

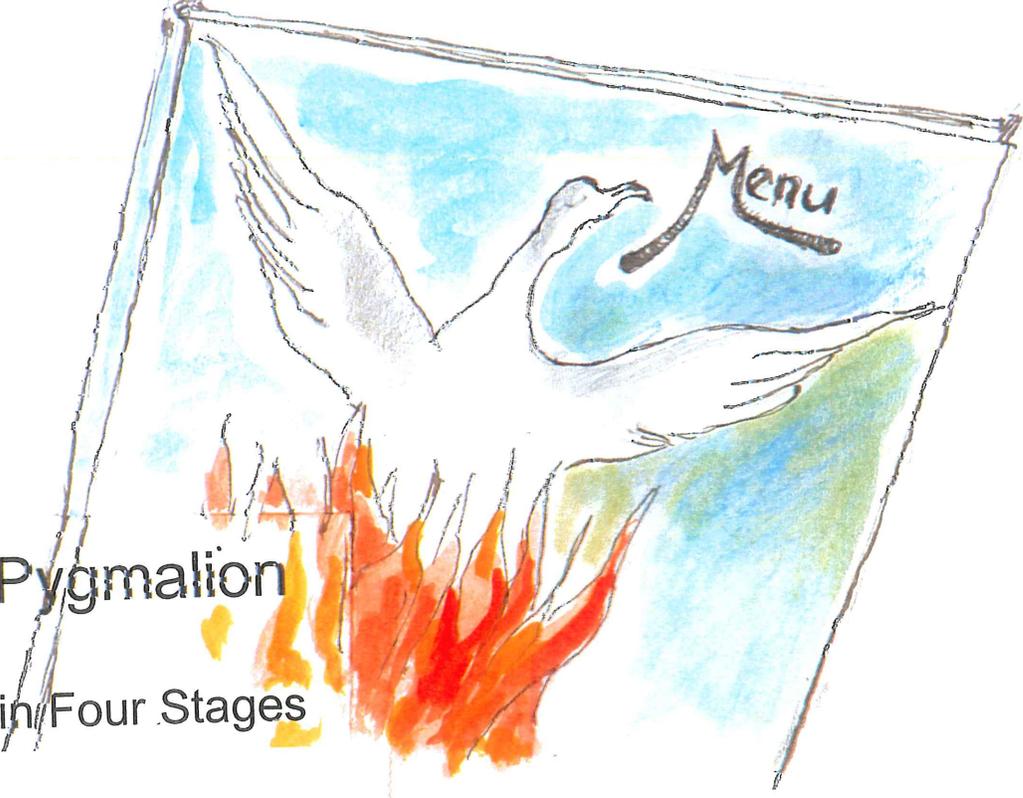
The New Pygmalion

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*Pafnuty Press
Providence, Rhode Island*

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An Addiction in Four Stages

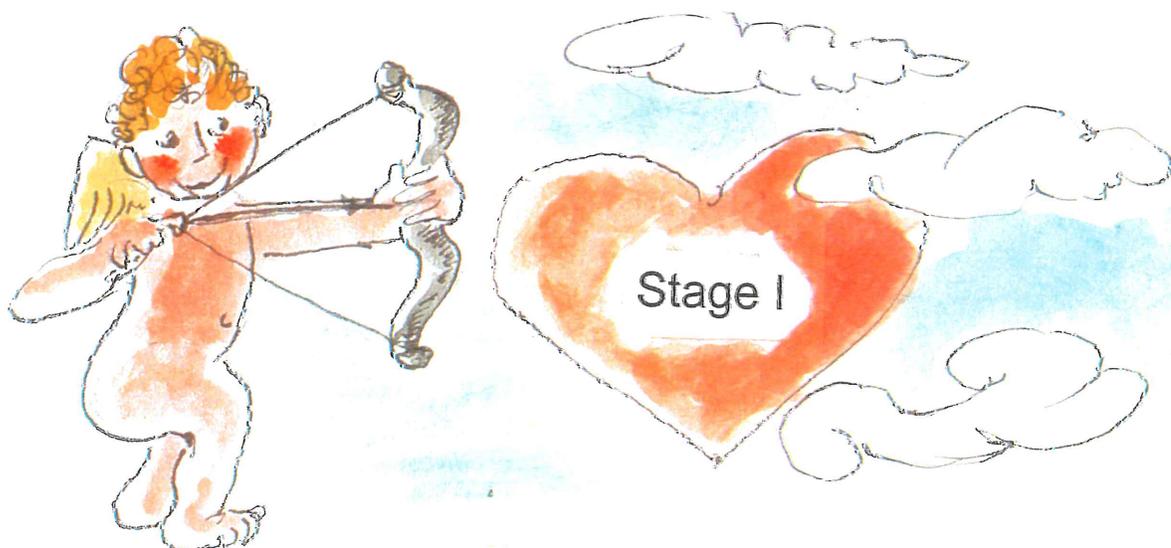
Every once in a while I would meet Leland Smith for lunch at the Phoenix Suburban Club. The dining room opened onto the first tee area of its golf course. I was not a member of the Club, but the Spirit of the Times had opened its dining room to any prospective customer who appeared at the door wearing shoes and appeared able to pay for his meal. Golf did not interest me, but the view was pleasant and the food was both imaginative, tasty, and was priced reasonably. Lee Smith concurred.

