

The Return

The wind was cold, as if from nowhere. On the flight, Zurich to O'Hare, he had catnapped fitfully. The sky was full of winter storm-clouds, and somewhere over western Pennsylvania, a mile or so still into the sky, he had stepped into the lavatory to change the bandage on his recently cut hand. It was a deep cut which traveled across the entire palm. He stood at the sink, blinking, and rinsed his face. There was the sound of a chime.

In customs he passed through quickly. The agent, a man with a refreshingly rich Chicago accent, had asked him if he had anything to declare.

A carton of French cigarettes, he said. But that's not what you have in mind.

The agent glimpsed the rucksack lying on the counter, the bag of gear with the tripod strapped to its side, and said, Journalist?

More or less.

The agent nodded with the authority of one who makes the disadvantaged often tremble—the keepers of the gate, they were the same everywhere—and then the agent relaxed, almost smiling, and returned the passport.

Welcome home, Mr. Brings.

Home, he thought. Chicago. The Windy City. He felt his heart lift. Even if you want to leave it, there's still no place like home. He stood alone now on the curb of the international terminal, facing a bank of flags, as if this were a subsidiary of the UN, which caught him off guard. Chicago, the city in which he had been raised. The city in which the wind was often cold as the grave. He lit a cigarette, a Gauloise Blonde, and inhaled the foreign nicotine.

His wife, R, would be at work now, even though it was a Sunday. The day of proverbial rest. His wife would be in the office making up for lost time. Long ago she would have delivered their son to daycare, though not today. Not on a Sunday. Today he would have to call his

wife at her office to apologize for having arrived a day early. On the phone she would be cool but enthusiastic, her voice pitched and slightly nervous. It would be awkward, full of stumbles, that initial kiss.

He understood he hadn't spoken with his wife in over two weeks. And before that? An eternity.

The gash in his bandaged hand throbbed in the cold. He looked now over the sea of dirty taxis, and as he did so, he saw his life go by: not the entire life but rather the last moment of his awareness of it, thus indicating its entirety, and this startled him because of its fundamental lack of pain. There was no pain, only clarity, and having understood this startling fact, he became intensely curious about its origins and consequence—like a young man, having observed his beloved naked for the first time, uncertain if he is permitted to look at length. Mostly he wanted to raise and hold his gaze. And, as in a dream at the very moment of nakedness, the view disappeared. The body evolved into a tree or brook, into the very thin ice forming against the ledges of a freezing lake.

Daphne, he recalled, turned into a laurel tree, and Apollo wept.

He would have to call Elise soon, too. He ended up taking the El and sat in an empty car which filled up along the way. Thirty-five minutes later, deep into the city, he disembarked at Damon and Milwaukee. His legs were weak, his knees threatening to buckle. On North Avenue, he passed the junkyard with the psychotic dogs inside, now charging the dented and corrugated fence; he recognized a few of the panhandlers in front of the currency exchange, as if this were a tourist office. There was a new prostitute—a white girl with dirty-blond hair—and now he headed into the neighborhood blocks, each prospering and gentrifying—million-dollar houses going up, despite the weather. On Honore he turned left and recognized his wife's Jeep. The rust on the tailgate had continued to spread. The Garcia kids still lived across the street. The house was there, the Garcias', its roof sagging like a hammock: soon they would be property-taxed into oblivion. In the back, there would be a dog tied up, its hips held together with metal staples after having been hit several years ago by an ice cream truck. A mean dog, and consequently vicious—had it belonged to him, he would have put the dog down years ago. *Big dogs and little dogs*. The family loved that dog. He turned into the alley which led to his three-flat.

At the door he had to dig through his luggage for the key; the mechanism to the lock worked sloppily, as always, and he began to ascend the narrow steps. The carpet in the hall smelled like mildew and cold and smoke. On the second floor, he opened the door easily enough. He crossed the carpet, past the heavily burdened coat tree threatening to topple, and stopped to check the fridge. He discovered a beer and opened it. The cap fell from his fingers, numb with cold, to the floor, tinkling loudly, and then he heard a man's voice descending, saying, *What's that?*—not angrily, just a little fearful and faintly curious, as if the man might be smiling into a mirror admiring his teeth. Stephen recognized the voice, its particular Waukegan accent, and he stepped over the carpet which smelled of the dust of spent vanilla candles and vases of desiccated eucalyptus. He stepped toward the stairs, his rucksack still over his shoulder: light poured into the stairway through the skylight, and he saw himself, an eighteen-year-old boy, admiring across a wide lawn the figure of a nineteen-year-old girl with waist-length hair—lots of spring grass, and tall oak trees, a library in the distance filled with books. The girl, R—she would grow up to be his wife, though not without a lot of typical complications; then she would become the mother of his child. And now her voice fell pleasantly down the sky-lit stairwell.

Shhh, the voice was saying. Stephen won't be back until tomorrow.

He heard her say, her voice flushed, I want you to go down on me.

He heard the man laugh, good-naturedly, the way a man will to impress upon his lover that he is kind and sensitive and unselfish, and he felt the man's weight shift overhead on the joists. A big man who could shake a house. They would be on the futon in the room which had now become a room for guests—also an office, a storage room for common files. They would be, when the couple paused long enough to look up from their handiwork, admiring the city view: the snow beginning to fall through the early city light descending across the glass of the rooftop window. It was the window which had sold Stephen on the apartment, and the man, an acquaintance of Stephen's from college, the man who continually got away from R and then came back for more . . . How to make these decisions? Who to marry? Who to love? And how does one's affinity for love limit itself to the monogamous parameters which describe the typically civil union? It was dizzying, these simplest of complications, of equations, and standing below them, his head racing, Stephen listened to R's voice

and the pitch of her rising breath. Having been here before, he knew where this was heading.

He kept the beer, left the apartment the way he had entered it: sadly, and overtired. The muscles in the backs of his knees were twitching with exhaustion. He walked to the Club Lucky where Jimmy or Nick dawdled inside, arranging furniture, and then he crossed the street, briskly, the way he might have had he been anybody else.

Nineteen ninety-three, he said to himself. This is your life. This is where the wind blows.

He hailed a cab at North Avenue.

Hyatt, he would remember saying to the driver. Downtown.

The air would be cold, filled with the city's brittle lights.

And then he leaned his head against the brittle glass. The window. He nursed the cold beer between his hands. He felt the cold, and the heat from the cab ascending from beneath the seats. Somewhere, anywhere, it was still possible to be warm. Having been away so long, he'd forgotten that, too. He saw his wife, rolling over the sea of sheets on top of their futon—blue, blue sheets—and then he saw his wife kiss her lover on the mouth.

That was sweet, she was saying, still flushed. Sweet.

2

Two years earlier—

The Adriatic Sea, the former Yugoslavia's fine pail of water, was full to the brim. From the rocky shore the blue water stretched out across the horizon, out and across to the island of Vis and, to the west, across the curve of the sky and into the land of Italy.

