

The Return

Scheherazade was called into the chambers of a bitter and black-hearted king. After the king was to have his way with her, he intended to kill her, as he had in fact killed so many dozens of other young women—former virgins, all, prior to their entry into his chambers. A chamber can be a bedroom, an ancillary working space off a judge's courtroom, a particular judicial body or prison cell, a casing for a shell fired from any number of firearms . . . it is a word, *chamber*—from the Greek *kamara*, for vault—fraught with the history of authority and confinement, intimacy and violence. Most likely Scheherazade had deep eyes, raven hair scented with oil, fine silk robes. Perhaps a gold chain adorned her slender waist, resting just so upon the curve of her golden hip. Possibly a golden ring pierced her navel—the nipple, say, or the ear.

Now it is day . . .

Stephen woke, bleary-eyed and thirsty on the chair. A buzzer, sounding and resounding. Where am I? he said, standing. He stood, the scarred muscle in his arm throbbing from the cold, and walked to the intercom. The clock over the kitchen sink read ten A.M. The morning after.

Yes?

Package for R. Metcalf.

Leave it—

Gotta sign.

There was static, that awkward moment when two voices are trying to speak at once through a single line. Stephen said, removing the throw which draped his shoulders, Hang on.

He rushed upstairs to put on a pair of khakis, a sweater. This being the day after his homecoming, and not before, R's clothes were all over the bedroom, the bed left unmade. Clutter. He slid into his old cowboy boots sans socks and came stumbling down the stairs. Her cereal bowl and the knife she had used to trim her breakfast banana

were sitting on the ledge of the sink beside the darkening peel. Stephen took the stairs down and greeted the man at the door. The man was wearing the cheerful colors—purple and orange—of the express delivery man.

Stephen signed, and the man said, staring at the bruise above Stephen's eye, Where do ya want it?

He stepped out into the cold air which bit through his sweater. The man was pointing to a loaded skid wrapped in cellophane. The skid, it wouldn't fit through the door leading to the stairs, let alone the hallway leading to their flat.

Stephen said, What's that?

Beats me, R. You ordered it. Where do ya want it? Hey, think fast.

They put the skid in the carriage house behind the building, the first floor of which served as storage for residents and housed the common laundry. Stephen said, finding the key, opening the door, There. He pushed aside two bicycles, pinching the long cut on his hand, and rearranged some boxes. Then he and the delivery man used a hand truck and horsed inside the heavy skid.

The man left, and Stephen opened partially the cellophane: the skid was loaded with signs, thousands, each emblazoned with the logo USAAN—United States Abortion Action Network. Everywhere you went, somebody was manufacturing another acronym, and signs on which to paint it.

Stacked into the skid were thousands of wooden sticks.

This, Stephen thought, your PAC dollars at work.

He lit a morning cigarette and returned to the entrance of his building. He took in the icicled morning air, his sockless feet in his boots beginning to numb, and sat on his heels—his back to the brick wall. Across the street, the eldest Garcia boy had grown, and Stephen waved to him in the cold air, and the boy, wispy-bearded and tough-looking, broke into a broad-hearted smile and waved back. Years ago Stephen had given the boy an old Pentax K1000; they had gone to the park, and Stephen had instructed him on matters relating to film speed and aperture. Don't worry about the focus, Stephen had told the boy. Don't worry about the frame. First you figure out the clutch, then you learn to drive.

You back? called the boy, no longer a boy.

Yeah.

Cool, the boy called. Cool.

Ice, Stephen thought. He loved the way it was always possible to break. He stood, and shivered, and smoked and watched a cab pull to the curb. A woman stepped out in heels and a black, woolen overcoat. She had longer hair than he remembered and was evidently stoned. She stumbled to the entry, her heels clicking sloppily, not recognizing Stephen, giggling slightly. She gathered to her chest the coat to keep it from spilling open. Squinting in the cold light, she recognized Stephen and said, Oh, it's you. I forgot my contacts.

She stumbled beside him, their shoulders rubbing. The last he'd heard the girl was studying fashion design, though perhaps her career in dressmaking had led her elsewhere. He watched her stop on the landing and remove her heels, one at a time, fumbling with the straps. He watched the weight of her heavy, black coat shift in the light. There was dust streaming into the light of the landing. Now she faced the blank wall and opened her coat wide, her back to him, unfolding a pair of black and giant wings.

She said to Stephen, Wanna look?

It's early, Stephen said.

It's late, she said, closing her coat, turning to face him. She clutched the coat closed to her throat, though still one of her naked knees winked in the fragile light. She raised a finger to her lips and said, Shhh.

He waited for her to enter her flat and close the door; he crushed the butt of his cigarette against the tuckpointing; he read the address tag on the mailbox—*R. Metcalf & S. Brings*.

And beneath that, *Gulliver Metcalf-Brings*.

In the kitchen he cleaned up R's breakfast. She had left a note, saying things, reminding him of the gathering to be held in honor of his return. She asked him to pick up some items from the market—including condoms, for example. If he wanted to come by the office to say hello, she would like that. He tossed the note into the trash, which needed emptying—always—and poured himself a drink, which he took all at once, the bourbon burning his throat. He turned on the television to an all-news program: apparently, there was an important development in an important trial. He made a pot of coffee, and drank two tall glasses of water, and then the TV anchor interrupted the important trial for breaking news and a commercial.

