

The Appian Way

In mathematics, as on a camera lens, the symbol for infinity is this: ∞

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Having found his place in the field, he was now on his knees. He was on his knees retching behind a tree into the snow.

His stomach, three days empty, his legs too weak to hold him—the muscles in his torso were convulsing, as if by electrocution, and he was spitting up bile. When he finished, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The old couple's dog, seeing he was finished, stepped out of the stairwell to see if anything had been left behind.

It took Stephen seven minutes to make it up the stairs to the door of his flat. His side was burning. He fell onto his sleeping bag, holding his side, and said, I am not going to die of the flu.

Testing the measure of his conviction, and purposely forgetting many details of the century, he said, People in the twentieth century do not die of flu. Americans especially do not die of flu.

Depth of field, he told himself. *Depth of field.*

And then he disappeared within the tumult of his fever.

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He woke to the sight of Elise, her hand beneath the back of his head, another holding to his lips a bottle of water. The water was spilling down the sides of his mouth. He was coughing. At first he thought it was a dream.

Where am I? he said.

Ado's, she said. You're burning up. We have to get you out of here.

It's just the flu.

Then he was asleep, and through his sleep, amid the fevered dreams, he could hear her packing things up.

The next time he woke, or remembered waking, he was in a room at the Holiday Inn, which was freezing, the window having been shattered and covered with a mattress. He was on a small bed beside a machine for pressing pants. His luggage and gear were packed.

Sometime Ado came into the room.

Later, she said, It's still dark. Shhh.

She said, We catch tomorrow's two o'clock. We have to hope it is not canceled. To Zagreb.

She said, I can say things because you won't remember any of them. You are very sick.

He said, in German, Why did you find me?

Weil ich Dich suchte, she said. Because I have been looking for you.

The two o'clock was postponed to four o'clock on account of weather. They huddled at the airport. A Canadian gave them as much water as they wanted. In Zagreb, a cab to the train station. Only four hours to kill.

He said, I need a shower. A bath.

The concierge at the Hotel Esplanade opened a room for Stephen and Elise. No, Stephen said to Elise. Wait.

He went to his bag and removed a pair of khakis and socks, a sweater. Something clean? He said to her, I have lice. I need some chemicals.

She said, nodding, The Holiday Inn. Anna spread them to me. I spread them to you. The linens.

I didn't know—

The linens, she said. It's nothing. She took the clothes downstairs; he began to undress: a sweater, his two shirts, his union suit. He fell trying to remove his socks which had holes in them. In the shower he fell again. A bellhop appeared with a bottle of lindane smelling like petroleum—the Esplanade, you could get anything there; a couple chicks, a stinger missile—and then the bellhop disappeared. He washed his body, his hair. He put on a cotton robe and Elise returned with hot tea. She said, Something to eat?

No. I can't.

She made him drink water, which he threw up on the quarter-hour. The housekeeper brought his clean clothes; the concierge said

there was nothing to charge, and Stephen left the concierge several large bills, as always, and thanked him, asking that he leave something for the housekeeper, too.

Of course, Sir. Very good.

The concierge said to Elise, Safe journey, Ms. Kohlhaus.

Old world, new world. The doorman held open the iron doors. They took their bags and made it slowly across the few hundred yards to the train station. On the way they passed a sign leading to the chic underground shopping mall which read *No Dogs, No Bicycles, No Firearms*.

It was sleeting in Zagreb. He would remember that.

Stephen said, I didn't get to say good-bye. To Ado.

Elise said, He came to say good-bye.

I don't remember.

You were asleep, she said. Don't worry. He knows you love him.

The train, a night train, would deliver them to Munich, and they rode on the way in a sleeping car. The *Schlafwagen*. They lay on their backs in the bottom bunk, their heads by the cold window, rising often to endure repeated border checks. The Croatian guards, new to the game, were the most cartoonish.

Said the baby-faced guard with the Uzi, his partner at the ready with a drawn 9-millimeter Beretta, Perhaps you have something you wish to declare?

No.

Perhaps you have some drugs? Some other illegal items?

No.

Perhaps before I search your bags you will wish to make some declaration?

Stephen said, What are you waiting for? A bribe? Search them or get out.

Elise said, pointing, He is sick.

He is American? This is his American passport?

Stephen said, What are you. Sixteen?

Yes, Elise said. That is his passport.

And why are *you* traveling with an American?

Because we are lovers.

Ahh, so. I will not intrude further. I am glad you are not smugglers. Then there was the other side of the Slovenian border to endure. It

was obvious everybody took him to be a junkie. Then Austria. The Austrians were polite, cheerful and precise. They came in teams of three with headsets, checking the database on a laptop. They went their way, whistling.

In between stops Stephen dozed in and out of nightmares. I should have said good-bye, he dreamed saying. Anna was shot.

She's in Bonn. With her husband. I saw her. She is fine.

I found some of her teeth.

Sometimes, he cried out; sometimes he rose to fall onto his knees in order to retch into a bucket of ice. Elise would hold a glass of Coke to his lips. It was real glass, not plastic.

Once he said, somewhere in the mountains, It's too bad I am sick.

I know.

You are supposed to make love on a train. In a sleeper.

We will have more trains. We will travel the world by train.

Not the United States.

No. Not the United States.

Australia, Stephen said. And Russia. I would like to cross Russia on a train. It's cold there.

Italy, always.

To Spain, Stephen said. When we visit Anna next summer. I promised.

You did?

Yes.

So did I.

He laughed. He said, I'm not so hot anymore, am I?

Not so bad. But you need water. Your clothes are soaked again.

Later, dozing, Stephen said, Gulliver loved trains. When he was very little he called them *dues*.

Du, Elise said.

It sounds like him. The tracks beneath. The rocking. It sounds like when he was born. Like his heartbeat hooked up to the monitor. Just like that.

She said, later, You are very weak.

I never get sick. It's a point of pride.

Everyone gets sick, I think.

He would not remember entering Munich in the morning. He would remember leaving his pillow, soaked with sweat by the cold window, and removing the case. They took a cab to a garage on the

edge of the city. It was bright and clear and cold. Elise said, paying the driver, My car is here.

It was a small silver car with an enormously powerful engine. The Germans, he thought. They love to drive. She took the car to the lip of the autobahn and shuttled into the fast lane and did not look back. She said, at the speed of some two hundred kilometers an hour, Do you want some music?

Is it okay if we don't?

Of course. It is not too long a drive.

Not with you driving.

She laughed. She said, flashing her lights, My father calls me Gordon Johncock.

The racer.

The racer, she said. First I will take you to my parents' house. Did I tell you my mother speaks with a Texas accent?

How is that?

She studied there for a while. At Rice.

And your father?

He is a businessman.

I know that.

I don't know if he will be home or not, if that is what you mean.

I'm not likely to make a good impression.

I have already made that. She said, taking his hand, It is important for you to know: my parents love me. Because of that they will want to love you.

He shivered, fiercely, and she said, Shhhh. It will be all right.

Could you pull over please. Right now?

He threw up on the side of the autobahn. It was early afternoon. Soon they were making a winding descent into the bowl of Stuttgart. It was a city set in a bowl. Grapes on the side, the vineyards of the Neckar Valley. She squeezed his knee and said, downshifting, Soon. Soon we will have you in a bed.

The houses on the hilltops had red tile roofs. She pulled the car into a driveway and pushed a button for the garage.

We're here, she said.

Work, say the Germans of Stuttgart. *Save. Build a little house*. The house was spacious with a view of the city below. It was located not on top, where the winds blew, and not below, near the downtown's perimeter traffic, but halfway up the hillside: quiet and safe, mod-

estly proportioned, guarded on either side by trees. Inside the furniture was rich and used and well lived in. There were walls of books. Elise led him to a hall, then a room—the guest room—and said, pointing across the hall, A bath.

A blue silk robe hung on the back of the door. She sat him on a chair; she started up the bath. He watched her by way of a mirror pour a dose of the chemical rinse into the water. When she returned, he said, I feel better already. Really. I can do this by myself.

I don't think so.

She stood him up. Let's take these off. She said, lifting his sweater over his head, Do you want me to burn these? The clothes?

Not the sweater.

It is made of holes.

It's my favorite.

She opened the window to his room just a slice. Stephen leaned on her shoulder while he struggled with his socks. His khakis, ripped and torn at the knees and the seat, were stained with blood. He stood, gaunt and shivering.

I stopped having any strength, he said.

Shhh.

He remembered undressing his sick father much in the same way. She had gotten down to the gray-ashen skin of him. She inspected the knotted scar on his arm. Looking at his raspberried sides—each appearing as if he'd slid naked across a hundred yards of asphalt—she said, Stephen, what is this?

I don't know.

Your knees are shaking.

I know.

She led him to the bath. The lindane made him cry in pain as it brushed against his sides. He sat on the lip of the tub. Elise scrubbed at his hair, and then the thatch of his genitalia. She inspected briefly the pink scar on the tip of his penis. She drained the tub, and as he sat on the lip of it, she ran the shower faucet along his body, rinsing him. She stood him up and rinsed the tub. Then she washed his hair, twice, with a rich shampoo. She helped him shave with a freshly bladed razor she used for her legs and arms.

She said, shaving him, I shaved my whole body. I was certain you would be mad at me and never speak to me again.

He said, Just the face, I think.

She said, laughing, Mm hmmm.

She poured oil into the warm water and he slid into the tub.

He said, I've never been this clean. Squeaky. I'm squeaky clean. Bath time, that was my favorite. With Gulliver. He had this perfect body. Pure boy.

She brought him hot tea. When the water cooled, she warmed it again, and poured more oil into the water which smelled of sandalwood. Then he fell asleep, hard, and when he awoke, the water having cooled again, he saw Elise and an older woman dressed in the classical German manner—dark skirt and jacket, white blouse: beautiful fabrics, perfectly cut. She had the same features as Elise, only very dark hair; her glasses sat perched on her nose, and she stood looking down on him as if he were an interesting insect or plant. He understood she was gazing at his penis, the tip of which was bobbing just above the waterline. Then the woman said, realizing he was awake, simultaneously raising her gaze while extending her hand, Hello, Stephen. I am Rebekka.

He reached with one hand to cover himself and slid his body deeper into the water; with the other hand, he shook her own, which he made wet.

She laughed, a burst, and reached for a towel, which Elise handed to her. Well, Rebekka said. That injury appears to have healed satisfactorily.

I am very glad for that, said Elise.

I would think so, Rebekka said. It should be a lesson to both of you to stay away from shrapnel. Why do young people think it discriminates? But that is for another time. She said, turning to Stephen, You are very ill?

Just the flu.

She said, I think it might be more than that, no? *Like* the flu, correct? Will you show to me your side? Is it very painful?

Yes.

Will you show me now please? She and Elise helped him stand, and Elise gave him the towel to wrap around his waist, and Rebekka said, looking at one side and then the other, Ah so. Yes.

This is embarrassing, you know.

I am a doctor. Nothing embarrasses a doctor. She said, putting her hand to his stomach, and pushing, There. Is that okay?

Okay.

But it hurts?

Okay.

While Rebekka checked his lymph nodes, she said, Well, maybe flatulence. Unexpected. Maybe *that* embarrasses a doctor. The dropping of one's forceps, that of course embarrasses. Especially during a surgery. Right into the liver, say. Whoops! Very embarrassing. Now she told him to turn around in order to listen to his lungs, which she did without a stethoscope. She said, turning him back around, looking at his side, Well, you look to have the herpes.

Excuse me?

Here, she said, pointing to his side. The blisters. They are very painful.

God yes.

It is like the chicken pox herpes only these hurt very deeply.

What?

It is quite serious. Your immune system has failed you. You have probably been anemic for weeks. Too long at the war. No vitamins. We are going to get you many vitamins, among other things.

Elise handed him the blue silk robe. Rebekka said something in German to Elise, which Stephen did not catch, and Rebekka left the room.

Your mother, she's a pediatrician?

Elise laughed. She is the director of pediatrics at the hospital. Do not worry, Stephen. We are not a family of quacks.

I didn't mean—

Stop being sensitive, Elise said. She took him to his room, where she had laid out pajamas and wool slippers. There was a pot of hot cocoa. Elise said, pointing, Rest.

Later, as he sat alone in his room in a deep chair in pajamas which nearly drowned him, all legs and arms and cuffs, Rebekka knocked at his open door.

