

MIDNIGHT IN DOSTOEVSKY

We were two sombre boys hunched in our coats, grim winter settling in. The college was at the edge of a small town way upstate, barely a town, maybe a hamlet, we said, or just a whistle stop, and we took walks all the time, getting out, going nowhere, low skies and bare trees, hardly a soul to be seen. This was how we spoke of the local people: they were souls, they were transient spirits, a face in the window of a passing car, runny with reflected light, or a long street with a shovel jutting from a snowbank, no one in sight.

We were walking parallel to the tracks when an old freight train approached and we stopped and watched. It seemed the kind of history that passes mostly unobserved, a diesel engine and a hundred boxcars rolling over remote country, and we shared an unspoken moment of respect, Todd and I, for times past, frontiers gone, and then walked on, talking about nothing much but making something of it. We heard the whistle sound as the train disappeared into late afternoon.

This was the day we saw the man in the hooded coat. We argued about the coat—loden coat, anorak, parka. It was our routine; we were ever ready to find a matter to contest. This was why the man had been born, to end up in this town wearing that coat. He was well ahead of us and walking slowly, hands clasped behind his back, a smallish figure turning now to enter a residential street and fade from view.

"A loden coat doesn't have a hood. A hood isn't part of the context," Todd said. "It's a parka or an anorak."

"There's others. There's always others."

"Name one."

"Duffel coat."

"There's duffel bag."

"There's duffel coat."

"Does the word imply a hood?"

"The word implies toggles."

"The coat had a hood. We don't know if the coat had toggles."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "Because the guy was wearing a parka."

"'Anorak' is an Inuit word."

"So what."

"I say it's an anorak," he said.

I tried to invent an etymology for the word "parka" but couldn't think fast enough. Todd was on another subject—the freight train, laws of motion, effects of force, sneaking in a question about the number of boxcars that trailed the locomotive. We hadn't stated in advance that a tally would be taken, but each of us had known that the other would be counting, even as we spoke about other things. When I told him now what my number was, he did not respond, and I knew what this meant. It meant that he'd arrived at the same number. This was not supposed to happen—it unsettled us, it made the world flat—and we walked for a time in chagrined silence. Even in matters of pure physical reality, we depended on a friction between our basic faculties of sensation, his and mine, and we understood now that the rest of the afternoon would be spent in the marking of differences.

We headed back for a late class.

"An anorak is substantial. The thing he was wearing looked pretty flimsy," I said. "And an anorak would have a fur-lined hood. Consider the origin of the word. You're the one who brought up the Inuits. Wouldn't an Inuit use fur to line his hood? They have polar bear. They have walrus. They need coats with bulk and substance top to bottom."

"We saw the guy from behind," he said. "How do you know what kind of hood it was? From behind and from a distance."

Consider the origin of the word. I was using his Inuit lore against him, forcing him to respond reasonably, a rare sign of weakness on his part. Todd was a determined thinker who liked to work a fact or an idea to the seventh level of interpretation. He was tall and sprawling, all bony framework, the kind of body not always in synch with its hinges and joints. Somebody said that he seemed the love child of storks, others thought ostriches. He did not seem to taste food; he consumed it, absorbed it, ingestible matter of plant or animal origin. He spoke of distances in metres and kilometres, and it took me a while to understand that this was not an affectation so much as a driving need to convert units of measurement more or less instantaneously. He liked to test himself on what he knew. He liked to stop walking to emphasize a point as I walked on. This was my counterpoint, to let him stand there talking to a tree. The shallower our arguments, the more intense we became.

I wanted to keep this one going, to stay in control, to press him hard. Did it matter what I said?

"Even from a distance the hood looked too small to be fur-lined. The hood was snug," I said. "A true anorak would have a hood that's roomy enough to fit a woollen cap underneath. Isn't that what the Inuits do?"

The campus appeared in fragments, through ranks of tall trees on the other side of a country road. We lived in a series of energy-efficient structures with solar panels, turfed rooftops, and red cedar walls. Classes were held in the original buildings, several massive concrete units known collectively as the Cellblock, a bike ride or long walk away from the dorms, and the flow of students back and forth in tribal swarms seemed part of the architecture of the place. This was my first year here, and I was still trying to interpret the signs and adapt to the patterns.

"They have caribou," I said. "They have seal meat and ice floes."