When he thinks of Sarajevo, he thinks of the dark. It is cold, and dark, and in the dark nobody is warm. Except when the moon is full,

the light on the snow in the mountains, the light is cold and insufficient. Sometimes, a woman is falling out a window; sometimes, the sky is full of thunder: artillery and rockets, and the light they make, God's own static, flashing in the dark night. Sometimes boys are rollerblading on the streets between overturned cars. Always nobody has enough to eat; nobody has enough to drink; always, in the cold and the dark, nobody has enough to give to those who do not have enough. Safely returned to his home, and standing alone in his kitchen, Stephen had a third glass of water. To chase the cold chill in his heart, he went upstairs to the medicine cabinet, located the Xanax, took a tablet, and broke it in half along the scored center with his thumbnail. He started a bath, returned to the kitchen, and poured himself another drink. It went down far more gracefully than the first. He felt his belly warming to the heat. Still, his hands were shaking, and he said out loud, knowing he was speaking only to himself, This is ridiculous.

His voice echoed hollowly off the tile. The body electric, it always shocks. He said, This is not about you. The war is not about you.

He said, pouring a half-drink, If you don't do something about this then you never will.

He filled a large mug with coffee, had the final drink, and turned off the fucking TV. He put on a CD of Beethoven's piano concertos and went upstairs to the bath, past the splintered dent in the door—a hideous argument, so many months ago, which he had finished off by hitting the door. His knuckles had bled, and he had been shamed for life—R, looking at him; she had looked at him blankly, at this wretched man he had become, and said, Well, I'm sure you feel better now, huh? I'm sure that solves it, Stephen. The next morning he called his dean and scheduled a leave for the forthcoming year and left the country. Now, having returned to it, he undressed to take a bath. To avoid looking at the door, he placed a towel over the splintered dent. He slipped into the hot water and lay back and looked through the dormer window across the rooftops of his city telling himself to let it go. *Let it go*, he told himself, and the water was hot, and soon he began to sweat. He closed his eyes and waited for the water to begin to cool.

He had last been home for five months, after leaving Dubrovnik, before going back to Munich, where he spent several days with Messinger and his family, and then going on to the capital of Croatia,

Zagreb, where Nina and Marko had made a new place for themselves and the baby. Nina stayed at home with the baby while Marko ran arms south to Dalmatia. They were rich now, richer than they ever dreamed, and Stephen took a photograph of the baby, Stephania Elise, which was marvelous on account of the baby's radiance—it belonged in a chapel, in a mosque, it belonged in every temple of the world—and he made several prints for Marko and Nina and then a print for himself and another for Elise, who went to Vienna, and then to her parents' home in Stuttgart. She'd be coming back to find him, she said. *This is not a letting go.* At the gate to her train, Elise kissed him on the mouth; she squeezed his hand, silently, and boarded her train. Then Stephen went to Italy, where he learned nothing he already did not know; he visited with a priest on a lone crusade against Internet child pornography—the Christians, they'd never had much luck with their crusades; he considered going back to Chicago, decided against, and went back to Zagreb to spend a nightmare waiting in lines at the Intercontinental listening to piped-in saxophone music by David Sanborn while gathering credentials involving faxes back and forth from his friend at the *Tribune*. Next there was another line with no music and more clerks and rubber stamps—clearing the way, or not—and then Stephen went to Sarajevo.

He stood in the tub, dried off his body with a harsh towel—Chicago, that hard-water town—and put on a pair of jeans he hadn't worn in years. He changed the bandage on his hand; he replaced the blade in his father's old razor and shaved closely, the way his father had once taught him to. The face in the mirror resembled his father's, as well the face his son had been in line to inherit. In the room which served as his and R's office, he went to his drafting table, where R had organized piles of mail, and on which was stacked a handful of large prints. The very print on top was of Elise, wearing a shirt open at the collar—sitting in the sun, facing the sea. This would be Split, where she had shorn her yellow hair in the fashion of a boy. Here she is looking into the eye of the lens: the eye of the world, the needle and the storm. She had needed a publicity photo, and just off center you can see the dimple in her cheek.

Beneath this print was one of the photographs from Biševo—Elise, before he knew her, having risen from the sea, standing alone in the sun. And beneath this the photograph of Messinger on the city walls. Then there were several of refugees in a gymnasium. There was the

print of Stephania Elise. And beneath this, as if to footnote, there was a print of his son, Gulliver, striding into the frame, his fine hair in the breeze. He is in the center of St. Peter's Square in Rome. The hair is lit, as if with quicksilver, and it is Christmas Eve, 1989. Just after noon. Though he is only four, there is in the shadows of his small-boy face an intimation of the man he will become. He is willful and bright-eyed, and he is striding across the square on his own two feet.

Also on the desk: the letter Stephen asked Messinger to deliver, another from Sarajevo.

To deliver is also to invite the possibility for redemption? R, he knew, had orchestrated this particular arrangement of his desktop. He knew perfectly well he had left the prints along with several dozen others in a drawer. Wanting to see what he had, she'd been going through the prints, leaving her own along the edges. Also on the desktop, tucked between a dictionary and a lamp, R had arranged a packet of letters Stephen had written over the years, all neatly bound by a purple ribbon which had once dressed R's own auburn hair. And there, on the shelf beside copies of his books, stood a photograph of R, circa 1981, smiling coyly into the lens over a glass of beer. Even then, R was one never to bend.

I see you, she must have said, way back then. *There.*

Give, his father had taught him. *You must always, always give.*

2

Paradox, Stephen had taught his own son to say, so that he might come to recognize it early. His son, he had been four when he vanished, the age at which one begins to understand time moves in cycles. Christmas comes *next* year. Time, like the history of the world, like the living soul, moves in cycles. Four is the beginnings of empathy, the beginnings of compassion. It is the awakening of one's self. It is an awakening, but not yet an articulation.

He had wanted to name his son Thomas, after the Thomas of the Gnostic gospels, but R had voted against, thinking it would mark their child as doubtful. You know, she said. Doubting Thomas?