Yes?

Hello, Stephen, she said, entering. I have spoken with a colleague.

She placed a glass of water and two packages of medicine and a single pill the size of a horsefly on the table. She said, The good news or the bad news?

The good news.

She laughed, like her daughter. You are an optimist. I like you already. So: you are not going to die.

The bad news.

Mmmm. I think maybe the medicine may make you want to. You have what you call shingles. That's why you are so weak. The herpes blisters—

You keep saying that. Herpes?

Not *that* herpes, of course.

Thank God.

God has nothing to do with it, I think. Take these three times a day. It will hurt. It is a very powerful antiviral medicine. Ten days. Also, these for the pain. Then the misery will end. I promise. She said, But if it comes back you will need tests from my colleague, but he and I do not think it will come back. But for the next three weeks, rest. Real rest. No working. Four would be best.

You're kidding.

No, I am not the kidder in this case. This is very serious. You must rest.

Okay.

Stephen, she said. Do not worry. It is not contagious. Nobody gave it to you. Such an odd expression. Who would give away a sickness? And you cannot give it to anybody, anyway. It is all your own.

When she said that word, *anyway*, he caught the Southwest in her accent.

She said, catching his eye, And it is not sexual.

Okay.

We have a flat nearby. My husband uses it for the business guests. After we know you are feeling better, you can be there. Though you are always welcome here, too.

Thank you. I'm not used to. Well, I am—

Elise showed me your cowboys. Did you know I lived in Texas? They reminded me of Texas. So big and barren. In the apartment you will have more privacy. It will be a good place to rest and to reflect. Personally I like to read my Henry James there. It is very nice. The light is very nice. You will see.

Thank you.

It is an ugly building. But when you are inside it, you do not notice the ugliness. You see instead the view *from* the ugliness.

Okay.

Elise, Rebekka said. She had to meet with somebody. Errands. Her editor. I know not what. Also she had to go to Munich to fetch things

from her flat. My husband, Philip, he will be home for the weekend. He wants to make certain you feel welcome and told me to say so. Also, the telephone, the fax . . . they are in the den. You must have many calls to make. So please feel free. But *after* you take your medicine. *After* you begin your resting.

That night, the painkillers having kicked in, he removed the cuffed pajamas and slid naked into the bed: firm, trimmed by two feather pillows, a down quilt tucked into the envelope of a silken cotton sheet—the duvet. It was the bed of a European. One made specifically to comfort.

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On the third morning of Stephen's stay, Philip introduced himself: an enormously tall man, which explained the depths of these pajamas. Bald, he wore wire-rimmed glasses and a beautiful wool suit. Fifty-five, Stephen guessed, the same age as Messinger, which meant Philip would be twenty years Stephen's senior—not old enough, really, to be his father. Philip said, ducking through the door frame, extending his massive hand, Stephen, I am Philip Kohlhaus.

Stephen rose from the reading chair, and Philip said, No no. Sit. Please. Thus they shook hands—Stephen half up, half down in the man's cuffed pajamas. Like Rebekka, Philip had a solid grip. Philip said, I have just come by to say hello. We will have time to talk later. He said, Do you play chess?

Yes.

Marvelous. He said, But I am off. Please come out. Please come out for some breakfast. Or shall I ask on your behalf to have something delivered?

No, Stephen said. Please don't.

Having been so far removed from a steady diet, Stephen still wasn't hungry. The first few days of the medication went by unremarkably. At times he felt as if his stomach had turned into a hard, smooth stone—one which would fit into the palm of his hand should he feel the need to pull it from his body. The blisters began visibly to recede, though still he remained unfathomably weak.

One night Elise had helped Stephen in the bathroom, where he had fainted standing at the sink, knocking his head above the eye on the way down. There was minor swelling, and a bruise, and she helped

him from the bathroom to the bedroom, where he had sat dizzy in the reading chair. Sometimes he regretted not having the strength to read, but not enough to think about regretting it; instead he sat in the chair and reviewed the spiraling currents of his life which had brought him here. Too, there was the consequence of taking nourishment: the food, entering his digestive tract, and then passing through as if he'd swallowed a cupful of broken glass: this was the real source of agony. The food he ingested now passed through his body with inexplicable speed, its rate of passage increasing each day. And as that food passed through his body, he endured a new kind of electrifying pain. It was like having hemorrhoids, and then having those hemorrhoids doused with alcohol, and then set afire, and then having that fire doused with gin and salt and mercuric acid. His ass throbbing like the heartbeat of a rabbit had become an unbearable source of constant pain.

Rebekka, always the hawk-eyed doctor, said to him on the fourth morning, You are not eating.

It hurts, Stephen said. He was sitting—uncomfortably—in her husband's massively cuffed pajamas. Oddly, the robe fit him well. The robe, he thought stupidly, was meant for guests.

It is not unlike the chemotherapies, I think. No embarrassments. I know where the pain is. But you must have food. Broth at the least. Chicken broth.

Okay, he said. But no bread. Please. No bread.

He spent a lot of time in the bath, soaking in cool water; each day, the pain grew, phenomenally, worse. He thought he must have a cancer. He thought surely Rebekka had no idea what she was talking about. On her mother's instructions, Elise ran out to the Apothek shop for a hemorrhoidal cream, which at least broke up the pain for three-hour blocks, though when it returned, it always returned more viciously. Sometimes, during those blocks, he read from a novel in bursts—an epical novel, complete with a descent into hell, and the founding of a new kingdom—lying flat on his stomach, and as the days passed he now found himself able to concentrate. As the pain grew, at least his mind was gaining strength along with it; at least his mind had returned to him, as had his will to kill this motherfucking pain. Fuck you, he said to the pain, gasping. Fuck you. And by fighting the pain, he knew that he was coming back, even if physically he was still a weakened lamb. On the eighth morning Elise helped him

to the bathroom. She stood by him as he peed, as he washed his hands and face and brushed his teeth.

She said to him, by way of the mirror, You're better. It is in your eyes.

That afternoon Elise went downtown and returned with several packages. When she returned, packages in tow, she knocked at the door of his room, gently, lest he be asleep.

She said, How's your bottom? Am I disturbing?

No. Please.

She said, entering, I have come to announce that my father admires you and my mother adores you even if you are not eating.

He said, What's this?

I took your measurements. Some clothes.

He shifted awkwardly. Really?

Don't get nervous, Stephen. It is unbecoming.

She removed the packages: an indigo turtleneck of cotton and lambswool; white, brilliantly white underwear, of the thigh-hugging sport-brief variety, made from incredibly fine and seamless cotton; a pair of black twill jeans. Socks.

She said, I could make you into a German, maybe? We will need to find you some black shoes, I think.

I can't speak the language.

That will pass. You must work on your cases, though. I wanted to maybe buy you a coat but I was uncertain of the kind you might like.

I'll need to reimburse you.

Oh God. Stop stop stop. She sat quietly on the foot of his bed. She looked away, and then at him. Okay. So reimburse me. Pay me back if you must pay me back. If you want, then okay. So yeah. But soon it will be Christmas and you cannot pay me back if I choose to give to you a gift. That I will not permit.

I'm sorry, he said. I'm sensitive to gifts.

Stop it. At least with me. Just stop it. Grow up.

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It wasn't just Stephen. People were recovering all over Europe. Anna had a second surgery on her jaw which looked to rescue it completely. There would be a scar on her cheek, where the bullet had entered, and she would likely set off airport security screens on account of all the

metal used to reconstruct her face, but that would generally be invisible. Modern medicine, a wonder of the world. Messinger was in Paris with his family. Summerville was in and out of Sarajevo, doing what he could to rescue his girlfriend, whom he now intended to marry. In Zagreb Nina was raising her baby, Stephania Elise, and Marko was making his fortune smuggling arms from Italy to Dubrovnik, which were then funneled into Herzegovina. In Sarajevo, people were not recovering, but they were not perishing as rapidly as they had been: Ado and his uncle, Jusuf, were doing well as anybody might expect, and Ado's photographs of his comrades at the front were appearing in Spain and England and Italy. He had legitimate press credentials now. His career had been made.

They were a family of chess players, the Kohlhauses. One night Elise's father, nursing a cognac, defeated him easily. There was a Beethoven sonata on the stereo, a log on the fire. It had taken Stephen a while to discover what made the house feel unusual. It wasn't the fireplace or the furniture. It wasn't the coffee table smothered with magazines. It was, instead, the absence of a television. Elise worked in the kitchen wrapping tins of Christmas cookies for friends of the family; Rebekka worked late at the hospital.

Later, after Philip had gone to bed, after Rebekka had returned home and taken her two glasses of wine, after the house had settled in for the night, Stephen called R in Chicago.

She said, Are you okay?

Yes. Fine.

You sound funny. Guilty. I got your friend's fax.

I've been sick. I'm staying with some friends in Stuttgart.

The same friends? Friend?

Yes.

She said, Where is that? Austria?

Germany. Baden-Württemberg. They make Mercedes here. It's on the train station, the emblem thing.

That's interesting. She said, So are you coming home?

No. Not now. I wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas.

Okay. So you've wished it.

Stephen said, Are you still seeing Adam?

Sometimes.

Is it serious?

Sometimes.

Is there news?

No. There's another bill from the Italians. Just the bill.

Okay. Write a check from my account.

I already did.

Okay.

Okay, she said. So I have your permission. Is that what you want?

I wanted to say Merry Christmas.

Then he heard a voice—not R's, not a woman's. He said, He's there now.

Yes.

All right. Well, be sure to say hello. He said, Will you—do you have a place to go? For Christmas?

Yes.

I'm sorry for calling at a bad time.

It's your house. It's the first time I've heard from you in months. Well, not counting the fax. And the letter.

R, he said. For Christmas. Don't be alone, okay? Go see your parents—

Do you want me to come there? To Baden Whatsitburg? You haven't been shot or anything, have you? Stephen?

I just don't want you to be alone.

She was crying. She said, I'm going to go now. But I'm glad you're safe.

When he hung up, he went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. Elise was waiting for him in his room. She was sitting on the bed, lotus-like, wearing a white transparent cotton nightdress. He could see the exposed nipple of a breast, and she caught him looking at it.

She said, frowning, Are you going?

No.

You are not going?

No, he said, taking her hand. I want to stay.

Good, she said, standing. She took him by the hand and led him to her room. At her door, she said, rising on her toes, I forgot to get you pajamas.

I never wear them.

I know that, Stephen.

She kissed him at her door and said, Good night.

Three days after Stephen had finished his course of medicine, and with Rebekka's permission, Elise took Stephen downtown.

We'll walk down for the exercise, Elise said. We can taxi back.

A bright day despite the clouds overhead, the brightness elicited by the snow on the rooftops and lawns. Elise's family, he had learned, lived on Dilmannstrasse. They walked down, past a lone tall residential tower, striped in green, which could have been in Split or Sarajevo or Chicago. It was the location of the flat Stephen would be borrowing. Next they walked by offices for the Max Planck Institute and picked up a pedestrian path which wound down through a hospital campus, delivering them to the university's two glass and steel towers. Now Elise led him through an underground passage, beneath the highways, and they emerged back on the surface on a street which led them to the Königstrasse.

It's so clean, Stephen said. I'd forgotten what a clean city looks like.

The Königstrasse had filled with walkers charmed by the hustle and bustle of a forthcoming Christmas. Elise took his arm, the way European women do, and he felt suddenly displaced. It was the kissing thing all over again. They strolled away from the Hauptbahnhof and stopped at a café nearby the stone-pillared Börse for chocolate. They sat on the second floor, overlooking the pedestrian avenue. The restaurant, like all of the city, was impeccably clean.

We could be on Ferhadija, he said. Across from the Economy Park.

Do you know why all the buildings look so new? Because the buildings *are* new. Well, not *all*. Almost 20 percent survived in some part. The Allies, the bombing. My father's factory—the Nazis made my father's family manufacture parts for trucks. The bed part and the fences to keep things in. The drive shafts. By the end of the war my grandfather made treads and skirts for the tanks, but it was too late. The factory was destroyed over a weekend by a flight of sixty-two bombers. The Allies had so many they didn't have anything left to bomb. So they sent sixty-two bombers to make sure they destroyed the factory. In case one or two missed. So maybe there is hope for Sarajevo. I don't know.

What does Peter say?

