

The Voyeur.

It's been said that a house is a house is a house. But there are houses and then there are houses. I have lived in several, owned some, and loved none, save one, and I think I loved that structure for much the same reason that I have loved some people: because it struck a sympathetic cord in my spirit.

That house was the eccentric product of a bizarre genius whose investigation and experimentation on the concept of the geodesic dome had been superseded by Buckminster Fuller's popularization and patenting of the structure. Georg Howitt – he had dropped the softening “e” from his first name in a fit of Teutonophilia – was from Cleveland and a brilliant, if sad and strange, character. Georg never recovered from his loss.

I met him late in his life and listened to his tales of lost acclaim told over endless bottles of California burgundy, which seemed his singular alcoholic taste. He had stocked his cellar with enough of the brand to keep himself stupefied for the remainder of his life.

Some years after his numbing disappointment, Georg turned to another project: that of building a house to rival those fashioned by Frank Lloyd Wright who was then in his architectural zenith. Georg dreamed and plotted and sketched, drawing upon his vast knowledge of structure, materials and design, all the while keeping his trash cans filled to overflowing with empty wine bottles. His wife of forty-one years left him during this period, which Georg always referred to as his “crisis.” He pronounced the word with a harsh sibilant as if to emphasize her treachery.

It was a childless marriage, he confided to me one night after he had drained more than his usual fare of the dark liquor because, he said, he was sterile. Mumps, he said, in his fifteenth year. “An empty chest of family jewels,” he laughed, cupping his groin. “The bitch never forgave me. You see, I didn't tell her until after we were married.” He giggled insanely. “She never forgave me for failing to distort her belly with fetal life. He then fell into a fit of melancholia and began to cry: not openly, but I saw a tear trickle down his cheek. The cloud passed and he decanted another glass of burgundy.

“Do you have children?” he asked me one evening. I hesitated for a moment before answering. It was a painful question that plagued me with uncertainty because, you see, I'm not

sure. My wife of sixteen years told me, on the day our divorce decree became final, that the child who had called me Dad for fourteen years was actually not mine. It was a painful shock to me, true or not, for I had invested not a little pride and affection in the tall, handsome adolescent whose paternal ancestry was now in question. The first time I saw him after that unsettling news, I remember looking at him with a new vision. His eyes, facial structure, frame, fingers, nose, mouth: I dissected him, pared away the hair and skin, microscopically invading his corpus in search of his genes.

But I could not know. He neither looked like me, nor unlike me. He has Melanie's eyes and mouth. I had thought his forehead and hands were similar to mine. Now, I couldn't be sure. When I questioned her, she laughed and gave me an exquisitely cruel look. Tests could determine his parentage, but I wasn't sure I could face the possibility that Jon was not my child.

One evening, as he so often did, Georg invited me over to his house for a drink. After he had poured the wine he announced to me in a calm, somber voice – he was uncharacteristically sober that evening – that he was dying. He brushed aside my sympathetic solicitations and bade me drink to life. “Salute,” he shouted, striking my glass with his own and downed the liquor in one large gulp.

He refused to discuss his impending demise, choosing instead to talk about his house. He was obsessed with the building and took me on tours of the rooms and grounds, describing in endless and minute detail the architectural singularities of the structure.

Two weeks before his death, Georg took me to a room I had not before seen. It was a small enclosure of triangular shape, somewhat like a giant corner cupboard without shelves. The outward facing wall was glass: a giant picture window recessed about eight inches which was, in turn, covered by an outer wall. Georg walked to a panel on the right wall and pulled a toggle switch. A slight whirring noise sounded as the outer wall opened, revealing a view of San Francisco at twilight.

I had never before noticed the window. When I mentioned this to Georg, he told me that he opened it only at sunset. It was a room built for an ethereal moment, which was surprising, because Georg, for all his genius, seemed grounded in the mathematics and physics of creativity,

not in its sublimity. Somehow, he had got past the engineering plane and had tapped into a spring of inspiration.

