THE ENGLISH PATIENT

a novel by

MICHAEL

ONDAATJE

Caravaggio

shrugs. “It’s possible.”

“I think he is an Englishman,” she says, sucking in her cheeks as she always does when

she is thinking or considering something about herself.

“I know you love the man, but he’s not an Englishman. In the early part of the war I was

working in Cairo— the Tripoli Axis. Rommel’s Rebecca spy— ”

“What do you mean, ‘Rebecca spy’?”

“In 1942 the Germans sent a spy called Eppler into Cairo before the battle of El Alamein.

He used a copy of Daphne du Maurier’s novel Rebecca as a code book to send messages

back to Rommel on troop movements. Listen, the book became bedside reading with British

Intelligence. Even I read it.”

“You read a book?”

“Thank you. The man who guided Eppler through the desert into Cairo on

Rommel’s

personal orders— from Tripoli all the way to Cairo— was Count Ladislaus de Almasy. This

was a stretch of desert that, it was assumed, no one could cross.

“Between the wars Almasy had English friends. Great explorers. But when war broke out

he went with the Germans. Rommel asked him to take Eppler across the desert into Cairo

because it would have been too obvious by plane or parachute. He crossed the desert with

the guy and delivered him to the Nile delta.”

“You know a lot about this.”

“I was based in Cairo. We were tracking them. From Gialo he led a company of eight

men into the desert. They had to keep digging the trucks out of the sand hills. He aimed

them towards Uweinat and its granite plateau so they could get water, take shelter in the caves.

It was a halfway point. In the 19305 he had discovered caves with rock paintings there. But the plateau was crawling with Allies and he couldn't use the wells there. He struck out into the sand desert again. They raided British petrol dumps to fill up their tanks. In the Kharga Oasis they switched into British uniforms and hung British army number plates on their vehicles. When they were spotted from the air they hid in the wadis for as long as three days, completely still. Baking to death in the sand.

"It took them three weeks to reach Cairo. Almdsy shook hands with Eppler and left him.

This is where we lost him. He turned and went back into the desert alone. We think he crossed it again, back towards Tripoli. But that was the last time he was ever seen. The British picked up Eppler eventually and used the Rebecca code to feed false

information to

Rommel about El Alamein."

"I still don't believe it, David."

"The man who helped catch Eppler in Cairo was named Sansom."

"Delilah."

"Exactly."

"Maybe he's Sansom."

"I thought that at first. He was very like Almdsy. A desert lover as well. He had spent his

childhood in the Levant and knew the Bedouin. But the thing about Almasy was, he could fly.

We are talking about someone who crashed in a plane. Here is this man, burned beyond

recognition, who somehow ends up in the arms of the English at Pisa. Also, he can get away

with sounding English. Almdsy went to school in England. In Cairo he was referred to as the

English spy."

She sat on the hamper watching Caravaggio. She said, “I think we should leave him be. It

doesn’t matter what side he was on, does it?”

Caravaggio said, “I’d like to talk with him some more. With more morphine in him.

Talking it out. Both of us. Do you understand? To see where it will all go.

Delilah. Zerzura.

You will have to give him the altered shot.”

“No, David. You’re too obsessed. It doesn’t matter who he is. The war’s over.”

“I will then. I’ll cook up a Brompton cocktail. Morphine and alcohol. They invented it at

Brompton Hospital in London for their cancer patients. Don’t worry, it won’t kill him. It

absorbs fast into the body. I can put it together with what we’ve got. Give him a drink of it.

Then put him back on straight morphine.”

She watched him sitting on the hamper, clear-eyed, smiling. During the last

stages of the

war Caravaggio had become one of the numerous morphia thieves. He had sniffed out her

medical supplies within hours of his arrival. The small tubes of morphine were now a source

for him. Like toothpaste tubes for dolls, she had thought when she first saw them, finding

them utterly quaint. Caravaggio carried two or three in his pocket all day long, slipping the

fluid into his flesh. She had stumbled on him once vomiting from its excess, crouched and

shaking in one of the dark corners of the villa, looking up and hardly recognizing her. She

had tried speaking with him and he had stared back. He had found the metal supply box,

torn it open with God knows what strength. Once when the sapper cut open the palm of his

hand on an iron gate, Caravaggio broke the glass tip off with his teeth,

sucked and spat the

morphine onto the brown hand before Kip even knew what it was. Kip

pushing him away,

glaring in anger.

“Leave him alone. He’s my patient.”

“I won’t damage him. The morphine and alcohol will take away the pain.”

(3 CC’s BROMPTON COCKTAIL. 3:00 P.M.)

Caravaggio slips the book out of the man’s hands.

“When you crashed in the desert— where were you flying from?”

“I was leaving the Gilf Kebir. I had gone there to collect someone. In late

August.

Nineteen forty-two.”

“During the war? Everyone must have left by then.”

“Yes. There were just armies.”

“The Gilf Kebir.”

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“Give me the Kipling book... here.”

On the frontispiece of Kirn was a map with a dotted line for the path the boy and the

Holy One took. It showed just a portion of India— a darkly cross-hatched Afghanistan, and

Kashmir in the lap of the mountains.

He traces his black hand along the Numi River till it enters the sea at 23°3o' latitude. He

continues sliding his finger seven inches west, off the page, onto his chest; he touches his rib.

"Here. The Gilf Kebir, just north of the Tropic of Cancer. On the Egyptian-Libyan

border."

What happened in 1942?

I had made the journey to Cairo and was returning from there. I was slipping between the

enemy, remembering old maps, hitting the pre-war caches of petrol and water, driving

towards Uweinat. It was easier now that I was alone. Miles from the Gilf

Kebir, the truck

exploded and I capsized, rolling automatically into the sand, not wanting a spark to touch me.

In the desert one is always frightened of fire.

The truck exploded, probably sabotaged. There were spies among the Bedouin, whose

caravans continued to drift like cities, carrying spice, rooms, government advisors wherever

they went. At any given moment among the Bedouin in those days of the war, there were

Englishmen as well as Germans.

Leaving the truck, I started walking towards Uweinat, where I knew there was a buried

plane.

Wait. What do you mean, a buried plane?

Madox had an old plane in the early days, which he had shaved down to the essentials— the only “extra” was the closed bubble of cockpit, crucial for desert flights. During

our times in the desert he had taught me to fly, the two of us walking around the guy-roped

creature theorizing on how it hung or veered in the wind.

When Clifton's plane— Rupert— flew into our midst, the aging plane of Madox's was left

where it was, covered with a tarpaulin, pegged down in one of the northeast alcoves of

Uweinat. Sand collected over it gradually for the next few years. None of us thought we would

see it again. It was another victim of the desert. Within a few months we would pass the

northeast gully and see no contour of it. By now Clifton's plane, ten years younger, had flown

into our story.