Ach. Peter is a cynic. He is a great photographer. What does he know?

Stephen said, What does anybody know?

I think it will be bad there for a long time, Elise said. It is too perverse. Like Greece after the war.

I hope not.

The problem with stupid people is they are stupid. She said, It was not serious with him, you know. I am not a little girl. It was a little exercise.

I know.

And you are not too old for me.

You're certain?

She beamed, and popped that laugh, and said, nodding, Oh yes.

I've been feeling frail. My hair is turning gray.

You've been sick. Seven years is not so many. When you are forty, I will be thirty-three. That's very good for you! And when you are fifty, I will be forty-three. Blah dee blah dee blah. It's meaningless. Plus I am not so impressionable.

He laughed. I hadn't noticed.

She said, taking his hand across the table, I want to tell you something.

His heart raced. He said, bracing himself, Okay.

She said, bringing her other hand to bear, squeezing his own, My parents are going to have a party. For New Year's.

Do they— Should I leave?

No, no. It's *for* you. For you not to feel so lonely. To introduce you to friends. If, that is . . . if you are still here. Later you can move into the apartment. And rest. And work. I have to go to New York, but not until January.

For your book.

Yes, she said, nodding. She said, sipping her chocolate, For my next book I'm going to write about something else. I'm tired of the raping. The rape. I want to write instead about sex. Or something about the body. Medicine, maybe. She said, laughing, catching his eye, But I think I have sex on the mind right now.

Why's that?

So coy, Stephen. No. Seriously. Without sex a self cannot be. It cannot grow into a mature self. That's the crime of it, the rape. That's its horror. I'm not talking of the impregnating of Muslim women with a Serb, or a Serb with a Croatian—the washing out of the blood-

streams? That is too literal. Too common. No, it is the *smaller* emblem of it. The psychological damage that is so irreparable. The taking away of the sexual self. The turning of another into a husk. Milošević, he is one of those priests who fondle the little boys. It destroys one's faith in humanity. It makes the soul into steel.

Stephen lit a cigarette. On the walls were black and white photographs of movie stars in steel frames. Below them, a sea of holiday window-shoppers.

She said, You know Berlin? The ruined cathedral?

Yes.

Some call it the Rotting Tooth. A reminder to us, our evil country. But that's not what it looks like to me. To me I call it the Syphilitic Penis.

She said, taking one of his cigarettes, Didn't those people pay attention to what made them? To what *made* Yugoslavia? To what we did to the Russians? The Jews? To what the Russians did to us? To the women of our mighty cities reduced to gathering all the broken bricks? How can anybody rape another? I do not understand why even after the atrocities of the Nazis—okay, okay, of the *Germans*—I do not understand why it is satisfactory for the Russian army to rape the German women. Kill, okay. But rape? You see my interest. My focus.

I do.

She said, Eight in ten Berlin women, raped, repeatedly, in front of their children? Twelve-year-old girls, grandmothers. Two million illegal abortions in 1945? The Russians didn't capture Berlin to capture Hitler. They did it to capture us. To kill our German soul. The war was over. Stalin had won!

Stephen said, My father was part of that. He was there. Not in Berlin—

Everybody wanted to surrender to the Americans. At least we hadn't bombed *their* cities. They had chocolate! This, this third war, didn't these stupid people pay attention to the first and to the second? And what if it does spread? What if it does spread into Greece? Macedonia? What if Russia decides to quit democracy and aid the Serbs against the NATO peacekeepers? This thing could still explode. One plane shot down. Then another. Then what?

She said, People, I think. People need a frame to hold themselves

together. God knows they cannot do it by themselves. They need a context. Something to contain themselves. Like a tree, one you must train.

Germany, she said. We have our frame of guilt. Like Japan, which is reinforced by America's forgiveness for committing the unconscionable. Before the wall came down we were beholden and guilty and small. The Russians were framed by their poverty and conquest, that cold peasant smugness, and now that they have collapsed, they are framed by their poverty.

And the French, she said. The French are framed by their arrogance and defeat, which they will never get over, being French, and the British are framed by their arrogance and great sacrifice. A fallen empire. The Suez Canal, South Africa. The Italians are my favorite, I think. They are framed by their lack of resources and warm sea climate and their love for children, which they mistake for industry. Everybody loves the Italians. It is impossible not to.

And the Americans?

The Americans are framed by what has always framed them. Their bounty. By their lack of struggle, which makes them good in the heart. Americans are never bitter, just annoying.

She said, Yugoslavia, it could have been a real nation. Tito dies, move to Sarajevo, build a multi-religious capitol. They have had forty years to prepare. A brand-new democracy. Instead they fall apart because they have no frame. Or because the frame of their leaders is one of selfishness and fear and separatism, and that is the frame which always implodes. Like the Middle East. Boom.

She said, looking around her at the photographs of all the movie stars, Most beautiful woman. It's okay. You may have more than one.

Anouk Aimée. In the race car movie. She's the film editor—

Yes, she said. *A Man and a Woman*. I love that movie.

It's the editing, Stephen said. It describes by how it splices.

Well, Elise said, laughing, she's also very beautiful.

Later, back outside, walking through the mall, it began to snow. Big, white, deliciously fat flakes drifted in the sky. The snow, looking up at it—you could not tell if it was rising or falling.

She said, taking his arm and cocking her head, Favorite second career.

He said, A luthier.

She said, Dentist. She said, What is a luthier?

He who makes guitars. Or she. Cellos, he said, A dentist?

Got you, she said, laughing. Actually a cook. Chef. A *real* chef in a marvelous restaurant. But I would have to be very good at it. And no tourists for customers. No no no. I would be a chef only for people who know how to eat.

They stopped at a crowded booth and ordered hot wine, the cups of which steamed in their hands. A handful of drunk men stood singing nearby. The wine was sweet, and they went on, and there was a bookstore which specialized in art, and Stephen purchased a copy of his North Sea photographs—120 marks, which smarted.

Back on the street, Elise said, A coat. You need a new coat.

He said, gathering the collar of his pea coat, The stores are too crowded.

They stopped at an art and office supply store, where Elise picked up several brightly colored file folders she was partial to, and while she was busy Stephen purchased a Rotring mechanical pencil—brushed in silver, not chrome. Outside, they walked to the old town, down toward the church. There was dark now, and snow swirling in the lights, singing and laughter in the streets. They stopped at a crowded booth for more hot wine. She said, We will have to take a cab back. The wine is making me sleepy. She said, I want to buy you a warm coat. It will be my gift to you. To keep you warm. She said, raising her eyebrow, For when you go back to the Windy City.

They walked through the crowd to the church. There, he stood still a moment and looked up at the sky, and Elise said, What is it?

I was thinking about Gulliver. Christmas Eve. That's when I lost him.

She said, taking his arm and pulling him close, I did not know that.

4

On Christmas Eve, after Elise's parents had returned early from a party, they all sat before the fire and exchanged gifts. Elise's father, Philip, gave Stephen an antique brass-handled magnifying glass; Rebekka gave Stephen a navy scarf. Philip and Rebekka spent several minutes exclaiming over the book of North Sea photographs. Elise kissed Stephen, and then, as he was seated on the floor, she separated his legs and snuggled her back into him, placing his arm on

her shoulder, bringing his hand to her heart. She was delighted with the pencil: its weight, and balance. Elise's parents gave her a leather folio for her trip to New York. And then Rebekka and Philip retired to their wing of the house.

That night, after he had slipped into his bed, Elise came to his room. She stood in the doorway in her white cotton nightdress. She said, May I come in?

Please, yes.

She shut the door and stood in the light from the street and the snow and removed her nightdress, which she hung on the knob of the door. She rushed to the bed, lifting the duvet, and slid in beside him. She wrapped her arms around his chest and said, I was cold.

She ran her hand along his ribs. She said, Stephen, I want you to tell me.

She said, Tell me.

—

And so he told her. He told her the story of the American couple with the strained pretend-marriage; he told her of the couple's trip to Rome which was supposed to ease the strain. They did in Rome, he told her, the things one does. At the airport, upon arriving, they walked by a half-dozen carabinieri in the process of removing by way of a fishing pole an unattended duffel bag. They stood in line for a cab and went to their hotel near Vatican City. The staff at the hotel was proper and punctilious and coldly impolite. They went to restaurants, and after the first day, Stephen learned to watch out for dog shit on the cobblestones. The wife of the couple, he said, asked her partner to buy her a beautiful pair of leather boots. At the Vatican Museum, Stephen lingered over the Gallery of Maps. They had taken that spiraling staircase so out of place. It was crowded, the museum, and hot, and they—the couple and their young son—were constantly being pressed by the sea of pilgrims. In the Sistine Chapel, the young boy did the Hokey Pokey, having recently learned it in preschool.

Exhausted, they were expelled out onto St. Peter's Piazza—the great collection plate of the people, Stephen called it. He took photographs of his son, and of his partner, R, holding their son into the air before the fountain. Three young priests in black cassocks passed

him by. That night, the couple arranged for a sitter, and then the couple walked to the Trevi Fountain and made a wish. Stephen wished to be more happy, to be more content with this life of his, and later they went to look at the Pantheon in the moonlight. They returned home, tired, and went coldly to bed, neither feeling happy.

Gulliver had been fussy that night, he remembered. Gulliver was jet-lagged and did not like the strange bed. He did like playing with the bidet. He called it the Magic Fountain.

Stephen said to Elise, All roads lead to Rome. We had been heading there since we first met.

Go on.

We had done the ruins, which seemed fitting. The Castle Sant'Angelo and the Pons Aelius. Nero's baths. The Tomb of the Scipii. The Spanish Steps and the Colosseum, the House of the Vestal Virgins. Keats's House. We'd done the things one does. We were in the Piazza Navona. I liked the fountain—those beautifully sculpted bodies. So sexual, the bodies and the water. The Fountain of the Four Rivers. We were having a drink and there was a gypsy woman in a long red coat—like Santa, one of his vixen helpers. White fur at the hem. She stood on a bucket, and the coat clung to her body and draped to the ground, and she did various pantomimes, and a crowd gathered. There was a radio set up blasting sexy music. Very Latin. R was turned on. It's hard to explain: the foreign setting, the beautiful light, the woman in red, the music. And R and I, we hadn't made love in months, and then it was as if the ice between us was melting away, and she was whispering.

Go on.

Some details I'll spare you. A general rule.

Tell me. Tell me all.

So there they were: Gulliver, the boy, sitting on the man's shoulders, laughing and looking at the pretty lady in the bright red cape. R had Stephen's hand beneath her sweater. And now an older man—Italian—trim Italian suit, brash, introduced himself to Stephen. R, using Stephen's thumb to tease her nipple, while Stephen turned to answer the man's questions—

You are a photographer?

Excuse me?

The man explained his name was Antonio. The man explained he was the Paparazzo of the Empire.

One thing led to another. R gave Stephen back his hand. The man introduced the couple to his bodyguard—a handsome boy. Conversation on the way to a café, laughter and a drink. Another.

I knew you were a photographer by your camera, the man said, pointing. In Rome I know all the photographers. I am the Paparazzo of the Empire.

And then the man invited them to his flat for more conversation.

So you go?

Yes, we go. We are world travelers. This is our adventure.

Inside, inside the apartment, it's a hymn to celebrity. It's a vast apartment filled with photographs of every conceivable star. The galaxy. The royals from Monaco to Jordan to England. There's Fergie, pudgy and topless on a beach. Diana in Versace. There's Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman in opening red-carpet gear at Cannes. Even Anouk Aimée, a set still. We are told that this man has done more drugs and had more sex with the famous stars than anybody. He is, you see, the Paparazzo of the Empire.

Then the man pulled out some ecstasy. He shared politely. The handsome bodyguard. R, who sallied forth up to the rail, as if she were at communion—the tablet on her pink tongue. I pulled Gulliver aside to look at the photographs of the pretty people. The hundreds on the walls. Distant family.

I said, It's time to go.

R did not want to go.

I said, It's late. Gulliver is tired. I am tired.

Oh Stephen, said the man, suddenly electric. Have some wine!

Go, R said, drinking wine. Go. I'll get a cab.

Oh nonsense, Stephen. It is not far. Come and kiss your pretty wife. I will escort your pretty wife personally!

R, I said.

I'm in Rome, Stephen. I'm in *Rome*.

So, okay.