At times, abandon meaning to impulse. Let the words be the facts. This was the nature of our walks—to register what was out there, all the scattered rhythms of circumstance and occurrence, and to reconstruct it as human noise.

The class was Logic, in Cellblock 2, thirteen of us seated along both sides of a long table, with Ilgauskas at the head, a stocky man, late forties, beset this day by periodic coughing. He spoke from a standing position, bent forward, hands set on the table, and often stared for long moments into the blank wall at the other end of the room.

“The causal nexus,” he said, and stared into the wall.

He stared; we glanced. We exchanged glances frequently, one side of the table with the other. We were fascinated by Ilgauskas. He seemed a man in a trance state. But he wasn’t simply absent from his remarks, another drained voice echoing down the tunnel of teaching years. We’d decided, some of us, that he was suffering from a neurological condition. He was not bored but simply unbound, speaking freely and erratically out of a kind of stricken insight. It was a question of neurochemistry. We’d decided that the condition was not understood well enough to have been given a name. And if it did not have a name, we said, paraphrasing a proposition in logic, then it could not be treated.

“The atomic fact,” he said.

Then he elaborated for ten minutes while we listened, glanced, made notes, riffled the textbook to find refuge in print, some semblance of meaning that might be roughly equivalent to what he was saying. There were no laptops or handheld devices in class. Ilgauskas didn’t exclude them; we did, sort of, unspokenly. Some of us could barely complete a thought without touch pads or scroll buttons, but we understood that high-speed data systems did not belong here. They were an assault on the environment, which was defined by length, width, and depth, with time drawn out, computed in heartbeats. We sat and listened or sat and waited. We wrote with pens or pencils. Our notebooks had pages made of flexible sheets of paper.

I tried to exchange glances with the girl across the table. This was the first time we’d been seated face to face, but she kept looking down at her notes, her hands, maybe the grain of the wood along the edge of the table. I told myself that she was averting her eyes not from me but from Ilgauskas.

“*F* and not-*F*,” he said.

He made her shy, the blunt impact of the man, thick body, strong voice, staccato cough, even the old dark suit he wore, unpressed, to every class, his chest hair curling up out of the open shirt collar. He used German and Latin terms without defining them. I tried to insert myself into the girl’s line of sight, scrunching down and peering up. We listened earnestly, all of us, hoping to understand and to transcend the need to understand.

Sometimes he coughed into his cupped hand, other times into the table, and we imagined microscopic life forms teeming toward the tabletop and ricocheting into breathable space. Those seated nearest him ducked away with a wince that was also a smile, half apologetic. The shy girl’s shoulders quivered, even

though she was sitting at some distance from the man. We didn't expect Ilgauskas to excuse himself. He was Ilgauskas. We were the ones at fault, for being there to witness the coughing, or for not being adequate to the seismic scale of it, or for other reasons not yet known to us.

"Can we ask this question?" he said.

We waited for the question. We wondered whether the question he'd asked was the question we were waiting for him to ask. In other words, could he ask the question he was asking? It was not a trick, not a game or a logical puzzle. Ilgauskas didn't do that. We sat and waited. He stared into the wall at the far end of the room.

It felt good to be out in the weather, that wintry sting of approaching snow. I was walking down a street of older houses, some in serious need of repair, sad and handsome, bay window here, curved porch there, when he turned the corner and came toward me, slightly crouched, same coat, face nearly lost inside the hood. He was walking slowly, as before, hands behind his back, as before, and he seemed to pause when he saw me, almost imperceptibly, head lowered now, path not quite steady.

There was no one else on the street. As we approached each other, he veered away, and then so did I, just slightly, to reassure him, but I also sent a stealthy look his way. The face inside the hood was stubbled—gray old man, I thought, large nose, eyes on the sidewalk but also noting my presence. After we'd passed each other, I waited a moment and then turned and looked. He wasn't wearing gloves, and this seemed fitting, I'm not sure why, no gloves, despite the unrelenting cold.

About an hour later, I was part of the mass movement of students going in opposite directions, in wind-whipped snow, two roughly parallel columns moving from old campus to new and vice versa, faces in ski masks, bodies shouldering into the wind or pushed along by it. I saw Todd, long-striding, and pointed. This was our standard sign of greeting or approval—we pointed. I shouted into the weather as he went by.

