

Down the hill where it is said a sports field used to be, the soy crops look healthy in the jellied sunlight. Purple and white flowers bright and static in glare so strong it congeals the air. Along the rows ragged figures toil, bending, watering, crouching, pulling. Beyond, the sheen of the lung-shaped pond glitters green.

“We could go up to New Hampshire, to those settlements...” starts Vita.

She’s standing by the window after breakfast. Drake is behind her, still at the table. She anticipates his outburst before it comes.

“That’s enough,” he growls. “I won’t have my wife sounding like some subversive. Don’t let anybody hear you talking like that. You’ll get us all in trouble.”

She does not turn to look at him.

“We’ll just say we’re going for a visit,” she replies mildly. She’s used to his anger. It’s one of the few emotions he allows himself to show. “She’s still only thirteen. They won’t suspect us of leaving. Why would they, you’re an important man.”

“You bet I am. And you know why. I’m a loyal Zorian, and so are you. So keep your mouth shut. Subject closed. Do you want to jeopardize everything we’ve got?”

Vita weighs another reasonable response, but instead finds herself blurting, “Sure I’m a good Zorian, but I’m loyal to Lorna first of all, and you should be too! She’s just a child.”

“Nonsense. Don’t be melodramatic. All the girls have to do it, if they want to be accepted.” His tone reverts to sadly patient. “Look, Vita. We’ve been through all this before. Be sensible. We want her to keep the position we’ve worked so hard for—I know you want her to have that security. I know

you want the best for her, you're just wrong. All heated up about nothing. Relax. It will be good for her."

"Good for you, you mean."

But she has gone too far. Drake comes to stand close behind her. "Watch it." His hands are on her arms turning her to face him. His grip is tight enough for discomfort. "Forget it, I said. And I don't want the girl getting any of your treasonous notions in her head. Don't you dare try to put her off. She has a bright future in this enclave and I won't let you rob her of it with your silliness." His tone mellows. "I won't let you endanger yourself, either."

He relaxes his hold; his body warmth softens her.

"Drake dear. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's the best thing for her," he urges quietly. "Nowadays there's just no choice. Use your head."

He smells of soap and chicory coffee. Impulsively she kisses his cheek. He laughs shortly, hugs her, dismisses her.

"Let's clean up the dishes or we'll be late," he says, in a tone both light and firm.

She watches him gather their plates and cups. He's stocky and broad. At nearly fifty he's more handsome than ever, no gray yet in his black hair, heavy shouldered, hard-jawed, an imposing rock of a man. But as soon as he's out of sight, she turns again to the window, no less concentrated on her idea.

Even with Drake's credentials, they know they're lucky to have been admitted to the upper levels of the Boston enclave. They moved here in 2053 when Lorna was four, and were granted this apartment not long after, in a house they share with five other families. It's one of several on the hill that form an imposing line of renovated triple deckers reminiscent of better times, slanted roofs crowned with solar panels, in what used to be the town of Arlington. The original city of Boston has been under water for twenty years

now, though the tops of the tallest buildings still rise out of the waves. From the temple steps on clear days, you can see the insurance building with some of its intact glass glinting like a mermaid's castle in the sun.

So Vita would really have no quarrel with their situation if it weren't for the recent amendment to the Zorian virgin decree, announced just this spring. Now every upper class girl turning fifteen is required to be delivered to the temple for Affirmation, no exceptions. It's one more sign that the priests are consolidating their power. But people feel too vulnerable to resist, memories of chaos are still too raw. Nothing is predictable, terrible things keep happening; even the children know survival is a question. Of course it's comforting to look to, cling to, authority.

Vita feels guilty about her rebellious thoughts. Maybe Drake is right that she's being disloyal, ungrateful, even reckless. She knows he could be right about Lorna's future. If they defy the law, they'll lose privileges and worse, whereas Lorna's Affirmation will benefit their whole family, with added status and luxuries. But Vita in her soul recoils at the price.

She hurriedly dresses for work. Sensible knee-length dress, but light and sleeveless for the heat, flat sandals that show off her painted toenails. It's a challenge to look both virtuous and feminine—the proper appearance for women is the subject of more and more commentary by the authorities. She vigorously brushes her pale hair that frizzes in this humidity, pulls it back with a small blue ribbon, sky blue that matches her eyes. Drake has already left and she longs to linger, to fuss and putter, stroll through their spacious three rooms, strategize about Lorna some more. But the office is waiting; she must immerse herself in processing work, helping to evaluate the overwhelming demands at Services for healthcare and emergency food supplies.

Boston's territory now encompasses parts of northern Rhode Island and southern New Hampshire, under the enlightened and popular leadership of Chief Barry, though he is advised by the usual clutch of priests. People even come here from elsewhere, seeking its relatively benign protection. The Hartford enclave just to the south, for example, is ruled by a priest inclined to cruel and arbitrary punishments.