So you were walking towards it?

Yes. Four nights of walking. I had left the man in Cairo and turned back into the desert.

Everywhere there was war. Suddenly there were "teams." The Bermanns,

the Bagnolds, the

Slatin Pashas— who had at various times saved each other's lives— had now split up into

camps.

I walked towards Uweinat. I got there about noon and climbed up into the caves of the

plateau. Above the well named Ain Dua.

"Caravaggio thinks he knows who you are," Hana said.

The man in the bed said nothing.

"He says you are not English. He worked with intelligence out of Cairo and Italy for a

while. Till he was captured. My family knew Caravaggio before the war. He was a thief. He

believed in 'the movement of things.' Some thieves are collectors, like some of the explorers

you scorn, like some men with women or some women with men. But Caravaggio was not

like that. He was too curious and generous to be a successful thief. Half the

things he stole

never came home. He thinks you are not English.”

She watched his stillness as she spoke; it appeared that he was not listening carefully to

what she was saying. Just his distant thinking. The way Duke Ellington looked and thought

when he played “Solitude.”

She stopped talking.

He reached the shallow well named Ain Dua. He removed all of his clothes and soaked

them in the well, put his head and then his thin body into the blue water. His limbs exhausted

from the four nights of walking. He left his clothes spread on the rocks and climbed up

higher into the boulders, climbed out of the desert, which was now, in 1942, a vast battlefield,

and went naked into the darkness of the cave.

He was among the familiar paintings he had found years earlier. Giraffes.

Cattle. The

man with his arms raised, in a plumed headdress. Several figures in the unmistakable posture

of swimmers. Bermann had been right about the presence of an ancient lake. He walked

farther into the coldness, into the Cave of Swimmers, where he had left her. She was still

there.

She had dragged herself into a corner, had wrapped herself tight in the parachute

material. He had promised to return for her.

He himself would have been happier to die in a cave, with its privacy, the swimmers

caught in the rock around them. Hermann had told him that in Asian gardens you could

look at rock and imagine water, you could gaze at a still pool and believe it had the hardness

of rock. But she was a woman who had grown up within gardens, among

moistness, with

words like trellis and hedgehog. Her passion for the desert was temporary. She'd come to

love its sternness because of him, wanting to understand his comfort in its solitude. She was

always happier in rain, in bathrooms steaming with liquid air, in sleepy wetness, climbing

back in from his window that rainy night in Cairo and putting on her clothes while still wet, in

order to hold it all. Just as she loved family traditions and courteous ceremony and old

memorized poems. She would have hated to die without a name. For her there was a line

back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he had erased the path he had emerged from.

He was amazed she had loved him in spite of such qualities of anonymity in himself.

She was on her back, positioned the way the mediaeval dead lie.

I approached her naked as I would have done in our South Cairo room, wanting to
undress her, still wanting to love her.
What is terrible in what I did? Don’t we forgive everything of a lover? We forgive
selfishness, desire, guile. As long as we are the motive for it. You can make love to a woman
with a broken arm, or a woman with fever. She once sucked blood from a cut on my hand as
I had tasted and swallowed her menstrual blood. There are some European words you can
never translate properly into another language. Felhomaly. The dusk of graves. With the
connotation of intimacy there between the dead and the living.
I lifted her into my arms from the shelf of sleep. Clothing like cobweb. I disturbed all
that.
I carried her out into the sun. I dressed. My clothes dry and brittle from the

heat in the

stones.

My linked hands made a saddle for her to rest on. As soon as I reached the sand I jostled

her around so her body was facing back, over my shoulder. I was conscious of the airiness of

her weight. I was used to her like this in my arms, she had spun around me in my room like

a human reflection of the fan — her arms out, fingers like starfish.

We moved like this towards the northeast gully, where the plane was buried. I did not

need a map. With me was the tank of petrol I had carried all the way from the capsized truck.

Because three years earlier we had been impotent without it.

“What happened three years earlier?”

“She had been injured. In 1939. Her husband had crashed his plane. It had been

planned as a suicide-murder by her husband that would involve all three of

us. We were not

even lovers at the time. I suppose information of the affair trickled down to him somehow."

"So she was too wounded to take with you."

"Yes. The only chance to save her was for me to try and reach help alone."

In the cave, after all those months of separation and anger, they had come together and

spoken once more as lovers, rolling away the boulder they had placed between themselves

for some social law neither had believed in.

In the botanical garden she had banged her head against the gatepost in determination

and fury. Too proud to be a lover, a secret. There would be no compartments in her world.

He had turned back to her, his finger raised, I don't miss you yet.

You will.

During their months of separation he had grown bitter and self-sufficient. He avoided her

company. He could not stand her calmness when she saw him. He phoned her house and
spoke to her husband and heard her laughter in the background. There was a public charm
in her that tempted everyone. This was something he had loved in her. Now he began to trust
nothing.
He suspected she had replaced him with another lover. He interpreted her every gesture
to others as a code of promise. She gripped the front of Roundell's jacket once in a lobby and
shook it, laughing at him as he muttered something, and he followed the innocent
government aide for two days to see if there was more between them. He did not trust her last
endearments to him anymore. She was with him or against him. She was against him. He
couldn't stand even her tentative smiles at him. If she passed him a drink he

would not drink

it. If at a dinner she pointed to a bowl with a Nile lily floating in it he would not look at it. Just

another fucking flower. She had a new group of intimates that excluded him and her husband.

No one goes back to the husband. He knew that much about love and human nature.

He bought pale brown cigarette papers and glued them into sections of The Histories

that recorded wars that were of no interest to him. He wrote down all her arguments against

him. Glued into the book— giving himself only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the “he.”

During the last days before the war he had gone for a last time to the Gilf Kebir to clear

out the base camp. Her husband was supposed to pick him up. The husband they had both

loved until they began to love each other.

Clifton flew up on Uweinat to collect him on the appointed day, buzzing the lost oasis so

low the acacia shrubs dismantled their leaves in the wake of the plane, the Moth slipping into

the depressions and cuts— while he stood on the high ridge signalling with blue tarpaulin.

Then the plane pivoted down and came straight towards him, then crashed into the earth fifty

yards away. A blue line of smoke uncoiling from the undercarriage. There was no fire.

A husband gone mad. Killing all of them. Killing himself and his wife— and him by the

fact there was now no way out of the desert.

Only she was not dead. He pulled the body free, carrying it out of the plane's crumpled

grip, this grip of her husband.

