

The House of Scheherazade

- Q. Why did the king lop off the wing of his beloved hawk?
A. The hawk would not permit the king to drink from a golden cup, which was filled with poison. (The king lived, the hawk died.)

—

The Montenegrin Reservists came up from the south. Bosnian Serbs, having control of Pigeon Rock on the Bosnian border, came in from the north and the west. Next the JNA—the Yugoslav National Army—rolled through Konavle and occupied the Žarkovica promontory overlooking the city. The Yugoslav navy, long since purged of any non-Serbs, blockaded the sea, and thus was Dubrovnik—the Pearl of the Adriatic—cut off. Then the JNA sent in warplanes. They took out the city’s electrical grid. They bombed the Imperial Fort on Mount Srdj, and the telecommunications tower standing just beside it. The hills and villages began to bleed with refugees. As the United Nations Security Council would later describe it, because there existed no main line of resistance, or MLR, there could be no actual front line. Instead the city was surrounded from points on high; the shelling began, as did the siege. Where do you go when you want most to disappear? You go to war.

This was before, this was the start. The inauguration of 1991. Stephen, having recently been delivered to the city by a truck filled with lambs, was living with his recently made friends Marko and Nina in the Ploce district—just southeast of the city walls, up the street from a cluster of hotels. Marko and Nina had a *soba*, a room to let, which is how they were paying for their new house, and Stephen had traveled long enough to know he preferred the sometimes querulous quarters of a private house over the frigid and mini-barred walls of the modern hotel room. Marko had a taxi, which he had now hid-

den away in the city, and he also had a vending booth—cigarettes, condoms, *Playgirl* and *Swank*, sun creams and counterfeit Ray Bans and postcards featuring topless women in primary-colored bottoms mocking pudgy men. Nina ran the store, but with the tourists gone, the foot traffic of those with money in their pockets had long since dried up. Too, Nina was six months pregnant, and she was counting the days.

Nina, Marko would say, his ear pressed against her body.

And Nina would say, in English for Stephen's benefit, something scolding.

We speak English, Marko would say, looking up. We speak English because we look forward. Forward, you see.

Marko had been approached by the Croatian Guard which had wanted to give him a shotgun and half a dozen shells and the charge of fortifying a last-ditch line of defense a hundred yards out from the city walls. Marko had escaped thus far that service on account of the very few shotguns available and the condition of his wife.

My baby, Marko would say. Baby baby baby.

A planned defense of the city—proclaimed repeatedly by various authorities as one of the world's Great Treasures (they were not wrong in this assessment, just annoying)—was ludicrous. It wasn't merely the lack of a real defending army. At best Dubrovnik was a fragile city. The hundreds of ancient tiled rooftops, each clay tile having been manufactured over the breadth of a man's thigh, to describe the curve—the rooftops would not hold up to the concussions of the shelling. The city walls, at places six meters thick, had been built to hold back men armed with swords and spears. Men on horseback. A rock, hurled from a wooden-framed and oddly slung contraption? If anybody had learned anything from the twentieth century, then the lesson had to be this: artillery destroys anything its commanders hanker to. A shimmering marble promenade—the *pjaca* or Stradun. A clock tower. A palace or cathedral.

Stephano, Marko said to him, as if Stephen were Italian. This will be our greatest opportunity yet.

Stephen said, What's that?

They were sitting on the front terrace overlooking the Adriatic Sea. Nina was sunbathing on the porch off Marko and Nina's bedroom. Sometimes they could hear her singing a song made famous by a Croatian pop star. The latticework over the terrace was woven

through with bougainvillea and grapevines. The sun and sea, so quiet and clear.

The deutschmarks, Marko said. The sex. The bad *cevapi*. All gone, but only temporary. Temporary.

And then comes the opportunity?

Of course. I will be rich because of this war. He stood excitedly, and ran inside, returning a moment later with an enormous box. He set the box on the table, nearly spilling his wine. He said, You know what I have here?

No.

American Rock and Roll shirts. Bruce Hornsby & The Range! Nearly a hundred. Size Extra Large. And there's more to come. With strife comes opportunity. And then hard currency like the dollars. Soon we will be rich like Germany. Like Paris. We will have a Disneyland, you watch.

You want a Disneyland?

We are a small country, Stephano. Croatia is a small country.

You aren't a country. Not yet, are you? Don't you need a constitution?

Paperwork. All paperwork. When it is time I will have a fast boat and a big house and I will send my babies to Princeton. To Texas A&M and Old Dominion. And we will have a cellar full of dollars, too. I tell you—

He was cut off by the arrival of one mortar, and then another, which must have fallen somewhere near the harbor. The boats remaining in the harbor were now used for target practice—the water filled with the wreckage, greased over with gas and oil. And these mortars, having landed, exploded, and then it was briefly—oddly—quiet. When they came again, they came closer to home, as if walking up a sidewalk, or a ladder.

Cocksuckers, Marko said, gathering up his T-shirts. You don't get rich by blowing things up! This is not Business! Stephano, come—

They took their wine, too. Nina stood in the doorway to her bedroom, her kimono open, her tan belly poking out. She stood there, looking around, and Marko and Stephen took Nina by the elbows and they scuttled down the staircase to the cellar, which was cool, and where the wine was kept. In one corner stood a box filled with Luke Skywalker and C3PO action figures. There was a second box, too, Obi-Wan Kenobi.

If they destroy my house, Marko said, I will fuck them. Stupid fucking Bosnians. Stupid fucking peasants. Stupid fuck goat farmers. If they blow up my house I will fuck them, the cocksuckings.

Lighting a candle, Stephen caught Nina's eye. He understood her yellow hair had been dyed to look like a movie star's, or a German's. She liked that color, yellow: the color of the sun, the color which might have been her hair. There were dolphins swimming across the fabric of her batiked robe. Her hair was lit up by the light of his candle. He saw, too, that she was terrified, and that she kept her hands inside her kimono sleeves over the roof of her swollen belly.

The fucks I am going to fuck—

Stop saying that, she said to Marko, beginning to cry. And then she said something which Stephen could not understand, and Marko put his ear to her belly, listening, and now Marko was explaining how everything was going to be all right, and then he said, for Stephen's benefit, I will fuck them later after they think that I forget, and now they listened to the intermittent mortars falling onto the city's outskirts and stirring up the dust.

2

They would drink the water from the toilet tanks first. That was twelve gallons right there. Stephen, less optimistic than Marko, and understanding this was going to last longer than a week, began securing supplies: bags of rice; tins of canned beef and fruit; cigarettes. He bought these items now at outrageous prices and brought them home and placed them in the cellar beside a boxful of blue and gold imitation Nike sneakers—size forty-four, or nine-and-a-half?

The next day, the day being quiet and still, and after helping Marko empty the contents of the vending booth, and tape the windows of the house, Stephen strolled down in the sun to the Argentina. The hotel had been built on the cliff which overlooks the Adriatic Sea and the small picnickers' island, Lokrum. The floors of the hotel descend down to the sea, not up, and the highlight of the hotel is its rocky beach. Adjacent to its beach is a private stone courtyard belonging to the House of Scheherazade—a magnificent villa, built by a wealthy Jew for his young wife, subsequently confiscated by the state, later to be turned swank hotel for the likes of Elizabeth

Taylor, and now abandoned. The villa's most striking feature is a pale blue dome.

He went to the terrace, at the back of the hotel, and saw an acquaintance—an EC monitor, taking notes, sitting in the sunshine. The waiter, recognizing Stephen, and not having much to do, set about to bring him a drink. Bourbon, a *dupli*.

Mr. Brings, the waiter said. The ice is all melted!

It's begun, Stephen said to the monitor. What are you hearing?

I have a satellite hookup. Milošević says categorically there is nothing more than training activity taking place. The world, it would seem, does not know we are presently surrounded.

But you have told the world, right?

Oh, I don't think anybody will be listening to me. My work is for when this is done. I work for the European Community, you know.

I don't get it. That's what you guys are supposed to do, isn't it? Report and inform the heads of state?

Stephen, said the monitor, offering him a cigarette. You Americans advised Gorbachev of the coup threatening him. You can take a photograph from space of an automobile and read its identity tag! Do you really think nobody knows what is happening here?

There's no reason, Stephen said. There aren't even any Serbs to speak of. And those that are here are swearing to defend. It's like invading Bali.

Or Grenada.

Yes, okay. Touché. But this, this shit . . . it's an operation premised on spite.

Exactly, yes. Precisely.

The monitor drank from his gin and tonic. He said, ruefully, You know these people in the Balkans. He said, We are cut off from the world now, either way. Washington does not want to hear what it already knows. Russia is stable as a hydrogen bomb. Like it or not, Tito was always the Soviets' first cousin. The U.S. should *pay* the Russians to deploy. Give them a job to do, some *currency*.

The waiter brought Stephen his drink.

So long as nobody is looking, the monitor said, we do not exist.

Stephen said, turning away, I think this is the most beautiful place in the world. Really.

I've been coming here for years, the monitor said. When I was a boy my father brought me here to walk the city walls.

It was a city, Stephen thought, built for a father and his boy. Tunnels and parapets, drawbridges, coves along the sea to play pirate in.

The monitor said, Your George Bush is going to lose the election. Read my lips. You will have a Democratic president and he will order your joint chiefs to stop this. He said, That is an Indian word, isn't it? Chief?

Beats me.

We can't, of course. I mean my country cannot. Kohl is too busy raising taxes in the West to pay for the East. He is too busy eating sausage breakfasts. He said, Do not worry, Stephen. They are not going to destroy the city.

What about Vukovar?

Oh, that is different. The Serbs don't *want* Vukovar. They want to make an example. Like Hitler and Warsaw. It is so common, you know. So utterly provincial.

What next?

The monitor had an awkward, condescending smile, which revealed the gums of his teeth, not unlike a horse. He said, We wait for ITN and CNN to do their thing. We wait for you Americans to get your political house in order and have this stopped by Easter. This *is* Europe, you know.

In the distance they could see two warplanes coming across over Lokrum. Stephen shielded his eyes against the sun for a better look.

Stephen said, NATO?

The monitor raised a pair of binoculars. No, he said. I think not. MIG-21s. JNA.

The aircraft approached, then banked hard, and as the jets passed over the sea in front of the hotel the sea exploded.

The water, the sea—it rose up into the sky. Two great monstrous plumes. The noise was the most terrifying—the water exploding into a cloud of gas. He'd never seen anybody bomb a body of water, as if to break it. In fact he'd never even seen a bomb.

What's that supposed to be, Stephen said. A shot across the fucking bow?

Perhaps they were aiming for us. Very complicated, those airplanes.

Fish, Stephen said. They're bombing the fish.

They are just telling us internationals they know where we live. They are telling us they can kill us anytime. Clever, I suppose.

He watched the monitor make some notes in his notebook. The time, the date. The direction of the wind. They ordered another round of drinks and sat in the sun. Others had gathered now on the terrace to see what precisely had been blown up, though now there was only water, the blue sky reflecting in it.