She kissed Gulliver, and I placed Gulliver on my shoulders, and we walked back to our coldly impolite hotel. On the way we stopped to look at the moonlight on the pretty buildings. At home, a bath, and he played with the Magic Fountain, shooting up the streams, laughing, and I read to him books and tucked him into bed. I sat on the edge of his bed and looked at Antonio Bianchi's card. It had his picture; it

read *The Emperor of the Paparazzi*. When R returned, at dawn, she had wine and condoms and spermicide on her breath.

Was it his, or the bodyguard's, I will never know. If I guess, it's the bodyguard's. The old guy, he's busy with the camera. He's snapping shots. Of that night she will remember only the sexual compromise. You cannot play around with ecstasy. People, they assume photographers are obsessed with sex, but one does not make love with a lens. The lens may be a shield, but it's not a dildo. A lens requires distance. What is the paparazzo obsessed with? Money.

Go on.

She's angry with me for not being what she wanted to make me into. She is a feminist, class of 1978, thanks to a conspicuous lack of women professors at her small college; thanks to the example of her thrice-divorced aunt and sacrificial mother who gave up her career to raise the children, etcetera, and who would otherwise have been a great something-or-other. R is the feminist caught in the wake of those women who had nothing and who made their way from nothing, but she is of a generation of replacements, only she is not yet aware of the changes on the battlefield. It's no longer enough just to protest—

She is not honest with herself, you are saying.

Something like that. What troubles me, Stephen said, is that she could do so much. Instead she becomes a replaceable part in an ordinary political machine. Wanting to be loved, she does what those around her want her to. And so they have these differences, the couple, but despite these differences they love each other. They have a history, years of growing up together, and now the fact of this beautiful child. She's on a trip, feeling frisky. She's tired of the distance the man keeps and she's eager to break it down. She breaks people down to make them laugh, agree, to make them all her own. This is something she is good at, something people love her for. So why won't he?

In the morning, he lets her sleep. He puts a glass of water beside the bed and two aspirins. He takes the boy back to the Colosseum. On the way, they talk about Roman soldiers. There are men at the Colosseum with red skirts and golden swords. The men make funny faces and cry out in fake pain, and they delight the boy, who is in love with soldiers even though he has never once been permitted to watch any on television. But he is a boy. He is enchanted by the uniforms and bright weapons gleaming in the light and the sounds they make slid-

ing in and out of scabbards. The soldiers, they make those funny faces to him, and he laughs into the sky. He laughs in peals, like bells.

The streets, they are buzzing with scooters—giant gnats high on gasoline. The boy explains when they go home he wants to have a scooter too. But a *quiet* scooter. One not so noisy, because the scooters scare him, the noisy ones. The man and the boy, they talk about scooters and nifty sports cars and make their way back to the Piazza Navona. On the way he, the man, is trying to decide if he should cut short the trip. R, his wife, she's in the bath. She's got a case of morning-after. She's crying bitterly into the bath. It's over, now. She's got a good reason to make it over. This ridiculous act of infidelity she will never confess. Or will. The partnership, the union, it burdens her like a tax. It's not the first time she has wanted it to be over; it's time to humiliate the cuckold. She thinks she can make it over now for good so long as she tells him precisely what she's done. Stab him in the heart's faithful core. Twist the blade.

He stopped speaking. He reached for a glass of water and drank.

So, Elise said, gently. So you go back to the Piazza Navona.

The narrator, Stephen said. The narrator should tell you the man in question is one who loves women. He is neither a philanderer nor a pervert, but he loves women. And she's back. The gypsy girl. He watches her in an alley remove her jacket and slip on the red Christmas cape. The dazzling white hem. It's this sudden, awkward intimacy. And she is startling. The eyes. The cheap makeup surrounding. She has that gaunt figure of the proverbial and fetishized gypsy. Now she's talking with a man. The same handsome boy. The bodyguard. The bodyguard is handing her a wad of bills.

He thinks, So they are friends. He thinks, All great cities are made smaller by their common circles. Now the girl enters the square. The man, the narrator, he should have left right then. He should have picked up his son and gone back to the hotel. His wife could have confessed her sin, or not; he could have forgiven her, which he would have, much to his wife's surprise; or he might not have, depending if he sensed from her a genuine desire for dissolution. By not forgiving her, the road to separation would be more clear. More direct. The word *unite* has never been far removed from the word *untie*. A mere slip of the tongue, or pen. They'd have to work out only matters of custody.

Instead he should have gone to St. Peter's. He wanted to photo-

graph his son with one or two of the Swiss Guards. The *Pietà*, the most beautiful sculpture in all the world, that is in St. Peter's. He thought a picture of the Swiss Guards with his son would protect his son for life. Guardian Angels, Soldiers of God.

And then?

And then I hear that beating Latin music. The girl is on the elevated platform, toes together for it being so narrow. A paint bucket, draped over and concealed by her red Christmas cape. Her hips are tucked. I take out the camera, check the light. I tell Gulliver to come with, to stay close, because I have to let go his hand and in crowded places we always stay close. That's the phrase, *Stay close*.

Eyes sharp.

I wanted to see her up close. I wanted to look.

So I crash the line, dump a handful of lira into the collection plate. I'm on my heels, shooting up at her elevated figure. Always the serious artist. She gives me a sexy pout. She shakes her finger at me. She is actually flirting with me. She is terrifyingly angelic and marvelous. She has caught my eye and now she keeps it to herself by pretending to give it back. She twists that red cape like a skirt. She's a matador, and Gulliver is standing right behind me, looking sharp.

Only he isn't. He's gone. Like that.

—

Antonio Bianchi, the police assured me, knew nothing. He was of the paparazzi, well respected, not a *pornographer* or *pederast* or *ransomer*. Three months later, he was found in the stairwell of his building, dressed in a white linen suit, his throat having been slit. The police determined his throat had been slit in the dark by somebody who knew him well.

The bodyguard had also disappeared. Some speculate there might have been a quarrel between the two. Truth is, if I saw him, the bodyguard, and having never photographed his face . . . if I saw him I wouldn't recognize him. He was beautiful. Anybody can be beautiful.

The wife, Stephen said. The wife never forgave the man for losing her son.

In Rome, he said, you walk by the old lepers. It's a thespian-influenced form of panhandling. Very creative. The bent, crippled figure, hooded in black, twitching. You are supposed to give her

money. That summer I went back to Rome. I learned of the assassination of the Paparazzo of the Empire. In my crueller moments I like to imagine somebody taking a picture as it happens—the knife, coming across the throat, just a bit more firmly than a kiss. A girl's ribbon, or silk scarf, blowing in the breeze. The blade would be sharp and handled by somebody very close, preferably a lover. Somebody holding the camera would have to use a flash. The flash, hitting the blade, would bounce back into the lens, into the eye of he who held the camera, blinding him. Her? The eye of the first beholder. A picture like that, a snuff picture, it would be worth thousands. He must have had a thousand people who wished him dead. Who could wish otherwise on a paparazzo? They are leeches. They suck the blood of the public figure and then they sell it. They are parasites.

You? Did you?

I just wanted my son. I wanted to ask him what he knew but arrived too late. That summer, amid the tourists and the faithful, I watched a girl in sneakers and shorts and a halter top put on the black robe of the leper. I followed her to her place, to a spot beside the McDonald's at the Pantheon, where she struck the pose. Got down on her knees, her face to the cobblestones, twitching endlessly.

Nothing is what it seems, I said.

And then I went home, and then I came back, almost a year later, and still the bodyguard was gone. Perhaps his throat had been slit, too. Perhaps his body had been dumped into the Tiber. People forget, why shouldn't the river? I never saw the same girl, though I saw many like her. The brothels in Europe are filled with pretty girls from the Ukraine and Slovakia, Romania and Hungary, and the girls are all protected by their bodyguards. The brothels are filled with girls who are not permitted to leave on account of their bodyguards who protect them with knives and guns and who keep them safe by locking them up at night into their rooms. So much for Wars of Liberation. Sometimes the guards permit the girls to call home to their families. Nothing is what it seems. Not the War on Choice; not the Sexual Revolution.

And then I went across the Adriatic to Hvar. I went to Biševo. I went to the Blue Grotto and swam in the blue water and I saw you. You were diving into the sea. It was the first time I took your photograph.

He said, The first time I saw you, you were naked.

As were you.

Mirrors and veils, he said. The veil is the key to all deception.

He said, rolling over, now facing her . . . Once. Once a clerk at an airport asked to see my identification. I showed it to him, and the clerk said, I am protecting you in case somebody has stolen your ticket.

I said, No. You are presuming I am a thief.

I said, Presume anything you want, but let's not lie about it.

The veil is the key. The veil is the key to all the secrets of the world. The veil is what keeps you warm; in the house of God, it keeps a woman's hair in place. It is the essence of all that is erotic which is the essence of that which creation permits. The veil is the fabric which conceals the face, the body; it's made of the same fabric as the shroud. It is the emblem of an act of vision. The veil describes what one permits another to see of oneself. The eyes. Why do the eyes tell all? Because they *see* all. I lost my son because I looked away from him for a moment. Because for a moment I was entranced by a woman wearing a red cape.

That's what I found in Rome. I found out that God holds a mirror from the sky but I am the one who holds the veil. I found my calling. My calling is to remove the veil, or to hold the veil in place, but either way, stay or go, it is I who must choose to reach. To keep it there. To take it away.

Elise said, almost a whisper, Why did you stay with R? After that?

Because if we had split up then Gulliver would not have had a place to come home to.

But you are never there.

No, Stephen said. One thing I am not is ever there.

—

In the morning he was awakened by Elise, sitting up in bed, watching him. He stirred and rubbed at his eyes. She was squinting one eye to focus. She said, We all have a frame. A frame that holds us. My frame is my parents and their love for me and my love for my parents. Their love for each other.

Okay.

Your frame is your lost son and his heartbroken mother, whom you love but cannot love enough. Not her heartbreak, but your own. You can change that. You can change that loss to love.

She said, That's what my parents did. When their son died. Leukemia. Even my mother the important doctor could not save him.

I didn't know.

They had to fill that loss. That void in the heart. They had to love to fill it up with more. They had to have me.

He said, You can't fix me, Elise.

I don't want to fix you. I want to love you. I want to know you will forgive me in advance of all I do wrong. I want you to know that I will forgive you likewise. And then I want to spend my life with you traveling the world.

What are you saying?

I am saying you cannot disappoint somebody who loves you.

You don't know me well enough to love me.

Then how am I to reply to your love for me? That is a silly premise, Stephen. It does not hold. A love which is new does not mean it is a love which will not last.

Most don't.

Some do. She said, I *know* the essence. I know there is more to know that I want to spend my life discovering. You are afraid you will disappoint. You are afraid you will never be forgiven because you will not forgive yourself.

Something like that.

You do not believe that two people can be perfect for each other. That love must not always be the acceptance of things which diminish that love.

I've never seen it.

I have.

Your parents.

Yes. Also others. Anna and her husband. I know two women who have that love with each other.

My father had that, I think. With my mother. I don't know.

She said, There's time. I can wait. Love does not vanish unless you make it. But you must look at this: I have never met a person like you, and I know you have never met a person like me. I know because only my life could have made me. I am not a dewy girl looking to be laid,

especially by an American. This is not a passing infatuation. Do you understand? A crush?

She said, reaching between his legs and grabbing a handful of testicle, Like this?

When she let go she swung out of bed. She picked up her night-dress, and she said, opening the door, I'm going to use the toilet. After we'll make breakfast.

Okay.

And then, Stephen Brings. Then we are going to break the fast.

5

As Stephen grew stronger, his spirits rose. For breakfast he ate bread and a tomato and a slice of Gouda and he drank two cups of the most delicious coffee ever brewed in the history of caffeine. Following Rebekka's instructions, he drank mineral water by the liter. Next he moved into the tower apartment with his gear and set up shop. The apartment was on the seventh floor, sparsely furnished, facing the rising hilltop. There were a French bed and a table in the center room, a wooden-framed self-standing mirror, a pocket kitchen which would serve well as a darkroom; there was a bath built for two. The light was warm and there was a rich, dark carpet, a fine reading chair in the manner of Eames and a shelf full of Henry James and John Hawkes and William Gass.

It's perfect, Stephen said.