The cover of the blue folder into which the daily menu was inserted bore a proud legend in gold letters:

Phoenix Suburban
Est. 1899

"Where the Spirits are Revived"

and below, a figure of the legendary Phoenix, also in gold, arising from the ashes. Lee, who had more than a walk-in connection to the Phoenix, conjectured that the club motto was particularly relevant during the Late Lamented Period of Prohibition (1920 -1933).



On the day in May in which my tale begins, Lee, more pensive than usual, opened up and told me he was in love. I wish I had had the foresight to have taped this and subsequent lunches that lasted perhaps a half year, but of course, one can rarely guess the end from the beginning. At any rate, in my presentation here I'll do the best I can to capture the swing of our conversations.

"That is awful," I said.

Lee had a lovely wife, Veronika, and two lovely children, a boy and a girl.

"Have you told Veronika?" I asked.

"No. Not yet. The situation is complicated."

"It usually is," I agreed.

"It is very unusual," Lee went on.

"Most always. And who is the lady? Do I know her?"

"Probably. If you've done any train travel."

I began to wonder whether my friend Leland Smith was off his rocker. Perhaps some deal that he had counted on (Lee was a literary agent) had fallen through. Perhaps there was some friction back home. It could be anything.

Further conversation both clarified and mystified. It turned out that Julie was the automatic, computerized voice that comes on when you get Amtrak train information by phone. Lee had fallen in love with Julie's voice.

"Well, that's a relief to know. Not much harm in that, is there ?"

"Yes, there is and I'll tell you why. I call Amtrak four or five times a day just to hear Julie's voice."

"Not much harm in that, is there ? I've just been reading that Disraeli, the Prime Minister of England, when he was in office, would send his wife mash notes four or five times a day."

"I don't know about Disraeli, whoever he is. It's an addiction with me."

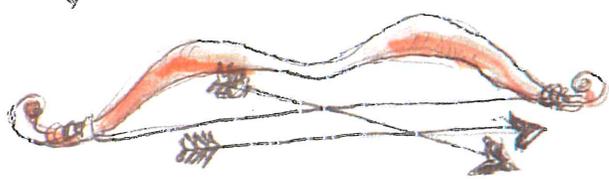
"That's an old story. Do you know this song ?"

And I sang:

♪ "Can't get enough. Wouldn't let go.
How I'm wishing I could get her back
I've got those addiction blues." ♪



Our waitress, bearing the check, looked at me as though by singing out loud I had violated Rule No. 24 of the venerable Phoenix Suburban Club. That wound up our lunch and driving back to town our conversation turned to other matters.



Curiouser and curiouser, I thought, even as Alice thought, and I pumped Lee for more details. There was no need to pump. He was ready to tell all.

"You probably know her. Her name is Julie."