"Saw him again. Same coat, same hood, different street."

He nodded and pointed back, and two days later we were walking in the outlying parts of town. I gestured toward a pair of large trees, bare branches forking up fifty or sixty feet.

"Norway maple," I said.

He said nothing. They meant nothing to him, trees, birds, baseball teams. He knew music, classical to serial, and the history of mathematics, and a hundred other things. I knew trees from summer camp, when I was twelve, and I was pretty sure the trees were maples. Norway was another matter. I could have said red maple or sugar maple, but Norway sounded stronger, more informed.

We both played chess. We both believed in God.

Houses here loomed over the street, and we saw a middle-aged woman get out of her car and take a baby stroller from the rear seat and unfold it. Then she took four grocery bags from the car, one at a time, and placed each in the stroller. We were talking and watching. We were talking about epidemics,

pandemics, and plagues, but we were watching the woman. She shut the car door and pulled the stroller backward over the hard-packed snow on the sidewalk and up the long flight of steps to her porch.

"What's her name?"

"Isabel," I said.

"Be serious. We're serious people. What's her name?"

"O.K., what's her name?"

"Her name is Mary Frances. Listen to me," he whispered. "*Mar-y Fran-ces*. Never just Mary."

"O.K., maybe."

"Where the hell do you get Isabel?"

He showed mock concern, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"I don't know. Isabel's her sister. They're identical twins. Isabel's the alcoholic twin. But you're missing the central questions."

"No, I'm not. Where's the baby that goes with the stroller? Whose baby is it?" he said. "What's the baby's name?"

We started down the street that led out of town and heard aircraft from the military base. I turned and looked up and they were there and gone, three fighter jets wheeling to the east, and then I saw the hooded man a hundred yards away, coming over the crest of a steep street, headed in our direction.

I said, "Don't look now."

Todd turned and looked. I talked him into crossing the street to put some space between the man and us. We watched from a driveway, standing under a weathered backboard-and-rim fastened to the ridge beam above the garage door. A pickup went by, and the man stopped briefly, then walked on.

"See the coat. No toggles," I said.

"Because it's an anorak."

"It's a parka—it was always a parka. Hard to tell from here, but I think he shaved. Or someone shaved him. Whoever he lives with. A son or daughter, grandkids."

He was directly across the street from us now, moving cautiously to avoid stretches of unshovelled snow.

"He's not from here," Todd said. "He's from somewhere in Europe. They brought him over. He couldn't take care of himself anymore. His wife died. They wanted to stay where they were, the two elderly people. But then she died."

He was speaking distantly, Todd was, watching the man but talking through him, finding his shadow somewhere on the other side of the world. The man did not see us, I was sure of this. He reached the

corner, one of his hands behind his back, the other making small conversational gestures, and then he turned onto the next street and was gone.

"Did you see his shoes?"

"They weren't boots."

"They were shoes that reach to the ankle."

"High shoes."

"Old World."

"No gloves."

"Jacket below the knees."

"Possibly not his."

"A hand-me-down or hand-me up."

"Think of the hat he'd be wearing if he was wearing a hat," I said.

"He's not wearing a hat."

"But if he was wearing a hat, what kind of hat?"

"He's wearing a hood."

"But what kind of hat, if he was wearing a hat?"

"He's wearing a hood," Todd said.

We walked down to the corner now and started across the street. He spoke an instant before I did.

"There's only one kind of hat he could conceivably wear. A hat with an earflap that reaches from one ear around the back of the head to the other ear. An old soiled cap. A peaked cap with a flap for the ears."

I said nothing. I had nothing to say to this.

There was no sign of the man along the street he'd entered. For a couple of seconds, an aura of mystery hovered over the scene. But his disappearance simply meant that he lived in one of the houses on the street. Did it matter which house? I didn't think it mattered, but Todd disagreed. He wanted a house that matched the man.

We walked slowly down the middle of the street, six feet apart, using rutted car tracks in the snow to make the going easier. He took off a glove and extended his hand, fingers spread and flexing.

"Feel the air. I say minus nine Celsius."

"We're not Celsius."

"But he is, where he's from, that's Celsius."

"Where *is* he from? There's something not too totally white about him. He's not Scandinavian."

“Not Dutch or Irish.”