There was a sloop in the distance on the deep, blue water, beyond the bay of the island. He was sitting naked on the rocky ledge of Biševo—home of the Blue Grotto and a half-dozen goats. The sun felt warm on the ribs of his chest. He opened up a liter-sized bottle of water and considered going in for a final dip, and he could smell the sweat—the salt from his pores—languishing on the surface of his skin. Swimming in the coves, through the shallow translucent blue-green channels amid the rocky shoals and reefs, he had lingered for hours in the sun. His body over the past several days had become

bronzed, his hair tangled and full of salt. To the right, a football field away, a local family picnicked: a mom, a dad, two boys of their own making beside a pitched tent to provide shade for the children. Earlier the dad, waving him over, had cracked open two iced beers, and they made a toast to the sea while the woman scolded her husband lovingly and took the children into the sea. Later, the man presented his camera and set it on a rock and hit the self-timer, and they watched the red light counting out the seconds as the camera prepared to photograph the two of them together drinking beer. Souvenirs, they'd always been a way of life—the gathering of a stone, or leaf.

The nature of the photograph: that which is stolen from the light cannot be forever lost. To Stephen's left, closer by, a group of tourists had recently arrived on the last boat and made their camp. They sat around a wicker table on an elevated ledge built up with white stones from the island. European, by the looks of it, except one—a large red-headed man with a wild thatch of balding, curly hair. From a duffel bag at the man's side a pair of black cowboy boots with fine stitching lifted its toes into the air.

The group had taken its place, spreading out towels upon the chairs—one tall, dark-haired woman nodding to Stephen while unbuttoning her hiking shorts. He had nodded back to the handsome woman, who stood off in the distance, unbuttoning her shorts, and now her shirt, and returned to his book. He was reading an account of Heinrich Böll's return to his destroyed home after the war; he was waiting for the light.

A few minutes later a woman stood, shrieking, kicking back her chair. Topless, she scooped down to remove her bottoms, and then she ran laughing down the makeshift pier to the sea. At the ledge, she had to slow herself, in order not to cut her feet. He watched her slip into the water, another gleeful shriek of recognition—why does one always forget what that feels like, that moment of slipping in?—and he watched her negotiate her footing beneath the water, her hands spread out against the surface, the fine azure plane of water, and now she paused, having selected her moment, and dove in. He watched her swim out a hundred yards, then another; he watched her curve into one of the shallow channels shimmering in the light. She looked like a pale fish, her hips flashing in the light, swimming through the blue sea.

When she climbed up from the water, onto the ledge of the pier some two hundred feet distant, he broke his rule and took her photograph—three frames. First she stepped up from the sea to the ledge, the water to her mid-thighs; she raised her hands to pull her yellow, tangled hair from her face and eyes, pulling it back to fall upon her neck; then she lifted herself by the strength of her arms, vaulting onto the cement pier—this, the moment of the Cartier-Bresson leap, as she lifted herself from the Adriatic Sea. Now she stood alone in the sun, and Stephen took a fourth frame while her friends called to her, laughing, waving her in. It was a good photograph, he knew, this final shot: the exclamation point to that preceding triptych.

The cistern contains: the fountain overflows.

He stood and draped a bandanna over the camera to protect it from the salt air, which was hopeless. He watched the woman calculate her steps along the rocky shore, returning to her companions, gingerly but also lazily. Several times she paused to pick up a rock, study it, squatting on her heels, and then rising to skip it into the calm water. Now he walked to the sea, towel in hand, and then he dropped the towel onto the flat of a warm rock and slid into the deliciously brisk sea. He tasted the salt in his mouth. He felt the tender waves drawing him in—water, it parts as easily for the body as it will a stone—as if by design, past the nearby islands and on to Rome. The Appian Way. Even when flooded, all roads lead to Rome. He floated deeply on his back, the salt creating more buoyancy; he drifted on his back, his ears lowered into the seawater, and lying so he listened to the still quiet so that when he finally raised his head into the air he felt as if he had become reborn into the sun and sky.

What the hell, he thought. I'm lonely.

He thought, swimming in to the shore, Right is right.

When he returned to the beach, he lifted himself up at the same spot the woman had. He rubbed his arms and shoulders, not quite chilled in the swift breeze, drying him fast, and retrieved his towel, which he cinched about his waist. Now he walked toward the group, briskly so as not to give himself time to change his mind. Assuming the woman knew he had taken her photograph, he wanted to give her the opportunity to ask him to destroy it. If she did, then he'd simply give her the film. Free to choose—yours to print, or not. As he approached he made out two of the party speaking German. And the big man, the man with the beard, and the boots in the bag, he was

talking a blue streak. The pitch and the cadence: the American was definitely from the South.

The South, he thought. Yugoslavia. Land of the Southern Slavic States. One nation, under Tito. Then Tito died, and then the iron curtain fell off its rod. And now, the world knew, lightning was soon to strike.

A man waved to him, and then a second, tentatively, and now they waved together, as if deciding at the same moment. They waved him into their circle.

Hello, called a man.

That's him? asked the American.

Brings, said a man, his accent French. You are Stephen Brings?

Yes, Stephen said. Hello.

They offered him a chair. They offered him a cup of wine.

We're at the Palace, too, said the American. The concierge fellow, he told us you were already here.

The concierge?

He told us an American was here, that's all. It's not as if there's a lot of business right now, he said, laughing. Like Martinique after a hurricane. Bad for business. I'm David Summerville, he said. Galveston, Texas. They said an American photographer and Michel here recognized you is all. Nobody's giving away any state secrets.

Two others introduced themselves—the Frenchman, Michel; and the dark-haired woman who'd nodded to him earlier—Anna Castile, from Madrid. They were journalists and had been covering the war in Slovenia. The two Germans—a muscular man with a once-broken nose, early fifties, and the blond woman he had photographed rising from the sea—they kept to themselves, studying him as if from a distance. The blond woman sat beneath a thick, white cotton towel the breadth of a cape.

The man from Texas said, So how's the water?

Stunning, Stephen said. Blue and welcoming.

We're staying at the Palace for another week, Summerville said. R & R. I'm just stringing along. The others here are from *Focus*. La dee da. Except Michel, who's doing something for *Match*. Me, he said. I'm the oddball out. Have some more vino. It's good for you, 'specially when you aren't wearing any pants. The only thing worse than wearing short pants in this life is having no pants at all. He said, taking a generous hit from his wine, When in Rome.

Stephen said to the others, Have you heard anything about Dubrovnik?

No, Anna said. Nothing new, that is.

Are the buses still running?

So far that we know.

Clearly she was the serious one—dusky eyes, open wide, as if to provide a mask, and then to provoke. The cautious one, that would be the German, the man with the once-broken nose staking him out. Measure twice, cut once. Michel, the Frenchman, seemed more timid than probably he was, given the evident intelligence in his eyes. And the Texan was merely living up to the reputation of his state—all brass and sass and feigned simplicity. Soon, Stephen observed, soon the Texan was going to burn bitterly in the sun.

Vukovar, Michel said, appears to be next. That's the word this morning.