They followed the standard rules: no names after old lovers; no names invoking the personality of anybody either had ever found offensive. It was so much easier to name a child when one was

young—say fifteen, or twelve. They ruled out, too, the environmental names: the Glenns and the Cliffs and the Dales. They ruled out the cities and the states: Georgia, Carolina, Madison and Saratoga. All of his life Stephen's friends had been named Mike; all R's life, her friends had been named Jennifer and Mike. They were countless, the Jennifers and the Mikes who populated the American countryside. And there were other considerations: nothing fakely Irish, the Declans and the Finns. Nothing overly British. Malcolm was excluded despite R's affection for Malcolm because it was built around *mal*, with obvious unpleasant etymological implications.

I know a nice guy named Malcolm, R had said.

It means bad, Stephen said. Mal. Bad. Malevolent. Malcontent. Malvolio, in *Twelfth Night*? You can't give a kid a name with bad at the very beginning of it. Talk about early tracking.

We could call him Rob, R said.

Yeah, great. After a thief. Stick 'em up.

For a while R had been smitten with Calvin until Stephen pointed out that while Cal was a sure-footed enough diminutive, Calvin meant "little bald one." And let's not address the theology, Stephen had said. The entire born-again pro-life movement is going to be patting you on the back.

Well, what then? R had said. Mr. Expert, what?

Names for boys were harder because there were fewer possibilities; in this manner, too, names for boys were easier. This Stephen called the Paradox of Naming. And then, while Stephen was busy inventing theories of names, R had an ultrasound which indicated as great a degree of perfection on the part of their forthcoming baby as anybody in the medical community living in a litigious age would admit to, and during which the ultrasound technician had exclaimed absentmindedly about that shadow of a thing there being a penis, and so that settled it: a baby with a penis was going to be a boy.

There was a sense of panic as the pregnancy passed. Get the name wrong, what kind of parent are you going to be? Toward the end, the conversations were becoming more testy, and they'd spend hours each night with the baby-naming books spread out across the bed. Typically they went back to the *L* name, Luke (which was out, always, on account of being tainted by two soap operas; Luke, which was otherwise a perfect name—having previously belonged to a saint, and meaning *light*), the *M* name, Maxwell (which reminded Stephen of

Maxwell Smart, of *Get Smart*, which was a Cold War comedy about spies who weren't particularly smart), and the fruitful and patriotic *J* names: Jake, Jason, Jesse and James.

Jonas? R had said.

Judas. Christ loved Judas more than anybody will admit.

R said, You can't name a baby after a traitor. Jesus!

Just thinking. I like James. You know. Good, kingly. Goes well with my name. Stephen, *crown*.

God no. No more monarchy. No no no.

Okay. Noah.

No Noahs. Everybody cool names their kid Noah.

Stephen said, Really?

R said, You should read more novels. Also big is Adam, for obvious reasons, and Sam. God, everybody is called Sam now. Or Garth.

Stephen said, Garth?

Uh-huh. Garth. Damn, Garth said quickly under his breath stubbing his toe. It was a dark and stormy night and Garth was feeling randy. Suddenly, Garth rolled over and poked his wife! Oh Garth. Garth, yes. Oh Garth! Yes yes, Oh Garth! Oh do me, Garth!

Stephen said, That's pretty good.

You think? I've been practicing. To show off.

G, Stephen said. Maybe there's a *G* we haven't thought of.

Gawain, R said. G-spot? R said, Are you sure?

We don't have to call him *G*.

She said, spelling it out, we could call him *G-E-E*. *Gee!* Like that!

He said, We might be rushing things a bit.

He has to be sensitive, R said, rubbing her abdomen. And kind. But not a wimp. No wimps. He can be gay or straight, I don't care, *really*. But he cannot be a wimp and he cannot have a name that makes him into a bully.

He's not going to be a bully.

If you name him Raymond he will be. Or Doug. Doug Doug Doug.

He's not going to be a wimp either. Not with you for a mother.

Praise, R said, looking up. I know you mean that as praise.

Gulliver, Stephen said. How about Gulliver?

There is a time when you know something is right. When you catch another's eye and know, in that moment, you are going to be friends for life with that person whose eye you've just caught. When you take a photograph, and despite the number of frames wasted thus far you

know, you just know, this particular likeness is the one you came here for. That this is the image you want to take and keep.

They had to sit on it for several days to let the enthusiasm cool. To be certain. Once, while driving, R said, We can't let anybody call him Gully.

God no.

Three nights later, Stephen woke R in the middle of the night. Or Gull, Stephen said, shaking her. No Gulls. He is not a bird.

R said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, You always shorten people's names. You call Sarah *Sar*. You call Christopher *Chris*. He hates that, by the way. What makes you think you're not going to call Gulliver *Gull*?

I guess it's not bad. Birds are good. They fly.

Gulliver Brings, R said, rolling over onto her pillow. It was hard to sleep, being pregnant. It was hard doing anything at all.

Gulliver Metcalf-Brings, she said, sleepily. I'll be glad when he comes out to play.

The day came. They had been on their way to a Cubs game—a special treat, what with R playing hooky from the office. A hot day in Chicago . . . the flats heated up, the asphalt on the streets grew soft and began to smell like tar. Gum on the streets, and sneakers, turned soft to the touch. The exhaust from the cars lingered a bit longer, and the traffic stalled, idling impatiently at the intersections, heating up the already stifling hot air. True, it was cooler by the lake. After the game, they were going to go to the lake. All was a go. Especially because she was pregnant, R liked to spend that summer walking barefoot in the foot of the lake. Then, while riding on the train, her water broke, and somebody had helped them to a cab, and the cabby, driving, said *No baby not here*, etcetera, driving through the stalled traffic, blasting his horn, bobbing in and out of all the pedestrians and hot dog venders and then, driving up onto the hospital launch pad—EMERGENCY—where there happened to be a television film crew filming like emergencies, Stephen helped R out and they rush-limped to their preassigned obstetric unit while all the way R continued to dilate.