You would have never known.

3

During the midst of a dirty war it is difficult to keep clean. Dubrovnik—the first republic to recognize the independence of the thirteen colonies, back before the invention of communism, or electricity, or possibly even coal—a city which celebrates water by way of its marvelous fountains, and the first European city to develop a sewer system: here the filth of humanity could not be kept at bay. The sewers back up, the water mains all run dry. Two weeks later, Stephen and Marko were bathing in the sea. Stephen scrubbed at his body with a pumice.

Go wash, Nina had said, waddling to the door and pushing them out. The war is not going to end this afternoon.

Afterward Marko wanted Stephen to come with him to the new harbor. It was a decent walk. This way, Marko said. I want to show you.

The harbor was a wreck, as were the dozens of remaining small craft. There was a man fishing in the greasy water. If you had dropped a flame on it, the water would have burned. Then Marko led Stephen to a square building, and he unlocked the door, inside of which was parked his BMW—*Bay M Vay*, he called it—and a low-slung boat, circa 1940, on a trailer which they boarded.

It belongs to a rich friend in France, Marko said. I have liberated it for him. I have rescued it! Very fast. Two inboards.

It's a beautiful boat, Stephen said.

Yes yes, Marko said, impatiently. It's beautiful. It needs much varnish.

He led Stephen into the cabin, where there was a small galley and two bunks. On one stood a stack of Russian girlie magazines.

Marko said, Nobody has money now for pussy. Maybe later. He said, Stephano, if it goes bad, if the Serbs make a big push, you must

meet me here. With Nina. She will not be able to walk fast. We will go first to Korčula. See?

Yes.

If you cannot find me—

We will find you. You'll find us.

No. Do not be American. Do not be sentimental. You know how to drive the boat?

Yes, Stephen said. If I need to.

Marko showed him where he kept the key and the pump to prime the engines. Marko pried at the housing of a vent, inside of which was stacked neatly a thick pile of five-hundred-mark notes.

For Nina, Marko said. If it must be. In Split she can always sell the boat, too. She will not have to, I think. Her mother lives in Split.

Okay, Stephen said.

Not as nice as my house, but bigger. Soon the baby is going to come out.

Stephen said, I know.

Stay near the coast. If you wait out the day, then you can travel at night. In the dark. The navy will shoot at you if it can. But if it comes to that they will have many targets. The gunboats cannot fire at everything. They are too small. Not enough room for the missiles. Marko said, replacing the vent framework, This boat is a fast boat. Fast. It is good it needs varnish. People will not think it is so fast. The owner he stays with us. He is my rich friend.

They went out and Marko showed Stephen where he hid the keys to the taxi. If you have to, take the boat and leave the car. Just leave it. If I am not able to be here it will not matter.

Stephen said, looking at the boat, What do you call the right side? What?

The right side.

Marko looked at Stephen disappointedly.

A joke, Marko.

Ahh. That deadpan American humor. He said, I have some people to meet. Some business. He said, closing the heavy door, locking it, Okay.

At the Pile Gate, Marko said, Remember the plan, Stephen?

Yes.

Okay then. I am off.

Stephen went through the gate. He looked down the Stradun—the avenue of white marble, resplendent. He stopped at the dried-up Onofrio Fountain. A young girl, twelve, sat in the crowd alone—her head in her hands, crying.

Stephen approached the girl. He said hello, and she wiped her eyes and looked at him blankly. Her feet, shoeless, were dirty.

He said, *Sprechen sie Deutsch?*

She said nothing, then looked at her dirty toes. He held out his hand, which she took, cautiously, and he began to lead her across the promenade.

The girl said, pointing to the fountain, Mama, and Stephen nodded, understanding. He put his finger to her cheek. He told a group of refugees who knew him he would return in a few minutes. Now he walked with the girl, hand in hand, to a house adjacent to a pizzeria—closed for lack of ingredients. He knocked at the door, twice, and when it opened an old woman said, No eggs.

I'd like to shop, Stephen said.

A man came to the door. He wore the black paramilitary uniform of the Ramboesque. Standing there, he was an iconic figure. On one hip he carried a 9-millimeter Beretta; on the other, a knife the size of a fourteenth-century plow.

Yes? said the man, flexing his pectorals, speaking with a tractor-sized lisp. The woman told you the eggs are gone. I heard her say this. You did not hear her say this?

I don't want eggs, Stephen said.

The lieutenant gave Stephen the once-over, as if the man were the doorman at a private sex club in Paris, or Berlin, and now he stepped aside and let them in. He took them through a narrow hallway reeking of diesel fuel which led to a smoke-filled room overflowing with goods. A crate of grenades. Cases of cigarettes, and fruit. Stephen picked a half-dozen oranges, a chocolate bar for the girl. He bought a brick of cheese and two loaves of stale bread. Nina, who could not drink wine on account of her baby, was constantly thirsty. He told the lieutenant he wanted two cases of bottled water.

The man said, unbelievably, *Mit gas?*

Nein.

Okay, okay. More with no gath, you know.

You don't say?

Thay what?

Stephen explained he would be by to pick up the water later, and as he gathered the oranges and cheese and bread, he said, Two Cokes.

The man said something to the woman, who reached into a refrigerator—powered by a private generator, which would explain the rumbling and the fumes—and delivered to Stephen two small bottles of Coke. The girl beamed and they drank them down. After returning the empties, they left the way they came. At the fountain he cut slices of cheese and bread and spread them out on the shelf. He cut the oranges, all but one, and as the women and now two men approached, he looked the other way lest they feel even more obligated to avoid him. He sat with the girl, waiting for her mother, and told her a story from the *Arabian Nights*, a magical one with a clever genie. She nestled up against his side, listening to the rhythms of his voice the way his son once had. When the girl's mother arrived, carrying a yellow knapsack as if going back to school, the girl rushed to her with the orange she and Stephen had saved. She spoke to her mother excitedly, and the woman came to Stephen and took his hand.

No, Stephen said, rising. No no. It's okay.

He said, sitting on his heels, touching the girl's hand, I'll see you tomorrow. Here, he said, pointing to the fountain. Tomorrow. Then he rose and gave the woman a business card advertising Marko's stalled taxi service.

Argentina, he said to her. Stephen Brings.

Stephen, she said.

Stephen, he said. They'll know.

Next he returned to the house of the iconic black-marketer and his wart of a mother. Inside, three men were smoking and passing around a bottle of Joe Beam—long-lost Balkan cousin to Jim. The lieutenant pointed to the cases of water, over which he had draped a greasy towel to conceal their contents, and Stephen paid the man two hundred marks.

Thank you, said the lieutenant. Have a nithe day.

The Balkans, Stephen was learning. He carried the water out—another rich American, doing what the fuck he wanted. The pumice in his pocket banged against his leg. He carried the water through the old city, the water's weight gaining with each hundred yards, causing the muscles in his arms to burn, beyond the water queue, where dozens of people had lined up with buckets waiting to secure their

daily ration from the trucks which brought it in. The water was tainted, he knew that. Typhus, cholera, the likelihood of each was becoming inevitable. Imminent? He walked across the old city and up through the Ploce Gate. Through the gate, over the drawbridge, past the House of Scheherazade. When he arrived home, lathered in sweat, he found Nina sitting in the living room reading an American women's magazine. On the cover posed an American woman with American cleavage and American teeth.

Nina smiled sweetly and said, You are clean? Let me smell.

I was. More or less.

Ahh, that is okay. You can swim again tomorrow.

He set the water in the kitchen on the stove which no longer had any gas. He placed Nina's pumice on the small kitchen table. The bougainvillea at the window swayed in the breeze like a song.

The baby's kicking, she called. Come feel.

No—

Stephen, come feel. I am a pregnant woman. You may touch me if I say.

He poured a tall glass of water, *keine gas*, and stepped into the living room.

What's this? Nina said.

Go, he said, handing her the glass. There's plenty.

He watched her drink the water. When she finished, she set the glass on the table and took his hand. With her free hand she wiped the back of her mouth and laughed. There was a faint trace of down on her lip; she had blue eyes. She lifted up her shirt, over the curve of her abdomen, and together they watched her tan, smooth skin flicker. There was something going on in there. Something being made. She took his hand and placed it on her body.

No, she said, not letting go his hand. Here. Feel.

4

A note on the common language: it's the same for everybody—Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, though the partisans of each prefer to pretend otherwise.

Meanwhile Time, being infinite, slips away for good. To pass the time, he read. He wrote a draft of an essay on Pissarro. Mornings he

walked along the city walls. There were Croats on top now, firing off teasing rounds to make the enemy fire back. He checked daily with the young girl and her mother, a few others, if only to provide himself with the illusion he was being useful. He shot no film.

Once he might have: he stood on the terrace of the house and watched a gunboat approach Lokrum. He located his 80–200-milimeter lens and scrambled down to the water to spy on the men on deck. It was a small ship, not much bigger than a fishing boat he had once worked. There was a battery of rockets, starboard and port, but he couldn't make out any actual guns—the name, *gunboat*, having lingered despite the advance of time. The ship cruised slowly to intimidate and to cast thick, black smoke up into the air; it was painted gunboat gray, making it invisible in certain waters. The color of death, it seemed. All that steel, painted to be inconspicuous? The effect was entirely reversed, and he watched the black smoke, the prow and the viscous wake it stirred.

Go home, he'd said to the officer on deck. Get a life.

And then came the cavalry: a fleet of small boats led by two car ferries leaving Split with the intent of breaking the blockade. On one car ferry, there were stacked cases of food and supplies; on the other, some sixty cranky journalists, as well as the new nation's cultural elite, sailing under the protection of those journalists. Outside of Korčula, the fleet was stopped, and searched, but at last the JNA backed down: such is the power of the press once it decides to squeeze. The president of a nation now collapsed, on board a car ferry facing down the navy warships he commands, on the horn negotiating with an admiral back in Belgrade . . . who could dream this up? Meanwhile the boats arrived at dawn, and after word began to spread—like wildfire, like blood poured into a river or pond—the city residents gathered to listen to important speeches about freedom and standing firm. Already in the breakaway state people were learning how to run for office. Standing there, amid the crowd, Stephen saw his acquaintances step off one of the liberating ferries. Everywhere now there were cameras. He knew they would know he was here.

At the cathedral a thanksgiving mass was held in order to permit more important speeches among the prayers. Stephen was sitting outside, smoking a cigarette, as if there were a limitless supply, when Peter Messinger and Elise Kohlhaus and Anna Castile approached.

Stephen Brings! called Messinger. We have been looking for you!

They shook hands. Anna nodded to him, and Elise extended her hand, grasping his own, which startled him.

Do you know where we find a phone line? Messinger asked. Elise needs to file a story. What a circus, that boat. Nobody could translate! Speeches, the Blah and the more Blah, and nobody can translate, and only one line going out—

And me, Anna said. Me too.