Three of them nodded, their mirth dampened. They all talked seriously a few minutes more. Stephen looked into the sky, observing the clouds, the sun which was beginning now to dip its way into the horizon, and said he ought to be getting back. His boat would be soon returning, and so he rose, lest he seem a gate-crasher, one of the dreaded sticky and lonely Americans abroad, and explained while checking the towel around his waist that he needed to be going. He brushed a trail of sand off the back of his calf with his foot.

Say hey, said the Texan. What's this FKK movement?

Excuse me?

There, said the Texan, pointing to what looked like a small pillbox, and on which somebody had graffitied in red paint the letters *FKK*. He said, That some kind of party? Some kind of Political Action Committee?

The woman spoke now, the blond. She laughed. She said, Oh David, you do not know about the FKK?

Nope.

The Free Communism from the Communist Liberation Party?

Stephen smiled, along with the German. So, she liked to tease. Not meaning to notice, Stephen noticed, not for the first time, that the German had a hefty dick. Thick-waisted, like a horse.

Stephen said, feeling patriotic, It means you go naked. If you like.

Ah ha, said the Texan. Well, by God, at least nobody here's break-

ing any laws of the state. Thank God for that. At least it's not the PLO or IRA.

It was then, for the first time, that Stephen caught the blond woman's eye. He told himself twice not to stare: the white towel covered her shoulders, not unlike a flag, revealing her chest. For a moment she held his gaze, then let her eyes descend along the flight and scale of his body. She lifted her eyes again, and smiled gently so as not to hurt his feelings, despite the fact of his towel, and turned to Anna. She said, speaking in German to Anna, I want a cigarette. She said in English, turning back to him, Michel explains you are widely known?

Not quite.

I don't know your work. But maybe I will look for it.

She smiled now, collecting her towel, which had slipped about her shoulders, and lit a cigarette. She caught his eye again, momentarily, and turned away, dismissing him. She was, as they say, on holiday.

Well then, Stephen said, turning. Thank you for the wine.

He turned and walked away, following the path to the pier and across the rocks, cutting up to where he had made his camp. Along the way he removed the towel from his waist and draped it over his shoulder. The family in the distance had apparently gathered on the other side of their tent where somebody was playing a guitar very well—a simple melody, marked by the repeated interval of a perfect fifth. He dressed in a pair of khakis and his canvas sneakers. He took the photograph he had not necessarily been waiting for: another picture of the sky, a sloop in the background, a well-dressed woman on deck.

As on a battlefield, most shots miss.

—

All effort was effort well spent, wasn't it? And he did have the photograph of the woman, not to mention the rolls he had shot in the Blue Grotto, often from the water. In the water, the world had become liquid; in the cave, the water and the sky had been transformed into a blue cathedral of light. His guide, wearing headgear like a sheik's, had stood on a shelf and passed him his cameras. That night, back on the island of Hvar, his last night at the Palace hotel, he had showered

and washed the salt from his hair. He dressed and went to the patio where he stood behind a stone railing overlooking the town square. Passing below him, the same blond woman skipped by, and he knew she'd seen him standing there. A hitch in her step, a decision on her part not to notice.

Dressed, she seemed younger than he had first thought. Twenty-eight? Still a girl, broaching the cusp. He watched her skip by, wearing a pale blue summer dress, her shoulders newly bronzed, and as he watched her going by, he admired her stride—the muscles in her calves, flickering; the light glancing off her knees—and drank from his beer. He stood at the railing and listened to the music rising off the white-stone surface of the square beneath him. He watched the air filled with lavender now fill with the half-light of the rising moon.

He felt this late-summer breeze in his hair. He heard footsteps behind him, and then came a voice, saying hello.

He turned to face the German—the muscular man with the once-broken nose, the man with the thick-waisted penis. He was dressed now, wearing black jeans and a white shirt open at the collar. He was offering his hand in greeting.

Stephen switched his beer to his left, awkwardly, and shook the man's hand.

I am Peter Messinger, the man was saying, almost patiently.

Stephen Brings, Stephen said.

Yes, I know.

I almost didn't recognize you, Stephen said. Having all your clothes on.

The German nodded, again patiently. May I join you?

Please, Stephen said, turning back to the railing. He took a drink from his beer. The German was drinking a cognac, its bouquet filling the air, mixing with the smells of the sea and the lavender.

I know your work, Stephen said. I admire it very much.

The man nodded. You are on assignment? You are with Gamma?

No. To both. I'm just following my nose.

Excuse me?

Wandering.

Ahh. To wander. To wander is to Follow One's Nose. I see. My nose, it keeps running. All the lavender plants.

It's pretty, that lavender.

Yes, Messinger said. My wife loves the lavender.

They took in the night and sea air. The moon had risen even more. A fact about the island of Hvar: there is no pollution. Not in the water, not in the air.

The man said, I am sorry. About your child. He removed a packet of cigarettes, tapped them out, and offered one to Stephen. He said, I read about it. In *PHOTO*, I think. Please accept my sympathies and deepest feelings.

He produced a lighter and lit Stephen's cigarette first.

Thank you, Stephen said.

They smoked for a while. The few tourists and several locals were gathering below. Even if a war was coming there was also late summer. Peter Messinger said, I've been in Africa. Have you seen it?

Just Morocco.

I see. Messinger said, exhaling smoke, You are going to cover the war?

Which one?

The war of course that is coming. The *real* war. That is why you are here?

No, Stephen said. I'm just taking pictures. Pretty things, you know. The deep blue sea. Mostly I'm just looking for a subject.

You like the pretty, Peter Messinger said. Even when it is ugly. When it is hard. Yes, I know. You always depict things pretty. He said, Prettily, yes? I enjoyed the cowboys very much. And of course your little book of essays. Reading them in English, I am afraid I did not understand everything so well.

I was younger then, Stephen said. He worked at his beer politely. He said, I watched what was going on in Africa from Italy.

Africa is a toilet, the German said. It is a deep reach into the toilet. But Slovenia? An embarrassing feint. When confronted with several snakes, the hunter takes the plumpest first. Like in football, a head-fake.

I wouldn't know, Stephen said.

Venice was still sinking, Stephen did know that. Below him a group of people was dancing now to Latin music. He saw the girl, wearing that pale blue summer dress, dancing with the woman from Spain. He saw the bartender mixing drinks with a blender and he saw the handsome waiters hustling.

Peter Messinger said, nodding to the women, The Serbians, they have the army. The JNA. And Milošević, to stay in power he must

make Serbia to be a Great Power. One of the Great Powers. That is why you hear all this about the Great Blah Blah Battle of Kosovo. It is like your Alamo, you know.

Messinger spoke like a German. One of zee great powers. At the Battle of Kosovo, circa 1400, the Turks had risen north, and having cracked Serbia's spine, or neck, had then settled in to live for the next few hundred years—spreading, among other things, the gospel of Islam, though often with the blade of a knife.

Messinger said, passing his hand over the square, The fight will be for here. Serbia requires a coast leading to the West to be a Great Power, like all Great Powers. The people are too stupid to understand there is no longer a place for Great Powers. They think being a Great Power will bring better shopping. But never mind. Croatia possesses the coast. The tourist economy, quite rich. No matter how you gaze at it, Croatia and Serbia will go to war. It is inevitable, I think. But it will be a *pretend* war.

