

The Return

The day breaks—

Like a man's heart, or a wave. All over the world people are rising and welcoming the day. *It's been a long time. Where've you been?*

The kids, like the fish in the sea, are all in school. They're opening up their books.

—

To live is to participate knowingly in the spectacle and amplitude of light.

He felt light-headed and awake. Hungry.

He rose from the bed. He showered and dressed in his black jeans, his indigo turtleneck, and then he made a bowl of cereal and ate two plums. He drank a tall glass of milk.

R was out—a note on the table—attending to matters of the rally in Schaumburg. She wanted to say good-bye, not like this. She'd be back at one. Please wait.

—

Packing was easy given that he'd always traveled light. He opened one of the boxes he had shipped from Germany and located a duplicate set of prints which would make up the contents of this new book. He went through them, pleased—not for what he'd done, but for what the portraits made. Elise was right. He'd call it *The Goat Bridge*. Then he closed the folio and took the photographs upstairs and slid them beneath the bed.

—

The signs for the rally were still in the storage room, having been long forgotten. They would need to be returned, the signs, perhaps to be

saved for a rainy day. There was always certain to be the need for another rally.

He sealed up the box he had opened, and several others; he made two trips to the shipping store and sent the boxes on to Vermont. He was eager to see Vermont.

His father's—now his—farmhouse.

The snow on the trees.

—

He saw the wispy-bearded boy across the street in front of his burned-down house. The boy had his camera. He was taking pictures.

Hey, Stephen said, crossing the street.

The boy looked up. Hey.

Stephen said, You're taking pictures?

Yep. The boy said, It's okay. We were going to move anyway. To my grandmother's. She has a bigger house anyway.

I didn't know that.

Yeah. He said, pointing, I mean, it's just a house.

Stephen said, I wanted to say good-bye.

You're moving, too?

Yeah.

The boy nodded. Cool, he said. He kicked at a charred beam. He said, pointing with his camera, The light's not right. Not yet.

It will be, Stephen said.

You think?

Well, I've never lost my house.

The boy said, smiling, It's just a house. Only the dog got killed. We were lucky, man. You know? I mean, it's just a house. This kind of thing, my dad says—happens all the time.

—

This is something Ado once said:

When I go across the street, and there is the sniper, I always go with somebody else. Never alone. I run at the same time as another. This way there are more targets and everybody has a better chance. This way, if I am killed, I know I have helped to save the other person from being killed.

He said, It is always best when they shoot at me and miss. This way, they are powerless.

He drove to the lake. He stood before it, cold, the wind kicking through his tangled hair. Certain places he'd been he'd go back to. He'd go back someday to Panama, and to Chile. He'd go back to Sarajevo—not soon, but later, when the time was right. He'd go back there often. And he would go on to Gaza, and to Moscow, but he would not come back here to Chicago—the city and sprawl into which he had been raised. He was grateful for the place, for the fact of his being raised here; he appreciated its resourcefulness; he was thankful for the cold water and the whitecaps on the lake and the clarity of the air and the light. But he knew he would not come back, and so knowing, he removed the bandage from his hand and dipped his hand, his wrist, into the water. The water parted icily to receive him, and when he withdrew, the water resumed its place. He tasted it, the water. He turned his back and went back the way he'd come.

He was thirty-five. He was no longer young. Nor was he old. He was instead a man yet to do what lay before him. Thirty-five is a turning point for a man: reaching it, he either grows stronger than he already is, or he begins to weaken and to die. He is either all he will ever be, or he is charged with a desire and conviction to be more.

Either way, and like God, he is and always will be all alone.

He was thirty-five. He was glad to be alive. It was a given, it always had been: the greatest gift one can give is to sacrifice one's life for another.

- Q. How is one to know at any given moment, right now, that this is the moment of sacrifice? The moment of one's destiny?
- A. One never knows, though perhaps for those to whom that moment is delivered, perhaps for them that moment is deeply felt.