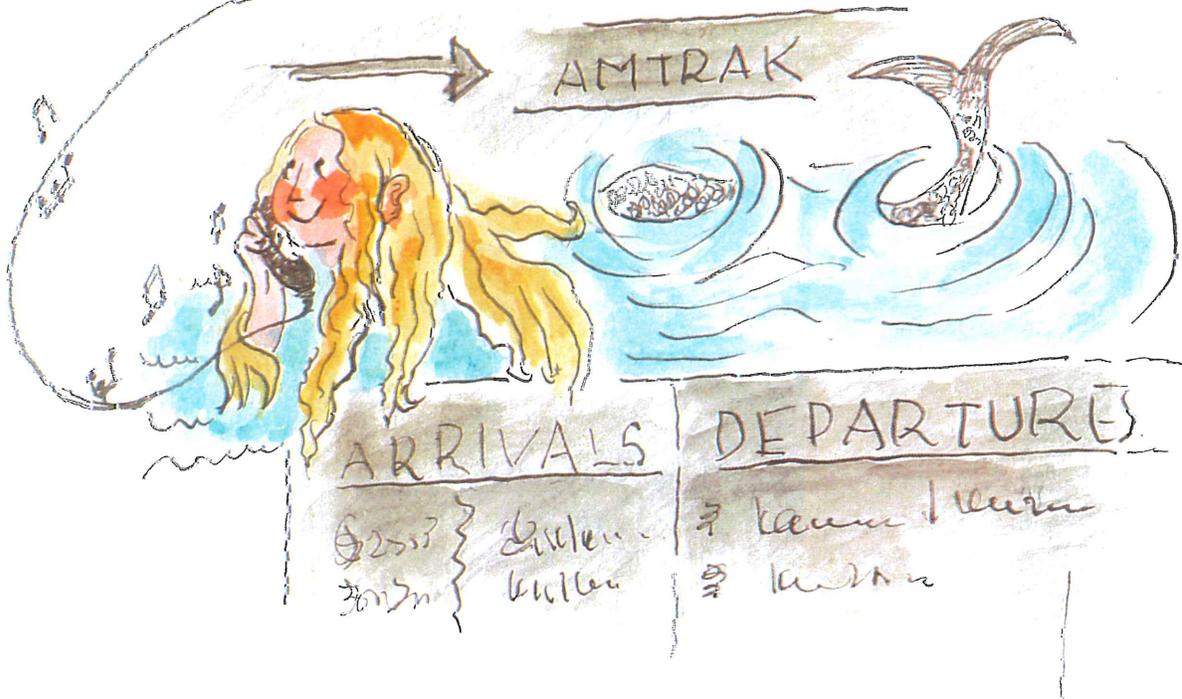
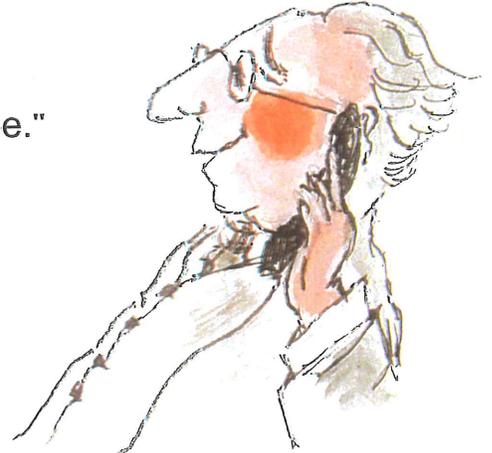
"What's her last name?"