Bosnia, Stephen said, studying the light on the white stones of the square.

Bosnia, Messinger said. The war will be about the land, not the coast. The Ustashas. The Chetniks. Jasenovac? There is still so much hatred because of Hitler. Now Germany has recognized Croatia, but we will not stop the war. Germany only *starts* wars. The French, being French, will pretend to do something but won't. Saigon. Algiers. The French and their failed military policies.

Not to mention Paris, Stephen said.

Yes, Messinger said, laughing. There is that, too. But of course there is always that. Germany will be afraid to act because Germany is Guilty and the British will do only what the United States permits. So between Croatia and Serbia, Bosnia will be crushed. Like a vise. Like a fruit or a child's head in a vise.

That's why you are here? To cover it?

For now. But you know, Stephen Brings, the world is so much smaller. Eventually we all meet. We should talk about more cheerful matters.

Stephen nodded. The art, like the collapsing Yugoslavia, had become fragmented by the sensibilities it provoked. He supposed he should feel flattered, standing here at the rail with Peter Magnum Messinger. Unlike Peter Messinger, Stephen had no understanding

of the future of the world. He watched the women below him dance in the night air. There was a theology of being, right there, available to all if only you chose to bring it to your heart: those women, dancing in the sea air beneath the half-light of the waning moon.

Stephen said, finally deciding, Do you know somebody named Bianchi?

Messinger thought for a moment, then crushed out his cigarette. He shook his head, No. He said, He is a photographer?

Antonio Bianchi, Stephen said. He worked out of Rome. Usually had a boy or two for a bodyguard. He called himself the Paparazzo of the Empire.

Paparazzi, Messinger said. The shits.

He started out working for Fellini. A set photographer.

No, Stephen. I have not heard of him. He is a friend?

He's dead.

Ahh.

When he wasn't in Rome, he'd spend most of his time hanging out at resorts. Like this. Or Cannes. Hoping to get a nudie shot of Sigourney Weaver.

Fergie, Messinger said, nodding. There is money in that now. Big Bucks.

I thought you might have come across his name. I've been looking for a friend of his. One of the bodyguards.

Why?

Why what?

Why do you look for one of the bodyguards?

He's also a pornographer.

Messinger said, *Kinder*?

He's connected, I know that. Like you said, it's a smaller world—

You are looking for your son, then. That's why you are here?

No, Stephen said. He's gone.

Having said it, not for the first time, Stephen felt it likely to be true, and this panicked him, also not for the first time. What's lost is lost, like a coin, or a good cause. A year and a half ago his son had disappeared in the Piazza Navona, into the very thin air and light of day. It was important, he'd decided, to maintain one's faith, which at the time had been the kind of understanding followed by a great deal of bitterness. The amputation, now having been layered with scar tis-

sue, still never felt complete—like a missing hand, and a man who, forgetting for a moment, will use its ghost to reach for another glass of wine, or his wife.

Of course, Messinger said, filling in the quiet. I am very sorry.

Stephen said, You'll go to Vukovar?

I think so, *ja*.

Godspeed.

They shook hands warmly. Messinger said, If you want me to make introductions with people I would feel honored. Not that you require such. But I could perhaps save you time? While you are looking for your next subject?

I don't know many people, Stephen said. But thank you. That's kind.

Stephen set down his glass and returned his eye to the women. Anna, she was close to his own age, but still she danced like a girl, all pent-up steam and vigor. She danced seriously. The German girl—Elise Kohlhaus, he would later learn—danced with her eyes open wide, her arms lifting into the air. Dancing, she had removed her impervious gaze. Unlike most who danced, she danced to feel the music, as opposed to being seen feeling it. The Texan, lobster-boiled and wearing his fine boots, stepped out from a bar, half-drunk, and made his way to the women.

Messinger said now, gesturing with his empty snifter to David Summerville, He is, as you say, a spoke.

A spoke?

Yes. Like your black people from the American South. The segregations?

I think you mean spook.

Ah yes. Spook. As spirit.

We don't say that much anymore.

You don't say spook? You don't say CIA?

Stephen laughed. Well, not all of us. Certainly not on the phone.

You Americans, Messinger said. You are so sensitive and you do nothing about these things. You do nothing about Haiti. You do nothing about Africa or Cuba. Have you seen the Kurds in Northern Iraq your president has liberated? You are the last Great Power. What is the good of shopping if you still think it? The offense, I am speaking about.

I wouldn't know, Stephen said. But I take your point.

Messinger said, pointing to Summerville, who was spilling his beer, He's not a *spook* then. He's a spy. A Secret Agent? I can say that? He will tell you he is a journalist but I will tell you he most certainly cannot be that.

Okay, Stephen said, turning. He wanted another beer. He wanted to watch the women dance.

Messinger said, pointing, Proper or not, he dances like a fat man from Texas. He said, touching Stephen's shoulder, We have our own problems, you know? Our own history of disasters. I did not mean to be argumentative. The Holocaust word?

No, Stephen said. I understand. I'm glad we were able to meet.

Messinger said, pointing to Anna and Elise, The dancing. It's soon to end. Now Messinger turned away, leaving, and then he stopped, turned again, and said, Stephen, it's going to end before you know it.

—

Later that night Stephen wrote a letter to his lost son, which he often did, and addressed it to his apartment in Chicago. Then he cleaned the salt from his lenses and packed up. In the morning, before sunrise, he took a fast boat to Split. Anna had been mistaken; the buses were no longer running. Instead he stood in the rain until he caught a ride to the Adriatic Highway. While still in the rain—that which was never supposed to happen, this rain in high season—beside the highway overlooking the sea, a truck carrying a load of sheep pulled over to the side and offered him a lift down the long and winding coast.

Second star to the right, he told himself.

Dubrovnik, said the driver, offering him a cigarette. No good.

3

Now, years later in a Chicago hotel, he slept like the dead. He saw a woman, her body cut in half, on a burlap stretcher in Koševo Hospital, where somebody had mistakenly bothered to place her legs alongside her ribs. He saw the corpses of half a dozen men, face down in the mud of the Sarajevo suburb of Ilidža. He saw a boy decapitated mid-step by a piece of lamppost which had been set loose by an exploding

mortar, and he saw a man, in flames, and a woman on a street and her teeth, scattered like seeds—small, white stones.

He saw, he saw; he slept like the dead.

It is sleep which builds a fortune, his father would say. Make sure you can always sleep at night, and you will be blessed. And while he slept he saw his father, dressed in his blue suit, worn at the elbows—this would have been the suit he had been married in—with his arms crossed over his chest, as if he had been caught engaged in the act of prayer. These are my hands, he might have said. This is my heart. In general his father had been a hopeful man, eager to see the good in everyone. Then his father and his father's suit of clothes had been incinerated in a vault and turned to ash.