He had not been able to save his son. Certainly his son would want his father now to save himself. His son would want his mother to come here in the summer and walk barefoot in the lake she loved. In summer, when it was warm. There are sacrifices measured by the breadth of the surface they cover, and there are sacrifices measured by the depths they penetrate. And all sacrifices required first the act of diving in.

Like the act of self-resurrection, the act of sacrifice required first an instrument of will. It required first an understanding of one's place. It required a given life to save.

He turned, looked back at the lake, and then he made his way.

2

It is day. Time to get going.

Any road, even the most ancient, will take you either *to* or *from*.

He called Elise at her hotel.

Stephen!

Can you meet me?

Of course. Where?

He gave her directions to his father's—now his—farmhouse.

He said, I'll be there late tomorrow. Late.

Not too late, she said.

He said, There's no insulation. It'll be cold.

I don't think so.

The key is under the mat. There are sleeping bags in the big room. Bring some long underwear. You can build a fire to warm it up.

—

He went up to R's desk and turned on her computer. It was a Macintosh, named after an apple—an operating system which relied on folders and icons.

He opened a new folder, then another, then another, and then several more. Before putting the folders into each other, a kind of collapsing accordion of intent, he labeled the folders thus:

Stephen's Work
No Snooping
I'm Serious, R
Please don't Snoop
R, you're Snooping!
I'm grateful to you, R
But you're still Snooping
Am not
R too

And then, for the final folder, he labeled it, *Got you!*
And then he created a document for that final folder which read—

I left for you a book I like under the bed. Afterword to follow.
Love, S.

—

She arrived a little after one, slightly breathless.

I was afraid you'd be gone.

No. Not yet.

She said, taking off her red coat, What about the books?

Oh, I don't know.

She said, Come on. They went to the bookshelves then, and she said, I want this one.

Okay.

You can have this one.

Okay.

She said, stopping, God, I do not want to do this.

He said, R, keep the books. Later, if you move, if you're packing, if you want to get rid of some, if you want to clean me out of your life, you can send me some. Or not. There's always libraries.

Where are you going?

Vermont. I'll set up there. And then I'll be going back to Germany.

To Elise.

Yes.

She said, wiping her eyes, Okay. She said, Maybe someday I'll

meet her. I'd like to meet her. Maybe. I mean, if you love her, I'd like to meet her.

I left contact info on your desk.

She said, I'm going to move. I'm going to find a new place. Maybe I'll do that three-flat idea.

Okay.

I'll send you my new address. When I do that.

She said, shaking her head, I don't want to meet her. I'm sorry. I just don't want to do that.

And then she stood and pushed aside the books and hugged him. She said, I'm really going to miss you, Stephen. Really.

She said, pulling back, I've got you something.

Really?

Yeah. Uh-huh. She went to her purse and removed a package. It was wrapped in blue paper. She said, Go ahead, Mister. Open it.

Inside was an address book. Leather bound, beautifully tooled.

It's lovely, he said. I've been needing a new one.

For years, she said. Years and years. It's in case you get lost. So you always have someone to call.

He held her then. He said, holding her tightly, Thank you.

She said, releasing him, Time to go.

—

Ado said, There will be no happy ending.

But then Ado didn't understand that the decision of when to end—a story, a song or life—was just a matter of God's particular editorial design. End a story anywhere you want, you make it happy or otherwise. Bitter or sweet. Conclusive or not.

He started up his father's—now his—car and drove away. Traffic was light. He crossed the Indiana Skyway, and then the state of Indiana. He gassed up in Ohio late and in the dark. By the time he hit Pittsburgh, he was growing dizzy, and so he stopped by the side of the road and did fifty push-ups and drank a Coke. Then he did fifty push-ups more. He spent the next day crossing the dark state of Pennsylvania. I-80, in the dark, under the gray skies—he drove fast across the longest state in the world. By late afternoon he was in the tangle of Connecticut, this state's legislators having recently decided its

bridges were unsafe, now engaged in the process of rebuilding each. The lanes narrowed dangerously and unexpectedly at each crossing. There were men and women working at the sites, wearing hard hats, waving him through. Then, past Hartford, he took the highway up through the middle of Massachusetts, and then he crossed the border into Vermont.