Ahna, Stephen thought. Not *Ann*. He said, The Argentina. Business as usual. But the rates are steep. Do you know the way?

Please show us, Elise said, taking his arm.

The crowd thinned as they left it. Stephen, embarrassed, did not know what to do with his arm. Messinger said, admiring the architecture, and then gesturing with his elbows, flapping like wings, It smells here. Bad. No water?

Not enough, Stephen said, growing more self-conscious. He thought, People in America took your arm at the prom, and then strictly for the snapshot. He said, sniffing himself discreetly, The city is an epidemic waiting to happen.

Elise matched his quickening stride. She said, drawing him closer, Peter showed me your cowboys. In Zagreb. They are wonderful!

Well they have not yet destroyed the city, Messinger said, falling behind.

You have been okay? Elise said. Staying here?

Fine, Stephen said. I've been reading.

At the top of the hill he was in his typically lathered sweat, though mercifully Elise had by now let go his arm. Stephen introduced them to the Reservation Director who Stephen knew liked to be called the Reservation Director. Stephen agreed to meet them all two hours later on the terrace, excused himself, and went home.

Nina said, looking up from her magazine, Your friends have arrived? Maybe you won't be so sad? I wish you would not always be so sad.

Well, some people I know.

Should we invite them to dinner? We could have a party for you!

Maybe, he said. They have to decide if they will return with the flotilla.

Oh, of course. She said, Do you think they will?

Yes. Probably.

Then you will, too?

He stood in the kitchen and considered making his decision then. He reached for a bottle of water. Truth is, he hadn't expected to be here as long as he had. He said, Nina, I don't know. I make it a point to never make up my mind until I absolutely have to. I'd like to see the baby. He said, shifting his feet, I'm going to do something very extravagant here. Please don't tell Marko.

Ooh la la, Nina teased. Of course I will tell Marko. She said, There is new soap under the bathroom sink. And shampoo!

He went to the bathroom, red-faced, and stepped out of his clothes. He stood in the bath and poured enough water into the cups of his hands to work up a decent lather. It was good just to wash off the salt from the sea. He shampooed his hair, and rinsed it; he shaved with his father's antiquated safety razor, the double-edged blade fresh. The window to the bath was open, sending in the breeze, and he could see the house up the hill, and the family which resided in it, standing on their terrace, toasting each other and the sunset.

Nina knocked at the door and entered, stepping around his clothes. She had a fresh towel with the Four Seasons imprint.

Nina?

She laughed. She said, unfolding the towel, It is counterfeit. But do not tell Marko I know this. She said, I have been saving it for a special time.

She set the towel on the lid of the toilet and said, checking him out, You will smell like a lily, and now she laughed like a girl and waddled back to the living room. She had left the door open and he could hear her singing. She called to him, interrupting herself: If they stay, we will have a party! Okay?

In his room Nina had also laid out for him a brand-new shirt—Bruce Hornsby & The Range, extra large—which hung like a drape on Stephen's thinning frame. He stood before the mirror and ran a brush through his tangled hair. On the way out, wearing hiking boots and cargo shorts and Bruce Hornsby & The Range (it had that new cotton smell!), he said to Nina, How do I look?

Like an American, Nina said. You are very much an American to me.

Is that a good thing? No, he said, don't answer that. He said, kissing her on the forehead, Thank you.

You shaved, she said, brushing his cheek. Like a baby.

When he arrived on the terrace, he found them—Messinger, Elise,

Anna, and the Texan, David Summerville. Apparently they were playing a game called American Talking Head.

They welcomed him again into their circle. The waiter brought Stephen a double bourbon, neat, and Summerville explained the rules of the game: you can't say something unless somebody has actually said it on TV. He said, explaining, Like this—

Summerville cleared his throat, paused, and said, affecting a speech impediment, Wike that Gweat Amewican Novewist, Wictor Hugo. A twagedy!

The others laughed and guessed instantly the proper authority.

Messenger said in his German accent, pounding the table, Hope is all we can hope for, no Judy? What say you about hope?

Elise said, taking her cue, That's right indeed. In our hour of need, hope is indeed very important for our hoping.

Indeed, Messenger said. A mouthful you said there, eminent journalist—

Read my lips, Anna said, turning to Stephen. I understand none of this.

Elise said, turning to Stephen, We are practicing in order to become BATS. BATS, you are thinking? Big American Television Stars!

Summerville said, Remember when Dan Rather said, Courage?

Yes, Stephen said. I actually saw that. I was watching that one.

How about when Bernie Shaw was in Baghdad the night we started bombing and old Bernie was drunk out of his gourd.

You think?

He was blitzed, Summerville said. Nobody could get him off the line.

God's truth, Stephen said. This is what bugs me the most—

What is that? Anna said.

What bugs me the most is when celebrities wear glasses when their eyes are fine. Then they say, It was a real labor of love.

Celebrity and State, Messenger said. You have no longer any separation of powers. Today every teenager in Berlin wants to be on MTV.

Yes, Elise said, And they say, *It was a lot of fun*. I've been watching, Stephen Brings. Apparently it is very important to have a Lot of Fun while you are making Action Movies.

Taxes, Summerville said. A coming across the aisle.

Elise said, leaning forward to Stephen, Like the Beach Boys.

Before, when I was learning English, I thought they were the Bitch Boys. You know?

Vukovar, Messinger said. Fun fun fun.

That killed it. There was one of those pauses now, the conversational riff having run its course.

Stay tuned, Summerville said. In a moment I'll be back.

Ted Koppel, Stephen thought. God love him. He finished his drink too quickly and ran his fingers through his hair and signaled for another.

Stephen, Messinger said. You have film?

No.

You have no film? Or you have not been *shooting* film?

I haven't been shooting, he said. But I wrote an essay. About Pissarro?

Stephen shifted his weight in his chair. He sensed the men and women wanting to be polite but understanding that he, Stephen, had not been doing what he was supposed to be doing.

Well, Messinger said. Perhaps tomorrow—

I'm not a journalist, Peter.

Messinger said, as if forgiving him for being lazy, But you are here and that is what matters. Still, Messinger said. One war is like all the others.

Why take pictures, Stephen thought, when you don't know what you're taking pictures of? He said, thinking aloud, The story is with the refugees. Everything else is smoke. The story is with the people who didn't make any of this. I'm staying with some people. They know people. There's an ad hoc agency for the women.

Summerville said, The women?

The military situation is all bluff and swagger. Boys, playing at it. The JNA is full of louts in the hills. There is no real defending army. Not yet.

It's the same up north, Messinger said. I think.

They are going to rearm, Stephen said. The Croats. They're coastal, and they're pissed, and the Swiss are creaming at the thought of selling them arms. The Serbs have blown it by not finishing it fast. But then what do I know—

More than you let on, Messinger said.

I do know all the Serbs I meet in the city are defending it. All three. Elise said, Could you introduce me? To the agency?

Yes. Of course. He said, speaking to the table, not wanting to appear to be picking favorites, I was worried when there was nobody here to see what happened. But now with the press having arrived—
Well?

Well, I don't know. It's not good, but it's not that bad, either. The chief danger is the shrapnel and the car accidents. But the reports of the shelling, all that, they've been at best exaggerated.

When Stephen's drink arrived, he said, We can talk about this later. I didn't mean to spoil the party.

Messinger said, after a long quiet moment, To Michel. A toast, To Michel.

They drank. Anna, the earnest one, explained. Michel had stayed behind to travel with a Croat patrol in the Krajina. He had set out several days earlier.

Messinger said to Stephen, You should get a flak jacket. Soon. I know just the guy in Split. Terrance the Armorer. He's Italian but has moved his shop to Split for all the business.

Stephen said, I can imagine.

Messinger said, stifling a yawn, It is dark, and I am tired. I have been working a lot.

Ja, Elise said, laughing. Working on women.

She vamped it up like a proper German, her Ws all Vs, *Vorking on vomen*, and Messinger stood and said to the table, Do not listen to the things she says about me, please. They may be true.

The Germans, Stephen thought—they made great scientists, but they had a difficult time cracking the joke. Perhaps they were just too serious a race. Still, they made great cars. He thought, Some of my best friends are German—

Stephen, Messinger said. Good to see you again. I am glad for your safety.

And now Stephen felt a twang of guilt, perhaps for not feeling as glad to see Messinger as Messinger appeared to be glad to see him. Truth is, he *liked* Messinger: instinctually. And now here was Messinger, disappearing into the darkness. In the wind the candle on the table guttered. There was a slice of lit moon, God's very fingernail, rising into the sky as if to scratch it.

Anna said, finishing her wine, I love the sea. The air. She said, rising unsteadily, I think I will go now and say good night to the sea.

She said to Elise, in German, Leave the door unchained, please,

and they watched Anna fill her glass and take her drink to the steep, descending steps which would lead her to the water.

That left Summerville and Elise. Stephen signaled for another round, and Summerville, being sloppy, insisted on paying off the tab, American style.

Summerville said, insisting, I'll just write it off, anyway.

Stephen let him pay. He lit a cigarette, inhaled, sitting back, and said, It's nice to see familiar faces. Then, after he spoke, he regretted instantly having done so, thinking he must sound utterly maudlin. The needy and the damned. He told himself to enjoy the night and to keep his mouth shut. Get a grip, Stephen, and he told himself to leave very soon lest his loneliness cast him further into a pathetic light. At least he had his new Bruce Hornsby & The Range. He listened now to Summerville tell a story about some guy in a casino who lost first his shirt, and then his pants, and he watched Elise lean back into her chair, crossing her fine legs; he watched her reach for the package of cigarettes beside the candle, and say, Yes, this is nice.

Summerville stood and said he preferred to get drunk alone if nobody was going to be listening to his stories, thank you very much, and he made a big show of kissing Elise on the cheeks—French style, he said, parting. For a moment Stephen had considered leaving with him, thus putting a final cap on the night, but he also understood he *wanted* there to be something more in the air than salt and the vague iridescent light cast by that fingernailed moon in the sky. Edward Steichen, the photographer, had insisted that everything was predicated on light, an observation which had never struck Stephen as being particularly brilliant until Stephen understood it was possible also to see the dark.

Stephen thought, watching Summerville walk away, Appetites attract.

And Elise was too everything—and certainly too aware—to pay attention to the likes of either. Americans abroad, how stupidly they behaved. Elise's eyes were watering, he noticed. Possibly she was wearing contacts. Probably he'd offended her by that stupid comment about people wearing glasses. Probably—

You are thinking? she said.

Excuse me?

What have you been thinking?

He said, to bring it to an end, right now . . . he said, for the purposes of building a fence, or wall, I was thinking about my wife.

What is her name?

R.

R?

A family thing.

Her name is R? How striking.

The candle bristled, its flame rising to attention, a good soldier. Well, he thought. That's that.

Elise said, You were frightened. When the bombing started?

I'm a coward, he said. I was terrified, actually. It's my nature.