His father had left him an eight-year-old European black sedan, a twenty-year-old stainless steel watch, a dozen acres and a farmhouse in Vermont and a solid hunk of cash. His furniture, which Stephen was to use after establishing his own permanent household, had been placed in storage, and the remainder of his father's estate had been liquidated in order to build a library. The library was to replace the one in which his father had studied as a boy—as had his son, Stephen, years later. The library would belong to a small and modestly endowed prep school in western Massachusetts. It would belong, his father had explained, to the future. The library was to be named after Stephen's mother, Arscilla Brings, who had died when he was a small boy—long before he could begin to remember her properly. A suicide, politely hushed up in keeping with the times: Stephen knew his father had loved her deeply; he knew she had been a tall, pale woman with raven hair and dark green eyes. She had green eyes, his father would say, like the Atlantic at dusk.

He must have meant they were deep as well. And having lost his mother at so young an age, and having no physical memory of her—only the few stories and the photographs—Stephen had been raised to think it commonplace: a boy, growing up in northern Illinois, beside his sad and lonely father. Summers at the lake, his father the architect had taught him to sail; winters, to skate. His father, having done his work, had left him to this world.

Where am I, he thought, waking.

The light was rising in the east. Any moment, any day.

Naked, he thought, we all look the same. Wasn't that the point? He stood before the all-purpose dresser-desk, upon which he had emptied

his pockets the night before, and checked his wallet (very few dollars), which he placed atop the two money pouches, one for each ankle, each of which held three thousand marks. He collected the mess consisting of his address book—loose sheets, everywhere; he put away his passport and looked for his good pen. Finally he dialed Elise's number in New York, and then a half-trillion other digits making up his calling card, a process which he twice screwed up, blurry-eyed and unfamiliar with the details. In America it was always later in the East, he knew that. The hotel machine picked up, and he said,

—Hey, El. It's me. I'm in Chicago. I'm not back yet but I'm going today. Actually I'm in a hotel. Later, it's not interesting I'm going to be here, I don't know . . . I'd like to I need a few days, okay?

—Ado says to say hello and to tell you he's met a girl just like you so it's too late for you, he's very sorry to say. Too Late for You.

—Hey I learned something I want to explain and it won't surprise you but not like this. Give me a week, I'll call. Okay? I'll call in a week. Be safe. —Love. Me.

He placed the phone on the receiver. He changed the bandage on his hand and called down for coffee and for clementines. He inspected the bruise above his eye and uncapped his pen and, instead of writing a letter to his son, made a list of things to do:

- Call Trib.*
- Change money?*
- Try for Elise in person?*
- Do not change money.*

And later, just before finishing off his coffee, weak but typically American, he felt a rising wave of nostalgia—home, that was the pith of nostalgia. That was its etymological root. To be rootless was to lack a home. Rootless and fancy-free. *Root* was also the root of *radical*, that which would first revolutionize the status quo in order then to kill it. Cambodia, Technology, Alternative Rock. He drank the coffee

and felt a longing to be back home and, nodding, just before he fell back into the oblivion of a jet-lagged and narcotic sleep, he wrote, shaking his head,

—*Go home.*

4

She welcomed him with open arms, his wife, though technically they had never married. The act of marriage, she considered, was an intrusive instrument of the federal government; so they said they were married, to avoid awkward explanation, but the real fact was that they were not. That he had never pressed the issue he had always taken as a sign of his misgivings; certainly, if it all broke apart, it would be far more simple to walk away. A marriage cast in the legal flesh is not the same as a marriage dressed in the current political fashion. To wit, there was so much less to lose, if only to the lawyers. And she loved him, he knew this, and he certainly knew he did love her, and so she welcomed him as was her way—standing on the stairs leading to the front and rarely used door of their building. She stood shivering on the cold steps in a blue wool sweater and black skirt. He exited the cab and looked up at his wife, her thick auburn hair all a-tumble—R, who spread her arms into the cold, brisk wind.

Stephen, she called breathlessly.

Stephen, she said, kissing him. She wrapped her arms around him, and squeezed him tightly, and he could feel the familiar cushion of her body against his chest. He could feel his heart beating against her body.

She stepped back, and laughed. Home from the wars, she said, wiping away a strand of tears. Touching the bruise above his eye, she said, It's the cold.

He hoisted his gear, which bit into his cut hand, and entered the dark wooden steps—the hall leading to their flat never having been finished. The staircase had been lined with six-inch-deep fiberglass to ensure warmth, good economy and sawdust. The lumber, still untreated, reminded him of an empty barn. Years ago, a job for his college summers, he had run a stable of forty horses for an all-girl

camp. It had been a sweet job full of tender labor and care for all those horses and the kids who loved them. The currying, and the feeding. The singing of songs while bringing in the hay.

R had visited him twice that final summer from her hometown in Wisconsin. Even then R knew she wanted to grow up to be an activist. Active active active: field hockey and soccer, always running laps around the campus, around her parents' neighborhood, which sat off Lake Michigan in Milwaukee. She had been raised in an academic household, a three-story wooden house large enough to embrace comfortably her large Milwaukee family, the entryway always full of sneakers and balls and bats. That summer she was cheating with her other boyfriend, the same boy who would linger in perpetuity as Stephen's rival; that summer she had visited Stephen on one of his rare days off, and he had borrowed a car, and they had driven to a lake. She had recently shaved one side of her head, to be radical, and pierced one of her ears several times—shocking, then, and sexy. He remembered her taking off her sweatshirt, hooded and emblazoned with the crimson initials of their alma mater. She had a new bra, she said. Do you like it?

Now home at last he ascended the flight of stairs and entered the center of his living room. It was small, cozy, and recently picked-up.

I took the day off, R said, closing the door behind her, latching the dead bolts. It's all neat and—

It's fine, he said, shifting his weight.

R said, You got in yesterday?

Late. I didn't want to bother you. I couldn't remember what day—

It's your apartment, too, R said.

It was late. I was tired. I just went to a hotel.

That guy from *Aperture* called, she said, changing the subject. And Jack says you should call the minute you get in. There's a list by the fridge. Apparently you have a new dean. He wants to know if you're ever coming back.

Okay, Stephen said. Okay.

She put her finger to the bruise above his eye, and said, What's this?

A bump. Just a little turbulence.

She said, turning away, You want a beer? I think I'm going to have a beer. I thought we'd eat at Club Lucky tonight. For, you know—

Old times' sake.

There, she said, handing him a beer. What does that mean, anyway? Old times' sake. Beats me.

The beer, the glass of the bottle, felt cold in his hand.

Cheers, she said, clinking his bottle. Jesus, you sure look different.

I've lost a lot of weight, he said. He could feel his heart beating unnecessarily fast. He said, running his fingers through his hair, I need a haircut. It was a gesture of his father's, a gesture Stephen now undertook when he was nervous, running his fingers through his hair. He said, I get a haircut, I feel better.

I like it that way, she said, tousling his hair. You look like you just stepped out of the seventies.

He said, Do you have any Xanax? I kind of think I'm slightly freaking out. Not bad. Just anxious. A little manic. I don't want to get drunk.

Yeah, sure, she said. Upstairs. In the cabinet. You remember the way?