She was going fast. There was no time for an epidural. R had some Stadol, which eased the pain but also made her catatonic, until a contraction came, and then she screamed, and Stephen did the counting thing: the *wuh wuh wuh* panting he had been taught like a good part-

ner to pant, as if he were actually helping her out, which was ridiculous, what with the Stadol in her bloodstream and that proverbial ring of fire now in flames. You were supposed to hold when you pushed, which made no sense; you were supposed to look at the two little fingers he held up in front of her eyes. Good, good, he said, as if he had any idea. And all of their careful planning—the special birthing room with the hot tub, the bag of sundries including pictures of Stephen and R together at the beach, the Mozart CD which was supposed to raise their baby’s IQ by thirty points, the granola bars and Perrier and the warm, blue socks—all of that had been left behind, by the coat tree, right by the door leading out. And now R panted in a dreadful smock: her doc, busy shopping, had called in another, who had the bedside manner of a horse. She kept clip-clopping on her heels in and out of the labor room, careful not to smudge her outfit. Thank God for the nurse, not the Bad Nurse who misplaced the IV, causing R’s wrist to swell up the size of an orange, and then a grapefruit, but the *other* nurse, the Good Nurse with red hair who held R’s hand and then her leg. She showed Stephen how to hold the other leg (this had not been a part of that partner-education curriculum!) and she showed him how to bend it back as if he were a wrestler intent on pinning her. Harder, the Good Nurse said. *She won’t break.* And then the blood, all the blood: he’d seen blood, like when he cut his finger, but he’d never seen blood belonging to a woman that he loved spilling forth from the ring of fire. It was more crimson than anything he’d ever seen, so crimson there beneath the white lights of the hospital room filled with more lights and the machines beeping and a white plastic bucket which read *Sharps*. He could see and then smell the blood and then the baby’s head, crowning, and R, screaming now, and then, whoosh, out slipped the baby’s head and then his body into the nurse’s arms and the well-dressed doc with the bedside manner of a horse clip-clopping into the room said, *You have a baby boy. Congratulations,* and then the Good Nurse slipped the baby to R’s breast, right there, and there was that mewing sound of the newly born, and the well-dressed doc attended to the afterbirth and the final contractions necessary to deliver it. The well-dressed doc handed to Stephen a pair of shears, and she said, *Dad, want to cut the cord?* And Stephen said, *Here?* and she said, *Right there,* and he said, *Really? Here?* He had tears in his eyes and was uncertain of his vision. He said, *Here. Right here,* and then he did it, bringing the shears together, and he

felt the flesh of that cord caught in the jaws of those metal shears, and then he said, not fainting, I am not going to faint.

Really, he said, swaying. I'm fine.

They cleaned the baby. They weighed him. He was small, just under six pounds, and measured against a point system which, tallied up, declared him to be average (B+/A-). If he didn't get into Andover, or Juilliard, there would always be the historical record to explain.

Stephen held R's hand. He said, his heart brimming, It begins now.

She said, Do you want to go out and smoke?

I'm going to have to quit.

Yup.

Soon, he said.

I know. You can go out now. Just come back. Soon.

So he went out and had a cigarette. On the way back, he stopped in the restroom to wash the poisonous nicotine from his hands. He rode an elevator with a man who was talking on a telephone the size of Maxwell Smart's shoe.

What's that? Yeah, said the guy on the horn. She had the baby. What's that? Nah, I can't complain—

Then Stephen had to go through the security stations to prove he wasn't stealing anybody's baby. He was given a tag, as if he were a record, or a leather jacket in a department store, and then another tag indicating he was the father to Baby Metcalf.

He thought, They got the name wrong.

He thought, They don't know we've already got a name for him?

When he returned to the room, R was in tears. The baby was gone.

What?

They said his heart wasn't going.

What?

His heart. It's not going right. They took him to ICU.

She was bereft, lying in the empty bed, spent. He rushed to the nurses' station and found the Good Nurse. A cardiologist was on the way in from the Cubs game; the tiny baby was on a table beneath a heat lamp. We can't circumcise him now, the Good Nurse said. One thing Stephen knew, the doc with the bedside manner of a horse wasn't going to be getting near his son's penis. In R's room he held her hand. They had to wait, just a little bit more, and R said, What if he dies?

He's not going to die. Babies don't die.

From another room, a woman was screaming, as if she were in fact dying, delivering another baby not supposed to die.

Stephen said, He is not going to die.

Two hours later, he went out for another smoke; there were others out there, smoking in the heat, one in a smock with his arm tied up to his IV. On the way back Stephen passed a man eating a submarine sandwich: this, the cardiologist. The cardiologist said, It may not be his heart. He's not getting enough oxygen through the blood. There was talk of blood and oxygen, a need to top off the baby's crankcase, the only real risks being those of hepatitis or HIV infection, please sign here, we have a fine blood supply these days, and later that night, six hours later, the blood having *finally* arrived in a plastic bag from someplace downstairs, or upstairs, and the Bad Nurse who had trouble with IVs having a heck of a time figuring out how the little gizmo attached to this other little gizmo—Stephen said, losing his temper in the ICU filled with preemies, Is there somebody here who knows how the fuck to do this properly?

The Bad Nurse began to cry, not wanting to be Bad. Another nurse, having taken his point, dismissed the Bad Nurse, and the blood was set up, and Stephen spent the night going back and forth between R's room and the baby's. Once, in R's room, she had said, How's Gulliver?