I wondered about Andalusian. Where was Andalusia exactly? I didn’t think I knew. Or an Uzbek, a Kazakh. But these seemed irresponsible.

“Middle Europe,” Todd said. “Eastern Europe.”

He pointed to a gray frame house, an ordinary two-story, with a shingled roof and no sign of the fallen grace that defined some of the houses elsewhere in town.

“Could be that one. His family allows him to take a walk now and then, provided he stays within a limited area.”

“The cold doesn’t bother him much.”

“He’s used to colder.”

“Plus, he has very little feeling in his extremities,” I said.

There was no Christmas wreath on the front door, no holiday lights. I didn’t see anything about the property that might suggest who lived there, from what background, speaking which language. We approached the point where the street ended in a patch of woods, and we turned and headed back.

We had class in half an hour, and I wanted to speed up the pace. Todd was still looking at houses. I thought of the Baltic states and the Balkan states, briefly confused—which was which and which was where.

I spoke before he did.

“I see him as a figure who escaped the war in the nineteen-nineties. Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia. Or who didn’t leave until recently.”

“I don’t feel that here,” he said. “It’s not the right model.”

“Or he’s Greek, and his name is Spyros.”

“I wish you a painless death,” he said, not bothering to look my way.

“German names. Names with umlauts.”

This last had nothing but nuisance value. I knew that. I tried walking faster, but he paused a moment, standing in his skewed way to look at the gray house.

“In a few hours, think of it, dinner’s over, the others are watching TV, he’s in his little room sitting on the edge of a narrow bed in his long johns, staring into space.”

I wondered if this was a space that Todd expected us to fill.

We waited through the long silences and then nodded when he coughed, in collegial approval. He’d coughed only twice so far today. There was a small puckered bandage at the edge of his jaw. He

shaves, we thought. He cuts himself and says shit. He wads up a sheet of toilet paper and holds it to the cut. Then he leans into the mirror, seeing himself clearly for the first time in years. Ilgauskas, he thinks.

We never took the same seats, class after class. We weren't sure how this had started. One of us, in a spirit of offhand mischief, may have spread the word that Ilgauskas preferred it this way. In fact the idea had substance. He didn't want to know who we were. We were passersby to him, smeary faces, we were roadkill. It was an aspect of his neurological condition, we thought, to regard others as displaceable, and this seemed interesting, seemed part of the course, displaceability, one of the truth functions that he referred to now and then.

But we were violating the code, the shy girl and I, seated face to face once again. This happened because I had entered the room after she did and had simply fallen into the empty chair directly across from her. She knew I was there, knew it was me, same gaping lad, eager to make eye contact.

"Imagine a surface of no color whatsoever," he said.

We sat there and imagined. He ran a hand through his dark hair, a shaggy mass that flopped in several directions. He did not bring books to class, never a sign of the textbook or a sheaf of notes, and his shambling discourses made us feel that we were becoming what he saw before him, an amorphous entity. We were basically stateless. He could have been speaking to political prisoners in orange jumpsuits. We admired this. We were in the Cellblock, after all. We exchanged glances, she and I, tentatively. Ilgauskas leaned toward the table, eyes swimming with neurochemical life. He looked at the wall, talked to the wall.

"Logic ends where the world ends," he said.

The world, yes. But he seemed to be speaking with his back to the world. Then again the subject was not history or geography. He was instructing us in the principles of pure reason. We listened intently. One remark dissolved into the next. He was an artist, an abstract artist. He asked a series of questions, and we made earnest notes. The questions he asked were unanswerable, at least by us, and he was not expecting answers, in any case. We did not speak in class; no one ever spoke. There were never any questions, student to professor. That steadfast tradition was dead here.

He said, "Facts, pictures, things."

What did he mean by "things"? We would probably never know. Were we too passive, too accepting of the man? Did we see dysfunction and call it an inspired form of intellect? We didn't want to like him, only to believe in him. We tendered our deepest trust to the stark nature of his methodology. Of course, there was no methodology. There was only Ilgauskas. He challenged our reason for being, what we thought, how we lived, the truth or falsity of what we believed to be true or false. Isn't this what great teachers do, the Zen masters and Brahman scholars?