It was snowing again. The sky white like flowers. In bed, before the windows, they watched the snow swirl into the wind in the sky. Elise said, looking out the window, I have always liked this apartment. There is no need to draw the drapes.

He noticed, for the second time, she had shaved her body. And he thought, A woman who smiles at you when you begin to rise, knowing she has caused it: it is a confluence of power and desire, which allows for trust. He watched the upturned corners of her mouth. He felt the laugh bubbling in the back of her throat. He thought, She has you now. Look at what she can do.

He said, Ten Books.

She laughed. She said, Well, *Anna Karenina* I think is in order.

Perfect.

She said, The usual suspects. *Emma. Middlemarch. Orlando.* Kundera, she said, shifting her weight on his lap. Don't you want to come?

Not now.

She laced her hands behind his neck, arching her back. What if I did?

Do you?

Not just yet. But fairly soon, perhaps. Before the sun comes up, certainly.

Promise, he said.

She said, brushing his tangled hair from his eyes, We have a lifetime to do this. Oh fuck. We could read, doing this. I have never done that.

Nothing technical.

Mm-mm, she said.

Nabokov?

Yes. And maybe a little Anaïs Nin.

The Story of O?

Doubtful, she said, laughing. Again that laugh, which traveled through her body, and gripped him. But *The Kama Sutra*, she said. God yes. We would have to have that. The walking of the crab and such. The squeezing of the horse?

Later, while she slept, he spooned her body and buried his nose into the nape of her neck. Simply he could not get his fill of her. He ran his finger across the declivities of her ribs, he placed the flat of his hand against her navel and felt the rising and falling of her breath. He repeated in his mind observations she had made. *Why is it*, she had said, *that children always appear older in a photograph than they really are? What is that radiance? That lack of self-consciousness?* She said she preferred skiing to bicycling. She preferred Beethoven to Mozart. She said, *Have you ever noticed that a man's penis, once fully cocked, resembles a loaded gun?* She preferred long letters always to the telephone. Without the answering machine, she said, we would be compelled to answer. *Ugh.* She said she preferred to drive rather than to be driven. She preferred to wear her hair short now that she had made it so. She preferred winter to summer only if it was possible to ski, and she preferred a pencil to a pen because with a pencil it was possible to erase. She preferred modernism, she supposed, to post-modernism; film to television, which she refused to watch on account

of the commercials. Italy to Greece, Spain to France. Berlin to Paris. She didn't care for London at all. New York City, she supposed, to Detroit. *Just checking*. She said she preferred nude gay beaches to nude straight beaches because at the gay beaches the men were beautiful and preferred not to look at you but rather to be looked upon. A man like Stephen, one thing he was pretty certain of was his ability to love a woman not for the way she looked, but rather for the things she saw.

This honeymoon, this unexpected adventure of the body, it was like absorbing into the bloodstream a finely manufactured opiate—it freed the mind; it loosened the heart. *Ich komme*, she'd say, coming. And then she'd say, later, maybe at a café, *Ich will dir einen blasen*, and wait for him to translate, laughing, and it wasn't simply this spilling bucketful of sexual display which freed him: that manic thrill of travel, and discovery, the there-and-back-again of the erotic imagination freely exchanged. *Behind*, Elise said. *Sometimes I like it from behind*. The blind cry in the midst, the arching of the back, the breath in the ardent, tangled-up kiss? Sometimes she liked him to come on her breast. Sometimes she'd put his cock in her fist and say, *No, No, not yet, Stephen*, and he'd bite his tongue, and then hers, and then he'd come without ejaculating and she'd let him go all over again. Because it wasn't the love which had set him free, it was the possibility to. It was the pauses, the rests—like in music, or after great exercise: the space and pauses between the sentences and the heartbeats, the ranging of the eyes across a field of vision before that precise moment of their locking into focus: the fine ribbon of light circumnavigating the aureole, the blue-white vein throbbing at the ankle, the scar on the knee the length of a penny. There was always the hint of sleep in the waking eye; and the curve of her hip, silhouetted against the skyline.

He thought, watching the snow fall from the sky, Sex is about the body only insofar as it has nobody else to mind.

He thought, Thinking makes it so.

—

In the morning she awoke and pulled the duvet up across her chest. She sat up, hanging onto the duvet, and said, Will you make the breakfast?

Sure.

He swung out of bed: the heat was on, the room toasty, the windows fogged with condensation. He went to the kitchen and poured juice from a box—those Germans—and began water for the coffee. Waiting for the water to boil, he smoked a cigarette at the window. He opened a fresh brick of coffee. He stepped out of the kitchen and saw her, sitting up, the quilt covering her body, and said, Are you cold?

She held the quilt in place and said, looking at him, No. Why do you ask?

Nothing, he said. He stepped back into the kitchen and called, Toast? With cheese?

No. Meat.

Never both. He made a three-egg omelet to split. He poured the coffee; he set the tray. Then he brought the breakfast to the foot of the bed. In bed, she insisted on holding the duvet to cover herself. She ate with one hand. She made a big show of it, always shifting her coffee or juice from one hand to the other, using her chin to pin the quilt in place. Once, when the quilt began to slip, she cursed under her breath. She raised her eyes and caught him looking.

He looked away, at his coffee, which was hot.

She caught his eye again. She said, You look perplexed, Stephen.

I was just wondering what's with the sheet thing—

And then she burst into a laugh. She threw aside the quilt and pushed aside the breakfast tray and grabbed his shoulders and pinned him on his back. She said, laughing, pinning him, her ribs shaking, You should have seen your face. I mean—

She howled now. She howled and held her ribs. She said, shaking, Really. Boy oh boy!

Very funny.

She said, shaking, wiping the tears streaming from her eyes, Boy oh boy. Did I get you!

—

After a while even the most ardent lovers come up for air. So they did other things. Stephen, for example, wrote an essay in the manner of Andrew Marvell exploring the relationships between body and soul. It wasn't right, the essay, but he was eager to be trying to explain the state in which he found himself. Elise met with her publisher and edi-

tor about page proofs and publicity matters. In summer there would be a tour through Austria and Switzerland and Germany: together, Stephen and Elise marked up a map with places to go and to stay. They took a day trip to Baden-Baden and did the spa, parting at the lobby, going their separate ways through the various stations where Germans of hardy stock with beefy hands attended to their bodies. They met, naked and weak-kneed, in the center of the pool beneath a spectacular dome. There was an old couple nearby, sitting on the lip of the pool, holding hands. There was another couple, younger, and another. In the pool the water was blue and rife with minerals. Also they attended a reading at the American Center by an American poet nobody in America had heard of, but should have, and they ate at the Rathskeller, and they picked out a suit for Stephen in a tony shop off Calwerstrasse and lingerie for Elise in a basement shop with an arched brick ceiling—where Elise pulled him into the curtained booth, while the clerks spoke through the gauzy curtain, and Elise said, undoing his fly, kissing him, Do you dress to the right, Sir? Or to the Left? When Stephen blushed, she laughed, by the bellyful, and said, Oh Stephen, sometimes you should see yourself. She said, turning him to the mirror, Look, Stephen. Just look at us!

For the doorknob, he said, looking at the piles of lingerie. No?

They ate delicious pretzels; they walked up to the top of the hill, and back, to build strength in their legs; they returned to their bed, or to the bath built for two, and made love; they read books together in bed, and in the bath for two. Stephen was partial to the effects one could generate with the magic wand of that handheld faucet, perhaps Europe's greatest and most underrated prize; why wasn't this a standard device in every American bath? Shame, shame—and so, reading, taking turns to adjust the temperature, they could fill an entire day. Once, she made him lie back, and close his eyes, and then she used three of his razor blades to shave his body.

He said, Elise?

She said, laughing, Trust me.

It's not that I don't trust you—

She had his calves resting upon her shoulders. She said, squinting, I am in a delicate place just now. You should not make me laugh so hard, Stephen.

Or sneeze.

She laughed again. She said, Next it will be your turn.

And then he shaved *her* body, which was little more than a touch-up job; still he shaved all but the tuft she'd asked him to leave for decoration. The arms, he understood, they could be a tricky proposition, and when they had finished, they stood in the toasty room and slathered each other with lotion and gazed at each other in the free-standing mirror.

Like babies, she said, kissing him.

And then they dressed and went into town and met Philip and Rebekka for dinner, during which Stephen learned more about Helmut Kohl than he could possibly ever keep straight. And so the days passed, and they attended the symphony, and the ballet. They took the subway to a movie theater which showed films in English and sat in wooden chairs belonging to a former grade school; they strolled in the dark; and alone, learning the city, Stephen worked on his German.

And as his health improved, as his strength grew daily, certain elements of his chemistry began to assert themselves. Whether it was the food, or the surprising lack of stress, or the heady state of being deeply in love, he wasn't certain, but he had somehow slipped over the equatorial line circumscribing his moods. Among other things, he was reading breathlessly: book upon book, now often through the night. He felt it unnecessary to sleep for more than three or four hours, usually in the morning, while Elise also slept, whereupon they rose together to plan their days. Next he began to print, working in long, dedicated blocks; he wrote letters to the owners of galleries who knew his work. And now he was taking notes: he saw the next three projects unfold before him like a flower in the course of a single night. He'd do something about foreign workers in Berlin. He'd do something in Moscow as it struggled to embrace free enterprise. He'd write a book about—a study of—light, and he'd ask the physicists at the Max Planck Institute to help, and they would help because didn't everybody want to help? And as the speed of his mind accelerated so too did the speed of his speech so that he was often asked to slow down so that he could be understood. Then, the final proof of it—he mastered, finally, his understanding of the German dative case. Like a lightbulb, clicking. *Den*, and *Der*! He was on. He was on fire—his mind, his heart—in a way he hadn't been in years. He was, as they say in the helping professions, high.

The night of the New Year's Eve party, the knife's point of the most recent wave having passed, he thought it odd how people used that expression *clean as a knife* always forgetting that a knife remains clean only insofar as it is never put to use, so what's the good of that? Take note, he thought, settling in to a very pleasant cruising altitude. Sit back and enjoy the flight. Ladies and gentlemen, the captain is pleased to announce that lithium is a place for those afraid of elevation. He was alive: his senses—his eyes, so sensitive to light; his hearing; his sense of smell: it was as if he had been finely bred to put these things to use—a dog, say, looking to flush drugs and bombs, or birds. And he was sexual, this suddenly teenaged physiology of his, in ways he hadn't been since he first discovered sex, alone in his bed, at the very complicated age of thirteen. That first, solitary orgasm, in which he had felt as if his spine had sprouted a dragon's wings and taken flight out of the small of his back, taking along with it his ribs, and pelvis. And then the semen, the entire flooding Mississippi River of it all. He'd had no idea what had been inside of him, what his body had been making. Terrified, he had touched the pooling river of it in his sheets. He had held his fingers in the air and looked at it in the light.

Mostly Dead, says Miracle Max. *I said Mostly Dead. Mostly Dead is not All Dead.*

And here he was alive like a current. Like a flaming sun. And so the night of the New Year's Eve party, and in order to adjust his trim, he nipped into his supply of Xanax. To be used sparingly, he'd taught himself, lest he have to kick. Then he dressed in his new suit. Never had he ever worn so fine a suit of clothes. It made him feel rich, or at least faintly important. At Philip and Rebekka's house, he and Elise were the first to arrive, and Philip said, shaking his hand at the door, Stephen, may we speak a moment?

Well, yes.

Philip led him to his office, a room which Stephen had yet to enter. There were two chairs off to the side. Two empty snifters, a bottle of cognac. Philip poured, he made a toast, they sat and admired the liquor's bouquet.

Stephen, Philip said. I say these things not to stick my beak in.

What is it?

We can arrange a work permit. You could work for my company—I can't imagine being any use to you.

Oh, we could have you shoot the annual reports or something. If that's not beneath you.

Not if it's for you.

But that's not the issue, I think. We could arrange something with the university where I have some relations. There will be people here tonight. Or perhaps some magazine associations.

I have a job, Stephen said. In America.

I mean only to discuss a way for you to stay. I did not mean—

No, Stephen said, placing his hand on Philip's arm. It was the gesture he typically made to indicate gratitude and warmth, though it struck him, mid-gesture, as out of place. Who was he to gesture in this man's study? Suddenly he was nervous, which irritated him. He had made it a point in this life not to be intimidated by anybody, fuck 'em, and, well, here he was, crossing his legs, sniffing at the cognac to hide his face behind the glass.