Naming a thing, it makes it so. Stephen said, The guy says he's going to be okay. He'll need antibiotics before he goes to the dentist. Go figure. Apparently it's just a little murmur. It'll keep him out of the army.

Gulliver, she said. I'm glad he won't be a soldier.

It's just a murmur, Stephen said. It means he's blessed. It means God put his finger there. Right there on his little heart.

He's not going to die.

No. He's not going to die. Stephen said, kissing R on the forehead, He's ours to keep.

And then R said, I want to hold him. I want to hold him right now.

And then the Good Nurse came in and helped R up and took her to the ICU where R nursed their baby. Even in the ICU all the other babies had pink or blue bears announcing their given names, celebrating their arrivals. R said, smiling weakly, Can Gulliver have a name, too? A bear?

Oh God yes, the Good Nurse said. Yes yes.

Gulliver, R said, nursing him. All my life I've wanted to do this.

Gulliver, Stephen said. Gulliver with the magic heart.

Thank you, R said to Stephen. Thank you for letting me do this.

3

Paradox, his son had said. Like when you stick your finger in your nose and get a booger? Like that?

A wave of panic sideswiped him now—No, he said, blinking fiercely, leaning against the sink. *God no*—and when it passed, miraculously, he drank a tall glass of water. The key to riding this out wasn't more substances, but less. A fundamental and willfully engaged act of withdrawal.

He put on a pair of socks, laced up his hiking boots. He stood before the kitchen sink and poured himself a shot of bourbon. Killing time was not necessarily the same as killing oneself. He took the bottle and poured it down the drain.

He went out to the alley, across and down to the neighborhood market, larger than he remembered, and where he bought a pint of skim milk which he drank on the spot. From there he went to a gas station. Like the market, it was a family-owned business; the kid working knew Stephen and loaned him a jerry can. Stephen bought a battery; five quarts of oil, a filter; a gallon of antifreeze; a pack of chewing gum and condoms from the impulse rack. The boy's father drove Stephen back to the alley, past the train trestle, to the garage which Stephen rented. The garage was cold and filled with items packed in boxes ready to be shipped anywhere. For years Stephen had been living his life in a state of perpetual storage—ready, at any moment's notice, to depart for someplace else. Inside, he rubbed his hands together. He turned on the lights and removed the tarp which covered his father's—now Stephen's—sedan.

He had run the tank empty before leaving to keep the fuel from gumming up the injectors. He had also drained the oil, and now, first, he opened a quart and ran a thin coat of film around the gasket of the new filter; he placed the new filter on, spinning it gently. He liked doing this kind of work; he added the oil. He put the dead battery in the trunk and installed the new one. He primed the engine and fired it up. The car, being well cared for, and despite its previous hundred thousand miles, idled sweetly. His one chief extravagance, this

finicky car, which he had hoped to pass on to his son. Being in the genes, boys like cars. He let the engine idle and watched the blue-white exhaust billow out into the darkening afternoon light.

He ran more errands now that he had official transport. He drove to the grocery store, also larger than he remembered. America, Land of the Good and Plenty. At the butcher's counter he bought two New York strips and then he went to produce and bought carrots and romaine lettuce and salad dressing, the profits of which went to charity, and mushrooms to sauté for the steaks, and fruit: bananas, apples, kiwis and grapes. The Fruit Santa, that's what Elise called him. When he finally returned home he parked on the street and unloaded three trips' worth of groceries. In the kitchen he folded the paper bags and put away the perishables. He placed the fruit in a bowl, separating the bananas, because a banana in contact with other fruit would cause that other fruit to spoil.

Presto, he said aloud. A symbol.

He drank two large glasses of water and regretted having disposed of the bourbon but congratulated himself for holding firm. Have a chocolate kiss instead. He called R to explain he wouldn't be coming by the office but that he'd be cooking dinner. He took a breath and went up to his desk and attacked blindly the stacks of mail.

R had also left a note, indicating she required several thousand dollars, his share of the rent. No rush on this, she said.

He noticed, not for the first time, that everybody had his name on a list: the DNC, Smith Barney and the Softer Side of Sears, Toys-R-Us. Even the Sierra Club sent him junk mail. What was that? He attached his return address labels—*R. Metcalf & S. Brings*—to his bills. Having signed his checks, he licked his stamps.

A man who pays his debts is a man who's free to travel. He stood, stretching the small of his back. He went to the bathroom sink, removed the Xanax, and broke another tablet in half. He held both halves in his bandaged hand.

Fuck it, he said, and flushed the Xanax, all of it.

Just say no.

That's that, he said. And then he shuddered through a fierce but mercifully brief wave of anxiety.

He did fifty push-ups.

A wave, once it hit, would eventually recede, just as certainly as another would return. They came, the waves, in sets.

He brushed his teeth. The trick was being clean. Water.

He drank three glasses of water and took a long and thunderous leak.

He did another fifty push-ups and went downstairs to cook.

4

R arrived home two hours late with snow in her hair. He had kept her dinner warm for her. While she ate, R told him about her day, and he listened meaningfully. She stood once, went to the fridge and offered him a beer, which he declined, and she said, Not just one? Why not *one*?

Because sometimes I don't want *one*.

I guess.

He said, Let's make a list—

What kind of list?

Books. Ten Books. You're on an island, or going to be, stranded. A pretty one. You have fresh water and coconuts. You get ten books—

Am I alone?

Maybe, maybe not. That's part of it. You don't know.

Do other people get books?

Yes. But you don't know if you're alone or not when you make your list.

This is stupid, she said, pushing away her plate.