How did you hate me? she whispers in the Cave of Swimmers, talking through her pain

of injuries. A broken wrist. Shattered ribs. You were terrible to me. That's when my husband

suspected you. I still hate that about you— disappearing into deserts or bars. You left me in Groppi Park.

Because you didn't want me as anything else.

Because you said your husband was going mad. Well, he went mad.

Not for a long time. I went mad before he did, you killed everything in me. Kiss me, will

you. Stop defending yourself. Kiss me and call me by my name.

Their bodies had met in perfumes, in sweat, frantic to get under that thin film with a

tongue or a tooth, as if they each could grip character there and during love pull it right off the

body of the other.

Now there is no talcum on her arm, no rose water on her thigh.

You think you are an iconoclast, but you're not. You just move, or replace what you

cannot have. If you fail at something you retreat into something else.

Nothing changes you.

How many women did you have? I left you because I knew I could never change you. You would stand in the room so still sometimes, so wordless sometimes, as if the greatest betrayal of yourself would be to reveal one more inch of your character. In the Cave of Swimmers we talked. We were only two latitudes away from the safety of Kufra.

He pauses and holds out his hand. Caravaggio places a morphine tablet into the black palm, and it disappears into the man’s dark mouth.

I crossed the dry bed of the lake towards Kufra Oasis, carrying nothing but robes against the heat and night cold, my Herodotus left behind with her. And three years later, in 1942, I walked with her towards the buried plane, carrying her body as if it was the armour of a knight.

In the desert the tools of survival are underground— troglodyte caves, water sleeping
within a buried plant, weapons, a plane. At longitude 25, latitude 23, I dug down towards the
tarpaulin, and Madox's old plane gradually emerged. It was night and even in the cold air I
was sweating. I carried the naphtha lantern over to her and sat for a while, beside the
silhouette of her nod. Two lovers and desert— starlight or moonlight, I don't remember.
Everywhere else out there was a war.
The plane came out of the sand. There had been no food and I was weak. The tarp so
heavy I couldn't dig it out but had simply to cut it away.
In the morning, after two hours' sleep, I carried her into the cockpit. I started the motor
and it rolled into life. We moved and then slipped, years too late, into the sky.

The voice stops. The burned man looks straight ahead in his morphine focus. The plane is now in his eye. The slow voice carries it with effort above the earth, the

engine missing turns as if losing a stitch, her shroud unfurling in the noisy air of the cockpit,

noise terrible after his days of walking in silence. He looks down and sees oil pouring onto his

knees. A branch breaks free of her shirt. Acacia and bone. How high is he above the land?

How low is he in the sky?

The undercarriage brushes the top of a palm and he pivots up, and the oil slides over the

seat, her body slipping down into it. There is a spark from a short, and the twigs at her knee

catch fire. He pulls her back into the seat beside him. He thrusts his hands up against the

cockpit glass and it will not shift. Begins punching the glass, cracking it, finally breaking it, and

the oil and the fire slop and spin everywhere. How low is he in the sky? She collapses— acacia

twigs, leaves, the branches that were shaped into arms uncoiling around him. Limbs begin

disappearing in the suck of air. The odour of morphine on his tongue. Caravaggio reflected

in the black lake of his eye. He goes up and down now like a well bucket. There is blood

somehow all over his face. He is flying a rotted plane, the canvas sheetings on the wings

ripping open in the speed. They are carrion. How far back had the palm tree been? How

long ago? He lifts his legs out of the oil, but they are so heavy. There is no way he can lift

them again. He is old. Suddenly. Tired of living without her. He cannot lie back in her arms

and trust her to stand guard all day all night while he sleeps. He has no one. He is exhausted

not from the desert but from solitude. Madox gone. The woman translated into leaves and

twigs, the broken glass to the sky like a jaw above him.

He slips into the harness of the oil-wet parachute and pivots upside down, breaking free

of glass, wind flinging his body back. Then his legs are free of everything, and he is in the air,

bright, not knowing why he is bright until he realizes he is on fire.

Hana can hear the voices in the English patient’s room and stands in the hall trying to

catch what they are saying.

How is it?

Wonderful!

Now it’s my turn.

Ahh! Splendid, splendid.

This is the greatest of inventions.

A remarkable find, young man.

When she enters she sees Kip and the English patient passing a can of

condensed milk

back and forth. The Englishman sucks at the can, then moves the tin away from his face to

chew the thick fluid. He beams at Kip, who seems irritated that he does not have possession

of it. The sapper glances at Hana and hovers by the bedside, snapping his fingers a couple of

times, managing finally to pull the tin away from the dark face.

“We have discovered a shared pleasure. The boy and I. For me on my journeys in Egypt,

for him in India.”

“Have you ever had condensed-milk sandwiches?” xthe sapper asks.

Hana glances back and forth between the two of them.

Kip peers into the can. “I’ll get another one,” he says, and leaves the room.

Hana looks at the man in the bed.

“Kip and I are both international bastards— born in one place and choosing to live

elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our

lives. Though

Kip doesn’t recognize that yet. That’s why we get on so well together.”

In the kitchen Kip stabs two holes into the new can of condensed milk with his bayonet,

which, he realizes, is now used more and more for only this purpose, and runs back upstairs

to the bedroom.

“You must have been raised elsewhere,” the sapper says. “The English don’t suck it out

that way.”

“For some years I lived in the desert. I learned everything I knew there. Everything that

ever happened to me that was important happened in the desert.”

He smiles at Hana.

“One feeds me morphine. One feeds me condensed milk. We may have discovered a

balanced diet!” He turns back to Kip.

“How long have you been a sapper?”

“Five years. Mostly in London. Then Italy. With the unexploded-bomb units.”

“Who was your teacher?”

“An Englishman in Woolwich. He was considered eccentric.”

“The best kind of teacher. That must have been Lord Suffolk. Did you meet Miss Morden?”

“Yes.”

At no point does either of them attempt to make Hana comfortable in their conversation.

But she wants to know about his teacher, and how he would describe him.

“What was he like, Kip?”

“He worked in Scientific Research. He was head of an experimental unit. Miss Morden, his secretary, was always with him, and his chauffeur, Mr. Fred Harts. Miss Morden would take notes, which he dictated as he worked on a bomb, while Mr. Harts helped with the

instruments. He was a brilliant man. They were called the Holy Trinity. They were blown up,

all three of them, in 1941. At Erith.”

She looks at the sapper leaning against the wall, one foot up so the sole of his boot is

against a painted bush. No expression of sadness, nothing to interpret.

Some men had unwound their last knot of life in her arms. In the town of Anghiari she

had lifted live men to discover they were already being consumed by worms. In Ortona she

had held cigarettes to the mouth of the boy with no arms. Nothing had stopped her. She had

continued her duties while she secretly pulled her personal self back. So many nurses had

turned into emotionally disturbed handmaidens of the war, in their yellow-and-crimson

uniforms with bone buttons.