He said, I understand, I think.

What I mean, Stephen, is that we should not permit immigration to be a deciding factor in any matter.

You are kind to worry.

This is not worry. One does not worry for the likes of you.

To offer, then. To help. I know I can't stay in your apartment forever.

It is free to you until spring. In spring we can take up the matter again. If you are here.

Thank you.

Philip said, looking at a photograph on his desk, I hope you are here. You have compelled me to address my game. He said, Are you a good teacher?

I never met one who said he wasn't.

Philip laughed. Yes, I suppose. I suppose you want to grow.

Yes.

A company, it grows. We are in Brazil now. And soon Chile. I would not want to be a part of something which could not grow. Which could not make me change. In this manner I think we are very much alike. Others, too.

Stephen nodded.

I did not want, Philip said, my daughter to fall in love with a man who has commitments elsewhere.

I take your point.

Do you?

Yes.

I am very hopeful to know you well, Stephen. He said, rising, The guests?

Stephen thought, following him out, Well, at least he didn't say, *That's my last son-in-law on the wall, looking as if he were alive.* They joined the party. There were tall Germans everywhere in tailored German clothes. When introduced, they spoke English to save Stephen embarrassment. Stephen met, among others, friends of Elise—two of whom had come up from Munich, and the elderly lesbian couple from Heidelberg, and a friend from the America House. Elise, wearing the Little Black Dress, a platinum choker at her throat with a small emerald pendant—she said, fingering it, My grandmother's. She said, taking his hand and putting it to her warm waist, Are you happy? I am very, very happy. What did my father say? Tell me later, please. Her perfume, sandalwood and lily of the valley, bloomed off her chest and throat. She kissed him, they parted to mingle; mingling awkwardly, Stephen popped another Xanax. He stood in the corner, sipping his wine, sipping, fearful of getting drunk, when Rebekka approached him and said, You are fine? You are not bored with all this?

Not at all, he said. It's splendid.

She brushed a bit of lint from his shoulder, and then she stood beside him and proceeded to describe the various guests. She laughed, just like her daughter. She said, We will have fireworks at midnight. It's the tradition.

He shifted his weight. Elise stood across the room, laughing at something her father had said.

Rebekka said, Stephen?

Yes?

This was not a bad idea, was it?

What?

The party, of course.

No. No.

And then she kissed his cheek, and Stephen said, I think I'll step outside.

Outside on the porch, he took in the hillsides surrounding the city; he stayed out there as long as it was socially permissible, and then others stepped out to smoke, and there was interesting conversation

as far as interesting conversation went. Now he stepped back inside for a bit of food and became involved in another interesting conversation. There was a scientist from Uganda and his wife wearing bright and cheerful clothes. There was a young German novelist Elise had gone to school with, whom Stephen liked instantly, and his Venezuelan lover. The hour approached, and the clock struck midnight, and now everybody was kissing and shaking hands.

Come, Elise said, kissing him, leading him to her parents' bedroom, another room he had yet to enter, and out onto a porch overlooking the city.

She said, The fireworks!

He had been expecting lights and flowers shooting up into the sky. Roman candles. But that is not what happened. Instead it was just fireworks, packages of dynamite, the noise of them lit off by all the neighbors—detonating like guns. Big guns, little guns. No need to aim, given the occasion. Soon the air began to smell like smoke, like cordite, and the smoke rose up from the Neckar Valley and then there was a low-flying aircraft sweeping over the city checking for fires. And now he was shaking, listening to the detonations which kept firing across the city in the dark, and he drank down his flute of champagne. Elise refilled his glass. He drank that down, too fast, and he took the glass from her own hand and set it on the railing. He put his arms around her and held her tightly, breathing in her perfume, and the smell of her beneath that, and she held his arms tightly, and then she said, *Happy New Year, füsser*, and he said, *I don't want to go*, and she said, *Don't*.

They rejoined the party to pay their respects. Outside they looked at the sky. They breathed in the cold, winter air, which felt cleansing now, the smoke having cleared. He took her hand and they set off, briskly, and he said, Sometimes I get excited. Worked up.

Really?

No really. Really. Like I'm on speed.

I hadn't noticed.

Okay, okay. But see then I come down.

She said, What are you trying to say?

He stopped walking. They stood beside a tall tree, the residential tower overlooking them. There were parties all around. Music, blasting from a house, with people dancing on a porch. Women's voices,

peeling from pale throats in silk blouses. Men, laughing. Elise said, gathering her coat to her throat, shifting her legs, Yes?

I'm not always easy, okay? I'm not always happy happy.

You are trying to scare me.

No. I don't know what I'm doing. I eat, I feel the fuel kicking in, I can't stop. It's intoxicating and exhausting at the same time. But sometimes I can't stop when I want to. And then it's not fun. Or I crash hard, he said. I'm not good at stress. Little things. Like meeting new people. Or driving in traffic. Parties terrify me, actually.

Why didn't you say so?

Because I can manage. Because I'm not a fucking cripple. Thing is, what a lot of people take for granted I don't. And here's the deal. It's getting worse. As I age. It's getting harder for me to slow down. In my twenties people thought I was goofy and alive and whatnot. I was moody. But it's harder now for me to slow down and then speed up. It's harder for me to find the center. Like a bubble in a carpenter's level? To find it you have to be able to hold it steady.

He said, I have never told anybody this. Anybody.

What?

Well this, *all* of this. This thing I have. This whacked-out swinging state of grace and abandon. It killed my mother. She was my age. The age I am now. My father, it broke his heart. She was charming and then she was oh so vivacious and then she was dead. Do you see? It broke my father's heart.

She . . .

He said, I did that once. I can't do that again.

Oh Stephen, Elise said. She put her arms around him, holding him. She said, stepping back, looking him in the eyes, You're stronger. Your mind's alive. You're not used to it now. Like too many sweets.

God, please do not tell your mother.

She said, taking his hands, You're cold.

No, I'm shaking. He shook himself like a dog, shaking it off, and said, You need to understand the whole package. I can cut it off with exercise, with physical exhaustion. I used to burn it off with booze, but that's dangerous and I'm too fucking old for that. But it dulls it. At least it used to. But—

Just tell me.

I think I need to walk, he said, walking.

She followed, her steps skipping, and they approached the tower's entryway.

She said, It's two A.M. Should I come? Do you want me to come?

No, he said. No, please.

He saw her to the elevator, kissed her, and stepped out of the building and now he really began to walk. Fast, a pace that swallowed up the yards like a long-legged horse down into the city. He passed a drug dealer in the subway. *Tssst*. He went to the church and looked at the sky. There was a warning beneath the roof of the church to watch for falling sheets of ice. Then back, and across the university campus, then back, now off to the Schlossgarten, then back to the Hauptbahnhof: he was breathing fast, too fast, along the Königstrasse and on to Schillerplatz—the sun was rising now, rising into the sky—and there was a television tower here, too, just as there was on Hum in Sarajevo—and he headed for Wilhelmsplatz. There were people on the streets now. A happy drunk with a monstrous bottle of wine, a new pair of shoes. And he, Stephen, telling himself, *Find the center. Just find the fucking center* and now, walking, his mind slipped back to Ferhadija, in Sarajevo, and he saw shelling from the hilltops which might have been from one of these, and he saw kids on rollerblades going off to their abandoned schools, or the water queues, the breadlines: the world, since when had it become so porous? Its borders had dissolved like sugar or salt into a glass of water, like semen into a hot pool, and he thought *Who am I?* and he thought *Why am I?* and there was a backhoe, in reverse, beeping alarm as if preparing to dig a grave. There was a fifteenth-century mosque with a fountain now dried up. There was the Chicago Water Tower standing like a minaret and the lions of the Art Institute and the Börse and the Vatican with its mighty obelisk and there were all the capitals of the world and then there was the woman he was approaching: a woman, dressed in a black cashmere coat, having made her own pilgrimage, making her way home after a late-night party—her tall, thin heels clicking; her black, waist-length hair and her perfume billowing into the cold morning light. She was crying, tending to her eyes with a white handkerchief; she was walking home alone in the rising morning light in order to start the year off right. To get it under way, the entire whole of it. Probably she intended to catch a train. And as they approached, and then passed, they were

subsequently separated by way of their direction. By way of their profoundly independent lives.

—

When he returned, it was after seven. He could hear Elise in the bath. There was a breakfast laid out waiting to be made. She stood in the center of the bath, rinsing herself with the handheld faucet, soap pouring off her limbs. He stood in the doorway, his face flushed, and said, I'm sorry.

Are you hungry?

Yes.

She set the handle down; she turned the lever to stop the drain. She said, stepping out of the tub, reaching for a towel, Get in.

She said, drying herself, watching him undress, You spend all your life taking care of other people. You think I don't know this. Okay. But you can take care of me only when I need to be taken care of. I don't need that now. Sometimes, yes. Three years ago, yes. Maybe next year, who's to know? But I know the whole package. Just one rule.

Okay.

Never lie. Not to me. Never, never lie.

He stepped into the tub and slid in. She poured oil into the water. She held the faucet over his body. She said, Agreed?

It cuts both ways.

Agreed, she said. To you I will never, never lie.

We should seal this somehow. With a toast. A kiss.

After breakfast, she said, kissing him. We will seal it then.

6

This was the real gift: the way they worked alone together. Not the same, but similarly, and always side by side. Never before had he known somebody he could actually work beside. And so they exchanged ideas—exchanged, as opposed to espoused—and he read the work she wrote in English—It always comes out different, the language, she said, and my idioms are always backward and upside

down—and she pored over the prints scattered now throughout the flat, looking for points of order, for unexpected moments of unity.

This, she said, pointing to the two shrouded figures on the Goat Bridge. This is my favorite. This will be your cover, I think.

Why?

Well, it is beautiful and stirring and provocative. But that's not the reason. They are *all* provocative. The reason is because it is about us. Because it is about the two of us meeting on the bridge.

I still don't know how I got there. To that bridge.

Well, she said. Perhaps it came to you?

One night, walking up the hill to the flat, Elise said, Come meet me in Manhattan. I would like that very much, Stephen.

If I leave Chicago I'll have to go somewhere. That's when my mind shuts down. Where do you go when you don't know where to go?

You can go anywhere, she said, stopping, turning to look him in the eye. Always the eyes. She said, And you don't have to come to me. I can come to you, you know.

I have a place in Vermont. An old farmhouse.

Well, so you do have a place to go then.

If I go, for good, then—there are other issues.

Your son.

Always my son.

I see, she said. Really I do. She said, not entirely changing the subject, I want you to meet me in New York. It puts a clock on the matter. A structure. She said, I think you are afraid to go from one lover to another. The rebounding. You are thinking it is not proper.

Well, it isn't, is it?

If you were happy and in love with R, of course not. But if you were in love with another I could not be in love with you. It would be a different experience. Not the experience of this. She said, Two years! How much longer do you require? I do not like this doing things because that is what the magazines say one should do. It's like shopping in the stores with the bad music always going on. The airport televisions blasting American news broadcasts. The billboards in the train stations? Everywhere you go people are telling you how to think and how to behave—

To sell. They're selling—

Well *you* should not be buying. The best movie is always the most

popular when the best movie is supremely banal. People are sheep. Bahhh. But I think nobody can tell you what you are supposed to do. You should follow the road you like the scenery to. Your heart's beating. What took you to Yugoslavia? What? You went there because it was the right thing for you to do. To find something out. She said, taking his arm, leading him up the hill, And look what we have found. I think it would be stupid of you to be a stupid sheep and give that back. To let that go.

She said, People always *know*. But they do not always *act*.

They walked now in silence and he listened to the rhythms of their shoes beating in time against the pavement. As the residential tower came into view, the wind picked up, and Elise's scarf began to blow in the wind. She said, You know that's the secret of Sentimentalism, which is always false, and grotesque. Sentimentalism, Capitalism, Formalism. The *isms*, they are the sticks that instruct the sheep how to behave. Like Hitler telling the good German women to put on the dirndls while he fucks the teenage niece. Never mind the ruined cities. What Sixth Army? What Africa Corps? Oh look, the Schwartzes' house is empty, and look at all the pretty paintings and the nice piano they have left behind! And the silver! Otto! Otto, come look at all the pretty silver!

