself. It emitted a stench of burning hair. It writhed and writhed in an agony I could not bear to watch. ♦



Az album ott maradt, ígéretemet teljesítettem.

Mire visszaértem a hotelba azon a különös napon, amikor előzőleg elképzelttem fiatal, csinos anyámat, amint a jóvágású Francis Silverrel udvarolnak egymásnak a tengerparton, vázlatosan összeállt a fejemben, mit fogok hazudni apámnak, aki számára a valóság – így láttam – kedvezőtlenül alakult. Pár nappal később, majd otthon, azt reméltem, kiegészíthetem ezt a vázlatot megtámadhatatlan részletekkel: nem mertem apámat kiábrándítani. A beavatásom, első feladatomban felnőttként az volt, hogy egy anyám emlékeibe illő Francis Silvert teremtsék meg apám számára.

A Coffee Palace-ban előttem feküdt a rózsaszín boríték, amely idősebb volt nálam. Egy tétova pillanatig kedvem támadt egy filmszerű gesztusra, hogy megcsókoljam, de rájöttem, az nem az én szerepem. Azt a szerepet nem osztották ki senkire. Az üveglapos éjjeliszekrényen fekvő szállodai Bibliával, drapp függönyökkel, szürkésbarna tapétával és pitiáner, őszi vadszőlőt mintázó szegélyléccel díszített szobámban elégettem a borítékot. A lángoknak ellenállva egy pillanatra kibocsátotta a beléivódott illatot. Megperdült, birkózott a lángokkal és önmagával, majd égő haj bűzét árasztotta. Úgy vonaglott és tekergett haláltusájában, hogy képtelen voltam végignézni. ♦