He leaned toward the table and spoke about meanings fixed in advance. We listened hard and tried to understand. But to understand at this point in our study, months along, would have been confusing, even a kind of disillusionment. He said something in Latin, hands pressed flat to the tabletop, and then he did a strange thing. He looked at us, eyes gliding up one row of faces, down the other. We were all there, we were always there, our usual shrouded selves. Finally, he raised his hand and looked at his watch. It didn't matter what time it was. The gesture itself meant that class was over.

A meaning fixed in advance, we thought.

We sat there, she and I, while the others gathered books and papers and lifted coats off chair backs. She was pale and thin, hair pinned back, and I had an idea that she wanted to look neutral, seem neutral in order to challenge people to notice her. She placed her textbook on top of her notebook, centering it precisely, then raised her head and waited for me to say something.

"O.K., what's your name?"

"Jenna. What's yours?"

"I want to say Lars-Magnus just to see if you believe me."

"I don't."

"It's Robby," I said.

"I saw you working out in the fitness center."

"I was on the elliptical. Where were you?"

"Just passing by, I guess."

"Is that what you do?"

"Pretty much all the time," she said.

The last to leave were shuffling out now. She stood and dropped her books into her backpack, which dangled from the chair. I remained where I was, watching.

"I'm curious to know what you have to say about this man."

"The professor."

"Do you have insights to offer?"

"I talked to him once," she said. "Person to person."

"Are you serious? Where?"

"At the diner in town."

"You talked to him?"

"I get off-campus urges. I have to go somewhere."

"I know the feeling."

"It's the only place to eat, other than here, so I walked in and sat down and there he was in the booth across the aisle."

"That's incredible."

"I sat there and thought, It's him."

"It's him."

"There was a big foldout menu that I hid behind while I kept sneaking looks. He was eating a full meal, something slopped in brown gravy from the center of the earth. And he had a Coke with a straw bending out of the can."

"You talked to him."

"I said something not too original, and we talked off and on. He had his coat thrown onto the seat opposite him, and I was eating a salad, and there was a book lying on top of his coat, and I asked him what he was reading."

"You talked to him. The man who makes you lower your eyes in primitive fear and dread."

"It was a diner. He was drinking Coke through a straw," she said.

"Fantastic. What was he reading?"

"He said he was reading Dostoevsky. I'll tell you exactly what he said. He said, 'Dostoevsky day and night.' "

"Fantastic."

"And I told him my coincidence, that I'd been reading a lot of poetry and I'd read a poem just a couple of days earlier with a phrase I recalled. 'Like midnight in Dostoevsky.' "

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"Does he read Dostoevsky in the original?"

"I didn't ask."

"I wonder if he does. I have a feeling he does."

There was a pause, and then she said that she was leaving school. I was thinking about Ilgauskas in the diner. She told me that she wasn't happy here, that her mother always said how accomplished she was at being unhappy. She was heading west, she said, to Idaho. I didn't say anything. I sat there with my hands folded at my belt line. She left without a coat. Her coat was probably in the coatrack on the first floor.

At the winter break I stayed on campus, one of the few. We called ourselves the Left Behind and spoke in broken English. The routine included zombie body posture and blurred vision, lasting half a day before we'd all had enough.

At the gym I did my dumb struts on the elliptical and lapsed into spells of lost thought. Idaho, I thought. Idaho, the word, so vowelled and obscure. Wasn't where we were, right here, obscure enough for her?

The library was deserted during the break. I entered with a key card and took a novel by Dostoevsky down from the shelves. I placed the book on a table and opened it and then leaned down into the splayed

pages, reading and breathing. We seemed to assimilate each other, the characters and I, and when I raised my head I had to tell myself where I was.

I knew where my father was—in Beijing, trying to wedge his securities firm into the Chinese century. My mother was adrift, possibly in the Florida Keys with a former boyfriend named Raúl. My father pronounced it *raw-eel*, like a thing you eat with your eyes closed.

In snowfall, the town looked ghosted over, dead still at times. I took walks nearly every afternoon, and the man in the hooded coat was never far from my mind. I walked up and down the street where he lived, and it seemed only fitting that he was not to be seen. This was an essential quality of the place. I began to feel intimate with these streets. I was myself here, able to see things singly and plainly, away from the only life I'd known, the city, stacked and layered, a thousand meanings a minute.