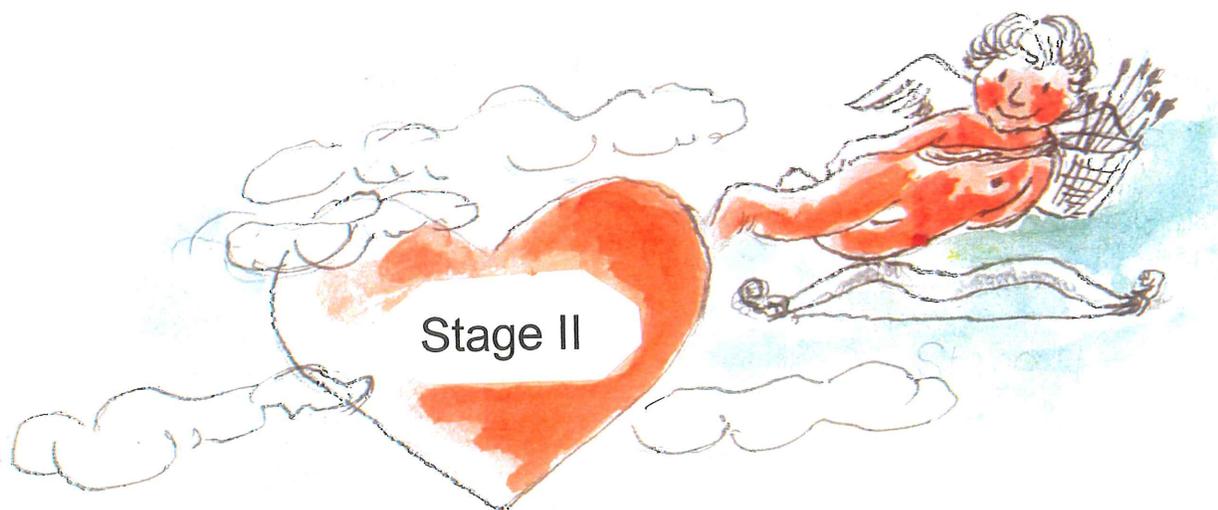
"I don't know, but that's irrelevant."

"When did you see her last?"

"I've never seen her."

"Then how on earth..."





A month or so later, Lee called me up and suggested lunch at the Phoenix. After some initial banter, and after ordering, he told me a story of how he had managed successfully and profitably to place a novel about Elizabeth of Bohemia with a well-known publisher.

"A bodice ripper?" I inquired, *pro forma*. I had no idea who Elizabeth of Bohemia was.

"No. Feminist approach. Much better these days."

Lee didn't bother to explain who Elizabeth was and feminism as an abstract concept did not interest me. I changed the subject.

"How are you getting on with Julie?"

"I'm afraid it's worse."

"Tell me. Four or five times a day?"

"It's worse. I asked her a question that had nothing to do with train schedules and she answered. A few days ago, I asked her whether she liked to cook, and she answered 'I cook panini.' Yesterday I asked her the same question and her answer was the same: 'I cook panini' in that same lovely, lovely voice."

"Did you ever ask her directly and specifically whether she liked to cook panini as opposed to cooking beef stew?"

"I did. Something of the sort. She answered 'I cook panini' ."

I began to worry seriously about my friend Lee's mental health. But I shrugged off my concern by suggesting to Lee that Julie was probably nothing more than a computer program with sufficient artificial intelligence built in to respond as she did. I added that her lovely voice was probably synthetic: not derived from any living person. Lee bridled at this suggestion.

"No, no, it can't be. Julie's voice is the voice of a real person. Julie is real."

"Well, maybe. But why don't you try her out. Ask her what she thinks about Roosevelt's Blue Eagle."

The question came to my mind because I'd been looking at the figure of the golden phoenix on the blue menu folder. Lee looked confused -- he was younger than me -- but he acquiesced.

"OK. I'll do it. But I don't really want to upset her with difficult questions. All I want is to hear her voice."

"How's Veronika ?"

"She's fine."

"Have you told her about your affair with Julie ?"

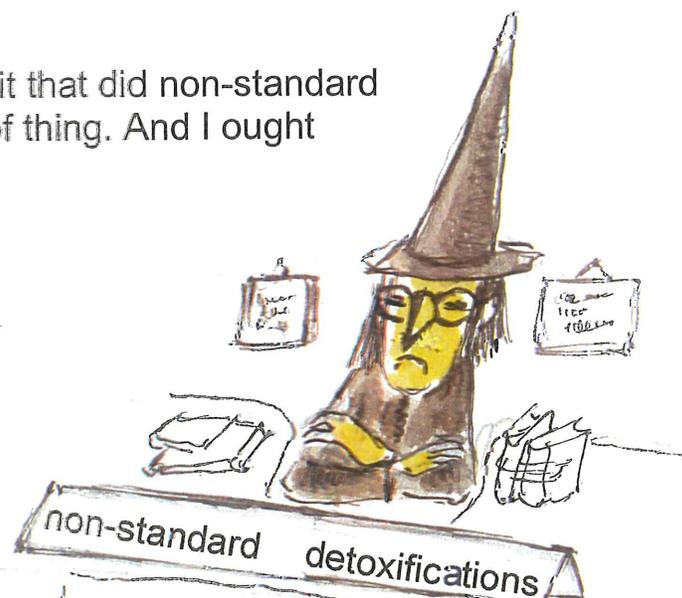
"Yes."