There were only two houses on that mountain ledge: Georg's and another a little below and about fifty feet distant. With the exception of this common visual exposure they shared, the two houses were secluded one from the other, separated by a deep, narrow, rock-strewn ravine and an impassible jungle of brush, bramble and jutting boulders. The window looked out past an enormous boulder that stood as a support and anchor for one side of Georg's house, across the rock-strewn garden down to the house below.

"That, my dear friend," Georg said, pointing a claw-like finger in the direction of the house, "is the happy accident of my architectural genius. The delights, ah the delights." He chortled and grimaced and clucked his teeth until I was afraid he was going mad. "What time is it?" he asked, suddenly focussing. I looked at my watch and told him that it was seven-twenty-five. "Ah, the floor show is about to begin," he said and sat in a chair before the window. "Turn down the lights, Charles, and join me," he said, gesturing to the chair at his side. I obeyed, flicked a switch and the room turned dark. Georg handed me a pair of binoculars.

The sun had set and the window framed a darkening landscape. The October chill shrouded the outside world and although the temperature was cozy in the little room, the outside mood seemed to invade the interior. I sat in the chair and accepted the glass of wine that appeared as if by magic. "A little libation, my friend: what we need is some lubrication for the spirit. Drink up, drink up. Here, let me pour another."

Georg drank wine as if it were water. I wondered if the bouquet ever had time to titillate an olfactory, or stimulate a taste bud. Pour it out, pour it in. That was Georg: drink, drink, drink. It wasn't long until I was tipsy.

Georg sat, staring out of the window, a vague smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

A light flashed on, startling me for a second, but I soon regained my composure and concentrated. The picture window on the east wall of the house below was enormous: a wall of glass from floor to ceiling, at least twenty feet wide. The room was a calcimined cavern glaring starkly in the darkness. A large, dark, rectangular painting was the only break in the monotonous

pallor of the back wall. The carpet was a brilliant crimson. A Baby Grand piano sat with its cover lifted in the center of the room near the window as if awaiting the entrance of a performer.

Georg chortled.

A woman with long, dark tresses appeared from stage right – that’s how it seemed – and glided across the room to the piano. A long, flowing gown swirled magically about her body. The gown was a light blue silken piece gathered on her left shoulder by a golden clasp. Although fully clothed, she appeared almost nude, a nymph in a white world, framed by darkness.

She sat at the piano in profile and began to touch the keys. “Yes, yes,” George snickered. I looked at him. He appeared animated, completely focused on the vision before him. His glass was empty and he hadn’t bothered to refill it.

She began to play, softly. Although the only sounds I could hear were Georg’s mumblings and my breathing, I could almost feel the piano strings reverberating in our room. The tempo progressed from adagio to andante to moderato. She had been playing, perhaps for two or three minutes, growing more animated all the while, until she was in a frenzy upon the keys, striking them in long, graceful arcs, her head enunciating the rhythm. And then she sank down onto the keyboard and began a slow, rhythmic caressing, redolent of the beginning.

Then there appeared a black shadow at stage left that materialized into a man. So absorbed was I in the woman’s performance that I was not immediately aware of the intruder. His dress complimented the woman’s with tails and tie. He moved stealthily, conspiratorially, towards the woman. His movements seemed frozen, almost cat-like. I became alarmed and looked at Georg, who seemed enraptured, his countenance glowing.

“My God, Georg, what’s going on?” I demanded.

“Steady, Charles. The best is yet to come,” he chuckled.

The man’s progress was painfully slow. I felt my heart pounding in my chest. My mouth was dry. The slinking man was a sinister shadow obviously up to no good. I sat on the edge of my chair, held there by the anticipation of an impending disaster.

