

AVAILABLE NOW

INSIDE THE MIND OF MARTIN MUELLER

EXCERPTED FROM PART ONE:

A DAY AND A WAKE-UP

It was his home now. But it could not be his home till he had gone from it and returned to it. Now he was the Prodigal Son.

G.K Chesterton

I have to see a thing a thousand times before I see it once.

Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*



HE MANEUVERS THE CANARY yellow Lamborghini Espada through the tight curves of a two-lane county road, downshifts from fifth to third in a single swift motion, and turns onto the quarter-mile tree-lined drive that crosses the manicured acreage of his country estate. The tachometer needle leaps from three to six thousand RPM. He feels the gears mesh smoothly, hears the powerful, finely tuned engine whine responsively. Martin likes that sound, that tawny wild cat's cry. It makes him feel young again. His wife Millie admonishes that the sporty automobile is evidence of a creeping mid-life crisis, but he prefers to think it is evidence of his reverence for eternal youth.

He approaches his sprawling twenty-six room manor house of river rock and cedar beams and floor-to-ceiling windows with a warm and happy feeling. He's been away a while. It is always a joy to return to where he does his best work. And today—today!—he feels certain he will finish at last!

He enters the attached garage, wheels his Lamborghini across the buffed and shiny black and white tiled floor and parks alongside Millie's 1962 Rolls-Royce Phantom V Coach. It is more her style: sedate and respectable. He would see her soon, for brunch on the terrace—he was famished!—but first a good session in his cell.

He walks to a door in the far wall of the garage. He is dressed in tasseled tan loafers, pale green hosiery, khaki pants, a pale green polo shirt to match his socks, and a straw hat—a boater with a brightly colored band. He is feeling gay, effusive, expectant. He opens the door upon a closet of mops and brooms and pails and paper towels and cans of cleanser and plastic containers of floor wax. From a hook in the right side wall of the closet hang a blue cotton work shirt, blue cotton pants and a tattered blue terry cloth robe. On the floor is a pair of fuzzy slippers. He strips down to his polka dot boxer shorts. Above his slight paunch, in the center of his narrow chest, is a patch of curly white hair. On his left bicep in faded blue ink are the words *Martin And Millie Forever* encircling an old oak tree. He dons the work shirt and pants and the robe and the fuzzy slippers and hangs his more fashionable clothes from the hook. He closes the door, pulls an expanding protective gate across it, presses a red concave button in the wall beside the door and the door slides upward as the small compartment lurches downward.

EXCERPTED FROM PART FOUR:

BRUNCH ON THE TERRACE WITH MILLIE

There is no spectacle on earth more appealing than that of a beautiful woman in the act of cooking dinner for someone she loves.

Thomas Wolfe

As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.

Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

MUELLER STANDS AMONG THE MOPS and brooms and pails and paper towels and cans of cleanser and plastic containers of floor wax. He is feeling gay, effusive, expectant. Millie will be so pleased. On a hook in the wall to his right hang a pair of Khaki pants, a pale green polo shirt and a straw hat, a boater with a brightly colored band. On the floor at his feet are a pair of tasseled tan loafers and pale green hosiery to

match his polo shirt. He strips down to his boxer shorts. Above his slight paunch, in the center of his narrow chest, is a patch of curly white hair. On his left bicep in faded blue ink are the words Martin And Millie Forever encircling an old oak tree. He dons his gay apparel, pulls an expanding protective gate across the door, presses a red concave button beside it and the door slides downward as the small compartment lurches upward.

HE PUSHES THE GATE of the elevator aside and turns the brass knob of the carved wooden door of his study. As always when he ascends from below he looks upon it lovingly as though with his fond regard he might assure its existence for all eternity. Hands clasped behind his back, he strolls leisurely among the array of art and artifacts that adorn its walls and stand upon its tabletops and pedestals, pausing before each piece to ponder its profundities: the somber, mysterious Dutch allegorical tapestries; the ancient and modern sculpted works in metal and stone; the fragments of medieval architecture: archangels and demons in high relief; the paradoxical compositions of M.C. Escher; the dream state depictions of Salvador Dali; the Bosch, the Bretons, the Goyas, the Klees. It is an eclectic ensemble of the surreal, the whimsical, the bizarre, the disturbing, which dear Millie has dubbed *distinctively dissimilar*, and which she once cited, only half in jest, as evidence of his hopelessly fragmented mind, to which he replied that, as do the Cubist works of Braque and Leger, his taste in art reflects his need to discover underlying harmonies, to fuse the disparate elements of life's experience. How pedantic! she had opined, an unkind assessment lacking her customary grace and good humor and the first hint that she had become disenchanted of his eccentric ways. Nevertheless, now, as always, he rejoices to be back.

He strolls to the far wall where, through floor-to-ceiling windows, the bright light of late morning slants across his massive wooden desk and the heavy wooden swivel seat behind it. He sits and caresses the sun-soaked leather desktop, picks up a fist-sized piece of stone sculpture, feels its weight, feels its curves and concavities and protrusions—its *presence*. To his right, before a stainless steel intercom replete with buttons and lights, is a note penned in delicate script:

Martin,

I'm in the garden. Buzz me when you're up. It's such a lovely day for brunch on the terrace!