That's not what Peter says. He says you are a thinker.

Fear is a consequence of excessive imagination. Stephen said, grimacing, I can't believe I said that. Too much teaching. Shoot me if I get blowzy, please.

She said, leaning forward, Tell me about Pissarro. Your essay.

It's just an idea I had.

Tell me.

It's not that interesting.

She said, Stop protesting.

It's about his use of foreground, background. The visual scale.

Okay.

Traditional painters, they'd approach consistently, foreground and background. Like a lens stopped down to create a depth of field. But Pissarro opens up the aperture. He selects what's in focus.

Mm hmmm.

Technology, Stephen said, the mechanics of the lens. Technology did not invent the way we use it. That seems to me the point. People have *always* been inclined to see. Or not.

She was making him talk, he knew, to avoid talking about herself.

So, she said. It is more than a hobby.

More or less.

She said, looking away, briefly, You are going to return with the flotilla?

I'm not sure. He said, I didn't mean to keep you. He said, making to rise, I—

No. It's me. It's been charming, Stephen Brings. That is what Peter calls you. You were blowzy only that once, I promise. She said, And

also I would like to apologize to you for being rude. When we first met—

No—don't do this. Really.

You must let me. I was a bitch. On the island? It was about another matter on my mind, but that is no excuse. *Comprenez-vous?*

Tu, he said. Please. And there ends my French. He said, rising to his feet, I can walk you—

No, she said, standing. So okay, she said, shaking his hand, that decidedly firm grip of hers. Not tonight, she said, and then she laughed, deeply, and then she let him go.

She had a strong hand. Had he not been half-drunk—fuck it, he was all drunk—he would have tamped down the emergent erection; he would have bitten his cheek, run his finger along the sharp metal edge beneath the table, perhaps drawn blood. Instead he watched the light from her hair and her arms dissolve into the darkness.

Later he went to the bar inside and talked with some of the ITN crew, learning that the going rate for plundered VCRs in Montenegro was down to fifty deutschmarks. He ordered a final drink, which turned into two—why is it that the *last* one always is the one you shouldn't take?—and talked some more, and he excused himself and took his drink to a stone table overlooking the sea. Late at night, he tended to want a change of subject, and after a while he heard footsteps ascending the stone staircase, and then Anna emerged, her blouse damp at the shoulders from her hair. She had been swimming in the cooling sea. She said, wringing her black hair, Yes?

It's me. Stephen.

Ahh, she said.

She sat beside him on the stone table, their feet on the bench, and they looked at the slivered moon sailing through a bright patch of clouds. He offered her a cigarette, and they smoked their cigarettes in silence.

She said, It's quiet.

He didn't want to say anything.

She said, My husband wants me to come home.

Stephen nodded, pretending to understand more than he should.

She said to Stephen, turning, I am very sorry. About your boy.

Thank you, he said. It was a long time ago.

But not long enough, she said. Maybe someday we will know each

other well enough for it not to make me feel awkward around you. I have a boy. I know what a boy means.

It's different, I imagine. For a woman. A boy for a woman is different than a boy for a man.

Or maybe not, she said.

Maybe.

She put her hand on his knee and said, That is one of the mysteries. She removed her hand and shook her hair. She said, laughing sadly, It's the dark.

Yes.

She said, Inside the hotel it is dark.

It's on my way, he said, getting up. I'm drunk, I'm tired, and I'm married. He tossed the contents of his drink onto the grass. He said, You're safe with me.

Oh?

Please, he said. It's a mess in there and it's on my way.

He walked with her into the maze of the darkened corridors, lit by the emergency lighting, and beyond the section which had filled with refugees, the corridors smelling of meat cooked in oil and mold. In one room a handful of men was exclaiming over effete matters of NATO policy. There was a glass, breaking. She took his arm, which flustered him all over again, and they walked on until they passed the EC monitor's room. He felt her hip, the side of her body brushing against his own. Then another door, behind which a couple was making love: a woman's voice, ascending, and a man's—straining, as if lifting a great weight.

Anna said, leaning into his body, Peter. He snorts like a horse.

She said, letting go, taking her key to her own door and fumbling with the lock, When in Spain.

She said, wiping her eye with the back of her hand, The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

Are you okay?

She said, touching his arm, Yes. Thank you.

They could hear the couple's voices through the wall. It was dark, and probable: she pressed him now, rising on her toes in order to kiss his cheek, and once there she lingered, and he felt the turbines in his body lighting up all over again, and he could feel the swell of her chest taking in a breath.

He raised his hand to the top of her shoulder and squeezed it gently.

He said, withdrawing, Good night.

She said, her hand to his chest, We could just rest. Sleep.

I'm sort of fragile right now.

You won't break, she said. You are not the kind to break. That's why some people hurt so much. Because it is so hard for them to break.

I want to, he said. It's not—

That is obvious, she said, pressing her hips into his body, and now she kissed him again, meaning to say good night, and ducked inside her room. He tasted the salt on his mouth, listening for the latch, and returned the way he had come: past the shut doors in all the darkened halls, and the voices, behind them, the voices conspiring their best in preparation to greet the forthcoming day. It had been stupid of him to be so spendthrift with this one clean shirt—and the water, the water he had first used to bathe, and the water he would now require to flush out the toxins. Anna, she too had a boy. When a man loses a boy, the boy also loses a man. So why don't you talk about it? Instead he thought about the dampness on his hand from Anna's shoulder, the water from her hair, the brush of her lips on his cheek, and he walked down the corridor—like a path, or tunnel—toward the patch of light waiting to receive him at its end.

5

That it made sense for Elise Kohlhaus and Peter Messinger to be lovers did not ease the ache and foolish apprehension in his heart, which surprised him, given that for so long now he had thought himself incapable of feeling anything in his heart at all. Like a schoolboy, he thought, waking alone in his bed. Peter, Anna's voice was saying to him. He snorts like horse. Stephen thought, opening his eyes, Where am I? He thought, Grow up. She's just a pretty girl.

He said, You already have a partner.

He said, rising for the day, You also have a headache.

Now committed to it, he drank a liter of water, and a Coke, and then he swallowed three aspirin, and dressed—cargo shorts, hiking boots, Bruce Hornsby & The Range—and walked to the sea, where he

undressed, and dove into the water to wash off the bourbon which had seeped through his pores in the night. Even now the sea was cooling: he swam a few hundred yards out to circulate the blood, then floated briefly on his back, the water lapping at his penis, which replied, having finally been paid some attention. Praise, Dostoyevski wrote . . . *Praise makes the man*. He laughed, out loud, and pivoted in the water and splashed like a donkey, and now he returned, swimming fast to speed his return: to blow out the dust in his lungs. He taxied in the shallows, and submerged his face: once, twice. And again.

In America it was illegal to be naked, something about the body appearing indecent. Shame on you. *I see you*. He lay alone on the sun-baked rocks for the sun to dry his shameful body. If you go there, he told himself, you can't come back. That's what it means to disappear. You become unrecognizable.

Q. What are we by nature?

A. We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God.

He used the EC monitor's satellite hookup to call R in Chicago. She wasn't in, meaning she wasn't sleeping at home, and after the machine kicked on—R's voice, cheerful and clipped, faintly winsome—he left a lengthy message, thinking she might wake, less clipped but hopeful, nonetheless . . . possibly she might come swinging in through the door, having heard his voice in the hallway? It had happened before. Still she did not pick up, and so, fighting the static, he said into the machine he would call her in a few weeks, not to worry, that today he went swimming in the Adriatic—

The line went dead. He hadn't even been able to pick his moment.

On the Argentina terrace he found Messenger and Summerville eating breakfast rolls with cheese and sausage. There was a bowlful of fruit worth twenty marks, but then again, as Summerville would have it, who's counting?

Messenger was bright and chipper, having been recently laid, and Summerville said, reaching for a roll, his voice winking, Howdy, Stephen Brings.

Howdy?

Indeed, Summerville said. Care for a snort?

No, Stephen said. Thank you.

Always polite, Summerville said.

Stephen Brings, Messinger said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. Let us go to the city walls. I want to photograph the snipers.

Which side?

Messinger smiled broadly. Oh, I think the side which is closest, no?

Stephen wrapped two pears in a bandanna and on the way they made a detour to Nina and Marko's where Stephen picked up his everyday camera—a Contax II rangefinder. He loaded a roll of film, and Messinger was entranced by the bottom plate, the meticulous and sturdy design of its fit, and said, May I?

Stephen handed him the camera.

Messinger said, There is no light meter.

No.

It is a rock, Messinger said, hefting it. And the lens?

A diamond, Stephen said.

German glass, Messinger said. Zeiss. *Old Zeiss*, he said, returning the camera. But where are you doing your film?

Nowhere. Like I said.

Ah yes, he said, clapping Stephen on the shoulder. Well then, Stephen Brings. Let us go then and be famous men of war.

They crossed the drawbridge. At the entrance to the staircase, Stephen paused to touch the cool stone. They passed an empty card table and ascended the narrow steps and stood on the ancient city walls.

Stay low, Stephen said, pointing. They have rockets. Boom.

Messinger said, I do not like rockets.

They turned a corner, following an incline, and as they turned another corner they came across a gathering of a dozen or so cameras, television and print, surrounding a lone militiaman—a bartender Stephen recognized from one of the hotels, dressed up in brand-new hunting gear. Several of the cameramen were giving the bartender various tips for ensuring the best pose.

No no. Not me, the bartender yelled, pointing to the hills. Them! Shoot them!

Now the man stood in the open and fired blindly into the hills three rounds, and ducked. There was no return fire, which apparently disappointed.

Ahh, said a British voice, clicking. So you want us to shoot them? I see. Right.

Messinger said, So many the brave.

They passed through the gaggle. As they passed, the militiaman rose again and fired several more quick rounds, and this time there was return fire, and splinters of stone, spraying, one of which brushed the back of Stephen's neck.

What the fuck! somebody yelled. They're firing at us!

Fuck, said another. Rat fuck, this is ridiculous—

Stephen lowered his head, turned, and ran on, his camera strap wound tight around his fist, cutting off the blood. He paused, checking a corner, and waited. Messenger had stopped to photograph the Croat militiaman on the parapet giving orders to the press. Then two more rounds struck the wall and everybody went down, kissing the bricks, while Messenger took more shots.

Messenger caught up with Stephen and they went on. They ran along the wall facing the hills. To their left drifted a sea of tiled roofs, chopped up by the concussions of the randomly lobbed shell. They came to a turret well protected from the enfilading line of sight. Stephen took a seat, forearms on his knees, hitching his breath—his back to the wall. He said, From here you can see most. He said, gesturing backward with his thumb, Note Serb flags on yonder hilltop.

There came more fire, potshots, none directed their way. Nonetheless they were awake now on the other side. Messenger, sitting beside him, placed his bag between his outstretched legs. He took out an automated SLR.

Stephen said, Those are serious hilltops.