He stood, removed the plate. He brought back a glass of sparkling water for himself and a pen and a pad of paper.

You get ten, he said. What else do we have to talk about? You get ten books. One sex book. One art book. A book of poems, maybe. Maybe an American novel to be patriotic. But it's your list. Whatever you want—

If you pick the books then I don't need to, do I? You do this a lot? Sit around in hotel bars and make lists of books?

Just try it. Ten Books. What do you want?

TV Guide, she said. To see what's on.

Jesus—

No. Okay. Ten Books? What is this, a quiz? A test?

Isn't everything?

Okay. Fine. Give me the pen.

She reached across, took the pen and paper.

He blinked through a wave of panic. He said, hopeful to distract himself, I left a check for you on your desk. The rent.

Don't bother me, she said. I have to study.

He cleaned the kitchen. It was a small kitchen and then, thank God, the jet lag kicked in, and he felt a sudden and profoundly uncommon need to sleep, and he knew this window of opportunity would last at best twenty minutes, and so he said, R, I can sleep now, so I'm going to sleep, and she said, not looking up from her pad of paper, scratching out a line, Uh-huh, and he went upstairs, undressing along the way, and went to bed.

He awoke three hours later—to the sound of his own voice—from a freakish dream: R was going down on him on top of the deck of a ship. It was snowing, and people in Bermuda shorts and golf shoes with spikes were pacing the deck—waiting for the sun, swinging their clubs. We paid for this? somebody yelled. And then, in the dream, R lifted her head and smiled to show him how she clenched between her teeth a double-edged razor blade. She removed the razor from her teeth and, holding his penis at the base, slicing open his testicles at the seam, said she knew he would taste better this way.

She said, You get what you pay for, Stephen. You're the one who signed on—

He had cried out, waking, hitting his bandaged hand against the wall.

In the morning while dressing for work R paused to go down on him, and he felt the silken brush of her hair against his thighs, and he woke a second time, now feeling obligated, and terribly in the wrong, and said, Where am I?

Just lie back, Mister.

No, he said, sitting up. Please.

In the kitchen, dressed for work, she sat finishing her cereal and juice. She watched him as he descended the stairs draped in the blanket from the bed. A purple blanket, R's color. She said, watching him, I know her name is Elise.

He said, You know?

I wasn't snooping, she said. It's in your wallet. I was looking for an address but of course your address book is indecipherable. Pages everywhere.

Elise, she said, and lots of phone numbers. You don't pay attention

to anybody's phone number. You can barely make a long-distance call! She said, She's the girl in the photographs. The pretty one. You know, the *naked* one?

He poured himself coffee. He said, Did you find what you want? Did you?

He drank a glass of water, fast. Another day, he told himself. Another day in which nobody could be happy.

Another day, he told himself, and you'll be clean.

He wanted to be clean.

R said, Do you love her?

What? he said, sitting down. He said, I don't really think she's the issue.

Elise, R said, nodding. She even has a pretty name.

She does.

So it is her. The friend in Baden Blitzitburg? That *is* her?

Yes.

When did she cut her hair? Before, or did she cut her hair *after*?

Stephen said, I think we have larger complications.

You mean Adam.

Is he in love with you? Again? And no, actually I mean Gulliver. I mean you and I mean me. But what the hell, yeah, let's throw Adam into the pot, too.

R nodded. Okay, she said, biting her lip. You're not in love with me. I've known you longer—better—than I've known anybody.

You love me, R said. Jesus, Stephen. I'm not stupid. But you're not *in* love with me. The only time you ever fuck me is when you say good-bye. You don't even want to *kiss* me. You're bored with everything I tell you about that I happen to spend my life doing. And God knows you certainly don't want to *live* with me. With *me*, Stephen.

She said, rising from the table, It's like you don't even live here. Like I'm some kind of port of call. Even before. Even then, you and your need for solitude. Don't bother Stephen, he needs to think. He needs to read. He needs to be alone. Stephen needs and Stephen needs. She said, hitching her breath, And let's not kid ourselves: it's not as if you were a decent father. I mean it's not as if I want to have another kid with you. Thank God we didn't have any spares.

He said, picking at the bandage on his hand, You have more?

She said, wiping her nose, Damn you. Damn you. Goddamn you. People think—We're having a party. For you. Everybody at work

thinks we're having a honeymoon and you won't even let me give you a blow job. She said, rising, I'm late for work, and then she said, pushing him a folded piece of paper shaped into the size of a quarter, Here's your Goddamn list.

She stood at the coat tree making her selection, a bright red wool overcoat. She said, turning, I didn't leave you in case you didn't want me to leave you. But you ought to give me a sign, you know? You ought to say, Tell Adam to get fucked and move to LA. And you ought to say that because Adam is also not the issue. You know when I touch you that you actually flinch? We have larger complications, you and your sanctimonious, supercilious—

Look at me, Stephen. I did not leave you because I did not want to leave you. And it's not just about you. It's about all of us. It's about admitting defeat. Giving up? Goddamn it, Stephen, I do not just give up. And that's why you love me. You think I'm a political hack, you think I don't read the right books, okay. Fine. But I do not give up and that's what brought us together, you and me. We do not give up. So if we're going to smash this history of ours into smithereens then we'd better find a way to talk about it. You're good at that. Do some thinking, Stephen. Get to work, okay? Because Goddamn it I did not leave you because I did not want to leave you.

And then she tucked her scarf around her thick hair, wiped her eyes with the back of her hands, and left for work.

5

What's your name?