Millie

He turns and gazes down upon her garden, bright and bountiful beneath a pure azure sky: lush hollows mottled in light and shadow, thick with semi-tropical growth, interspersed with gay swaths of massed azaleas, camellias, showy white hydrangeas; plush grounds crisscrossed by footpaths; streambeds spanned by miniature bridges; colorful birds cavorting in the spray of fountains...all watched over by the spreading limbs of a giant oak. He sees Millie depart a glade of *Gunnera Manicata*, its broad leaves translucent in the morning sun, pass through the arch of a white wooden trellis interlaced with creeping vines, and approach a greenhouse carrying the cuttings of some fern or other in her white-gloved hands. Yellow silk secures her tightly drawn hair. He takes a quick breath. Beneath the gazebo on the terrace a table is set, white-

cloth covered, a bowl of bright flowers its centerpiece, to its left an ice-filled champagne bucket and a long succession of stainless-steel food bins, blue flames warming their undersides. He sighs—What a marvelous day for brunch on the terrace with Millie!

He spins back round in his swivel chair and presses the intercom button marked Basement. He says: Koot, are you there?

Presently, a voice crackles back: I'm here, Waldo.

Koot, what a session! I went back to my cell and wrote a dozen good pages and—dare I say it?—I think I have finished my work! I realize this is subject to review, I won't presume, but I believe I've compiled a piece of esoteric literature that holds the key to reassembling the scattered shards of the shattered Over-soul of Mankind and I'm ready to move on to the next phase. Let's get together tonight at six. I'll make a presentation and state my case. We'll drink Portofino De Portugal and smoke Don Diegos and ponder the plan. What do you say?

My pleasure, Waldo.

Wonderful! And please contact the players and have them assemble tomorrow afternoon at half past four. There will be a cast party, with an open bar and finger food and a generous bonus to express my gratitude for their contribution to my work. Oh, and Koot—the young man who played Crazy Carl? He's not invited. He doesn't cooperate. Cut him a check and cut him loose!

Consider it done, Waldo.

Terrific! See you at six.

Mueller presses the button marked Greenhouse. He says, Millie, are you there? He turns and looks down on the garden and sees Millie look up, wave and walk to the greenhouse and pick up a handset secured to the siding next to the door. He sees her lips move silently. Hears *Martin* through the intercom speaker. He turns back round to speak into the intercom microphone: Millie! So good to hear your sweet melodious voice. It positively tinkles! Is the champagne cold?

Yes, dear, and so will the food be, if you don't come soon!

I'm famished! I feel I haven't eaten in years!

Come eat with me now, darling. The birds are trilling. The air is sweet and clean!

Five minutes, dear. I'll freshen up. Don't eat without me!

He stands and turns to wave but Millie is not looking up. She busies herself in the garden quite as if they hadn't spoken. The table is no longer set. There is no champagne bucket, no stainless-steel food bins, no blue flames warming their underside. *Odd!* He feels a pang of utter aloneness, anxiety that clutches the pit of his stomach like the claw of a beast. He sits and turns to face his study. The space seems magnified, cavernous, the pictures on the walls far away, their secrets inaccessible. He turns and looks again upon the garden. *Odd!* There sits Millie at the linen-draped table under the gazebo across from a man in khaki slacks, a pale green polo shirt and a straw hat, a boater with a brightly colored band, who turns and looks up, the shadow of the hat brim hiding his face, and regards Martin looking down on them. The man turns back round and removes the glistening green champagne bottle from the bucket and holds it up to the sun. It sparkles like an ice-encrusted emerald.

Martin sits and turns his back to the window. He wonders: *What do I do now? What do I do?* He scans the desktop. He picks up the note next to the intercom and reads:

Martin,

I'm in the garden. Buzz me when you're up. It's such a lovely day for brunch on the terrace!

Millie

Of course! he exclaims. Brunch on the terrace with Millie! I can't wait! I'm famished! I feel I haven't eaten in years!

He crosses the study to a wide spiraling marble staircase and descends. He is feeling gay, effusive, expectant. He croons in a quiet baritone, to the tune of *Frankie & Johnny*:

Martin and Millie were lovers,
Lordy how they could love,
Sworn to be true to each other,
True as the stars above,
He was her man, he couldn't do her no wrong.

It is a common tune, of which Millie would not approve, but he doesn't care. It is how he feels. He pushes open high wide French doors inset with leaded glass windows and walks onto a patio. The light is so fine and white he can feel it on his skin. He crosses to the balcony and looks down upon her garden. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply the intoxicating fragrance of a thousand blooms: it is all so fine!

He spots Millie, fussing over the table, arranging the silverware just so. He descends three short steps to a path of flagstone and follows it through the garden to the gazebo. Millie turns and greets his arrival with a warm smile. He notes the light in her almond eyes and the bloom on her cheeks, and though there are delicate lines around her mouth and hints of gray in her hair, she looks marvelously well preserved—as pleasant to behold as ever!