On the stunted commercial street in town, there were three places still open for business, one of them the diner, and I ate there once and stuck my head in the door two or three times, scanning the booths. The sidewalk was old, pocked bluestone. In the convenience store, I bought a fudge bar and talked to the woman behind the counter about her son's wife's kidney infection.

At the library, I devoured about a hundred pages a sitting, small cramped type. When I left the building the book remained on the table, open to the page where I'd stopped reading. I returned the next day, and the book was still there, open to the same page.

Why did this seem magical? Why did I sometimes lie in bed, moments from sleep, and think of the book in the empty room, open to the page where I'd stopped reading?

On one of those midnights, just before classes resumed, I got out of bed and went down the hall to the sun parlor. The area was enclosed by a slanted canopy of partitioned glass, and I unlatched a panel and swung it open. My pajamas seemed to evaporate. I felt the cold in my pores, my teeth. I thought my teeth were ringing. I stood and looked, I was always looking. I felt like a child now, responding to a dare. How long could I take it? I peered into the northern sky, the living sky, my breath turning to little bursts of smoke, as if I were separating from my body. I'd come to love the cold, but this was idiotic, and I closed the panel and went back to my room. I paced awhile, swinging my arms across my chest, trying to roil the blood, warm the body, and twenty minutes after I was back in bed, wide awake, the idea came to mind. It came from nowhere, from the night, fully formed, extending in several directions, and when I opened my eyes in the morning it was all around me, filling the room.

Those afternoons the light died quickly and we talked nearly non-stop, race-walking into the wind. Every topic had spectral connections, Todd's congenital liver condition shading into my ambition to run a marathon, this leading to that, the theory of prime numbers to the living sight of rural mailboxes set along a lost road, eleven standing units, rusted over and near collapse, a prime number, Todd announced, using his cell phone to take a picture.

One day, we approached the street where the hooded man lived. This was when I told Todd about the idea I'd had, the revelation in the icy night. I knew who the man was, I said. Everything fit, every element, the man's origins, his family ties, his presence in this town.

He said, "O.K."

"First, he's a Russian."

"A Russian."

"He's here because his son is here."

"He doesn't have the bearing of a Russian."

"The bearing? What's the bearing? His name could easily be Pavel."

"No, it couldn't."

"Great name possibilities. Pavel, Mikhail, Aleksei. Viktor with a 'k.' His late wife was Tatiana."

We stopped and looked down the street toward the gray frame house designated as the place where the man lived.

"Listen to me," I said. "His son lives in this town because he teaches at the college. His name is Ilgauskas."

I waited for him to be stunned.

"Ilgauskas is the son of the man in the hooded coat," I said. "Our Ilgauskas. They're Russian, father and son."

I pointed at him and waited for him to point back.

He said, "Ilgauskas is too old to be the man's son."

"He's not even fifty. The man is in his seventies, easy. Mid-seventies, most likely. It fits, it works."

"Is Ilgauskas a Russian name?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Somewhere else, somewhere nearby, but not necessarily Russian," he said.

We stood there looking toward the house. I should have anticipated this kind of resistance, but the idea had been so striking that it had overwhelmed my cautious instincts.

"There's something you don't know about Ilgauskas."

He said, "O.K."

"He reads Dostoevsky day and night."

I knew that he would not ask how I'd come upon this detail. It was a fascinating detail, and it was mine, not his, which meant that he would let it pass without comment. But the silence was a brief one.

"Does he have to be Russian to read Dostoevsky?"

"That's not the point. The point is that it all fits together. It's a formulation, it's artful, it's structured."

"He's American, Ilgauskas, same as we are."

"A Russian is always Russian. He even speaks with a slight accent."

"I don't hear an accent."

"You have to listen. It's there," I said.

I didn't know whether it was there or not. The Norway maple didn't have to be Norway. We worked spontaneous variations on the source material of our surroundings.

"You say the man lives in that house. I accept this," I said. "I say he lives there with his son and his son's wife. Her name is Irina."

"And the son. Ilgauskas, so called. His first name?"

"We don't need a first name. He's Ilgauskas. That's all we need," I said.

His hair was mussed, suit jacket dusty and stained, ready to come apart at the shoulder seams. He leaned into the table, square-jawed, sleepy-looking.

"If we isolate the stray thought, the passing thought," he said, "the thought whose origin is unfathomable, then we begin to understand that we are routinely deranged, everyday crazy."