She watches Kip lean his head back against the wall and knows the neutral

look on his

face. She can read it.

VII

In Situ

WESTBURY, ENGLAND, 1940

KIRPAL SINGH STOOD where the horse’s saddle would have lain across its back. At

first he simply stood on the back of the horse, paused and waved to those he could not see

but who he knew would be watching. Lord Suffolk watched him through binoculars, saw the

young man wave, both arms up and swaying.

Then he descended, down into the giant white chalk horse of Westbury, into the

whiteness of the horse, carved into the hill. Now he was a black figure, the background

radicalizing the darkness of his skin and his khaki uniform. If the focus on the binoculars was

exact, Lord Suffolk would see the thin line of crimson lanyard on Singh's shoulder that

signalled his sapper unit. To them it would look like he was striding down a paper map cut

out in the shape of an animal. But Singh was conscious only of his boots scuffing the rough

white chalk as he moved down the slope.

Miss Morden, behind him, was also coming slowly down the hill, a satchel over her

shoulder, aiding herself with a rolled umbrella. She stopped ten feet above the horse, unfurled

the umbrella and sat within its shade. Then she opened up her notebooks.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Yes, it's fine." She rubbed the chalk off her hands onto her skirt and adjusted her glasses.

She looked up into the distance and, as Singh had done, waved to those she could not see.

Singh liked her. She was in effect the first Englishwoman he had really

spoken with since

he arrived in England. Most of his time had been spent in a barracks at Woolwich. In his

three months there he had met only other Indians and English officers. A woman would

reply to a question in the NAAFI canteen, but conversations with women lasted only two or

three sentences.

He was the second son. The oldest son would go into the army, the next brother would

be a doctor, a brother after that would become a businessman. An old tradition in his family.

But all that had changed with the war. He joined a Sikh regiment and was shipped to England.

After the first months in London he had volunteered himself into a unit of engineers that had

been set up to deal with delayed-action and unex-ploded bombs. The word from on high in

1939 was naive: “Unexploded bombs are considered the responsibility of the Home Office,
who are agreed that they should be collected by A.R.P. wardens and police and delivered to
convenient dumps, where members of the armed forces will in due course detonate them.”

It was not until 1940 that the War Office took over responsibility for bomb disposal, and
then, in turn, handed it over to the Royal Engineers. Twenty-five bomb disposal units were
set up. They lacked technical equipment and had in their possession only hammers, chisels
and road-mending tools. There were no specialists.

A bomb is a combination of the following parts:

1. A container or bomb case.

2. Afuze.

3. An initiating charge, or gaine.

4. A main charge of high explosive.

5. Superstructionalfittings— fins, lifting lugs, kopfrings, etc.

Eighty percent of bombs dropped by airplanes over Britain were thin-walled, general-purpose bombs. They usually ranged from a hundred pounds to a thousand. A

2,ooo-pound bomb was called a “Hermann” or an “Esau.” A 4,ooo-pound bomb was called

a “Satan.”

Singh, after long days of training, would fall asleep with diagrams and charts still in his

hands. Half dreaming, he entered the maze of a cylinder alongside the picric acid and the

gaine and the condensers until he reached the fuze deep within the main body. Then he was

suddenly awake.

When a bomb hit a target, the resistance caused a trembler to activate and ignite the flash

pellet in the fuze. The minute explosion would leap into the gaine, causing the penthrite wax

to detonate. This set off the picric acid, which in turn caused the main filling of TNT, amatol
and aluminized powder, to explode. The journey from trembler to explosion lasted a
microsecond.
The most dangerous bombs were those dropped from low altitudes, which were not
activated until they had landed. These unexploded bombs buried themselves in cities and
fields and remained dormant until their trembler contacts were disturbed— by a farmer's stick,
a car wheel's nudge, the bounce of a tennis ball against the casing— and then they would
explode.
Singh was moved by lorry with the other volunteers to the research department in
Woolwich. This was a time when the casualty rate in bomb disposal units was appallingly

high, considering how few unexploded bombs there were. In 1940, after France had fallen

and Britain was in a state of siege, it got worse.

By August the blitz had begun, and in one month there were suddenly 2,500 unexploded

bombs to be dealt with.

Roads were closed, factories deserted. By September the number of live bombs had

reached 3,700. One hundred new bomb squads were set up, but there was still no

understanding of how the bombs worked. Life expectancy in these units was ten weeks.

“This was a Heroic Age of bomb disposal, a period of individual prowess, when urgency

and a lack of knowledge and equipment led to the taking of fantastic risks.... It was, however,

a Heroic Age whose protagonists remained obscure, since their actions were kept from the

public for reasons of security. It was obviously undesirable to publish reports that might help
the enemy to estimate the ability to deal with weapons."
In the car, driving down to Westbury, Singh had sat in front with Mr. Harts while Miss
Morden rode in the back with Lord Suffolk. The khaki-painted Humber was famous. The
mudguards were painted bright signal red— as all bomb disposal travel units were— and at
night there was a blue filter over the left sidelight. Two days earlier a man walking near the
famous chalk horse on the Downs had been blown up. When engineers arrived at the site
they discovered that another bomb had landed in the middle of the historic location— in the
stomach of the giant white horse of Westbury carved into the rolling chalk hills in 1778.
Shortly after this event, all the chalk horses on the Downs— there were

seven— had camouflage

nets pegged down over them, not to protect them so much as stop them being

obvious landmarks for bombing raids over England.

From the backseat Lord Suffolk chatted about the migration of robins from the war

zones of Europe, the history of bomb disposal, Devon cream. He was introducing the

customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture. In spite of

being Lord Suffolk he lived in Devon, and until war broke out his passion was the study of

Lorna Doone and how authentic the novel was historically and geographically. Most winters

he spent puttering around the villages of Brandon and Porlock, and he had convinced

authorities that Exmoor was an ideal location for bomb-disposal training. There were twelve

men under his command— made up of talents from various units, sappers and engineers, and

Singh was one of them. They were based for most of the week at Richmond Park in London,

being briefed on new methods or working on unexploded bombs while fallow deer drifted

around them. But on weekends they would go down to Ex-moor, where they would continue

training during the day and afterwards be driven by Lord Suffolk to the church where Lorna

Doone was shot during her wedding ceremony. “Either from this window or from that back

door... shot right down the aisle— into her shoulder. Splendid shot, actually, though of course

reprehensible. The villain was chased onto the moors and had his muscles ripped from his

body.” To Singh it sounded like a familiar Indian fable.