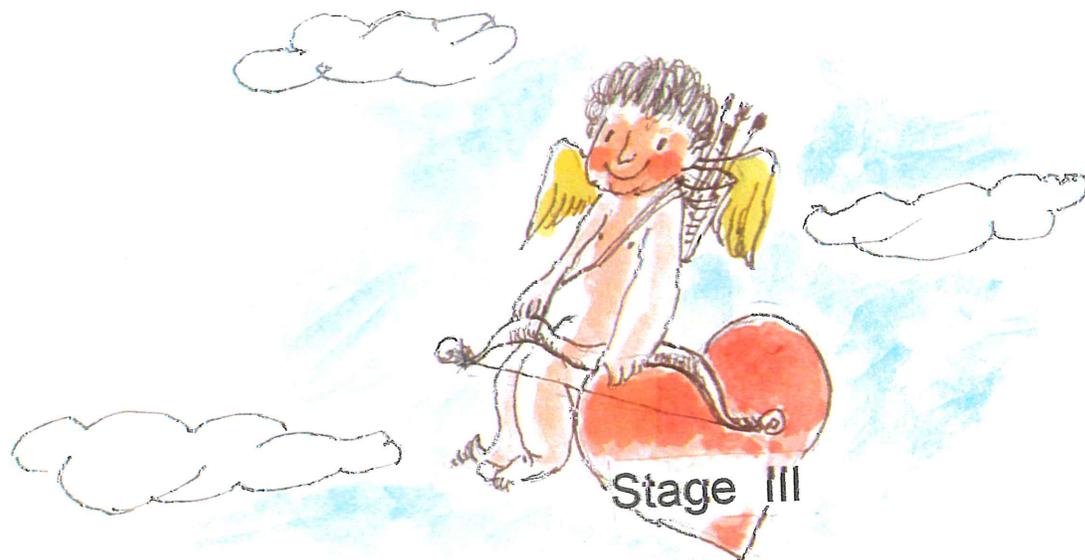
"And ? "

"She said there was an outfit that did non-standard detoxifications. Exorcisms. That sort of thing. And I ought to check in there."

"Will you ?"

"I'll think about it."





On Wednesday, August 12th, when I got back from a session with my dentist, I found a message on the machine from Lee Smith. I returned his call.

"What's up?"

Lee, quite excited, answered, that he was fielding a new manuscript and he'd like to show it to me because of something I said a while back.

"What's it about?"

"It seems to be a compare and contrast between your friend Disraeli and Oscar Wilde."

"Should do very well," I opined, "Both were great wits. Absolute stars in their day. Who's your author?"

"Francine Espardello. You probably never heard of her, but she's done a whole slew of compare and contrast books. Ronald Regan vs. Oliver Wendell Holmes. Gustav Mahler vs. Irving Berlin. Michelangelo vs. Norman Rockwell. She created the genre. They sell."

"Plutarch created the genre," I corrected Lee in my best professorial manner. "He did a whole compare and contrast series. They're still selling. Anyway, what's your problem?"

"My problem is that I wasn't quite sure how to situate my professional pitch. A genre problem, you might say. So I asked Julie."