Slowly, the woman raised herself from the keyboard and fingered the keys in fancy little movements, perhaps a minuet. The man was at her back, his presence unknown to the woman who played on, her life imperiled. The man raised his hands, slowly, until they were at a level with her shoulders. Then he grasped the woman's neck and began shaking her. I jumped up and Georg grabbed my arm to restrain me. "Sit – sit, Charles. Wait a little while," Georg sighed.

The woman raised her arms and her mouth flew open. She grabbed the man's hands and began tearing at them. I was apoplectic. "My God, Georg, the guy's killing her. We've got to do something!" I shouted.

"Patience, my boy," Georg cautioned, unalarmed, and strained forward in his chair.

The pair struggled on the piano bench until her movements became weaker. She slid from the bench onto the floor, dragging the man in a heap on top of her. They continued the struggle on the crimson carpet, the man astride the woman, choking her while she clawed and flailed at him.

Suddenly, as if on cue, the fighting stopped and the man grasped the woman's gown at the shoulder clasp and pulled, tearing the ornament from the material and ripping the garment from her shoulder. In short order, she was completely naked and her gown lay in a heap upon the floor. Her arms encircled the man's neck and she drew him down upon her. They lay in an ardent embrace for a long minute before she shoved him off onto the floor beside her. Then she was astride him, beating his head and shoulders with clenched fists. He lay completely still, yielding to the assault, his head lurching under her blows. She began tearing at his clothes, ripping off his tie, then his jacket and shirt until he likewise was nude.

"That's Mrs. Onado," Georg chuckled.

I was trying to recover from the trauma of watching an apparent homicide.

"And him?" I asked.

"Her current friend."

"Not, I take it, Mr. Onado?"

"No. This is his night out of town."

Georg poured wine into our glasses, and explained. “Mr. Onado is a sales representative for a heavy-equipment firm and quite successful from all accounts. The last Friday of each month Mr. Onado leaves and doesn’t return until Saturday noon. On most Friday nights Mrs. Onado and a friend have a party. Fascinating isn’t it?”

“Yes, isn’t it,” I said and asked for another glass of wine.

We got drunk and Georg told me once more about his race with Buckminster Fuller and how Fuller had beaten him to the patent office and became a world renowned figure while he – Georg – became a sad alcoholic who watched flaky adulterers on Friday nights.

When he was drunk, Georg’s cheeks and nose turned a somber shade of red. His large nose reminded me of the Christmas song and, when I too was inebriated, had to restrain myself from singing the tune. Georg’s large, linear head seemed misplaced atop his long neck and narrow shoulders. He was bald on the crown and grew what hair he had long, for a comb-over. He was incredibly vain and he perceived the curves life had thrown him as a malediction of the gods to be borne with the aid of wine and friendship.

Wine he had aplenty but, as best as I could tell, I was his only friend. He was a lonely man, much in need of the conviviality of human companionship. When I first met Georg, I thought him of a different persuasion than I, so powerful was his attachment to me. But, it was just that he perceived in me a kindred spirit: alone like himself and in need of friendship.

“Life is a kick in the balls, Charlie,” he said as he rambled on about fate and the stars and how his ship had got lost in a typhoon.

He was crying. The sullen, sarcastic, alcoholic genius was crying, blubbing, and sipping wine.

“Georg . . .”

“Don’t, Charles. Let me cry. It’s the first time I’ve cried since Ellen called me a sterile cuckoo with acorns for balls. Know what she did then?” he demanded, sitting erect in his chair. “She picked up the delivery boy at the local grocery in my van and drove to the alley behind our house and . . .” He couldn’t complete the tale. After a long drink of wine he continued. “She

came home and told me all the sordid details. She made comparisons, Charles: minute, detailed comparisons. I was impotent for months.”

We got drunker.

Through the fog in my brain, I listened to his outpouring and sipped his wine. Before he passed out in an alcoholic stupor, he turned to me, I could barely see him because the room was dark and everything seemed a shadow, and said: “Charles, when I die, this house will be yours.”

Within a fortnight, Georg’s was dead.