He notices, too, the figures in the garden, *Millie's Menagerie*, flat on their pressed board, two-dimensional beings with their eyes side by side, Cubist style: the pig chef, a fat nearly-human thing with its dumb, subservient, yet somehow intelligent look—secretive, conspiratorial—holding a bouquet, its big pig ears sticking out from beneath a puffy chef's hat, a scarf knotted at its fat pig neck, beady dark eyes like olives, cloven hoofs protruding from the hem of the ruffled chef's gown draped over its grossly distended belly; the butler, a stallion, reared back on its haunches, front legs flailing away at the air, its horse lips pulled back over big square teeth, grimacing; the tall dapper mustachioed Maître De, a sly weasel standing upright, dressed in black tails and bow tie, slick hair parted down the middle, a towel over his arm, *waiting*; the senator and his wife, attired for entertainment, he an elephant in tux with satin lapels, she a braying donkey in her sequined evening gown, black pearls at her bosom, the two of them chatting and holding their martini glasses just so; and assorted denizens of field and forest: rabbits, frogs, squirrels, minks. *Millie's Menagerie*. He is perturbed by their presence; he can't help thinking: I thought we'd be alone! But he tosses off the

troubling thought like a trooper and looks lovingly upon his Millie, who smiles and holds out her hands, and he takes them, they are cool and dry, as on the night they met on the lawn by the lake, and he leans forward and kisses her on the cheek, inhales her fragrance and says: You smell of a thousand blossoms, and of earth and Summer rain, my dear!

Her smile becomes wry. She says, And *you*, Martin, smell of whiskey and marijuana! You've been doing that scene again, haven't you?

Though the rebuke is playful, he recoils, not liking to be chastened at this, his finest hour. But he recovers quickly; he'll let nothing spoil the triumphant, celebratory mood he has got himself into. There is cause to be jubilant: the scene in the cell had gone so well; his mission is accomplished—pending final approval of his work, of course, which he fully expects, but will not presume; he is on the outer threshold of the inner sanctum; it is the dawn of a new day...and he has an announcement to make!

It's my favorite scene, dear, he says calmly, not losing his smile. And today we did it so well...and I have an announcement to make! But first, what do we have here?

He frees a hand from her hers and indicates the file of stainless-steel food warmers flanking the gazebo.

Millie says cheerily: Come look, dear, I've made all your favorite things!

Her voice is warm and sweet and melodious. He is glad to be alive! She leads him to the first bin and lifts the lid. He leans in and looks and inhales.

Oysters Rockefeller with shredded fontina cheese, she chirps merrily.

Ah, the strong taste of the sea is upon my tongue! he exclaims.

She opens the next bin: Shrimp cakes with asparagus and chive vinaigrette, she announces proudly.

Umm...smells delicious! he says.

She replaces the lid and leads him to the next bin: Pork tenderloin with spiced rhubarb chutney, she says.

Wonderful! he says.

She puts back the lid and leads him to the next bin and opens it and says, Wild mushroom and Gruyere cheese omelets.

Outstanding! he says.

She closes the lid and leads him to the last bin: Fettuccine with smoked salmon, goat cheese, leeks and zucchini, she says.

My, my, Mueller says, shaking his head in amazement.

There's more, Millie says with a broad smile.

No! he says.

Yes! she says, and leads him to a long side-table draped in white linen, and indicates with a sweeping hand the array of dishes there. Asparagus tart with tarragon, she says. And sugar snap peas with potato and chive sauté. And spring artichokes with arugula and prosciutto. And here, she says, indicating the right half of the table, are the salads! Mueller gazes in wonder at the platters heaped high with assorted fruits and vegetables, sliced and diced, artfully arranged.

Fresh from my garden, she says

I'm in heaven!

You sit, I'll serve, she says, leading him back to the table.

I'll open the champagne, he says grandly.

He feels festive. He'd had his best session of recollecting and writing. Certain matters have become clear. He has an announcement to make! He takes his seat at the table. He watches as Millie busies herself at the bins, piling his plate. He reaches for the champagne in the bucket beside him...and feels an abiding presence at his backside. He turns and looks up at the house, the tall windows of his study. The mid-day sun reflects off the glass, and behind the glare...does he see a figure there, watching? He is sure of it! *Odd*, he thinks—but never mind! Now is not the time for visitation. It is the time for celebration...and for disclosure of The Plan!

He turns back round and reaches for the bottle of champagne and brings it out and holds it aloft. The ice chips fall away. It glistens like an emerald in the sun. He studies the label. He lowers the bottle and undoes the wire mesh surrounding the cork, puts his thumb tips under the cork lip and pushes. It frees itself slowly from the constriction of the bottleneck until it pops and launches itself into the blue void like a blunt missile. He follows its trajectory, watches it tumble end over end in slow motion until it reaches the apex of its arch, then seems to hang suspended against the sky for an everlasting moment...