Lord Suffolk’s closest friend in the area was a female aviator who hated

society but loved

Lord Suffolk. They went shooting together. She lived in a small cottage in Countisbury on a

cliff that overlooked the Bristol Channel. Each village they passed in the Humber had its

exotica described by Lord Suffolk. “This is the very best place to buy blackthorn walking

sticks.” As if Singh were thinking of stepping into the Tudor corner store in his uniform and

turban to chat casually with the owners about canes. Lord Suffolk was the best of the English,

he later told Hana. If there had been no war he would never have roused himself from

Countisbury and his retreat, called Home Farm, where he mulled along with the wine, with

the flies in the old back laundry, fifty years old, married but essentially bachelor in character,

walking thp cliffs each day to visit his aviator friend. He liked to fix

things— old laundry tubs

and plumbing generators and cooking spits run by a waterwheel. He had been helping Miss

Swift, the aviator, collect information on the habits of badgers.

The drive to the chalk horse at Westbury was therefore busy with anecdote and

information. Even in wartime he knew the best place to stop for tea. He swept into Pamela’s

Tea Room, his arm in a sling from an accident with guncotton, and shepherded in his

clan— secretary, chauffeur and sapper — as if they were his children. How Lord Suffolk had

persuaded the LJXB Committee to allow him to set up his experimental bomb disposal

outfit no one was sure, but with his background in inventions he probably had more

qualifications than most. He was an autodidact, and he believed his mind could read the

motives and spirit behind any invention. He had immediately invented the pocket shirt,

which allowed fuzes and gadgets to be stored easily by a working sapper.

They drank tea and waited for scones, discussing the in situ defusing of bombs.

“I trust you, Mr. Singh, you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.” Singh adored him. As far as he was concerned, Lord Suffolk was the first real

gentleman he had met in England.

“You know I trust you to do as well as I. Miss Morden will be with you to take notes. Mr.

Harts will be farther back. If you need more equipment or more strength, blow on the police

whistle and he will join you. He doesn’t advise but he understands perfectly. If he won’t do

something it means he disagrees with you, and I’d take his advice. But you have total

authority on the site. Here is my pistol. The fuzes are probably more

sophisticated now, but

you never know, you might be in luck."

Lord Suffolk was alluding to an incident that had made him famous. He had discovered

a method for inhibiting a delayed-action fuze by pulling out his army revolver and firing a

bullet through the fuze head, so arresting the movement of the clock body. The method was

abandoned when the Germans introduced a new fuze in which the percussion cap and not

the clock was uppermost.

Kirpal Singh had been befriended, and he would never forget it. So far, half of his time

during the war had taken place in the slipstream of this lord who had never stepped out of

England and planned never to step out of Countisbury once the war ended. Singh had

arrived in England knowing no one, distanced from his family in the Punjab.

He was

twenty-one years old. He had met no one but soldiers. So that when he read the notice asking

for volunteers with an experimental bomb squad, even though he heard other sappers speak

of Lord Suffolk as a madman, he had already decided that in a war you have to take control,

and there was a greater chance of choice and life alongside a personality or an individual.

He was the only Indian among the applicants, and Lord Suffolk was late. Fifteen of them

were led into a library and asked by the secretary to wait. She remained at the desk, copying

out names, while the soldiers joked about the interview and the test. He knew no one. He

walked over to a wall and stared at a barometer, was about to touch it but pulled back, just

putting his face close to it. Very Dry to Fair to Stormy. He muttered the

words to himself with

his new English pronunciation. “Wery dry. Very dry.” He looked back at the others, peered

around the room and caught the gaze of the middle-aged secretary. She watched him sternly.

An Indian boy. He smiled and walked towards the bookshelves. Again he touched nothing.

At one point he put his nose close to a volume called Raymond, or Life and Death by Sir

Oliver Hodge.

He found another, similar title. Pierre, or the Ambiguities. He turned and caught the

woman’s eyes on him again. He felt as guilty as if he had put the book in his pocket. She had

probably never seen a turban before. The English! They expect you to fight for them but

won’t talk to you. Singh. And the ambiguities.

They met a very hearty Lord Suffolk during lunch, who poured wine for

anyone who
wanted it, and laughed loudly at every attempt at a joke by the recruits. In the afternoon they
were all given a strange exam in which a piece of machinery had to be put back together
without any prior information of what it was used for. They were allowed two hours but could
leave as soon as the problem was solved. Singh finished the exam quickly and spent the rest
of the time inventing other objects that could be made from the various components. He
sensed he would be admitted easily if it were not for his race. He had come from a country
where mathematics and mechanics were natural traits. Cars were never destroyed. Parts of
them were carried across a village and readapted into a sewing machine or water pump. The
backseat of a Ford was reuphol-stered and became a sofa. Most people in his

village were

more likely to carry a spanner or screwdriver than a pencil. A car's

irrelevant parts thus

entered a grandfather clock or irrigation pulley or the spinning mechanism of an office chair.

Antidotes to mechanized disaster were easily found. One cooled an

overheating car engine

not with new rubber hoses but by scooping up cow shit and patting it around the condenser.

What he saw in England was a surfeit of parts that would keep the continent of India going

for two hundred years.

He was one of three applicants selected by Lord Suffolk. This man who had not even

spoken to him (and had not laughed with him, simply because he had not joked) walked

across the room and put his arm around his shoulder. The severe secretary

turned out to be

Miss Morden, and she bustled in with a tray that held two large glasses of sherry, handed one to Lord Suffolk and, saying, “I know you don’t drink,” took the other one for herself and raised her glass to him. “Congratulations, your exam was splendid. Though I was sure you would be chosen, even before you took it.”

“Miss Morden is a splendid judge of character. She has a nose for brilliance and character.”

“Character, sir?”

“Yes. It is not really necessary, of course, but we are going to be working together. We are very much a family here. Even before lunch Miss Morden had selected you.”

“I found it quite a strain being unable to wink at you, Mr. Singh.”

Lord Suffolk had his arm around Singh again and was walking him to the window.

“I thought, as we do not have to begin till the middle of next week, I’d have

some of the

unit come down to Home Farm. We can pool our knowledge in Devon and get to know

each other. You can drive down with us in the Humber."

So he had won passage, free of the chaotic machinery of the war. He stepped into a

family, after a year abroad, as if he were the prodigal returned, offered a chair at the table,

embraced with conversations.

It was almost dark when they crossed the border from Somerset into Devon on the

coastal road overlooking the Bristol Channel. Mr. Harts turned down the narrow path

bordered with heather and rhododendrons, a dark blood colour in this last light. The

driveway was three miles long.