He let it go. It was, after all, just a jab to measure how they'd spar. Silence: it wrecks, and then it ruins.

I remember, he said, heading up the stairs. I thought I might take a bath.

Okay, she said. Should I come? Keep you company?

In a minute, he said, calling down the stairs. Yeah. That'd be nice.

—

At the restaurant Jimmy came over to their table. And Nick. Nick and Jimmy just wanted to say hello. Nick presented them with a bottle of merlot, compliments of Jimmy. Stephen could never keep them straight.

For your return, either Jimmy or Nick said. Welcome home.

Thanks, Stephen said.

Mostly they were good customers because neither R nor Stephen could cook. For dessert they split a tiramisu. They ordered coffee, decaf, and R propped her foot up on Stephen's side of the booth. She was wearing fine leather boots she had bought in Rome. The laces must have taken twenty minutes each day to figure out. They looked good, though, those thin-soled brown boots; they looked good on R's feet.

She said, I thought a party might be in order. Nothing fancy. Just a few friends. Evans, maybe. Sheila wants to see you. And Susan.

Susan with the nose thing?

Yep. That's the one.

She was getting loose, he could tell, which made him happy. R, feeling loose—a hurricane of cynical sensibility seasoned by experience.

He said, I was thinking about Minnesota. That summer you came to visit.

I remember, she said. I thought you were sleeping with all the camp counselors.

I was wearing boots then. Tony Lamas. I was faithful and true.

Such a cowboy. Giddyap.

You were thinking about breaking up with me, Stephen said. We went to that lake.

She drank from her coffee. Champagne, she said. Yeah?

They called for a bottle, modestly priced. Jimmy or Nick brought it over with a pail of ice.

R said, lifting her glass, It will be easier. After we make love. She placed cautiously her booted foot between his legs.

She raised her eyebrow. He grasped the boot and massaged her ankle.

We're just nervous, she said.

How long have we known each other? Fifteen, sixteen years?

She said, Kids under the same roof. We were babies.

You still are.

Am not.

Are too.

I am. I am. She said, making an old joke, I am Bic Pentameter.

She said, finishing her glass, I'm glad you're back. Even if it's difficult.

He poured her a second glass and refilled his own.

She said, I had an AIDS test. Last summer. I was thinking, just to be safe. It's all people talk about—

I can imagine.

She said, Do you need an AIDS test?

I don't think so.

Think?

Yes. I don't think so. I can get one if you like.

No. It's not as if I don't trust you. I mean, I've only seen one guy.

Adam. And I know *he's* safe. She said, This isn't about morality, you know.

Adam, Stephen said. So how's he doing?

Jesus, she said. This is ridiculous.

What do you want me to say?

She reached for his water, her own being empty. I don't want to fight.

Do you want to break up? Like in college? Do you want to leave me?

You're the guy who keeps going away. Off to foreign wars. You say, Okay? Only one guy? Gee, R, I'm so glad to hear it's only one guy—

He said, I'm not going to talk about this. I don't think I need a test.

But you're not certain, are you?

I'm as certain I think as anybody should be. I don't have sex with hookers. I try to avoid spilt blood. Like you, I'm careful.

He put out his credit card. Soon he'd have to clean off its balance. Make a withdrawal. He said, locating the image from his past, In Minnesota you brought a new bra. You could see right through it.

I don't remember, she said. If you say so.

How long?

We were nineteen, she said, looking up.

I'm thirty-five.

Thirty-six, she said. Do the math.

He signed the check and slid the credit slip to the edge of the table; he put his water glass on top of it. Now he reached across the table and took her hand.

She said, I have a hard week coming up. There's a rally. People from Washington are coming in to observe. Lynn and the Girls, the regular NOW gang. We're expecting a lot of signs.

Signs?

For the rally. They're on the way.

Okay.

Hey, she said. We'll get through this.

Maybe we won't. Maybe we're not supposed to.

We get through everything. When we want.

He said, We should go home.

I want to laugh more, she said, rising. I'm not laughing enough. It makes me sad. She said, putting on her red scarf, and then kissing him, Stephen, I'm just really glad you're back.

The fact of memory—the way it screens off your past only to project bits of it unexpectedly onto the fabric of the present—what frightens Stephen is the fact of memory and his inability to recall his life at will. I want it back, he might say. Give it to me, please. Sometimes he can't remember the most simple facts of his own life. And if he cannot remember them, then who will? All of which begs the question: is any life worth remembering at all?

And if so, then whose? His son, Gulliver, was four. Stephen remembered Gulliver climbing onto his back. Teaching his son to skate. He remembered feeding Gulliver his first morsel of solid food—apple-sauce, from a jar the size of a tangerine. He remembered Gulliver taking his hand and saying, *This way.*

This way, Dad.

Loss never disappears; it merely transforms the space it fills—a body placed into a body of water, or fire.

My dad, he heard Gulliver once say. My dad is a photographer.

Yeah, Gulliver explained, nodding. He takes pictures. Not draws pictures. He *takes* pictures. Like that.

And then, if they are any good, he gives them back. In bed, together for the first time in months, R inspected Stephen's body gently. She had lit a candle, and she had removed her fine boots, and her blue wool sweater, beneath which she did not wear a bra. They are children of the North American Seventies; she with her wardrobe, he with his tangled hair. Like that guy from Styx, she said, putting her hand into it. The Bee Gees? She placed his hand on the oblique curve of her breast, just above her ribs, knowing this was his favorite part of her body. The body, and that which it holds, water and blood, and heat, sometimes malice, at other times tenderness or regret . . . the body amazed him still. The human form, and the way it's possible to gaze at it. Gulliver had emerged from that body, as had R's inexpressible grief at his disappearance. Eventually, having finally registered it, she had screamed into the very fact of it. A wail so piercing it had made him dizzy, though he had since heard similar expressions of that cry. A woman, cradling her assassinated little girl in Sarajevo; a man, after learning his family had disappeared into the smoke and ash and bloody woods of Visegrád. Stephen had

become familiar with the language of suffering, of self-recrimination and grief.

If only, began the chorus. *If only* . . .

He could recall it all with perfect pitch. People said, Why don't you talk about it? Afterward, after the paperwork had all been filed, and more paperwork, and questioning, always the Italian questioning, and the aloof and meticulous carabinieri shaking their uniformed heads . . . *And why do you bring this boy to Italy?* . . . afterward R had disappeared inside herself as if she were retreating to the very center of her life, or the origins of the cosmos. She had slid inside herself, as if she were a pond, and waited for it to freeze over. Months later, she came back, chilled to the bone. She looked around, took a breath, and began seeing a shrink twice a week. They had by now returned to their home in Chicago. They had to figure out where to put all the toys. Stephen met briefly with a shrink of his own—a big, woolly man who reminded Stephen that pain often heals on its own terms. Life follows its own schedule, said his shrink, sadly, apparently burdened by his own passages of inexpressible grief. His shrink said, getting at the nub of things, *Pain is pain*. Then Stephen started taking more and more trips. He took a leave of absence. He helped R pack the toys and books and boots into a closet, in case Gulliver be returned to them, as if by airborne express, and thus they had gotten on with the silence which had become the making of their lives while waiting for the mail.