At least one always has the possibility of returning home, if only for a visit to say good-bye. He wanted to see his home. He bundled up: gray union suit, thick khakis, socks, a maroon wool turtleneck. He rooted through a box in a closet beside Gulliver's blue and yellow perfect trike until he found their skates. A dog, lost, could travel hundreds of miles and still find its way home: its internal sextant leading the way, this way and that: every three or four years there was another dog movie about the lost dog finding its way home. Gulliver had wanted a dog. He always wanted a dog. There were stories about the dog which stayed with a boy lost in the woods. Stories about the

dog which pulled boys from icy ponds. Stories about the dog sleeping with the lost boy in the deep snow to keep the boy warm and alive.

Stephen located his wallet, his keys, and headed out with his skates. The Chicago sky, cold and sharp, hovered overhead like the flat of a knife. On the highway, past O'Hare, the planes in the sky lined up for permission to land; beyond that intersection the traffic began to clear. The metropolis, like a middle-aged man, had begun to spread at the hips. A sign of the times. He passed the obscene mall—Woodfield—where once, when it was new, his father had taken him to see John Wayne in *The Cowboys*. All acts have their antecedents. Stephen had cried when John Wayne died, he remembered that. After the movie, driving home in the dark night, his father had explained that Bad Men—criminals, like those who stole the herd and shot John Wayne—men such as these were always afraid of Good Men who followed their convictions. Evil cannot abide Goodness in Men, his father had explained, and Stephen could not follow what came next. Perhaps he leaned his head against the cool glass of his father's car and fell asleep. He was eight, he knew that, or seven. He was just a boy.

He turned off onto Route 59 and encountered a startling array of McMansions—obese houses on tiny plots, cramped like bloated bodies in a common grave. The secret to being happy in America was understanding nothing was supposed to last: not the woods this subdivision had razed, not the houses with granite trim and chrome refrigerators powered by enough electricity to run a turbine. He followed the curving highway and drove into the town of Barrington, dawdling momentarily in the off streets. The stone bank, that former pillar of suburban privilege and stability, had been turned into something else, and soon he was recognizing other places he had visited as a child. Moving on, he saw the horse farm where he had mucked stalls—its rolling whitewashed fences and meticulously groomed paddocks; he saw the large white farmhouse his best friend in the fifth and sixth grades had lived in. A woody, his friend had instructed, was a more mature way of acknowledging one's hard-on. Much better than, say, boner. Anybody could say *hard-on*. Stephen said these words now, driving through his childhood: boner, hard-on, love muscle. It was like being thirteen all over again, and he caught himself beaming into the rearview mirror.

Elise, he said to himself. She *did* have a pretty name.

A man who makes is a joyful man. The road leading to his neighborhood had been gated off to accommodate the newly rich. He did a U-turn, his tires spitting, and returned by way of an alternate route to his old neighborhood, Timberlake. Here, too, had once been timber. It was a quiet neighborhood filled with woods and sloping lawns. Here people had let their children and their dogs run free; they gathered in the summers at the common lake and the girls wore their seventies bikinis and the boys hid their woodies by digging in the sand. They sailed Sunfish on the lake and at night teenagers collected there to drink beer safely—they'd blow some grass, too—in their tight Levi's and long hair and leather bracelets: Dylan on the 8-track, or Elton John. The house in which his father had raised him was for sale. It was a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired house built into the hillside: long decks, walls of glass. There stood a lamppost at the wooded end of the drive which had involved the digging of a hundred-yard trench to bring it power. One girl, Diane Eckendal—blond, buxom—would wear a white bikini to the lake. On the top was a place with a red heart, which Diane Eckendal had cut out, leaving a faint thread of red material and the shape of a heart which tanned in the sun as the summer passed. When she emerged from the lake her bikini became translucent. You could see the flesh—heart-shaped—and her blond, wet hair, even there, which also formed the shape of a heart. *Memory knows, Faulkner wrote, before knowing remembers.* Most likely he was drunk, writing that. Idling in front of the driveway leading to his old house, taking in the lamppost in the woods, Stephen understood he didn't know anybody who lived here.

The girl with the summer-tanned heart, did she grow up and move away, too? At the lake he parked behind some rail ties. He walked down to the surface and sat on the snow to lace his skates. His arm throbbed in the cold, a quarter-step behind his heart, and his fingers numbed—a matter of warming up. He cupped his hands and brought them to his mouth. A puff of steam.

Hockey is a game for boys—that balletic chaos of sticks and pucks and flying wings. The ice, thick and gray, a steel door sealing off that which lay beneath: he was startled momentarily by the tensile brittleness of its surface. He stretched, he blew on his hands, his breath steaming: he took off, toward the other side, dotted with houses and

frozen lawns covered in snow and docks locked into place by the ice. There was a young dog—lab variety—snuffling alone on the ice. Stephen's thighs, swelling with blood, like his heart, carried him along the surface of the frozen lake. He blew snot from his nose, one side at a time, cowboy style, and felt the wind chafing at his cheeks, and he skated hard, and fast, working up a fine lather, sweating out the toxins he'd been ingesting: the pharmacological products, the whiskey and the false comfort of nicotine. He felt his first wind go, his second catch up with him, and he felt his eyes tearing in the breeze beneath the sky and then he stopped: hips cocked, gouging his blades into the ice and casting a spray of slivers into the air. Like stars, when light-headed; like diamonds full of light.

This, he told himself. This was what made one capable of being.

It was underrated, joy—like delight, and expertise in something. In anything. One did not always have to be sad, to withdraw, that's what R always said, and believed, wanting Stephen not to be sad. She had a point. She had a lot of points, and he spread out his arms into the falling sky, and laughed, the endorphins kicking in, and he skipped off onto the surface and pivoted, skating backward, and pretended that he, Stephen Brings, was now in possession of the puck, and that he, Stephen Brings, was setting it up. Skating backward, admiring the signature his tracks made in the ice, he felt good, really good, and capable of making great speed.