His father had been born in Vermont. His father had fallen in love with a girl who would become Stephen's mother in the state of Vermont. The Green Mountain State. In Putney he stopped at the general store for the makings of a breakfast.

—

Elise, having seen his lights in the dark, stood at the door bundled in long underwear, a dark scarf, and a sleeping bag. She walked in big boots across a field of snow to his car and wrapped her arms around him. Then she led him inside the house. In the big room, there was a fire roaring.

She said, I've brought to you a coat.

3

He took her to the small school in western Massachusetts where there stood a new library named after his mother, Arcilla Brings. He wore his new overcoat, loden green, which reached to his ankles. Inside the library Stephen introduced Elise to the librarian and they all exchanged words. They met an old teacher of Stephen's, now deaf, who teased him loudly in precisely the same manner he had twenty years ago; there were two boys sitting in the big chairs looking at the women's breasts in the foreign magazines. Then Stephen went to see his books on the shelf his father had made. They were there, his books, and he touched them each on the spine. Then they went to the cafeteria and grabbed some coffee; they went outside and sat on a wooden bench in front of the library to drink their coffee. A bell had rung, and there were boys and girls, their cheeks red from the cold, racing across the lawns to make their classes.

He said, My father built that. With his life's work.

It's a beautiful building. We should all be so lucky. A library.

He said, Do you like kids?

Very much.

Do you want to have some?

She said, laughing, Well, not tomorrow.

But in general?

Well, I would like to have one, she said. I would like very much to have one.

If you have one, you have to have two, in order for the one not to feel so lonely.

Two, she said. Okay. Two.

And if you have two, you need to have three.

And just why is that?

Because if you have three, then you have more to keep *you* from feeling lonely. After you are old and all alone and they have flown the coop.

Elise said, I would like to start with one. With one. Not so soon.

Okay. Stephen said, We don't have to have any. It won't change—

Oh Stephen, listen. You would like to. *I* would like to. Listen to what we are saying.

Yes. He said, I would like to. Maybe.

What?

I don't know if I can do that again, he said. You should know this.

The children.

I don't know.

We don't have to, Elise said. Some things we don't have to know. Some things are just given.

—

He drove her to the falls nearby the farmhouse. The rocks were covered with snow and ice. He said, stamping his feet and overlooking the ledge, In the summer you go skinny-dipping here.

Is it cold?

Sometimes. Mostly it's a garden. Lush and green, waterfalls and moss. Dragonflies, skimming across the surface. Blackberries. It's difficult to imagine.

Not too difficult, she said.

He said, How do you feel about marriage?

Yes.

Really?

Yes, Stephen. Yes.

Really?

Oh yes, she said, laughing. *Ja*? She said, *Yes*.

He said, warming their hands in the pockets of his new coat, If we have children, I would want them to know God.

She said, They will know God. They will know God because they will know who made them.

He said, taking her arm, There's a storm coming. He said, leading her back to the car, I wouldn't want to leave forever. I would want to be able to live here, too.

She said, It is beautiful. I love this Vermont. I want very much to do the skinny-dipping with the dragonflies beside the mossy boulders, but not I think when it is so cold.

In summer. In winter there's good skiing. Not alpine, but good. It's a good place for children to learn. Maybe we could adopt, too.

Elise said, Some of us, some of them?

Maybe.

She said at the car, stamping the heavy snow from her feet, My turn to drive. You will have to tell me the way.

And then it began to snow.

—

The snow fell heavily that night. They took the thin roads and drove slowly back to the house. In the field across the field leading to the house there were two Morgans standing beside the barn. The horses had thick winter coats and black tails and heavy beards. In the morning the owner would hitch the horses to a sleigh. He would feed the horses, and then he would brush them out, and then he would put them into harnesses with bells.

And then Stephen and Elise went into the house in which his father had been conceived, in which *he* had been conceived, and they lit a fire. First they lit a match and then they lit a fire. And then they turned off the lights and opened up the blinds.

And that's what they did.

Like that.