She said, Like Leni Riefenstahl, so brilliant and corrupt. She became the sheep as much as anybody. She wanted to be the Leni Riefenstahl.

She's brilliant.

And stupid, Elise said. Like Good and Evil, Brilliance and Stupidity are not mutually exclusive, I think. Everything is propaganda now. That is what we Germans made and what you Americans have perfectly corrupted. The only way to be safe is to turn off the radio. The only way to be safe is to filter out the noises. Elise said, I think nobody can tell anybody what to do. Don't you see? Not your father, not your mother, not your neighbors, and certainly not your country. Not even your lover, Stephen. That's the great mystery. The people are sheep and they want to be told what to think and what to do so they don't have to be responsible for what they do. That is the heart of it. Cowardice in the face of existential anguish. The heart of it is there are no rules.

She said, taking him by the shoulders, There is only trust. There is only the taking of real joy when you are offered it.

—

Messenger arrived. Hermes, didn't he have wings on his feet?

Stephen, he said, shaking his hand. Elise, he said, kissing her: cheek, cheek.

She laughed, her hand to her belly. When Messenger reached to close the door behind him, he grabbed a handful of Elise's underwear (namely her bra), which he passed to Stephen, who put it in his pocket.

Oh, Stephen said. Thanks.

Messenger said, removing his coat, looking around the toasty apartment, Well, this is quite the lovers' nest. Yes?

Elise removed her bra from Stephen's pocket—*That's mine, I think*—and placed it beneath the pillow on the bed. They had coffee, then, and drinks with their coffee. Messenger had brought brandy, which they poured into thick-bottomed glasses, and Elise was in and out, packing, listening in when she could. She was leaving the next day. Meanwhile Stephen showed Messenger his new work, nervously, while Elise pretended not to listen in, and while Messenger admired it.

Messenger said, So, Stephen. You have a signature. Even when you do different things. He said, One can always spot your signature, Stephen. You always pull away at the moment of the looking. You direct the eye elsewhere so that the person has to *want* to look. You complicate the subject and then you layer it. Riddles and paradox.

This, Messenger said, pointing to the photograph of Biljana. The pregnant woman, okay. Then the wedding ring on the wrong hand. The light on the ring. Ahh, the missing finger? The nipple, the space it fills. So quiet. And this—

He set before them the print of Elise naked at the window—her body a silhouetted X. This, he said. This is splendid. The woman at the plastic window. Why is the window plastic? you make us ask. Because the metal bombs have blown out all the glass. Then you place *her* body in the window to fill it. The sex organs, shockingly de-erotized. Another space to be filled. Another window. Her body just another target: an emblem of what they've missed. Messenger said, It is what I have *always* liked about you. It is good it is not about the war. It is good that it is about more than just the war. He said, and

this praise coming from Peter Messinger struck Stephen to the quick,
It is your best yet.

Yes, Stephen said. I think so, too. But it's nice to hear.

Peter said, I think Americans confuse humility with a lack of self-confidence. But you, Stephen. You do not lack confidence. Your strength lies in your humility. In your understanding of the task you face.

Sometimes, Stephen said.

So you see, Messinger said, laughing. I *did* read your essays. Messinger said, his hand to his chin, *The Goat Bridge*. That is what you will call it?

I still haven't decided.

Your publisher will not like that. Goats. Too many goats, he will say. Goats do not sell books.

Tell me about it.

Stephen, Messinger said, studying the print, the shrouded figures of Stephen and Elise on the bridge. You do not see it?

See what?

Nothing, Messinger said. My mistake. I thought something dumb. Messinger said, It is to be a marvelous success, which is not important, because as you know it is important all by itself. And if anybody asks, *I* like the title.

Later Messinger said, crossing his legs, I was very sorry to hear of your friend.

What friend?

Ado. The one who— The one who knew the woman?

What about him?

His uncle, I forget his name—

Jusuf.

Jusuf, yes. Messinger said, You do not know this then?

What?

Jusuf was killed. A mine. I am sorry, Stephen. I thought you knew. Stephen sat on a chair. He put his head in his hands and took a breath.

It was very fast, apparently. His legs were gone, Stephen. The blood poured out of his body. I am certain he felt nothing.

Where?

Past the border at the No Man's Land. Where you showed us at the

bridge. He was collecting wood. Messinger said, I am going back there, you know.

When?

No, Elise said, entering the room. No. You have done enough, Stephen.

I've done nothing. There is no reason for Ado to be there. His family is gone. He shouldn't be there. He could be, he could be like us. Like us, going wherever. We could get him out.

We could arrange the credentials, Messinger said. But not a visa—

Once out he'd be fine. A refugee. Not Croatia. We fly into Italy, Ancona. We could put him on a flight with us.

You are trying to save people again, Elise said.

I'll go back. Talk to him.

With me, Messinger said.

Yes. With you.

It's bad there, Stephen. It's bad there again.

In and out, Stephen said. Quick.

7

To travel fast he lightened his load; he went to the DHL office and shipped hundreds of dollars' worth of shipping: the prints, a duplicate set; the excess camera gear, which he could insure. The slides he kept with himself in case the plane to the States with his possessions exploded en route. Then he caught the subway with Elise to the airport. Before passing the security gate, Elise said, Don't forget. And stay near Peter. He is too old to want to get killed. People only *think* he is brave. It is part of his charm.

Okay.

She said, kissing him, Come back, okay? Just please come back.

—

They caught an APC at the airport to the UN post on the boulevard. There they hitched a ride in an armored Land Rover to the Holiday Inn. Messinger got them a double room with blown-out windows: a push underway, it was getting crowded, and the hallways, also

crowded, reeked of shit. Messinger said, I am going to part with you now and go down to the bar. The light is gone for the day.

The cab driver who had helped get Anna to the hospital, he was there. Stephen had brought gifts and he gave the driver a bottle of whiskey. The driver lit up and took Stephen's arm and dragged him to the underground garage. Nobody paid for a cab anymore. The cabs were the ambulance corps.

Okay, the driver said, opening the door to his cab. He pushed Stephen inside the beat-up Volkswagen and said, Okay, go. Okay. We go. So, Stephen! Where we go?

The driver torched the tires, spinning out onto the boulevard—in the near-dark, no lights. They went to Jusuf's building above the Koševo complex. The girls were there: the Married Flirt, the Soulful One. Stephen lightened his load further and distributed bricks of cheese and coffee and a liter of olive oil and a carton of cigarettes and a ten-pound bag of pet food for the dog.

Where is Ado?

He is at the front, the Soulful One said. On shift.

The Married Flirt took the cheese to her kitchen. The dog, having saved their lives, and knowing it, followed her into the kitchen for a slice of cheese. The room smelled like burning newspaper.

I'm at the Holiday Inn, Stephen said. Will you tell him?

And then the driver took Stephen back. When Stephen tried to pay him, the driver said, No no no. No. No.

Stephen said, leaving a hundred marks on the seat, For the petrol.

Okay okay, said the driver. Okay. Petrol. He said, pointing to his watch, Tomorrow. Okay? Okay? Super. Okay, Stephen!

Inside Summerville was entertaining a group of British journalists. Cowboy stories. Bull and Cows. He said, seeing Stephen, Steve!

They had a drink from another bottle. Stephen gave Summerville a box of condoms, quantity one hundred. How is it, Stephen thought, that this man never ages? Probably because he was always pickled. Summerville had been preserved, as if in formaldehyde. That night, they stayed up late, drinking.

Summerville said, Steve oh Steve. Even Stephen, he said. God it's good to see ya, Pardner. It's a regular Comanche-land out there. You know? Lots and lots of Indians.

Later Stephen went outside. He had a smoke and took in the cold night.

Trust, Elise had said. *Trust*, which was an expression of power. The ability, however illusory, to keep things safe.

—

In the morning he met the driver who put him in the car and drove him down the boulevard. There were shots fired at them. The driver said, facing Stephen, Boom boom. Ha!

The driver delivered him behind the rotting road. Stephen left, and then he made his way crouching to the collection point.

There, somebody said, pointing.

Ado was standing in front of the stream. He was throwing rocks.

They embraced. Stephen removed a bottle of scotch and they had a drink. He said, Where are all the Bad Guys?

Hiding.

Excuse me?

They are hiding from me. They know I am angry.

I am sorry, Ado. About Jusuf.

Also there is the cease-fire.

Since when?

Ado said, You know, we are all family. We are a family of the manic-depressives. We go up, we go down. We drink together and tell each other how much we love each other and then we cut off each other's heads.

Ado bent to gather a handful of broken stones. He measured them in his hand, and then he lobbed a fat one into the dirt and rubble behind the icy stream.

Ado said, The men who placed that mine, they lived here, too. By the bridge. This side Serbia. That side? Death. I am sick of the death.

We can get you out. That's why we came. Me and Messinger. We can make you a journalist and then you can, I don't know. Messinger could get you work for the magazines. You could work for NATO, or the UN—

The UN, Ado said. The UN is nothing more than the woman who fakes the orgasm. It is all shouts and lies.

Ado threw another stone. He said, Stephen, I am in love.

What?

That girl. Just a girl I met at the cemeteries. We are lovers. Not the fucking lovers. The *real* lovers. You know? My heart, it keeps going boom boom boom.

He took another rock and threw it. He said, taking another, catching Stephen's eye, I am looking for the mines.

I see.

Ado said, I am going to explode all the mines.

—

Messinger flew out that afternoon after making Stephen promise he would do likewise the next day. No more pictures, Messinger said. We have taken all the pictures. And then they walked by the presidency, past an operating television camera, aimed at an intersection to catch the latest victims on tape.

The camera crew, not wanting to be a target, was nowhere in sight.

—

They stood in front of an old bridge above the dam. The night was falling. It was a small bridge, made of battleship gray metal, though in the dark it looked plain black. The wooden planks across the bridge had long since been removed. Ado and his beloved, a young woman with hair cut like a boy's, and Stephen—they stood above the dam looking down at the water. The young woman did not speak English, but she admired with Stephen the light on the water. The river shimmered in the fading light, its currents the cut and size—the same dimensions—of the stones paving the old town. He'd never noticed this before. Everything, Stephen thought. Everything reflects.

Ado said, I wanted to show you this.

He stooped and took off his jacket to make a shield and shone a light, briefly, in the dark. The light illuminated a circle, graffitied onto the metal beam, inside of which was the first letter of the alphabet: A—the universal symbol for anarchy.

Ado said, My friend Natasha put that there. She was older than me. Eighteen. Very sophisticated about the ways. I was seventeen. We went to movies together. We were punk rockers. What did we know? We liked the rock and the roll. She's dead, too.

Ado passed his silver flask. They had a drink. Stephen, he said.

Yes?

Where does a Serbian wife put money to keep it safe from the husband?

I don't know.

Neither do I. Not anymore. Blame it on the Field of Blackbirds.

The Battle of Kosovo—

Thirteen eighty-nine, Stephen. Thirteen eighty-nine! Shouldn't we be over it by now?

I know.

Stephen, he said. I cannot go. I am here. I told you about the Balkanian humor. We cut off our fingers, we put knives into our heads, and we laugh. You know why we are the committing suicides? Because we are afraid to help each other. Because we are afraid to ask for help from each other.

You could come back—

This is not the heroic gesture, Stephen. This is my life. Where would I go? Where? I would not know where to go. The people that go, they are the brave ones. To leave everything they have ever known! I could not be a refugee. I am not strong enough for that. So instead this is my life to prove that we can be here and live and get drunk and make fun of our hangovers in the morning.

Ado—

Stephen, this is not your tragedy. You cannot stop this tragedy. You cannot make the tragedy better and have the nice American ending.

I know that.

My life is to prove that we can live here again and be the family we once were. Ado said, scooping his arm around his beloved, We are going to be married. When it is over. We are going to be married and have seven babies.

What if it isn't over?

Everything is over, Ado said. How else to begin?

—

Alone he walked back to the hotel, cutting through the city, which could have been a city anywhere. He was cutting through the market behind the destroyed National Library when he felt a shudder, a flickering sensation—a knife along his ribs, a hawk's shadow. He turned

then and saw huddling in the dark the shape of a figure, draped in black, watching him. Stephen had felt its presence; why otherwise pause? Why otherwise stop to feel it? He stopped. He turned on his heel and looked at the figure draped in black. He took a step toward it, opening his hand. Then he took another step, as if to ask permission, and then the figure spit.