Messenger said, pointing, A serious lens. He stood, anchored himself, and took several fast shots of the surrounding hills, the bunkers which had been dug in. He turned on his heel and took more of the inner-city rooftops. When he sat back down, kicking out his legs once more, Stephen took his photograph. The photograph of the photographer sitting behind the wall.

Stephen said, May I?

You always ask, don't you.

I try to.

Stephen pivoted for the angle and took one more. He said, returning to his place behind the wall, Otherwise it's not fair.

Here, Messenger said, reaching into his bag, passing to Stephen a warm bottle of Coke. Stephen opened the bottle, its fizz spraying into the hot air.

Messinger said, opening a travel-worn leather album holding several photographs, Here. Look, Stephen. My family.

In one photograph stood a regal woman in a dark dress: beside her, two boys and a girl, rising up the scale of childhood like the triad of a major chord. Messinger said, admiring them, They are my family. My heart's sake.

Stephen said, A man's children are like arrows to his quiver.

Oh?

David. Book of Psalms. Stephen said, They are very handsome.

I live in Europe. We go to the church only to admire the disasters it makes. The churches, I mean. Especially the big domes.

At least you have a sense of scale, Stephen said, passing him the Coke.

Soon, Messinger said, nodding. Soon I will stop shitting around with all this. Become an editor and get fat. You say fucking, I know. But the war coverage, it gets one noticed. People like the pictures.

You are Herr Peter Messinger. Where you go, the others follow.

Messinger said, smiling, ever so seriously, I was glad to know you would be here, Stephen Brings. There is no shit with you. I understood your essays better than maybe you think. He said, pointing to his wife in the photograph, She has taken the children to Paris. She wants me always to come back to her, but Paris is expensive. I love Paris. Who could not? But it is expensive.

They go to school—

Ah no. On holiday, he said, closing the album. More the expense. So I keep gaining notice. Notices. This will be the end of it for me. This, what you Americans call conflict. Always a conflict. So American. He said, raising a Leica, taking a shot of Stephen, What say you now? We are friends?

We will be, Stephen said. Experience and sensibility. Like interests.

My thoughts exactly, Messinger said. And temperament: not the same, but kin. Like you I have very few friends. That Summerville, he is a funny guy, but he has I think a long line.

Stephen looked at him blankly.

Like the telegraph, Messinger explained. A long line must travel a great distance. Things get lost on the way.

He's a big guy, Stephen said. Big brain.

Perhaps, Messinger said. Big like the dinosaur. Too much growth beyond the brain.

Later a pair of Croat snipers wearing black paramilitary gear rounded the corner, and they set themselves up, away from the turrets—the turrets being the most obvious spot to hide a sniper—and using the big lens Messinger got his photographs. After twenty minutes of teasing the surrounding army—a shot here, a shot there—the snipers, having meant only to provoke, packed up and left. When they left Messinger removed the film from his camera bodies and inserted fresh rolls. Messinger gave Stephen a roll to do likewise.

On the way down, at the entrance to the city, the two snipers in black stood waiting for them beside the card table. Behind the table sat another man, big-bellied and officer-like, slicing up a carrot.

Open the bags, the big-belly said.

They opened the bags.

The officer pointed to the cameras. He said, The film.

They made a big show of protest, and Messinger affecting his outrage unloaded all three of his bodies. Then the snipers went through the gear looking for more exposed film. Finding none, they permitted them to pass.

Have a nice day, said the big-belly, waving them by.

Stephen said, later, his film in his fist, What if they had frisked us?

Messinger said, But what is he going to do? Shoot me? They are the same on either side, you know. The exact same. Militia is militia.

Stephen said, I *don't* know. A few weeks ago, the JNA bombed the Adriatic. This war shit, it does not attract.

On the promenade a young man with a brand-new top-heavy bag came running up. He paused a moment to collect his breath, hands to his knees, and asked if they knew where he could find Peter Messinger.

He is back there, Messinger said, pointing to the walls. When you see him please tell him that the old one with the wife in Paris sent you.

The kid lit up. Okay. Yeah, sure. Old one, wife in Paris.

Messinger said, Tell Herr Messinger it is time for him to go home. Okay. Time to go home. Got it.

They went on to the Onofrio Fountain, and Stephen introduced Messinger to the young girl and her mother, and Stephen gave to the

mother and daughter the fruit he had pinched from the hotel. Then Messinger left to meet up with Elise and the rising politician who had built the flotilla on which the distant relatives and the press had sailed, and Stephen sat for a while with the mother and her daughter. They had family in Istria, the mother explained. Here they had nobody. The mother said, We will not be permitted leaving Dubrovnik. The people without friends on the boats must stay. She said, beginning to cry, We cannot leave on the boats tomorrow. All the boats.

Saddened, he went back home, and there he put away his camera and the film. Useless, he thought, locating a place to store it. Later he sat on the terrace facing the sea with the enemy behind him and read a chapter from the *Arabian Nights*. At times, he paused to look up and study the water and the blue-domed roof of the House of Scheherazade, winking in the startlingly clear sunlight. A wave, cresting the day laid out. The dome had been designed to resemble the sky, he understood; it was the sky that made the clean water blue. He sat on the terrace and read from his book while listening to the snipers poke fun intermittently at each other across the sky.

While reading, and before turning to the next page, he thought, Asshole.

Am not, he thought.

Are too.

Am not.

Oh yeah?

Yeah—

Fuck you—

Bang.

6

This is what he knows about Elise Kohlhaus: her father, Philip, is the director of the privately held Kohlhaus Elevator Works in Stuttgart, which he inherited from his father, and which the British and Americans bombed to pieces in 1944. Her mother, Rebekka, was captured by the Russians. Rebekka, then five, and her mother later escaped to West Germany in 1946. Now Rebekka is a pediatrician, very popular, and Elise is the only child, born in the spring of the decade of love.

Educated in Berlin, with stints graduate and otherwise at Oxford and NYU, Elise left an entry-level position with a publishing house to cover the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Being twenty-eight, and childless, she is young enough to think she requires more adventure than is probably good for her. Elise's hair, pale yellow, falls into ringlets which grow tighter as the humidity begins to rise. She has a small cleft in her chin and a dimple in her cheek; she has abandoned her contacts due to the exigencies of modern war and taken to wearing glasses with metal frames. Also, she has taken to wearing a field cap—a gift to her from a once-smitten U.S. major stationed in Vaihingen—and, while wearing the field cap, she tucks her hair into a barrette that gathers at the nape of her neck. Her eyes are blue, her frame slight, and following the tradition of all families with military experience—her grandfather, an officer on the Eastern Front, lost both legs at Kursk—she takes meticulous care of her feet.

These things Stephen has learned by way of listening to others, many of whom are unknowingly in love with Elise. Nina had taken instantly a shine to Anna and Elise. Elise was writing about what was happening to the women.

Not for the magazines, she said. For me.

The morning the flotilla was to leave for Split, Stephen went to the hotel terrace, where he felt a palpable tension at the table. Everybody was over-caffeinated and not talking. Obviously Messinger and Elise had been quarreling.

The others, Anna explained, were returning to Split. Elise is going to stay.

With you, Elise said to Stephen.

I haven't said I'm staying, Stephen said.

Of course you are. You can help me. And Nina.

Stephen took a look at those around the table. He said, If you leave now then you know you can.

My point, Messinger said.

Summerville said, There's people getting shot lots of places. Why get stuck here? He said, making a doodle in his notebook, Beats me.

Stephen rose and said he had things to attend to, meaning he did not want to become embroiled in a family matter, especially one belonging to a family by which he had been so recently adopted, and so he promised to meet them later at the harbor in order to say good-bye.

Messinger followed him through the hotel to the street. Stephen!

The sun on the street was bright in Stephen's eyes. Stephen said, turning, shielding his eyes, Yes?

This is crazy, Messinger said. We cannot all of us stay.

I wouldn't know.

If you come with us we would be able to dissuade her. Together.

Stephen thought about this. He removed a packet of cigarettes, offered one to Messinger, and took one for himself. He lit them up.

He said, Peter, the time is not right for me.

Ja, well, Messinger said, spitting smoke. When is it ever?

Stephen said, How badly do you want this? He said, making his meaning clear, If you want me to return, I will, but then I'm going to have to make arrangements to come back, and that will be difficult. Uncertain.

Messinger inhaled sharply, exhaled. He waved his hand through the smoke—as if he were American, apologizing. This is stupid, he said.

Stephen said, I have an exit route. There's room for another.

I worry stupidly, Messinger said. She is not a child, God knows that. The television will be here. With her, you will be safer. Unfoolish. He said, Don't be foolish, Stephen Brings. One does not make friends so easily.

Likewise.

Messinger said, I showed you pictures of my family for a reason. My heart's sake. But that was insensitive of me. I should have thought—

They're your kids, Peter—Your family.

Do you know what I am saying?

Yes.

Then Stephen, please do not pretend you do not.

Peter, I lost my kid. It's a fact, like being blind, or short. But let's not walk around it, okay? Let's please just not always have to walk around it.

Of course, Messinger said. It is like cancer or the AIDS. Nobody knows how to reply. But I will just say what is on my mind. And I will also say, Stephen, do not be foolish. And keep Elise away from the snipers and militia. Okay? No walking along the tops of city walls.

They shook hands, standing in the street, and Messinger turned, and Stephen said, Peter?

Yes?

Will you deliver this for me?

He reached into his side pocket for the letter he had written in Hvar months ago to his son.

Yes. Of course I will. We will meet in Zagreb then, soon. Or Vienna.

Okay, Stephen said. Thanks.

So okay.

—

Say hello, say good-bye: he walked alone across the city to meet Marko at the new harbor. In the garage, Marko was loading a box of pirated software—Quicken—onto the fast boat needing varnish. Marko, like Stephen, was wearing his Bruce Hornsby & The Range. Marko leapt off the boat and said, The cocksuckers.

What is it?

They won't let Nina leave. She does not have a *young* baby. Pregnant does not count. Pregnant is not having a baby! They, he said, meaning the politicians and journalists and priests, they get to leave. He said, Why are you not leaving?

Time's not right. Besides, where would I go?

Marko said, I have some watches coming. Swatch. Very good. Real Swatch, not the fake. Made in the good factory in Poland. He said, Tomorrow we will need to move the boat to another place. Too much bombing here.

Okay.

Fuck the cocksuckers, he said. I am sick of not having a telephone.

They went together to the gangplank of the ferry which would be leading the way out. A crowd had gathered to see the rescuing flotilla off. Stephen ran into Anna, who dropped her bag and embraced him.

She whispered into his ear, Forget everything I said. That night. Please.

She said, pulling back, I was lonely. I am sorry if I made you awkward.

It's okay—

I'm glad, she said. It's not that you should forget. It's because I don't want to be awkward. I try never to be awkward with anybody.

Me too.

Then, she said, beaming. Then stay here and be very safe. Keep Elise safe. I love Elise very much.