I had difficulty remembering his bestowal of the house to me that drunken night and assumed it was merely the inebriated ravings of a pathetic man who wanted to say thanks for my kindnesses. When the attorney called and told me about Georg’s will, I was stunned. He said they had found Georg sitting in his little room staring out of the window holding a glass of wine balanced on his leg. “You know something funny?” the lawyer asked, “He hadn’t spilled a drop!”

I moved into my new house within a week after Georg’s funeral. His ex was at the funeral and apparently had discovered that Georg had willed me his house. She gave me not a few glaring looks during the graveside service that consisted of readings from one of Edgar Allan Poe’s darker poems and a recorded playing of a portion of Beethoven’s Third Symphony. Georg had written the instructions the week before his death and insisted his attorney swear on a Bible that he would execute them faithfully. After an anguished reading of “The Raven” by a drama student and the last strains of Beethoven’s magnificent symphony had died from the sound system, Ellen Howitt sidled up to me, gave me a mean look and said quietly: “queer.” I wanted to call her the moniker Georg had so often bestowed upon her, but I smiled, remained silent and watched as she walked out of the cemetery.

On the last Friday of that month after I had moved in, I felt a strange excitement. At first I couldn’t think why. I was still saddened by Georg’s death and felt not a little guilt at my own exuberance.

The wine cellar, with its bounty, was truly a prize that I walked down to inspect several times and once started to count the bottles, but I felt foolish and stopped counting. I brought up several

bottles from the cellar and placed them in a cool, dark closet under the stairwell that led to the second story.

I prowled through the house, examining the rooms and closets, the colors, the wood and glass and marble. It was enthralling. I had never before owned a house entirely. I had always been the tenant of a landlord or a lending agency and now that I was possessed of so unique a residence, something happened to my vision. I saw the house differently: in subtler shades, the perfect corners, the confluence of symmetry with asymmetry that melded into not just a structure, but a work of art. I saw the house through Georg's eyes, though imperfectly.

It was when I came to the secluded room that I remembered. It was the last Friday of the month. I checked my watch. Two hours until show time. It was then that I decided that I would not do it: that I would not attempt to spy on the strange tryst.

Having made the resolution, I became aware of frequently checking my watch. I became nervous and excited, the sensuous details of the bizarre event pushing through into my memory. My excitement grew as the images whirled in my head and I found myself at the door at seven o'clock and felt ashamed. I was no voyeur, was I? But are we not all voyeurs in some part of ourselves? I was ruled by irresolution.

My mind was that of a frustrated child refused his favorite vice. I became obsessed with the memory of the episode, recalling it in microscopic detail. I combed over the whole lurid affair, my memory exquisitely artful in the recreation. Why did the thing have such a hold on me? I was fascinated and appalled by my fascination. Finally, I had had enough. I relented and decided to indulge my obsession.

By seven-fifteen I had laid in a store of munchies, a bottle of wine and was comfortably dressed in my baggy pajamas and an old housecoat.

To pass the time I began working a crossword puzzle. But I couldn't concentrate. The mental images intruded into my every activity.

At last it was seven-thirty and I turned off the lights, opened the wall and took my position before the window. The wine cork made a pleasant, submissive pop and I decanted a glass of wine. In a little while, the light flashed on and Mrs. Onado paraded across the stage.

This night she wore a glowing, white gown that emphasized her raven hair and flawless skin. She was one of the few natives who did not look like a bronze statue which probably accounted for the fact that I never saw her outside on the grounds around her house. I took up my binoculars to get a better look. She was attractive, with enormous eyes, an aquiline nose and prominent cheekbones. Her large, sensuous ears were finely made and laid almost flat against her skull. She had her hair up and a small tiara was planted atop the mass of gleaming tresses. Her regal bearing was accentuated by the voluptuous angularity of her body. She looked quite thin, but the flesh was well situated on her frame. She appeared to be in her early thirties: a beautiful woman in her sensuous prime.