Apart from the trinity of Suffolk, Morden and Harts, there were six sappers who made

up the unit. They walked the moors around the stone cottage over the weekend. Miss

Morden and Lord Suffolk and his wife were joined by the aviatrix for the Saturday-night

dinner. Miss Swift told Singh she had always wished to fly overland to India. Removed from

his barracks, Singh had no idea of his location. There was a map on a roller high up on the

ceiling. Alone one morning he pulled the roller down until it touched the floor. Countisbury

and Area. Mapped by R. Fones. Drawn by desire of Mr. James Halliday.

“Drawn by desire ...” He was beginning to love the English.

He is with Hana in the night tent when he tells her about the explosion in Erith. A

250-kilogram bomb erupting as Lord Suffolk attempted to dismantle it. It also killed Mr.

Fred Harts and Miss Morden and four sappers Lord Suffolk was training.

May 1941. Singh

had been with Suffolk's unit for a year. He was working in London that day with Lieutenant

Blackler, clearing the Elephant and Castle area of a Satan bomb. They had worked together

at defusing the 4,ooo-pound bomb and were exhausted. He remembered halfway through he

looked up and saw a couple of bomb disposal officers pointing in his direction and wondered

what that was about. It probably meant they had found another bomb. It was after ten at night

and he was dangerously tired. There was another one waiting for him. He turned back to

work.

When they had finished with the Satan he decided to save time and walked over to one of

the officers, who had at first half turned away as if wanting to leave.

"Yes. Where is it?"

The man took his right hand, and he knew something was wrong. Lieutenant

Blackler

was behind him and the officer told them what had happened, and

Lieutenant Blackler put

his hands on Singh’s shoulders and gripped him.

He drove to Erith. He had guessed what the officer was hesitating about

asking him. He

knew the man would not have come there just to tell him of the deaths. They

were in a war,

after all. It meant there was a second bomb somewhere in the vicinity,

probably the same

design, and this was the only chance to find out what had gone wrong.

He wanted to do this alone. Lieutenant Blackler would stay in London. They

were the

last two left of the unit, and it would have been foolish to risk both. If Lord

Suffolk had failed,

it meant there was something new. He wanted to do this alone, in any case.

When two men

worked together there had to be a base of logic. You had to share and

compromise decisions.

He kept everything back from the surface of his emotions during the night drive. To keep

his mind clear, they still had to be alive. Miss Morden drinking one large and stiff whisky

before she got to the sherry. In this way she would be able to drink more slowly, appear more

ladylike for the rest of the evening. “You don’t drink, Mr. Singh, but if you did, you’d do what

I do. One full whisky and then you can sip away like a good courtier.” This was followed by

her lazy, gravelly laugh. She was the only woman he was to meet in his life who carried two

silver flasks with her. So she was still drinking, and Lord Suffolk was still nibbling at his

Kipling cakes.

The other bomb had fallen half a mile away. Another SC-25okg. It looked like the

familiar kind. They had defused hundreds of them, most by rote. This was the way the war
progressed. Every six months or so the enemy altered something. You learned the trick, the
whim, the little descant, and taught it to the rest of the units. They were at a new stage now.
He took no one with him. He would just have to remember each step. The sergeant who
drove him was a man named
Hardy, and he was to remain by the jeep. It was suggested he wait till the next morning,
but he knew they would prefer him to do it now. The 250-kilogram SC was too common. If
there was an alteration they had to know quickly. He made them telephone ahead for lights.
He didn’t mind working tired, but he wanted proper lights, not just the beams of two jeeps.
When he arrived in Erith the bomb zone was already lit. In daylight, on an

innocent day,

it would have been a field. Hedges, perhaps a pond. Now it was an arena.

Cold, he borrowed

Hardy’s sweater and put it on top of his. The lights would keep him warm,

anyway. When he

walked over to the bomb they were still alive in his mind. Exam.

With the bright light, the porousness of the metal jumped into precise focus.

Now he

forgot everything except distrust. Lord Suffolk had said you can have a

brilliant chess player

at seventeen, even thirteen, who might beat a grand master. But you can

never have a brilliant

bridge player at that age. Bridge depends on character. Your character and

the character of

your opponents. You must consider the character of your enemy. This is true

of bomb

disposal. It is two-handed bridge. You have one enemy. You have no partner.

Sometimes for

my exam I make them play bridge. People think a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy. But you have to consider that somebody made it.

The wall of the bomb had been torn open in its fall to earth, and Singh could see the explosive material inside. He felt he was being watched, and refused to decide whether it was by Suffolk or the inventor of this contraption. The freshness of the artificial light had revived him. He walked around the bomb, peering at it from every angle. To remove the fuze, he would have to open the main chamber and get past the explosive. He unbuttoned his satchel and, with a universal key, carefully twisted off the plate at the back of the bomb case. Looking inside he saw that the fuze pocket had been knocked free of the case. This was good luck— or bad luck; he couldn't tell yet. The problem was that he didn't know if the

mechanism was
already at work, if it had already been triggered. He was on his knees, leaning over it, glad he
was alone, back in the world of straightforward choice. Turn left or turn right. Cut this or cut
that. But he was tired, and there was still anger in him.
He didn't know how long he had. There was more danger in waiting too long. Holding
the nose of the cylinder firm with his boots, he reached in and ripped out the fuze pocket,
and lifted it away from the bomb. As soon as he did this he began to shake. He had got it out.
The bomb was essentially harmless now. He put the fuze with its tangled fringe of wires down
on the grass; they were clear and brilliant in this light.
He started to drag the main case towards the truck, fifty yards away, where the men could
empty it of the raw explosive. As he pulled it along, a third bomb exploded a

quarter of a mile

away and the sky lit up, making even the arc lights seem subtle and human.

An officer gave him a mug of Horlicks, which had some kind of alcohol in it, and he

returned alone to the fuze pocket. He inhaled the fumes from the drink.

There was no longer serious danger. If he were wrong, the small explosion would take off

his hand. But unless it was clutched to his heart at the moment of impact he wouldn’t die.

The problem was now simply the problem. The fuze. The new “joke” in the bomb.

He would have to reestablish the maze of wires into its original pattern. He walked back

to the officer and asked him for the rest of the Thermos of the hot drink.

Then he returned

and sat down again with the fuze. It was about one-thirty in the morning. He guessed, he

wasn’t wearing a watch. For half an hour he just looked at it with a

magnified circle of glass, a
sort of monocle that hung off his buttonhole. He bent over and peered at the brass for any
hint of other scratches that a clamp might have made. Nothing.
Later he would need distractions. Later, when there was a whole personal history of
events and moments in his mind, he would need something equivalent to white sound to
burn or bury everything while he thought of the problems in front of him. The radio or
crystal set and its loud band music would come later, a tarpaulin to hold the rain of real life
away from him.
But now he was aware of something in the far distance, like some reflection of lightning
on a cloud. Harts and Morden and Suffolk were dead, suddenly just names. His eyes focused
back onto the fuze box.