I know, Stephen said. Safe journey.

They joined up with Messinger. Summerville, seeing Stephen, waved howdy. Elise was making her farewells. The harbor was now teeming with drama: families being separated all over again. Sister and brother and cousin.

Elise made her way through the crowd, joining Stephen and Marko.

She took Stephen's arm and said, Thank you.

He said, not knowing what to do with his arm, For what?

She ignored the question—or didn't—and gave back his arm. She turned and said hello to Marko. She looked at Marko's shirt, Bruce Hornsby & The Range, and Stephen's shirt, Bruce Hornsby & The Range, and said, arms akimbo, Did I miss something? Was there a concert, too?

Stephen watched her take in the crowd. He said, looking at the hilltops, We should leave. They have a line of sight. Once the press is underway we become a fat target.

They left, and Marko split off at the gate to do some business, and Stephen and Elise went to the hospital, which was dark inside, not having any electricity except for emergency generators. Everywhere now there were refugees with no place to stay. The enemy had been blasting away at the resort hotels—like the one near the old nudist beach, which could have housed two thousand. Three. Elise explained, walking, that she wanted to talk to some people, with Nina, who would translate.

Trust me, Stephen said. You don't want me around for that.

Okay.

He said, Peter and Anna think I can keep you safe.

She smiled, and said, You cannot keep me safe.

I know that. He said, Stay close to the buildings, okay? It's safer there.

When he saw her next, on the terrace at home with Nina, it was obvious she had been crying. Her glasses sat on the table by her notebook—a tablet of paper, unlined, pale blue. On hearing Stephen coming through the door, bearing apples, Nina rose and made her way in her red dress to the kitchen to make coffee—they had some, now, though Nina and Marko never drank it—her belly swinging beneath her muumuu. What was it about pregnancy which made a woman

radiant? It was a thing he prized most in a photograph, genuine radiance. Nina's skin, like moonlight, lit up the house.

Stephen, Nina said to him. I was just making some coffee. American style, the way we like it.

They ate a lunch of cheese and bread. The enemy up high began firing from the hilltops at twenty-minute intervals. They listened to the shelling as they ate, and Nina said, They are just trying to scare us.

Elise said, Well, it's working.

A long silence. Nina's baby kicked. Elise asked Nina if she could feel the baby, and Nina beamed and took her hand.

There, Elise said. There!

Nina said, Will you stay with us? It's not la dee dee like the hotel. Don't tell Marko. But we have the room. This way I thought you will not be so lonely.

And then it was agreed nobody wanted to be more lonely than was otherwise necessary in this life, and there was a palpable lifting of the spirits.

I would like the companionship, Nina said. She said to Elise, giving Elise back her hand, Someday you will tell me all about your family. We will have lots and lots of time.

Before Elise could reply, the baby kicked and Nina dropped her cup, which struck the tiled floor and broke.

7

To fall in love is to understand the force of gravity. One never knows where one will land or just how hard. One can fall in love with a cause, Stephen told himself, though of course a cause is incapable of loving one back. A cause might provide one with identity—like a bumper sticker, instant membership and pals—but a cause was not capable of keeping one warm at night or, for that matter, feeling frisky. True to his nature, Stephen distrusted all causes, though he had at times been smitten by various individuals who represented causes directed toward the proper spirit of things. *A woman's right to choose*, R always said. *That's my passion . . .* and it was hard to complain against those who wanted to prevent a girl from having a coat-

hangered abortion, or save the forests belonging to the world. The forests around Dubrovnik. When a shell once lobbed fell into the city, it cast splinters—brick and tile and glass and wood—flying. And he told himself, Don't fall in love, but by now he was free-falling, which he didn't understand. It was the kind of flight he had come to think he was no longer capable of sustaining. At night he lay on the couch, having given over his room to Elise, and at night he felt his blood pumping through his body, through the arteries which led always to his beating heart.

This living hand, Keats wrote. *I hold it towards you.*

They took a small launch to Lokrum and tied up on the north side, tucking the boat between two giant rocks. The island had been shelled, and in that shelling, somebody had taken out the gate-keeper's house. Stephen and Elise had walked around to see it. The roof beams had been shattered. Everywhere, there were splinters.

Stephen said, walking up the path, and hopeful to change the subject, God, I love this place.

Elise said, sadly, Me too.

She was thinking, he knew, about what she'd been seeing. The things she was writing: not the *cause*, but the inhumanity. She was thinking about the way they separated the men to take them off to camps and beat them with clubs. It was easy to break a man's ribs. She was thinking about the way they raped the women. The little girls. The way they killed the livestock and burned the houses and raped the girls in front of their fathers before they took the fathers away to break their ribs. Smash their skulls, the skulls being always smashed last to keep the man alert to the fact his knees were being broken. His ribs and his hands.

Soldiers, she was thinking. Soldiers.

He said, You came here a lot? Before?

Yes, she said nodding. On holiday. My father liked to go to Cavtat.

They walked on to the western ledge. The water surrounding the island was green and blue. They walked along the rocks to the edge of the blue water.

This is not a war, she said.

You know those Yugoslavs, Stephen said. Animals!

She said back, For centuries.

Not like the French.

Not like the Russians and the British and the Italians. She said,

Once you become a defeated people, or have two continental coasts, *then* you become civilized. We are very civilized now in my country. Just like Japan.

She said, negotiating the rocks, which had become tricky, requiring various leaps, The gay men come here. In summer. Dozens of beautiful men tucked into the rocks. Sometimes you never see them until you are on top of them. Like surprises. When I was little, and we came here once, I walked all around them. Besides my father's, I saw my first penis.

Your first?

I was walking like this to a ladder—to that ladder, there—and this boy, he must have been, oh, seventeen. Eighteen? This boy comes right up out of the sea. Like Poseidon! He was so beautiful it made my heart ache.

She laughed and said, I stood looking at him. At all those marvelous complications! I have never understood how men walk. He was tan, *everywhere*, and then he smiled at me. I turned, I watched him walk by. I was in love.

Even then.

Well, I was eight. But eight is not too soon for love. Not if one has love at home. It was not the sexual love I am talking about. It was much more than that. It was the love of beauty. I had seen it. A gift.

She said, Have you ever noticed how people are so much more attractive when they are nude? Not the pretty ones so much—you know what *they* look like. You see *them* everywhere in the shopping malls and magazines. But everybody else? Especially the big people. Big people should not wear clothes unless it is cold. I love the old men drinking beer patting their big beautiful bellies. I love the grandmothers on the beach wearing floppy hats. And the kids. When children swim naked together they do not grow up to have so much shame.

You think?

Oh yes. I learned this from my parents. I'm not talking about the crazies. The people who golf nude. Good grief. But to swim? To lie in the sun?

They came to a fine rock with a long, flat surface, a ledge of marbled granite, and Stephen removed his knapsack. He spread a blanket on the sun-baked rock. Nina had packed for them a picnic: wine from the cellar; and bread; a can of sardines Marko had received in

trade for a used pair of counterfeit sneakers; a small brick of cheese. For dessert, an apple to split.

Elise sat on the rock. She lifted her arm, sniffed, and said, I stink.

Stephen popped a cork. Elise undid the laces on her boots and kicked them off. She tugged off her hunter green socks; she doffed her cap. She said, Now I am going to be an American Action Movie Sensation.

Excuse me?

First I undo my hair, like this. Next I take off my glasses, so. She set the glasses on her green socks. She said, squinting, The glasses make me intellectual. So I am permitted to be sexual only once they are removed.

She shimmied out of her shorts; she pulled off her new Bruce Hornsby & The Range, beneath which she wore a navy maillot. She smiled and turned to him, fully, taking him in—meaning she wanted him to be taking her in, too.

Stephen said, I see.

And she laughed, that belly laugh, partly a whoop, and said, But I will not embarrass you. Okay? She said, Also, intellectual women do not swim.

And then she dove in. She resurfaced several long seconds later. She swam out, a strong stroke, and then back in, calling to him from below—

Come swim!

It was a dangerous proposition, given his state of mind. His heart rate. He said, I bathed earlier.

Not with me you did not.

He said, drinking his wine, It's too cold.

Coward, she said. And after I promised you. She said, Stephen Brings, I *always* keep a promise.

She swam back out, splashing loudly with her feet, causing a spray. He stood on the ledge watching her. For a while she treaded water and sang the words to a song by U2. He watched her dive into the water, a porpoise, and resurface several meters later. She returned then, and scrambling up the ladder in the manner of that same boy before her, she said, It is becoming cold—

It's the wind, he said. Not to mention the season.

Her arms and legs were covered with gooseflesh. She shook her hair, wildly, then raised her hands to pull it off her neck, away from

her eyes. She stood away from him, her arms wide to the warm sun, waiting to dry. She turned to him and said, As I recall, you have seen me undressed?

From a distance, he said. Mostly.

She laughed. She said, turning her back to him, You are too skinny, Stephen. Losing weight. I can see it on your face and throat.

Now she came to the blanket, sitting cross-legged, facing the hot sun. At times her knee bumped against his thigh and he felt his body shiver. He felt the blood in his veins charging. She put her glasses on and shivered in the breeze.

She said, This is not so bad a place to have a war. Not like Finland.

She began to eat. She knew how to eat with her hands. She said, wiping her mouth, You are going to have to tell me about your family, I think.

How's that?

Family is all. It is the only thing.

You think?

She nodded, swallowing. We are having a picnic. I should know. I should not have to hear about it from other people.

He drank and lay down on his back and crossed his legs. He could feel the sun on his exposed knee. To shield his eyes from the sun, he lifted the edge of the blanket and pulled it over his head. The blanket cooled his eyes and rested just so above the bridge of his nose.

She said, So?

He said, Once there was a king. He had a hawk, which he loved.

This is about your family?

Don't interrupt or I'll forget. I'll get shy on you.

He said, This king . . . the king loved to hunt and he loved the hawk. He went with his men and his hawk to hunt a gazelle. A fine day for hunting, you see. But the gazelle leapt over his head and ran away. He was made to look foolish, this king, before his men. He was made to look foolish by a gazelle. A man cannot abide being mocked, especially a man who is king. What is the gazelle if not an emblem of the beloved? Shame is pride's cloak, Blake says.

Ahh, Elise said. A parable.

The king, Stephen said. The king was ashamed because the gazelle—the sexual object—had leapt over his head. And he was thirsty. It must have been a very hot day for hunting. Very thirsty. So he rode after the gazelle with the magnificent hawk on his sleeve

looking for a pool from which to drink. A stream. He was hot, you see. He was thirsty. But he found no water. Riding hard, a gray stallion, a horse for a king, he came to a tree dripping with a silvery delicious-looking fluid. Water, he thought. God's nectar. Or wine, perhaps. Scheherazade, like Solomon, is not always precise.