Vita checks the weather flag by the pond. It's still orange, as it has been most of May this year, so she packs her oxygen mask just in case. Among Drake's privileges are bus passes for his family, allowing Vita to ride to work in a small creaking van smelling of its fuel, stale cooking oil. The road to the center of town runs along a ridge that long ago was a train track, and then for a while a bicycle path in the days when bikes were playthings. Now cycles of all shapes and sizes are precious transportation that greatly outnumber fueled vehicles. Weaving in and out, some are so crammed with goods or possessions that the rider is invisible. Some of the pedicabs carry whole families.

On the left side of the road fruit trees anchor the slope; along the other side march lines of wind turbines, and below them jumble the ramshackle homes of the poor, or the Nons as they are often called. Disintegrating apartment buildings, lopsided shacks, ragged tents as far as the eye can see. Rivers of barefoot people carrying bundles on their heads. Vita turns her face away and does not allow thoughts of them. Instead, she ponders sounding out Lorna on the subject of leaving Boston, risking Drake's serious rage. She imagines the conversation. "Lorna, baby, do you know what happens in Affirmation when you turn fifteen?" How can she pierce Lorna's innocence and trust like that? It would be brutal.

Then the jagged idea that maybe Lorna already knows all about it. Vita struggles to grasp this and can't. Her memory of herself at that age conjures up only an image of embarrassed

awkwardness, a dreamy unrequited crush on an older boy, the desperation of trying to belong to a group, any group. Her real pleasures were giggling with her sister and running along the lakeshore with her dog.

At lunchtime Vita sits with co-workers around a table in a back room. There are no windows and the attempt to cheer it up with posters has not worked. As usual they talk about the heat and the latest storm damage. Someone boldly wonders if this new priest influencing Chief Barry is going to mean tighter controls. Vita suddenly wants to sound out their opinion about running away with Lorna. The thought of doing this scares her so much she starts to sweat, she's swept with all the symptoms of nausea. Of course, she wouldn't dare say anything like that in a public place. But the idea has her by the throat.

Finally she says, very timidly, "I wonder if it's possible to ask for a dispensation for the virgin decree?"

"Why would you want to do that?" queries one woman who has two grown daughters. "If my kids were young enough, we'd jump at the chance. Maybe we could even get some airconditioning out of it."

"Yeah," chimes in a young man, studying Vita suspiciously, "what's the problem?"

"I don't want..." She starts passionately, but bites off her words in alarm. "I mean. I don't know. Just wondering."

They all shrug, all except for Diamond. She turns her gaze full on Vita and comments, "What an interesting idea. A dispensation. Sounds almost medieval."

Diamond is a recent employee in the visuals department, assigned to the video team. She's about fifty, short and compact, with dark curls lighted by graying wisps at her temples that make her high forehead seem even higher. Slashing black brows add to the drama of her exotic face, shades of harems or gypsies, sultry, opaque. Vita is taken

aback by the directness of her stare and the slight sarcasm of her remark; she sinks back into herself, thinking grimly that she has opened an unfortunate door.

Sure enough, Diamond crosses her path as she leaves the office that evening.

“Heading for the bus?” asks Diamond casually, in her pebbly low voice. She falls into step beside Vita. “Heat always seems better this time of day, doesn’t it?”

Diamond’s words are bland, but her tone seems suggestive. Of what? Does she think she can trap Vita into revealing something worth reporting? Father Rose has recently persuaded Chief Barry to expand the powers of the Citizen Watch, ostensibly to spot spies. But the new CW has already summoned some average folks to quiz them about trivial things.

“Oh for sure,” she responds. “It does start to cool down around now.”

“How far do you have to go?”

“We live over on the hill. How about you?”

“Right up there.”

Diamond points to the third floor of a square brick building they’re approaching, above a store selling bottled water. In the display window a cardboard polar bear is lifting to its lips a scintillating blue cup. A prettily painted sign proclaims, “Crystal Clear. Buy Your Water Here.”

“The polar bear lives on,” sings Diamond with a smirk.

Vita knows this is a reference to the bear’s extinction, and also knows it’s not quite politically correct to refer to it. The woman could be trying to trap her, but then again, maybe she’s being courageously honest. Vita is drawn to the mystery.

“See the geraniums?” Diamond says. “That’s my place. But I have to go to the market first.”

“So do I,” Vita confesses.

Glancing sidelong at Diamond's neatly clad form, she decides that since the woman lives in an acceptable place and has a market pass, besides working for Services, Drake could not object to her, at least not as casual companion.

They turn down a narrow street and present their passes at a barbed-wire fence. Here the roofed market begins, its stalls crammed with everything from toothbrushes and diapers to potatoes and dried eels. Nons are not allowed in; they have very little valid money so would of course try to steal.

"You have a daughter?" asks Diamond as they stroll past the stalls, comparing prices.

Of course. Her indiscretion did find a ready ear. How can she play it down? "Yes, Lorna. She's thirteen. A handful. Do you have kids?"

"A son."

That's it? Diamond is not exactly forthcoming. But just then Vita spots the pigeons she's looking for and buys three for dinner, though they are small and scrawny. Their heads are still on, their little red eyes staring up, their claws piously curled together. Both women then decide on hothouse oranges for a treat.

"Do you live alone?" asks Vita quickly thereafter, keeping Diamond safely on the subject of her untidy former roommate until they separate.