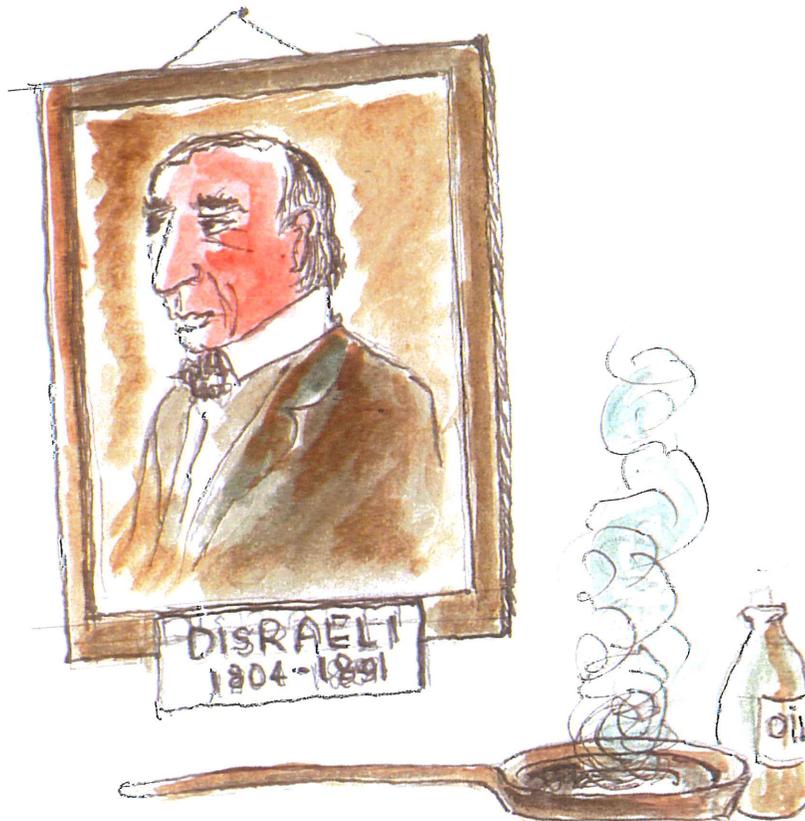
"Julie of the Golden Voice ?

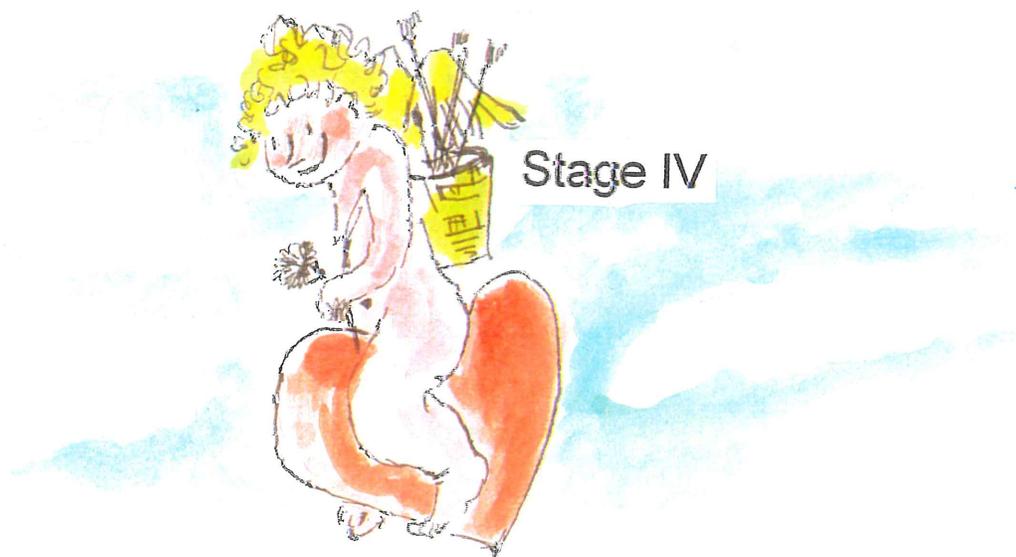
"Yes. That Julie."

"And ? What did you expect from her ? She's a program. She's not a business strategist. Anyway, what did she say ? "

"She said 'Disraeli cook panini'."

" Same old panini ? Must be computer lassitude. But why don't you just stick to train schedules ? She's not a know-it-all. She's not a quiz-kid. Her database is limited."





Several months passed before I either saw or heard from Lee Smith. Toward the end of October, on a bright Fall day, we were once again having lunch at the Phoenix Suburban Club. Our waitress recognized us and nodded towards a man and a woman sitting at a far table.

"He's the Attorney General of the State," she informed us in hushed tones..

Lee's eyes lit up. "I should go over and hit him up for a Book of Revelations."

I mention this irrelevant detail, because I'd like my readers to appreciate the circles in which I travel.

I ordered the Phoenix Wrap, a classic Caesar Salad --- hold the anchovies --- and coffee. Lee ordered soup and half sandwich of something substantial. He also ordered a bottle of Gewürztraminer, a white Rhine wine. This tipped me off that something favorable had happened in Lee's life.