Stephen sat up and reached for his wine and drank. A trickle of seawater ran down Elise's throat. He lay back down, covered his eyes, and took a cigarette. He could smell the seawater on Elise's skin. Before he could locate his lighter, Elise already had, and she took the cigarette from him, and lit it, and then gave it back. He felt her fingers touch his mouth.

This king, he said, exhaling. He took the hawk's golden royal hawk-cup and filled it. With that dense quicksilver. And the king set the golden cup before the hawk to drink, but the hawk knocked over the cup. The king did this a second time. Perhaps he loved the hawk so much that the king could not bear to drink first? An act of love for his hawk? It was, like I've said, a hot day, the sun fierce. And again the hawk knocked over the golden cup. Then, following the rule of threes, it happened for a third time. And the king, being king, grew angry and drew his sword and in one breath sliced off the magnificent hawk's wing. A great wing. And the hawk rose up, spiraling like a rocket, and pecked at a giant serpent in the tree. The fluid was venom, you see. Poison.

He sat up and looked at her. She had her hand placed to shield her eyes. Two beads of sweat ran beneath her raised arm down her side.

She said, What happened?

The king lived. The hawk died.

She said, I don't understand.

He wrapped his arms around his knees. He said, The king should have stayed home. The king should not have chased after the illusory. The gazelle.

She refilled her glass, then his. Catching his eye, she made her decision, and reached for the top of her suit—rolling the wet fabric over her shoulders, down past her chest, below her navel to her hips. When she had finished, she looked away, smiling gently, and turned to face the water and the sun. She rested her back against his legs.

Elise said, her voice to the wind, I think the gazelle was not illusory. He *saw* the gazelle. It leapt over his head. The serpent, that deceives. The serpent is over his head, too.

Stephen said, To which he is led by the gazelle.

Inexperience, Elise said. He must have been a young king.

Elise said, leaning her weight into his knees, The king loved the hawk.

Yes.

Like a son?

Yes.

How could he live afterward?

He was the king, Stephen said. Kings always live. Or else they are replaced. Without a king there is no story.

She turned and reached for her glass of wine and drank. She set the glass on the stone beside her which caused the glass to ring. She took his hand and turned back to the sea—his hand in her own, swiveling—and then she placed his hand on the top of her bare shoulder. The water of the sea was lapping at the island, breaking over the rocks below, and he could feel the sun's heat on the rocks. He could feel the bones on the top of her shoulder, and the muscle beneath it, beneath the very skin of it, the skin having a faint dusting of salt, and he could smell her skin and the salt from her body, and she held his hand like that with the weight of it resting just so.

She said, What happened to the queen?

8

They worked well in the city and in the house and by the sea. He read her book on the fall of the Berlin Wall and was astounded by the clarity of her voice—she having written this in a language not her own. He marveled at the lucidity of her prose. At her brilliance—meaning *luminance*, meaning *design*. She asked him to read drafts of what she was writing now, and he began to tease her about her idioms, the sometimes formal pitch. And using Scheherazade's Parable of the Hawk he began something of his own, though he was too uncertain to show it. Coward, she teased, and the days passed, and not having a calendar they lost track of the days. Among other things they had each stripped the watches from their wrists. They swam often and lay in the sun nude and when they dressed they confused each other's Bruce Hornsby & The Range. He went to the bookshop on the Stradun and began a crash course on German literature: Goethe,

Grass, and Mann. It is spirit which attracts, he told himself, turning the pages. *Not matter*. It was the pitch of her voice, the light in her eyes when she said, *Why are you looking at me so, Stephen?* He was in love with her, he understood, and he was pretty certain she could be in love with him, but still it went unspoken lest it fall apart for being rushed. And so while he was busy falling in love with her, they were not lovers. Once, when he became too riled up to think, let alone read, he swam off alone far into the distance, where he attended briskly to the call of his physiology, coming into the sea, and when he returned she lay naked on the beach, her hand shielding her eyes, and teased him saying, *Why so far away, Stephen? Why so far?* and then he climbed up onto the warm rock and fell asleep on it as if he were a seal. Later she gathered her clothes to make a pillow for his head and dove into the sea. He knew they had their separate inner houses, both of which were not entirely in order. He knew why she never spoke of Messinger, and so he never asked, and thus they circled each other—birds, spiraling in the sky.

Fish in the sea.

November came and went. The sea had cooled and turned to winter. The wind sharpened all around them.

The night of a fierce bombardment, the night the city was set on fire, Nina's water broke. They were on their way to the cellar, the enemy positions having started up a bombardment in earnest. Shells were landing in the city and along all the streets leading into it. The enemy fired phosphorus shells into the hills covered with oaks, setting them ablaze in the night sky. The moon, full, orange from the filtering smoke—the air and the sky filled with the smoke of the burning forests. The smoke rose to the orange circle of the moon, to the drain in the sky it made, as if it were possible to escape.

This is serious, Stephen understood, his eyes burning from the smoke.

It was on the stairs—the dark, dusty stairs leading to the cellar—that Nina's contractions began. A doctor, shipped in with the flotilla, had seen Nina earlier that day, assuring her the baby would not arrive for two more weeks, but he had also been busy and rushed and eager to dispense vitamins. Also, he was Greek, and he did not speak English, and his Croatian/Bosnian/Serbian was shaky, and so most of the examination had been done with a lot of nodding. The first two contractions were separated by thirty minutes. Then fifteen.

Nina sat on her heels and wailed. Oh God, she said, finally, the contraction having passed.

Marko had lit candles in the cellar. He had opened two large boxes of Hugo Boss leather jackets, to make a pallet for his wife, and which he covered with several U.S. army surplus sleeping bags to protect their resale value. Marko said, rubbing his hands, They are not supposed to be coming now. I am supposed to be waiting for the good news elsewhere. Locating cigars. Fresh fruits. I am—

There was a blast, this one shaking the joists, and it was the blast, her body's reaction to it, which caused Nina's water to break. Elise took her hand and moved a candle and said, Let me look, Nina.

Nina was in tears, her body shaking with fatigue. She leaned back on her hands and Elise helped her to remove the soaking muumuu. Elise told Marko to find some sheets, and he went bounding up the steps, raising up the dust.

Stephen said, Have you done this before?

God no, Elise said. But I saw my mother once. In a department store.

Oh.

I was nine.

Well then—

Elise gave Stephen Nina's muumuu, which he draped over a low-slung beam to provide a partial screen. He watched Elise and Nina in the shadows behind the fabric.

Everything, he thought. Everything comes down to light.

There was another contraction, and Elise called to him—She's opening! Big! I can feel the baby's head!

Stephen said, I'm going for the doctor. Just wait, he said, taking the stairs two at a time. He skipped the sidewalk and skidded on his heels and the seat of his shorts down the dirt and scree of the hillside to the street. The hotel was a hundred meters. Two? God's truth, he had no idea what a meter even was. He ran now, fast, hugging the embankment. The city was burning, the air full of smoke, and a water truck roared past him, its lights off, nearly killing him for not having seen a whit—the truck shaking the street as it rushed into the flames of the burning city. The air was thick with smoke and then another shell burst on the street, taking out a small garage and the two cars, stacked one upon the other, inside. There was a car on the street also in flames, and Stephen watched the water truck swerve around the

flames, clipping the tail of the car, sending the car skidding off to the side as the truck descended into the city on fire.

Oh fuck, he said, running. If I die, forgive me for being bad. Fuck—

In the hotel lobby he looked for somebody, anybody, who might know what he was doing. He ran down the flights to the EC monitor's room, through the darkened corridors, leaping over women and their children gathered in the halls. No voices in the halls: the people there, waiting, terrified silent. He took more stairs in the dark. He sprinted down another hall and banged at a door until somebody from a neighboring room opened up.

The Doctor!

Huh?

Herr Doktor. Wo ist—

The man made as if he held a saw and drew it back and forth. He raised his eyebrows.

Yes, Stephen said. Yes!

The man pointed up.

What floor?

The man looked at him closely, then smiled. He made to drink.

Stephen ran back to the stairs. Flights, more flights up. He should have known to go to the bar first. The indoor bar was empty: he went to the terrace. He saw a table made up of several men. Bottles of whiskey, and somebody smoking a monstrous joint, the air funky with the smell of pot. And there was the doctor, passing the joint to his table partner.

Stephen insisted the doctor come.

The doctor said, When do start?

What?

The contraptions.

Half-hour. No. Forty-five minutes. Three-quarters of an hour. He said, Fuck, an hour, okay! Un hour. *Ein*.

Ahh, said the doctor, taking a drink. He looked at his watch, held up his hand. He held up five fingers, then six.

No, Stephen said, shaking his head. She's in agony. Extreme pain. Too much pain. Pain, he said. It's not supposed to be like this. He said, looking around, Can't anybody here speak fucking Greek?

Silence, and Stephen said, pointing to a man's head, Owwww. He said, The head. The head!

Okay, okay. Okay. The head, very serious. Okay.

The doctor said, rising from the table and grabbing a bottle of Bushmills, We go to the head. Okay.

Don't you need a bag or something. Some pills? Medicine?

The doctor smiled and gazed at Stephen as if he were an idiot. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Buck knife—the type with the brass handle, the four-inch locking blade.

He said, Knife okay. Okay?

They ran, albeit at a slower pace, the doctor stumbling along behind. Once the doctor paused to retch up some whiskey, it having collected in his belly and risen to his throat. The doctor, now refreshed, wiped his mouth and said, *Better. Okay*, and they went on. The hills above them were still afire, an oranged vision of hell—that furnace, slowly dying, as it rose up into the sky. The paradox of fire: the faster it burns, the more it consumes, the quicker it dies.

At the steps he could hear Nina screaming in agony.

He led the doctor through the darkened house. A window, despite the tape, had been blown out. In the cellar, Nina lay draped in a white sheet, crying—the pain lessening on the downhill slope. Lamaze-like, she puffed out her cheeks.

The doctor assumed the position. He took a drink.

The doctor said to Stephen, You?

No.

Ah ha, he said, gesturing to Marko. He pointed to the whiskey and then to Marko. Marko took the whiskey and poured a cupful down his throat.

Elise wiped Nina's forehead with a washcloth she had fashioned from the sheet.

Moon, the doctor said. He howled briefly like a wolf. Big moon. Loony.

Uh-huh.

He said, Baby something. Baby something something, and he twisted his head around.

The doctor said, See?

He gave up on Stephen entirely and spoke in pidgin Serbo-Croatian to Nina. Marko translated: The baby was reversed, twisted. Back labor. Very painful, not dangerous, okay? Great pain. The baby was on the baby's way.

Okay.

Okays all around.

Nina said, squeezing Elise's hand, Like my mother, and Nina screamed.

It's the moon, Nina said, later. The moon has speeded up the baby.