The disappeared, that's what you called people who had been silenced, never to be heard from again. When Stephen's father had died, Stephen had been struck by the finality and the stillness of that moment, but at least he had been permitted to see his father go. Dust to dust, there on the frozen ground. When Stephen's son was kidnapped, there had been no possible brace sufficient to protect his heart. He recalled, instead, the sound of his son, crying, not wanting to be put down for his nap. Not wanting to go home from the park. He recalled the echo of that wail, that torment, deriving from inside his son's small and perfect body. On Gulliver's thigh, there was a splash of birthmark, as if the water had been just a tad too hot. When R's water broke, they had been standing in a crowded El car, the height of summer. She was standing in a big flowered sundress, and then her water broke, and crashed to the floor, and a kid wearing a Bulls cap said *Gross!* and then other people started clapping and cheering, and

a man had run ahead to fetch a cab, and the driver of the cab had said *No baby No baby Stay inside Please stay* and three hours later Gulliver had been born, and eventually circumcised, because he was to grow up and become a man. And then the boy disappeared, not having had an opportunity to become a man, and for months Stephen had slept with the voice of his son wailing.

No. No no no.

The disappeared, they can't go their way if you don't let them. The gash across the palm of his hand ached deeply. That Stephen had been becoming more relaxed in his grip served only to convince him he was letting go too swiftly. *Your wake-up call, please*, a voice had recently said to him. Meaning also *pay attention*. He had his life, and he had this life's work. He had his wife, in spirit if not in law, and this lost child they shared like an empty house, and now there was Elise, in Manhattan, telling him she hoped he'd come soon.

I hope you come find me, Stephen. You should not give this up.

Which way, once you heard the call, did you turn?

In their bedroom, R had lit a candle and placed his hand against the side of her body. She put her finger to the recent bruise over his eye, to the bandage covering the deep cut across the palm of his hand. She asked him about the beefy scar on his arm, just over the bicep, sewed up crookedly on the spot—*Does it hurt. Here?*—and she placed her finger against his ribs, counting them each. She said, Well, you're all in one piece, at least. She said, examining a thumbnailed and crimson scar on his penis, across the glans, What's this?

Nothing, he said. The shrapnel.

Jesus, R said, inspecting him. Jesus!

It's fine. It looks worse than it was, really.

I thought you wore stuff for that. Like for hockey. A jock strap or something. A flak dingy and helmet. That stuff!

It was a freak thing. I'm fine, he said. Really.

They would talk about it later, maybe. Actually he was pretty certain he did not want to do that. He said, Look, I told you, there was a little shrapnel once. I was scratched up. Like that. But that's nothing. Do you understand? Really. That is really nothing.

If you say so, she said. She said, looking closely, It looks like a scimitar. Like a sliver from the moon.

Yeah. I guess.

She said, letting him go, Okay then. Tell me a picture, Mister. Like

you used to. She placed her head on his hip, facing his feet. She said, stroking his raised knee, Tell me a picture like you used to.

He reached for his bourbon, three fingers' worth, and said, What kind?

A sweet one, she said, kissing his leg. No metal objects. No blood. No fucking terrorists.

He thought of the picture of his wife when she was still a girl, beside a summer lake, showing off her new bra and unshaved arms and funky haircut. He said, instead, You'll like this one.

I'm waiting, she said, pulling back her hair. Go.

He ran his fingers across her ribs. He said, beginning, I was in Split. On the coast. The Adriatic Sea. The home of Diocletian's Palace. It's full of refugees now. Thousands. Tens of thousands.

Refugees, she said. I got it.

But this is before—

Always before. You always do that. You always go back to before—

Before the war really got going. Split, it's not a fishing town, but compared to Chicago, or Newark, it feels that way. In summer it's a carnival. Coca-Cola and beer and wine and mussels, delicious mussels and plump white fish and everybody dancing. It's a horseshoe, the harbor. You walk past the fishing boats, the nets smelling like fish. After a while, you like that smell. You love it. Past all Tito's luxe hotels, you come to the beach. In summer the water's blue. Deep, deep blue. Azure.

In the guest room, across the hall, the wind howled through the frame of the skylight. When their son had slept in the guest room, it had been *his* room. The candle flickered in the draft.

Okay, R said, listening. Azure. The fancy blue. Go on. Details.

So, he said. So I'm walking along this paved causeway, which bends beside the water. It's full of old people: fifty, sixty years old. Weathered, tan like a saddle. They're poor. They've come here for the sun because they're unemployed and the sun is free and warms up their old bodies.

The sun, R said, kissing his hip.

And then, past the avenue of the aged and infirm, you reach this area of boulders and rocks. The harbor, off to your left, is full of ships and fishing boats and ferries. But on, over the boulders, this is where the beautiful people go.

The pretty people, R said. The people who are not old.

Sunbathing on the warm rocks. There's a topless girl, with a bright green and red dragon tattooed across her shoulder blade, smoking a cigarette. One claw, it's going over her collarbone. She's insouciant.

Insouciant, R said. So that's the picture? *Insouciant?*

No. No. That's the foreground. That's the context.

Okay, she said, kissing him again. Go on.

I'm walking over the rocky trail like something out of an Errol Flynn movie. Then I see this couple, beneath me. They're young. They're dark-eyed and stunning.

Here we go, she said, teasing him, running her tongue lightly across the glans—over the scar, which tingled sharply.

No, it's not like that. The boy, he's rail-thin, twenty-four maybe. Obviously from a prosperous family. He's wearing a black suit. A Speedo thing, the swelling of the bulge. He's sitting up, cross-legged, facing me.

Okay, R said.

He's facing his girlfriend. She's like a sister, exact same body. She's sitting straight up. Topless. I can see the bumps in her spine.

Her spine, R said, her hand now lifting his penis. She held the growing weight of it in her hand, measuring.

Her spine, Stephen said. She's perfectly tan. She's wearing a black G-string. The uniform. They are like this perfect, identical pair, you see. Identical. Slight, lean, hungry on account of being so inexpressibly alive. She's facing her lover, or her brother, who's about a foot below her on account of the slope—

And?

That's the context, Stephen said. We've framed it in. You see this dark-eyed pair, naked on the cliff above the blue sea. There's a pine tree with ample boughs. But this—this is the shutter snapping. They're playing chess.

Chess?

Chess. The girl, she's studying the board, which is between her spread legs, facing the boy. And the boy is raising his hand preparing to move a knight.

Go on.

The word, Stephen said. The word I thought of?

Yes.

Mate. I went, I saw, I named it. *Mate*.

Oh God, R said, letting go of him, rolling onto her back, her hand to her heart. Oh God, that's perfect.

Yeah, Stephen said, nodding. It was pretty.

And then R rolled over and took him in her mouth, and they made love far more tenderly than the way they had last. Welcome home, she said, once. The candle flickered. The wind continued to howl. They maneuvered themselves about the bed to gain a better purchase and then, while he was inside of her, R came, and he was struck by the sound of it. The very sound of R coming, which took him by surprise. He'd forgotten, he understood, what it sounded like.