We loved the idea of being everyday crazy. It rang so true, so real.

"In our privatest mind," he said, "there is only chaos and blur. We invented logic to beat back our creatural selves. We assert or deny. We follow 'M' with 'N.' "

Our privatest mind, we thought. Did he really say that?

"The only laws that matter are laws of thought."

His fists were clenched on the tabletop, knuckles white.

"The rest is devil worship," he said.

We went walking but did not see the man. The wreaths were mostly gone from the front doors and the occasional bundled figure scraped snow off a car's windshield. Over time, we began to understand that these walks were not casual off-campus rambles. We were not looking at trees or boxcars, as we normally did, naming, counting, categorizing. This was different. There was a measure to the man in the hooded coat, old stooped body, face framed in monkish cloth, a history, a faded drama. We wanted to see him one more time.

We agreed on this, Todd and I, and collaborated, in the meantime, on describing his day.

He drinks coffee black, from a small cup, and spoons cereal out of a child's bowl. His head practically rests in the bowl when he bends to eat. He never looks at a newspaper. He goes back to his room after breakfast, where he sits and thinks. His daughter-in-law comes in and makes the bed, Irina.

Although Todd did not concede the binding nature of the name.

Some days we had to wrap scarves around our faces and speak in muffled voices, only our eyes exposed to the street and the weather.

There are two schoolchildren and one smaller girl, Irina's sister's child, here for reasons not yet determined, and the old man often passes the morning fitfully watching TV cartoons with the child, though not seated beside her. He occupies an armchair well away from the TV set, dozing now and then. Mouth open, we said. Head tilted and mouth hanging open.

We weren't sure why we were doing this. But we tried to be scrupulous, adding new elements every day, making adjustments and refinements, and all the while scanning the streets, trying to induce an appearance through joint force of will.

Soup for lunch, every day it's soup, homemade, and he holds his big spoon over the soup bowl, the old-country bowl, in a manner not unlike the child's, ready to plant a trowel and scoop.

Todd said that Russia was too big for the man. He'd get lost in the vast expanse. Think about Romania, Bulgaria. Better yet, Albania. Is he a Christian, a Muslim? With Albania, he said, we deepen the cultural context. "Context" was his fallback word.

When he is ready for his walk, Irina tries to help him button his parka, his anorak, but he shakes her off with a few brusque words. She shrugs and replies in kind.

I realized I'd forgotten to tell Todd that Ilgauskas read Dostoevsky in the original. This was a feasible truth, a usable truth. It made Ilgauskas, in context, a Russian.

He wears trousers with suspenders.

Until we decided that he didn't; it was too close to stereotype. Who shaved the old man? Did he do it himself? We didn't want him to. But who did it and how often?

This was my crystalline link: the old man to Ilgauskas to Dostoevsky to Russia. I thought about it all the time. Todd said it would become my life's work. I would spend my life in a thought bubble, purifying the link.

He doesn't have a private toilet. He shares a toilet with the children but never seems to use it. He is as close to being invisible as a man can get in a household of six. Sitting, thinking, disappearing on his walk.

We shared a vision of the man in his bed, at night, mind roaming back—the village, the hills, the family dead. We walked the same streets every day, obsessively, and we spoke in subdued tones even when we disagreed. It was part of the dialectic, our looks of thoughtful disapproval.

He probably smells bad, but the only one who seems to notice is the oldest child, a girl, thirteen. She makes faces now and then, passing behind his chair at the dinner table.

It was the tenth straight sunless day. The number was arbitrary, but the mood was beginning to bear down, not the cold or the wind but the missing light, the missing man. Our voices took on an anxious cadence. It occurred to us that he might be dead.

We talked about this all the way back to campus.

Do we make him dead? Do we keep assembling the life posthumously? Or do we end it now, tomorrow, the next day, stop coming to town, stop looking for him? One thing I knew: he does not die Albanian.

The next day, we stood at the end of the street where the designated house was located. We were there for an hour, barely speaking. Were we waiting for him to appear? I don't think we knew. What if he came out of the wrong house? What would this mean? What if someone else came out of the designated house, a young couple carrying ski equipment toward the car in the driveway? Maybe we were there simply to show deferential regard, standing quietly in the presence of the dead.