He began to turn the fuze upside down in his mind, considering the logical possibilities.

Then turned it horizontal again. He unscrewed the gaine, bending over, his ear next to it so

the scrape of brass was against him. No little clicks. It came apart in silence. Tenderly he

separated the clockwork sections from the fuze and set them down. He picked up the

fuze-pocket tube and peered down into it again. He saw nothing. He was about to lay it on the

grass when he hesitated and brought it back up to the light. He wouldn’t have noticed

anything wrong except for the weight. And he would never have thought about the weight if

he wasn’t looking for the joke. All they did, usually, was listen or look. He tilted the tube

carefully, and the weight slipped down toward the opening. It was a second gaine— a whole

separate device— to foil any attempt at defusing.

He eased the device out towards him and unscrewed the gaine. There was a white-green

flash and the sound of a whip from the device. The second detonator had gone off. He

pulled it out and set it beside the other parts on the grass. He went back to the jeep.

“There was a second gaine,” he muttered. “I was very lucky, being able to pull out those

wires. Put a call in to headquarters and find out if there are other bombs.”

He cleared the soldiers away from the jeep, set up a loose bench there and asked for the

arc lights to be trained on it. He bent down and picked up the three components and placed

them each a foot apart along the makeshift bench. He was cold now, and he breathed out a

feather of his warmer body air. He looked up. In the distance some soldiers were still emptying

out the main explosive. Quickly he wrote down a few notes and handed the solution for
the new bomb to an officer. He didn't fully understand it, of course, but they would have this
information.
When sunlight enters a room where there is a fire, the fire will go out. He had loved Lord
Suffolk and his strange bits of information. But his absence here, in the sense that everything
now depended on Singh, meant Singh's awareness swelled to all bombs of this variety across
the city of London. He had suddenly a map of responsibility, something, he realized, that
Lord Suffolk carried within his character at all times. It was this awareness that later created
the need in him to block so much out when he was working on a bomb. He was one of those
never interested in the choreography of power. He felt uncomfortable in the

ferrying back
and forth of plans and solutions. He felt capable only of reconnaissance, of locating a
solution. When the reality of the death of Lord Suffolk came to him, he concluded the work
he was assigned to and reenlisted into the anonymous machine of the army. He was on the
troopship Macdonald, which carried a hundred other sappers towards the Italian campaign.
Here they were used not just for bombs but for building bridges, clearing debris, setting up
tracks for armoured rail vehicles. He hid there for the rest of the war. Few remembered the
Sikh who had been with Suffolk’s unit. In a year the whole unit was disbanded and forgotten,
Lieutenant Blackler being the only one to rise in the ranks with his talent.
But that night as Singh drove past Lewisham and Black-heath towards Erith, he knew he

contained, more than any other sapper, the knowledge of Lord Suffolk. He was expected to

be the replacing vision.

He was still standing at the truck when he heard the whistle that meant they were turning

off the arc lights. Within thirty seconds metallic light had been replaced with sulphur flares in

the back of the truck. Another bomb raid. These lesser lights could be doused when they

heard the planes. He sat down on the empty petrol can facing the three components he had

removed from the SC-25okg, the hisses from the flares around him loud after the silence of

the arc lights.

He sat watching and listening, waiting for them to click. The other men silent, fifty yards

away. He knew he was for now a king, a puppet master, could order anything, a bucket of

sand, a fruit pie for his needs, and those men who would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him when they were off duty would do what he desired. It was strange to him. As if he had been handed a large suit of clothes that he could roll around in and whose sleeves would drag behind him. But he knew he did not like it. He was accustomed to his invisibility.

In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that. The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. He had built up defences of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended him. But that night in Erith he knew he was capable of

having wires attached to him that influenced all around him who did not have his specific

talent.

A few months later he had escaped to Italy, had packed the shadow of his teacher into a

knapsack, the way he had seen the green-clothed boy at the Hippodrome do it on his first

leave during Christmas. Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden had offered to take him to an

English play. He had selected Peter Pan, and they, wordless, acquiesced and went with him

to a screaming child-full show. There were such shadows of memory with him when he lay in

his tent with Hana in the small hill town in Italy.

Revealing his past or qualities of his character would have been too loud a gesture. Just as

he could never turn and inquire of her what deepest motive caused this relationship. He held

her with the same strength of love he felt for those three strange English people, eating at the same table with them, who had watched his delight and laughter and wonder when the green boy raised his arms and flew into the darkness high above the stage, returning to teach the young girl in the earth-bound family such wonders too.

In the flare-lit darkness of Erith he would stop whenever planes were heard, and one by one the sulphur torches were sunk into buckets of sand. He would sit in the droning darkness, moving the seat so he could lean forward and place his ear close to the ticking mechanisms, still timing the clicks, trying to hear them under the throb of the German bombers above him.

Then what he had been waiting for happened. After exactly one hour, the timer tripped

and the percussion cap exploded. Removing the main gaine had released an unseen striker
that activated the second, hidden gaine. It had been set to explode sixty minutes later— long
after a sapper would normally have assumed the bomb was safely defused.
This new device would change the whole direction of Allied bomb disposal. From now
on, every delayed-action bomb would carry the threat of a second gaine. It would no longer
be possible for sappers to deactivate a bomb by simply removing the fuze. Bombs would
have to be neutralized with the fuze intact. Somehow, earlier on, surrounded by arc lights,
and in his fury, he had withdrawn the sheared second fuze out of the booby trap. In the
sulphureous darkness under the bombing raid he witnessed the white-green flash the size of
his hand. One hour late. He had survived only with luck. He walked back to

the officer and

said, “I need another fuze to make sure.”

They lit the flares around him again. Once more light poured into his circle of darkness.

He kept testing the new fuzes for two more hours that night. The

sixty-minute delay proved

to be consistent.

He was in Erith most of that night. In the morning he woke up to find

himself back in

London. He could not remember being driven back. He woke up, went to a table and began

to sketch the profile of the bomb, the gaines, the detonators, the whole

ZUS-40 problem,

from the fuze up to the locking rings. Then he covered the basic drawing with all the possible

lines of attack to defuse it. Every arrow drawn exactly, the text written out clear the way he

had been taught.

What he had discovered the night before held true. He had survived only through luck.

There was no possible way to defuse such a bomb in situ without just blowing it up. He drew and wrote out everything he knew on the large blueprint sheet. At the bottom he wrote:

Drawn by desire of Lord Suffolk, by his student Lieutenant Kirpal Singh, 10 May 1941.