I raised my glasses to the painting on the back wall. It was a large reproduction of the Last Supper: the darkened, somber colors standing in stark contrast to the crimson and white brilliance of the room. I stared at the reproduction for a moment, looking at the face of Jesus. He seemed to be looking away from his disciples toward the woman at the piano who, when I panned my glasses to her face, appeared to be looking directly at me. I shrank back, alarmed, but regained my composure when she looked down and began to play.

I thought of Georg and felt a wince of sadness that it was I and not he, sitting before the window taking in the view. I took a sip of wine and commiserated with his spirit. The house reeked of Georg: every eccentric nook and cranny of the strange and beautiful place.

The musical introduction progressed much the same as it had on my first viewing: from the slow, sensuous beginning, building gradually to the frenzied penultimate and the final resolution.

Enter the sinister figure from stage left. No change in the script. It was choreographed the same: the crouching malevolent man, the sensuous innocent Madonna. It was a different man this time: a shorter, stockier man. He did not look the part. Sinister men are tall and lanky and slightly bowed with a peculiar slant of the head. This man was handsome, perhaps, but oily – Mediterranean. He was new to the part, awkward and unconvincing. He would take some practice.

The attack was clumsily done and a bit violent, the man's actions crude and unskillful. It seemed to stimulate Mrs. Onado, however, and once freed of her garments she was lustily on the offensive. Through the binoculars, I could see the slight trace of blood at one of her flared

nostrils. She bent to her task, a willing prisoner of the strange chemistry of sadomasochism, ripping and tearing at his clothing, a veritable whirlwind, casting garments and pieces about the room until the man was at one with her in the flesh.

A flash of light from outside the house rested for an instant upon the window, obscuring my vision with reflected glare. I poured a glass of wine and sipped it, watching the coupling with a critical eye. I mused upon the procreative art of my species, ruminating on the amazing array of romance and fantasy and mythology with which we endow so primal, so basic, an act. Only we humans seem to be concerned with romantic love: the balm with which we soothe our over-sensitive psyches to camouflage our kinship in this ritual with our fellow creatures. The act of love, as we name it, is at base the physical rendering of nature's programmed command to continue the species. And yet, perhaps it is more: the ethos of which I observed through the window.

It was then that a third actor appeared upon the stage. It was a man dressed in business clothes: the casual, finely cut material of successful men. He approached from stage left, behind the couple now conjoined upon the floor. There was stealth in his progress: a fearless, purposeful movement that commanded the room. He came to the piano, stopped for a few seconds and watched as the coupling neared its crisis. The second man raised his arms, gripping a pistol with both hands. He took careful and deliberate aim and fired. His target slumped and the body twitched convulsively and lay still. The woman threw off the body and raised herself up. Her eyes appeared unfocussed, uncomprehending.

The metamorphosis from the former serene and sensitive setting was so startling in its character that I was spellbound and horrified, unable, in the little while that it took to unfold, to do more than stare at the bizarre scene. My clothing was damp with sweat and I could feel my body shaking from the horror of what I had witnessed.

She lifted her arms to the man and he came to her.

Afterwards, they stood and walked to the piano where she sat and began to play. He stood to her left, face on to me and watched as she fingered the keyboard in slow, easy movements. His face was shadowed by a quiet, vague smile as he watched. Mrs. Onado seemed unaware of the

gun he held in his hand. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, extracted two and lit them. She accepted the cigarette and continued playing.

When the shot came, she froze for an instant before crumpling onto the floor. The cigarette was stuck to her lip in an awkward angle as she lay on the floor, her face turned to the window. The tiara, loosed from her hair, now rested on her brow, just above her staring eyes. The man took a couple of drags on his cigarette and carefully, almost meticulously, stubbed out the butt in an ashtray. He then sat on the piano bench and looked at the dead woman for a couple of minutes before placing the barrel of the gun in his mouth.