They waited through three more sets, the cellar smelling of blood and sweat and Irish whiskey. The good news, despite the pain, was that the baby appeared eager to get out. There was another mortar concussion. On the hilltops now, from huge speakers, a lunatic was blasting over the city a song by U2. Rock and roll. Everybody loved U2, even the baby: a contraction, with Nina screaming and Stephen rubbing hard as he could the small of Nina's back—he rubbed so hard his wrist began to ache, and as the contraction passed, the doctor told Marko to bring him the bottle. The doctor took the whiskey, had a drink, and pulled from his hip the knife with the locking blade.

American made, the doctor said, looking at Stephen. Very good.

Now the doctor lit a cigarette and took a fierce drag. Then another. He gave the cigarette to Stephen, who crushed it while the doctor poured whiskey over the knife blade and set the blade on fire. When the whiskey had burned off, the doctor said, winking, Too much pain.

The doctor said something to Marko, who said, Too small. She's too small!

The doctor made the episiotomy in a single, deft stroke—a flicker across the flesh, quick as turning on the lights. He said to Marko, displaying his thumb and index finger, A small cut. Very small. Then at the next contraction, Nina, exhausted, her body trembling: then Nina pushed, and wailed, and the doctor caught the baby in his hands. There was no call to spank. The doctor lifted the baby as Nina fell back on her pallet of counterfeit Hugo Boss leather jackets and U.S. army surplus sleeping bags and in a sweeping gesture—like a magician, like an act of God—he placed the baby in Nina's arms. Everybody was laughing now, laughing and crying, and now the doctor cleaned Nina up, waiting for the afterbirth, which came easily enough. In time the doctor gave the knife to Marko who in turn gave the knife to Stephen who in turn gave the knife to Elise who finally cut the cord. She wiped the blade clean on her shorts. She gave the doctor back his knife, she laughed and rubbed at her eyes with her fist.

A girl, Marko said, laughing. A girl!

More drinks. Even a taste, a thimbleful, for Nina—doctor's excla-

mations. Marko fetched some thread and the doctor sewed Nina up as if she were a button. Just a couple loops. He told Marko to find a warm blanket. Before the doctor left, Marko gave to the doctor a fine counterfeit Hugo Boss leather jacket, which the doctor put on, there at the spot, beaming, and then Stephen led the doctor through the house. On the way out, Stephen grabbed his camera, and now he escorted the doctor up the eerily quiet street—the shelling having ceased, the fires having burned their course—and he took the doctor safely home.

9

Nina and Marko named the girl Stephania Elise. Linked first by accident, they were now bound to this life. Stephen thought, Joy, too, is a thing to have and to hold. At breakfast, having swept up the shattered glass, and with Nina resting, the baby tucked into the bottom drawer of their dresser, asleep on a pile of Bruce Hornsby & The Range, Marko said, Now I will take the leadership. It is my place.

Marko said, First we baptize Stephania Elise. He let his mouth linger over the name. Stephania Elise, he repeated. Next we leave. Today. No more fuckings around.

Okay, Stephen said. High time.

Stephen went into the city to the cathedral to locate the favorite priest. The damage, harrowing while taking place, had been fairly minor. He passed a crew of men securing the scaffolding around the clock tower. He sought out the young girl and her mother at the fountain, and he said to the mother, speaking in German, badly—Do you want to leave? Today?

Yes, said the woman, her face lighting up. She broke into tears once she understood it might be possible. He went with her to the basement of a museum and waited while she gathered their belongings: that knapsack which held, among other things, the family Bible; a transistor radio bearing the Zenith brand, circa 1968; a Sony Walkman and a box of photographs. Then Stephen brought them to Nina and Marko's house, and as they entered, Marko said, What is this?

They have family up north, Stephen said. Here they have nobody. They have you. They have the cocksucking pussy-ass UN.

But I'm leaving, Marko. Stephen said, Marko, we have the room.

We'll make the room, Nina said. She said, sitting up on the couch, Marko, you will make the room.

The baby needed to be baptized, Marko explained, before they went on the water. On the water, Marko explained, they might get bombed out of the sea.

The girl and the mother stood bravely. The mother said, If there is no room—

Oh fuck there is the room, Marko said. He said something to the woman, and laughed, and then everybody laughed.

When the priest arrived, several drinks were in order first. The actual christening, some of which Stephen understood, took less than two minutes—God, apparently, would abide a rush. At one moment Stephen and Elise swore in the name of God in a language neither understood to watch over the baby, Stephania Elise, and apparently they also renounced Evil, and then the priest opened up a bottle of consecrated Evian and made with the water on the baby's forehead the sign of the cross. One catholic and apostolic church, Stephen thought. *Our bounden duty*. They had a final drink with the priest, thus polishing off the Bushmills, and they had some cheese, and the priest left the house with a new pair of imitation Nike sneakers and several bags of rice.

Marko had made arrangements for a family to stay in the small house to prevent it from being looted. An hour before dark, he left to bring the fast boat around to the landing behind the House of Scheherazade, where Nina and the baby and Elise and the mother and the young daughter and Stephen stood quietly waiting. It was a snug fit, even without a lot of luggage. Marko had to rearrange on the bow two cases of batik silks he was to deliver for a friend. Nina had the baby slung across her chest in an orange sling, decorated with dolphins, and she boarded the boat unsteadily while Marko stood at the wheel, a pair of binoculars to his eyes, waiting, and now he told Stephen to clear the line.

We stay near the coast, Marko said. In the shadows from the moon. Fucks their radar. It will be slow this way. He said, But going out is not so dangerous as coming in. Nobody takes weapons *out*.

Stephen and Elise took their places at the bow. The girl and her mother stood at the stern, overlooking the wake from the thrumming inboards. Marko motored out, as quietly as the powerful engines per-

mitted, and as the dark came, Nina sitting by her husband's side, and Marko standing . . . Marko drew the boat further away from the coast, the shoals and the rocks, and slowly increased his speed. The sky darkened and filled with stars, despite the moon, an entire galaxy's worth, and the bow rose slowly to greet the dark.

They made the journey to Split without incident, swiftly and in slightly due course—through the Korčula Channel, then back around the lip of Hvar, then the island of Brač. They followed the light of the moon all the way to Split. Behind him, beside the heady droning of the inboards—behind him the girl and her mother were holding onto each other. He felt the breeze in his hair. He looked at the sky. Before, after he had safely delivered the doctor home, before the sun had just begun to consider rising, Stephen had climbed into the hills overlooking the city. He had climbed into the hills, camera in hand, the shelling having abated, in order to gain perspective—that which the human eye requires most to understand its place. He arrived at a hilltop still smoldering from the fires caused by the shells. The shells, he understood, belonged to the sea. The shells belonged to the sea with the fish and the mussels, with the eons of dead buried therein and with the living skimming across the surface, like boats. So believing, he looked around him at the gnarled blackened trunks of the once magnificent trees . . . *Dubrava*, forest of oaks . . . smoldering in the hot, blackened earth. Across the shoulder of the hilltop a hungover Bosnian Serb watched over him, and there, behind a rock, Stephen came across a sapling which had escaped the blaze. Then Stephen made a thanksgiving prayer for the safe arrival of the baby, and he prayed to God to watch over this new life more carefully than he had watched over Stephen's own son. Far above him a hawk circled into the hot currents above the city; he heard, as if from a great distance, a gasoline-powered generator being fired up. The king, wanting not what was his, saw what he loved most destroyed by his own hand. It was the wanting which displaced most, wasn't it? And the Lord God formed Man out of the dust of the ground. Dust to dust, there on your own hands, and Stephen rose and wiped the blackened soil and ash from his hands while above him the Bosnian Serb stood watching and the hawk circled on a thermal, overhead, each waiting to see what he would do, next, and then Stephen held the camera to his eye and photographed the bitter landscape.

A photographer, he told himself, exists by way of the photographs

he makes. Now you see him, now you don't. But he is always, always there.

Everything is made—a body, a photograph, an image of the sky. To see the made thing is to know the maker does exist. On a fast boat somewhere in the Adriatic, sitting on the bow beside this woman, Elise, the wind in his hair, he gazed up at the sky. He raised his knees and wrapped his arms around his knees to fight the cold. He felt the waves breaking at the hull. He felt the boat cresting the seas, and he gazed up at the sky, at the very firmament of being, and he listened to the baby cry.

10

People would say to him you should talk about it. When somebody asked him about it, he would say, What time is it? And then he would say, I have to go. People, they wanted to know what happened, as if knowing what had happened would change what had. As if their knowing could possibly stop the clock and fill the silence and the empty shoes in his son's empty room. As if their knowing might lift his kite back up into the sky, or fill the air with the sound of his voice. What happened was this: the sun was shining. There were sparrows in the air, like clouds, and the plaza was filled with people from all over the world celebrating Christmas. It was crowded and he was looking away, not toward. When you lose a child in a store, say, or at the airport, you think, I wonder if he's lost? Then you feel self-conscious, calling out your son's name, thinking everybody watching you knows you are a careless parent. Then the self-consciousness passes into panic, to match the racing of the heartbeat, and you call out your son's name and the people around you, even in a foreign country, they begin to catch on: they open up their eyes, they look all around, if only to indicate they do not have what you've misplaced. Your son. Then when you find your son, your little girl, people gaze at you smugly and you fall onto your knees and simultaneously scold and hug this blessedly returned creature. You could have been snatched, you say, you could have been lost in Toys. It's the could-have-beens which make you understand anything is possible. Why don't you talk about it? Why don't you try to explain? the people meant. To learn from your mistakes? This is what they also did: they took long rides on the train,

the El train, looking at the city lights. They walked on Special Nights with Dad in the cold Chicago night to the corner market for a treat. They looked for birds and squirrels at the park and gave them names: Big Fella, Furry, Hurry and Scurry. What did they want to know? They kicked the soccer ball around. What happened was he turned away and back again in a foreign city. They wrote a letter to Mr. S. Claus explaining this year they would be in Rome. First he turned away, then back, and the market was filled with colors: Christmas colors: red and green, green and red, and then a policeman arrived wearing a white belt. Then another. Sometimes they practiced counting stairs or cars on the street. They called R at the hotel, who arrived, her hair wet from the bath because sometime between when their son had last been seen and when he had last been not she had been in the bath. The police, optimistic, gave them coffee in a station and there were phone calls, and the taking of a description, and then they went back that evening to the piazza amid all the Christmas booths and the booths closed up for Christmas and the people filed out and Stephen and R sat on a cold stone bench in the middle of the plaza listening to water falling in the fountain. This, the great baptismal font of loss: R, her head in her hands; Stephen, his head up, looking in the dark, as if through dark water. Sometimes they made up stories to describe the symphonies: the sorrowful cellos, the friendly flutes. What happened was this: something essential to the making of their lives had been removed, and the darkness of the sky mingled with the lights of the city, and then it began to rain while they waited in the dark. That night. Then the next, and the next after that. On the third day, and having broken several bones in her hands, beating her hands against the marble walls of their hotel, R was given tranquilizers which failed to kill the pain. She sobbed in the dark room of their hotel while Stephen sat silently by the open window.

What happened? she cried in the dark.

Oh God, Stephen. What have we done?