No one emerged, no one went in, and we left feeling unsure of ourselves.

Minutes later, approaching the railroad tracks, we saw him. We stopped and pointed at each other, holding the pose a moment. It was enormously satisfying, it was thrilling, to see the thing happen, see it become three-dimensional. He made a turn into a street at a right angle to the one we were on. Todd hit me on the arm, turned, and started jogging. Then I started jogging. We were going back in the direction we'd just come from. We went around one corner, ran down the street, went around another corner, and waited. In time, he appeared, walking now in our direction.

This was what Todd wanted, to see him head on. We moved toward him. He seemed to walk a sort of pensive route, meandering with his thoughts. I pulled Todd toward the curb with me so that the man would not have to pass between us. We waited for him to see us. We could almost count off the footsteps to the instant when he would raise his head. It was an interval drawn taut with detail. We were close enough to see the sunken face, heavily stubbled, pinched in around the mouth, jaw sagging. He saw us now and paused, one hand gripping a button at the front of his coat. He looked haunted inside the shabby hood. He looked misplaced, isolated, someone who could easily be the man we were in the process of imagining.

We walked on past and continued for eight or nine paces, then turned and watched.

"That was good," Todd said. "That was totally worthwhile. Now we're ready to take the next step."

"There is no next step. We got our close look," I said. "We know who he is."

"We don't know anything."

"We wanted to see him one more time."

"Lasted only seconds."

"What do you want to do, take a picture?"

"My cell phone needs recharging," he said seriously. "The coat is an anorak, by the way, definitely, up close."

"The coat is a parka."

The man was two and a half blocks from the left turn that would put him on the street where he lived.

"I think we need to take the next step."

"You said that."

"I think we need to talk to him."

I looked at Todd. He wore a fixed smile, grafted on.

"That's crazy."

"It's completely reasonable," he said.

"We do that, we kill the idea, we kill everything we've done. We can't talk to him."

"We'll ask a few questions, that's all. Quiet, low key. Find out a few things."

"It's never been a matter of literal answers."

"I counted eighty-seven boxcars. You counted eighty-seven boxcars. Remember."

"This is different, and we both know it."

"I can't believe you're not curious. All we're doing is searching out the parallel life," he said. "It doesn't affect what we've been saying all this time."

"It affects everything. It's a violation. It's crazy."

I looked down the street toward the man in question. He was still moving slowly, a little erratically, hands folded behind his back now, where they belonged.

"If you're sensitive about approaching him, I'll do it," he said.

"No, you won't."

"Why not?"

"Because he's old and frail. Because he won't understand what you want."

"What do I want? A few words of conversation. If he shies away, I'm out of there in an instant."

"Because he doesn't even speak English."

"You don't know that. You don't know anything."

He started to move away, and I clutched his arm and turned him toward me.

"Because you'll scare him," I said. "Just the sight of you. Freak of nature."

He looked straight into me. It took time, this look. Then he pulled his arm away, and I shoved him into the street. He turned and started walking, and I caught up with him and spun him around and struck him in the chest with the heel of my hand. It was a sample blow, an introduction. A car came toward us and veered away, faces in windows. We began to grapple. He was too awkward to be contained, all angles, a mess of elbows and knees, and deceptively strong. I had trouble getting a firm grip and lost a glove. I wanted to hit him in the liver but didn't know where it was. He began flailing in slow motion. I moved in and punched him on the side of the head with my bare hand. It hurt us both, and he made a sound and went into a fetal crouch. I snatched his cap and tossed it. I wanted to wrestle him down and pound his

head into the asphalt, but he was too firmly set, still making the sound, a determined hum, science fiction. He unfolded then, flushed and wild-eyed, and started swinging blind. I stepped back and half circled, waiting for an opening, but he fell before I could hit him, scrambling up at once and starting to run.

The hooded man was about to move out of sight, turning into his street. I watched Todd run, long, slack, bouncy strides. He would have to go faster if he expected to reach the man before he disappeared into the gray frame house, the designated house.

I saw my lost glove lying in the middle of the street. Then Todd running, bareheaded, trying to skirt areas of frozen snow. The scene empty everywhere around him. I couldn't make sense of it. I felt completely detached. His breath visible, streams of trailing vapor. I wondered what it was that had caused this thing to happen. He only wanted to talk to the man. ♦