Jesus, he told himself. Take it.

He said, seeing the sentence coming—a man cannot speak a sentence knowing what it means until he's finished making it—he said, making the next sentence, *You're going to leave her.*

Then he made another.

It's not your fault.

Then another.

And it's not her fault, either.

He said, having found his meaning, *Where to now, St. Peter?*

He paused, gliding, looking back over his shoulder, the same direction he was traveling. Once, a long time ago, in another life, he knew people—and their names—who lived in these houses along the lake. He had spent days digging that trench by himself, but it never had belonged to him. The lamppost. He swiveled, facing the direction he was now skating into, wide-eyed, letting his eyes tear in the wind, his

breath steaming, and as he headed back across the long lake he saw the dog—a dog like anybody’s—and he watched first and then heard the dog yelp and scamper terrified across the surface of the ice.

Two boys with a rifle, standing on the bank in puffy, goose-down jackets.

Come on, Ginger! called the smaller boy.

And then the larger boy raised the rifle and Stephen, closer now, made out the puff of smoke and the pneumatic thunk of an air rifle firing off a pellet.

Ginger, yelled the other. Come on!

The boy put into the snow the rifle barrel in order to pump it. Having prepared another round, he raised the rifle, aimed, and the dog was hit, again, a dusting of snow powdering off its hip, and the dog yelped and dashed off again, its tags jingling, and now the dog was whimpering, circling, hunkering down for more, and Stephen skated up and sprayed the boys in a sheet of ice.

Jesus, Mister—

He wrenched the pellet gun from the boy and took it to a tree and began to beat it—the tree, the weapon—swinging the weapon by the cold barrel. The stock, being made of plastic, splintered first, and broke to pieces.

One of the boys was crying: the biggest, being biggest. Then, looking at Stephen, catching the rage in his eyes, each of the boys began to run and Stephen spit into the air, Don’t you move!

They stopped, being boys generally raised to respect the laws. It’s my dog, the first boy said. You can’t do that!

Stephen dropped the rifle. He skated over to the dog, who had approached, most likely to protect the boys to whom she belonged. The dog barked twice, uncertainly, as Stephen approached. Stephen dropped to his knees, which caused him to flinch, the hard ice on his knees. He slid into the dog, his arms open wide, and the dog nuzzled Stephen while Stephen checked the dog’s body for wounds. The dog had a thick winter coat; there was ice forming in the padded declivities of her paws, which Stephen rubbed out, one at a time, with his cold hands. When he finished, he called the boys over. He checked the dog’s tags.

What, Mister—

Stephen said, 14 East Oak. I know where you live.

We didn't mean to hurt her, said the larger boy. I mean, she's not supposed to run away! She's not supposed to do that!

I know where you live. I know your phone number. I know if you point a gun at anything ever again I will come back here and I will find you and I will cut off your thumbs!

The larger boy had begun to sob. He was taking huge breaths.

Do you understand me?

Then the smaller boy fell on his knees and the dog rushed to greet him. Stephen rose, dusting off his knees. The boy wrapped his arms around the dog, his hands digging into the dog's thick fur.

The boy said, crying, looking at his thumbs, I'm sorry, Ginger.

She loves you, Stephen said. You're lucky.

The boys, trembling, each having a hand on the dog's collar—*Ginger*—walked the dog across the ice, and then the frozen ground, and now the driveway leading to the lake. Stephen watched the boys for a long time, until they vanished, and then he went to his car and sat on the ground. He began to unlace his skates and, as he did so, a wave of anxiety rushed him out of nowhere, and he ran his hands through his hair and looked it in the eye. He said his name . . . *Stephen Brings*. *Your name is Stephen Brings* . . . and he leaned his head back against the car, the panic slowly receding, and looked it in the eye: it was like running away from something: it was like turning to face what you were running from. It was like coming, if you let it, if you called it what it was. The body had a mission, as did the soul, and he sat silently against the frozen door of his father's car, closing his eyes, and as he did so he saw his father, and his lost son, and his wife, R, a woman he loved and pretended to marry for all the wrong reasons. The lamppost—it didn't belong to anybody. It was just a light he and his father had installed at the end of the drive. *Turn at the light*, those were the instructions. In the early dark of winter it was how they had come to set their house apart—a lamp, alone in the dark—and it was odd the way the dark would always cause the light to dilate. To grow and to be more. It was a lesson in transcendence—digging that ditch, tying up the wires. Had Stephen and R not pretended to be married, had Stephen only visited on weekends, they never would have gone to Rome. Christmas in Rome. A trip, it will be fun; we need a trip, Stephen. Take me to Rome. You and me and Gulliver. He had pretended to marry her because he had not wanted his son not

to have a father. The gash in the palm of his hand ached bitterly. He had pretended to marry her because, despite loving her, he understood he could love her more. He could be a better man. Light, regardless of its source, belonged to anybody who could see it, wasn't that the lesson? And he saw an image of himself—of the man he had been unable to become, and the younger man he once was, so full of conviction and promise—and he said a brief prayer for the dog and for the boys who would never be able to forgive themselves for what they'd done to her.

They're boys, he said. They're just boys.

He was getting better, he knew that. He finished unlacing his skates. He studied the snow drifting on the ice. Given the right ordinance, it is possible even for water to break. A Soviet-built MIG, bombing the Adriatic Sea; a woman, giving birth to her firstborn in a cellar under fire. A man in winter, regaining his balance, skating across the surface of a lake.

No, he said, turning his eyes to the wind, and wiping the ice from the blades of his skates. You are not going to break.

He said, gaining confidence, Stephen, you are not the kind of man who breaks.