"Where've you been all these weeks," I asked Lee after our lunch came.

"Frankfurt Book Fair."

"Mixing it up with all those famous authors, I suppose."

"No authors. Just publishers. Agents. "

"And ?"

"Got a contract for the movie and stage rights of *Jelly Beans for Julie* . Six figures. Also French and German language translations of *Jelly Beans*. Many Euros. A breakthrough there; the French are tough.

"Light stuff, I suppose ?"

Lee nodded.

"Speaking of Julie..."

Lee caught my allusion immediately.

"Oh that Julie ? I'm over that obsession."

"You've been detoxified, so to speak."

"I wouldn't say that. "

" An exorcism has been performed by skilled operatives ?"

"I wouldn't say that."

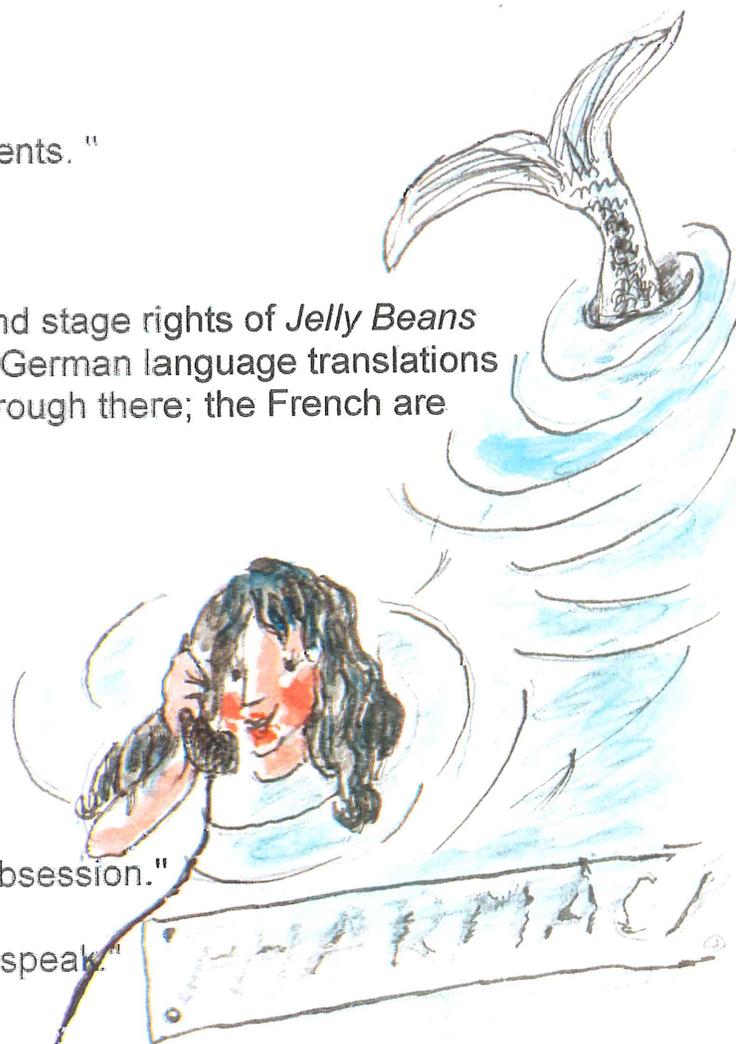
"What would you say ?"

"I've fallen in love again."

"With a voice ?"

"With another voice. The girl on the automatic medication line of the YourAide Pharmacy. I've been listening to her four times a day."

Reading the label on the bottle of wine, I ventured a judgment:



11.

"Her voice was bright, sparkling, and had the bouquet of peaches with an underlay of litchi-nuts."

Lee did not notice or disregarded my attempt at irony.

"That's true," he affirmed, "especially when I order enteric aspirin."

Postlude

All these months I had been keeping my wife Lois abreast of the Lee Smith saga and I certainly told her the latest development. Several days ago, Lois met Lee's wife Veronika in the Supermarket. Had Lois asked Veronika how her husband was getting along? She had and reported thusly:

"Franceska answered:

'Men! What can you expect from men? They're like a virus. After a while one develops immunity.'"