He wasn't scared. He wasn't particularly angry. But he knew, looking at this figure in the dark, the fear in its eyes, he knew with the same certainty that the earth is made of dirt, the oceans cold and deep—he knew that his son was lost.

8

Zagreb is a dirty city. The air chokes with its history of complicated industry. The streetcars scream in the canyons of the buildings they run between. There were whores, dressed in black, hanging out at the fountain beside the train station, and as he passed them they spoke to him in German, and then they mocked him, for not replying, and he went on to the hotel. He recognized the concierge. He was the same who had once shown Stephen the great and whispering ballroom. When you stand at one end, you can whisper to another. You can hear the voices of everybody in the room. And if you stand alone in the very center, and strike the flat of your hand against your chest, it sounds the same as a rifle shot.

He would not remember much of this last stay. He was drunk by the time he entered the marbled lobby, but he did not know he was drunk—the Xanax in his bloodstream having masked the effects of all that scotch. He swayed a bit, perhaps as if overly tired (he had not slept in three days), but he did not slur. He shook hands with the concierge, and tipped him heavily, and the concierge then picked out for Stephen a corner room. The lobby, all that glittering marble, the very slabs of it—he stepped into the whispering ballroom and stood beneath the dome and whispered his son's name. Then he went up the wide stairs and then to his room, down in the corner, and inside the room swaddled in pink drapes he dropped his bags. He pulled out a bottle of scotch and poured himself just a little glassful. He took, what the hell, another of those little pills. They really weren't that big. Then he took another.

That night he wrote his son a letter and walked the city. To Bana Jelačića Square. He sat on the ledge of a fountain and watched refugee children play with a paper boat. He went to the cathedral and had an argument with God. He went to a dog park full of dog shit with a tiny iron boy pissing from a fountain. Even in the middle of the night, there was a woman exercising a massive Dane. Then he walked to a bar. Amazing, a city full of bars. He was lost now, somewhere in a pedestrian mall, and he overheard a pretty girl speaking to her date, in English to prevent others from understanding what she said, *Maybe later I will let you fuck me*; and later in that same pedestrian mall he had a brief conversation with the statue of a man wearing a topcoat and black hat, each of which could have belonged to his father back in 1955; and now he was in a Hard Rock Cafe, which felt like home, as it were, being hard and made of rock. And then he was out, again, stumbling among the pilgrims and pedestrians. He passed a man playing a guitar in the cold, not badly, and put into the man's instrument case a wad of bills. God played the guitar, one could be fairly certain of that. In a mixed state, Stephen had no idea any longer what anything was worth.

He said to the man playing the guitar, Have you seen my son?

Ehh?

Keep an eye on your children.

Then the man said *Ahh* and played a few bars of a song by Crosby, Stills, and Nash. *Teach*, the man sang. *Teach your children . . .* Like that?

Stephen would never recall this moment. He would not recall stumbling into a stone wall and bruising—cutting deeply—his forehead. There was blood in his eyes now. He saw some cops with machine pistols standing outside a massive building which looked to belong to the Federal Reserve. More iron bars. He walked by, his hands in the air, his eye bleeding, and said, American. Don't shoot.

They called for backup, not wanting to leave their post at the bank. There were warlords and other thieves afoot. He was less than a thousand yards from the finest hotel in all of Europe, home to the Magnificent and Whispering Ballroom, even if that fine hotel had been requisitioned by the Nazis: there was a history here in Zagreb. *With undying affection*, Omar Sharif had written on his photograph framed upon the wall. There was history everywhere there was a history or a tomb. Then a new cop came to haul Stephen away, and on

the way back to the hotel, they laughed a lot and stopped for drinks at a disco filled with handsome men dressed in black. Then they walked by the whores in front of the train station, and the cop said, laughing, *Make love, not whore*, and then, inside the hotel, the cop asked the concierge to help him to deliver this particular package, and Stephen said, No. No delivery. Just water.

Water, Sir?

Water is the only cure for alcohol poisoning.

Indeed, Sir. Very good. Water.

The cop left after Stephen tipped him. Stephen drank a bottle of water. Then another. To Althea, he said, from prison walls. He said, Stone walls do not a prison make. Four days, five days, what was the point of sleep? Sleep schmeep, he said to his friend Summerville. He said, Water, and he drank another tall glass of water, and he opened up the bottle of pills, took six more in his hand, and gave the bottle to the concierge, saying, Whatever you do don't take these.

Excuse me, Sir?

You'll disappear.

Then he left the building and became lost all over again.

He returned a day and a half later, cold for having lost his jacket. *Stephen*, Messinger had said. *Do you not see it?* Somewhere along the way in the alley of a visionary stupor he had finally seen it. And seeing it had made him feel naked and small. Meaningless. Utterly bereft of consequence.

Q. What do you call a young goat?

A. A *kid*.

His son, he told himself bitterly. Not a kid, not a goat. His son. And it wasn't the grotesqueness of the pun that chilled his spine; it was the fact that his life's work had led him so blindly to it. In a cold alley he placed his back to a wall of stone, he sank to the ground. Somewhere a woman was singing. He made a fist and struck his own jaw: once, twice. He couldn't feel it. He tried again. He couldn't feel a thing.

Put it to rest, you say. Go to sleep. Let go, let God.

God isn't in the details; God is in the syntax. Muslim, Christian, Jew—if God made the world, then let God worry about the errors in translation. Lost, he'd been faithful to this pilgrimage, and thus he'd been led here to the inexpressible core of human understanding: to

the ecstatic, sublime, poetic heartbeat of the living world. And from this distance, he knew it to be timpanically scored. A big stick, and an even bigger drum: the sky the vibrating hide now of some other-worldly creature. And the hand, holding that stick, striking the instrument which filled his own heart with blood.

The heart's beating, the first act of violence.

Several hours passed before he rose to his feet. The numbness having faded, his chest began to ache. It filled his lungs, it pooled like near-frozen grease into the small of his back. And his mind refused any longer to hold still—it filled instead with the flashes of where he'd been, what he'd seen, what he'd thought he had forgotten—and the only way to hold it was to make it will his body to act. To appeal to the mind's vanity: see, I can make you do whatever I want. Stretch out that leg. Get the blood flowing. Lean on a wall for support. Get up. Just get the fuck up. Just get the fuck up and fucking go.

Stephen, somebody called, but he was alone on the street.

He'd been stumbling all his life. All those years of study, and still he'd been unable to see it by himself. That white-stoned bridge, the last of its kind. *The Goats' Bridge*. Walking, briskly, he was able at last to focus. His body and his spirit—they'd become separated, as if by a hyphen, and he began to shape an argument as if it were a brief. Discovery, he began. Even the discovery of something no longer present—or not yet here, or right in front of you all the time—wasn't this too a gift? Wasn't this proof of God's very order? His son was lost. His son was part of something else. His son belonged now to the constellations, to the currents of the tide, to the air that he breathed. He couldn't help it. He believed in the need for God, and now, stumbling alone in a darkened foreign city, he understood why he had always needed to believe.

Because he, Stephen Brings, was a creature of need, and because only God was big enough to fill it.

Like hunger, it was the need which made up for a lack of supply. Need, that which motivated the body to go forth and forage. Need, that which inspired one to do good works. Need, that which inspired one to give and forgive. He stepped through the iron doors of the Esplanade and skidded on the floor. Food seemed in order, no? After so long a forty days and forty nights? Truth is, he was scared any longer to argue. You weren't supposed to argue with God. You were supposed to praise. And give thanks to. You were supposed to do good

works and not fuck up and turn the other cheek. He went to his room and showered and came down in clean clothes and ate half a croissant.

Stephen, he said to himself. You're fine. A rough patch. All done.

He said, making his point at the bar, I demand my right to water. Water water water.

He also drank a Coke, two of them, with a lemon, no ice, and he said, I am very clean now and presentable. And then he went into the dome of the Magnificent and Whispering Ballroom and stood all alone listening to his voice.

I'm clean so why am I not clean? and he said into a rising sea of swirling panic *Oh fuck not again* and then he left the domed room and struggled up the red-carpeted stairs falling only once. On the way to his room he got lost and passed a woman wearing only jeans and spiked heels. She was carrying a bottle of champagne, and two glasses, squinting at the room numbers as she wandered down the hall. Obviously she had misplaced her glasses. Once inside his own room, he stripped off his clothes. He went to the bathroom and got his kit and removed the double-edged blade from his father's razor. First he held the blade to one eye, then to the other, thinking he'd start off with a lid. Then he drew a line in his hand along the lifeline and closed it. And then he worked on it some more, the lifeline. That map across the desert of his palm. He built for it first a stream and then a river. Then he heard the voice of his lost son calling *Dad! Dad, wait! Wait!* and he wrapped his bleeding hand in a towel and hit his head against the white-tiled wall and curled up into a ball and wept.

—

Look:

The word *camera* derives from the Greek *kamara*, for vault; from the French *chambre*, for chamber, intimate and public; from the Latin *camera*, for arched roof, which is in turn kin to the Latin *camur*, for curved. Even before it was discovered, the camera has always been little more than a room with a curved ceiling, as is the space beneath the sky. A hallowed dome.

And the glass shaped into a lens? An instrument of vision, ground from matter, like sand and stone. All it takes is fire.

If war isn't self-inflicted, then what is? And how does one make

peace with oneself? And just how is it possible to heal? Even if he couldn't answer, he could still fall asleep. He had to fall asleep, he knew; he had to be out of here by six the next morning, just so many hours away, because he had to go. The flight to Zurich, a final layover, then home. He lay naked sweating on the featherbed. Why hadn't anybody said anything? Somewhere, anywhere, somebody was fucking. He lay on the sheets and sweated saying *Sleep, sleep you must sleep* and then the phone rang and it was R.

Hi, he said, sitting up. Hi! God I'm glad you called.

Hi, she said. How are you?

Oh, a little sleepy. I'm fine. Really.

Really?

He heard a knock. He said, R, can you hang on?

Of course.

There's somebody at the door.

Go see. I'll wait.

He walked toward the knocking, and there was a royal blue door, and inside the door an enormous closet filled with light blue clothes, and a large red and white box with *DHL* on the side, and inside the box sat a small boy.

He said, back on the phone, R? R! There's a boy in my room. There's a little boy in my room!

What's his name?

What's your name? he called.

Francesco, said the boy.

He says his name is Francesco, R. Francesco!

What a pretty name.

Why didn't we think of that?

It's a great name, Stephen.

R, he said. He must belong to somebody. Somebody must love him. Somebody will think I took him? I have to find who loves him.

He hung up, and dressed, and he took the boy's hand and they went down to see the concierge. The concierge, a different one, this one with a German accent, said, But he is not my boy. Why do you ask?

He must be somebody's boy?

Why are you to worry? You have the boy.

He stepped outside through the iron doors. He held onto the boy's hand and he thought he'd go to the police. The police, he knew, would be watching the bank. They would be watching the bank to keep it

safe. The safes inside would be filled with notes and bonds and precious stones. Outside, there was a vast lawn, a soccer field's worth, ample enough to welcome a thousand graves, and standing on the field were all these people he knew applauding him. His father. His mother, wearing a red sweater with white bandages at the wrists. There was a girl he had been sweet on once. There was Elise, standing next to R, talking and laughing together.

He said, Well—

We are here for the show, Stephen!

What show?

Your show. It's a surprise. Your first retrospective. Are you surprised?

And then a warplane came flying slowly overhead and everybody looked up and waved and then the plane crashed into the top of the dome of the Hotel Esplanade. Pretty flames filled the sky, like ribbons on a package, and everybody cheered.

Then, then the boy was in the back of a small car. A convertible.

The boy was laughing, holding onto his sides. He called out, Taxi! Taxi!

It was time to leave. He needed to get into the car and go.

His father said, his arm around Elise, I'm so glad he's finally learned to take, too.

And R said, kissing Elise good-bye on the cheek, He's found him.

Who? Stephen's mother said.

Himself, Elise said, explaining. He's found himself.

And his wan mother said, shivering in the bright sun, I never did.

And then the phone rang, like a whisper, and then a bell, and Stephen answered it, and there was a voice now rising up from beneath him, calling up to him through all the flights, and he said *Yes?* and then the voice said to him, calling,

Your wake-up call, please.