Later, tugging on the sheets, she said, For life, right?

What.

The mating. Like wolves. And geese. Like us.

He said, We're not wolves. Aren't wolves monogamous?

She said, not ignoring him, brushing back her thick hair, It would be a shame, you know. Otherwise. I used to *know* so. I love you, Stephen.

He kissed her forehead.

She said, I want you to take me there. To Split. To the emperor guy's palace. I'll go to the beach and take my shirt off and play chess with you in public.

He said, teasing her, You always take off your shirt in public.

Because I can, she said. Because I want to. It was easier then.

She was falling asleep now.

You're the way you always are.

But I'm not the beautiful people, she said. The beautiful people do not have stretch marks.

Sure they do.

Crow's feet, she said. No no no. She said, falling asleep, Because the sun is on the water. Mmmmm. I like it when the sun is on the water.

He reached for his bourbon, and she said, grabbing his arm, *Don't go, Mister*, and he said, *I'm here. Go to sleep*.

He stood into the chill air of his apartment. He felt the wind funneling through the ill-framed skylight. Before at times like this he'd check in on his son: watch him breathe, rearrange the bunnies and the bears. Now he stood naked and alone before the skylight, looking

out across the rooftops of the city, and admired the lights. Snow was falling. Soon the wind would slow, and then stop altogether, and then the snow would fall more deeply, silencing the city it fell upon. The great unfolding of the blanket.

He went to the stairs, and he descended. In the kitchen he poured himself three more fingers of bourbon. For propriety's sake, he added two cubes of ice. His hands were still trembling, though now they smelled like the body of the woman with whom he had once shared his life. When she was a girl, she had shaved one side of her head in order to scandalize her parents; she had pierced the same ear in five places. When you're eighteen, or twenty, two weeks becomes a year. He stood in the dark kitchen, his feet on the cold, hard tile, and felt the electricity in his blood. He went to the living room, which was carpeted, and which held a view of his street: the snow, falling onto the cars below. To turn off another's city lights, all you had to do was interrupt the current. Across the street, in a flat similar to his own, a light flickered on: a woman, standing in a room, with pale yellow hair. Everywhere people were going places. Everywhere, anywhere, people were making love, and children. Everywhere people were putting their kids down to bed.

He raised his glass, the ice clinking, and sat in the pale slipcovered chair. Chilled, he draped a throw from the couch about his shoulders. The throw smelled like R—always the hint of orange, and cocoa butter. He nursed his bourbon and turned on the television, which flickered brightly. On CNN, the Newly Familiar Journalist stood giving a taped report of formerly breaking news in front of Sniper Alley, her hair dirty and mussed up, her pale blue flak jacket winking merrily in the cold daylight. He understood, by the state of her hair, they wouldn't have any water, the Bad Guys having shut off the supply. In Zagreb, apparently, certain U.S. officials were unofficially expressing their concern. On another channel the Crimson Pirate was swinging from the rigging of a ship. And on another, a naked woman with implants the shape of preseason grapefruit was kissing a second with equally modern developments. One of these days, they were sure to explode, like bombs.

- Q. Why are the girls in Sarajevo so beautiful and thin?
A. Because they never get enough to eat.

Sometimes the world opens up its jaws and eats your heart. In high school girls like those on the television wanted to grow up and be on TV. Bombshells. In Sarajevo, tomorrow morning, which was now . . . in Sarajevo the sky would be full of bombshells. He turned off the television. Look at all the things there are to look at now.

He loved the word, the beautiful name of that city—Sarajevo. Sitting in the dark, he looked across the street. He saw the snow falling which it also did in other places of the world. He saw his father, stooped, shoveling alone the walk, and a young woman in a red sweater with bandages on her wrists. He saw the police coroner's photograph of a fat man in a white linen suit, lying in a staircase off Vatican City, his throat having been slit. He saw Elise, driving break-neck, rowing through the gears into the streets of Stuttgart. She wore fine black gloves. She wore fine, black clothes, and a pale blue cashmere turtleneck, and she placed her gloved hand upon his knee. Soon, she was saying, gently. *Soon we will have you in a bed.* He saw his friend Peter Messinger dodging fire on the city walls of Dubrovnik. He saw the spook David Summerville puking on a linden tree in a cold and darkened park decorated with nameless graves. He saw his son, Gulliver, following a man in a navy peacoat, which he understood to belong to himself—that would be him, Stephen, in the coat, and his son following behind riding his perfect Kettler trike calling *Dad Dad!* and he saw his son eating pizza in a Rome café, the light all yellow and gold, as was Rome's way, the sky full of black sparrows rising. He saw a shriveled figure, draped in black, begging like a supplicant, and he saw a refugee woman, a drugged-out baby at her breast, striking a child with her fist. He saw a thin gypsy girl winking to him in the sunlight—raised above him, as if on a dais, wearing a red cape. He saw his wife, R, weeping on the marble floor of their hotel, her fists bloodied from having beaten her fists against the walls. He saw the blood on the walls and the white marble floor of their hotel and then he saw the National Library going up in flames on account of all the bombshells. He felt the bourbon in his belly warming him to his topic like a hot, wet coal. He felt a draft, descending from the staircase, and another, bleeding through the window.

Sometimes, sometimes you have to bite the world right back. Fuck you, too. Fuck the day and hope it turns to night. Years ago, in Minnesota, when R visited him, he took her riding in the moonlight. The moon in Minnesota could fill a lake, or a girl's hair, with light. At the

lake she had taken off her sweatshirt with the crimson initials and then her sheer bra. She had said, kissing him, I'm going to fuck you blind, Mister, and later that night he had taken her riding in the moonlight. *I'm going to fuck you so you can't forget me.* But before she did that they went swimming in the lake, and then she'd had him put her on for size, that was the order of things, and *then* he took her riding. She rode a spirited, soft-mouthed Palomino, and they rode across a ridge where below them grazed the herd—the horses, nickering, ranging on the soft grass, and they had circled around the loose horses in the grass, and then she had begun to call out to him, and he her, and then they had a baby, nearly on the train, but they had done other things in between, they must have, graduate school and first and second jobs, and his father had been buried in the suit in which he had married for what must have seemed at the time for life. To mate, to live with and for another life, a life which might someday rescue your very own—there could be no better sentence, no better conviction by which to live. It was the institution which made us civil, and capable of being more, marriage. Let not, the poet said . . . *let not the marriage of true minds admit impediments*—he was in need of rescuing, he understood this now—because *love alters not when it alteration finds.* He was in need of being saved. He was so in need he couldn't see straight.

After you close your eyes, unless you're dead, they always open up again. The day is like a sonnet, or a pool of water—all of one piece. This he still believes. Here is the day. And over there, here is the dark. Look, Stephen. Look at all you've seen. Look at your son, playing on the snow. Look at your wife, barefoot in the snow. Look at your heart, chewed up and spit out on the snow.

And look how it still beats.

And look at all the things you still might do with it.