He worked flat-out, crazily, after Suffolk's death. Bombs were altering fast, with new techniques and devices. He was barracked in Regent's Park with Lieutenant Blackler and three other specialists, working on solutions, blueprinting each new bomb as it came in.

In twelve days, working at the Directorate of Scientific Research, they came up with the answer. Ignore the fuze entirely. Ignore the first principle, which until then was "defuse the

bomb.” It was brilliant. They were all laughing and applauding and hugging each other in the

officers’ mess. They didn’t have a clue what the alternative was, but they knew in the abstract

they were right. The problem would not be solved by embracing it. That was Lieutenant

Blackler’s line. “If you are in a room with a problem don’t talk to it.” An offhand remark.

Singh came towards him and held the statement from another angle. “Then we don’t touch

the fuze at all.”

Once they came up with that, someone worked out the solution in a week. A steam

sterilizer. One could cut a hole into the main case of a bomb, and then the main explosive

could be emulsified by an injection of steam and drained away. That solved that for the time

being. But by then he was on a ship to Italy.

“There is always yellow chalk scribbled on the side of bombs. Have you noticed that?

Just as there was yellow chalk scribbled onto our bodies when we lined up in the Lahore

courtyard.

“There was a line of us shuffling forward slowly from the street into the medical building

and out into the courtyard as we enlisted. We were signing up. A doctor cleared or rejected

our bodies with his instruments, explored our necks with his hands. The tongs slid out of

Dettol and picked up parts of our skin.

“Those accepted filled up the courtyard. The coded results written onto our skin with

yellow chalk. Later, in the lineup, after a brief interview, an Indian officer chalked more

yellow onto the slates tied around our necks. Our weight, age, district, standard of education,

dental condition and what unit we were best suited for.

“I did not feel insulted by this. I am sure my brother would have been, would have

walked in fury over to the well, hauled up the bucket, and washed the chalk markings away. I

was not like him. Though I loved him. Admired him. I had this side to my nature which saw

reason in all things. I was the one who had an earnest and serious air at school, which he

would imitate and mock. You understand, of course, I was far less serious than he was, it was

just that I hated confrontation. It didn’t stop me doing whatever I wished or doing things the

way I wanted to. Quite early on I had discovered the overlooked space open to those of us

with a silent life. I didn’t argue with the policeman who said I couldn’t cycle over a certain

bridge or through a specific gate in the fort— I just stood there, still, until I

was invisible, and

then I went through. Like a cricket. Like a hidden cup of water. You

understand? That is

what my brother's public battles taught me.

"But to me my brother was always the hero in the family. I was in the

slipstream of his

status as firebrand. I witnessed his exhaustion that came after each protest,

his body gearing

up to respond to this insult or that law. He broke the tradition of our family

and refused, in

spite of being the oldest brother, to join the army. He refused to agree to any

situation where

the English had power. So they dragged him into their jails.

In the Lahore Central Prison. Later the Jatnagar jail. Lying back on his cot at

night, his

arm raised within plaster, broken by his friends to protect him, to stop him

trying to escape.

In jail he became serene and devious. More like me. He was not insulted

when he heard I

had signed up to replace him in the enlistment, no longer to be a doctor, he just laughed and

sent a message through our father for me to be careful. He would never go to war against me

or what I did. He was confident that I had the trick of survival, of being able to hide in silent

places."

He is sitting on the counter in the kitchen talking with Hana. Caravaggio breezes through

it on his way out, heavy ropes swathed over his shoulders, which are his own personal

business, as he says when anyone asks him. He drags them behind him and as he goes out the

door says, "The English patient wants to see you, boyo."

"Okay, boyo." The sapper hops off the counter, his Indian accent slipping over into the

false Welsh of Caravaggio.

“My father had a bird, a small swift I think, that he kept beside him, as essential to his comfort as a pair of spectacles or a glass of water during a meal. In the house, even if he just was entering his bedroom he carried it with him. When he went to work the small cage hung off the bicycle’s handlebars.”

“Is your father still alive?”

“Oh, yes. I think. I’ve not had letters for some time. And it is likely that my brother is still in jail.”

He keeps remembering one thing. He is in the white horse. He feels hot on the chalk hill, the white dust of it swirling up all around him. He works on the contraption, which is quite straightforward, but for the first time he is working alone. Miss Morden sits twenty yards above him, higher up the slope, taking notes on what he is doing. He knows

that down and

across the valley Lord Suffolk is watching through the glasses.

He works slowly. The chalk dust lifts, then settles on everything, his hands, the

contraption, so he has to blow it off the fuze caps and wires continually to see the details. It is

hot in the tunic. He keeps putting his sweating wrists behind himself to wipe them on the

back of his shirt. All the loose and removed parts fill the various pockets across his chest. He

is tired, checking things repetitively. He hears Miss Morden's voice. "Kip?" "Yes." "Stop

what you're doing for a while, I'm coming down." "You'd better not, Miss Morden." "Of

course I can." He does up the buttons on his various vest pockets and lays a cloth over the

bomb; she clambers down into the white horse awkwardly and then sits next to him and

opens up her satchel. She douses a lace handkerchief with the contents of a small bottle of eau de cologne and passes it to him. “Wipe your face with this. Lord Suffolk uses it to refresh himself.” He takes it tentatively and at her suggestion dabs his forehead and neck and wrists.

She unscrews the Thermos and pours each of them some tea. She unwraps oil paper and brings out strips of Kipling cake.

She seems to be in no hurry to go back up the slope, back to safety. And it would seem rude to remind her that she should return. She simply talks about the wretched heat and the fact that at least they have booked rooms in town with baths attached, which they can all look forward to. She begins a rambling story about how she met Lord Suffolk. Not a word about the bomb beside them. He had been slowing down, the way one, half asleep,

continually

rereads the same paragraph, trying to find a connection between sentences. She has pulled

him out of the vortex of the problem. She packs up her satchel carefully, lays a hand on his

right shoulder and returns to her position on the blanket above the Westbury horse. She

leaves

him some sunglasses, but he cannot see clearly enough through them so he lays them

aside. Then he goes back to work. The scent of eau de cologne. He remembers he had

smelled it once as a child. He had a fever and someone had brushed it onto his body.

VIII

The Holy Forest

KIP WALKS OUT of the field where he has been digging, his left hand raised in front of

him as if he has sprained it.

He passes the scarecrow for Hana’s garden, the crucifix with its hanging sardine cans, and

moves uphill towards the villa. He cups the hand held in front of him with the other as if

protecting the flame of a candle. Hana meets him on the terrace, and he takes her hand and

holds it against his. The ladybird circling the nail on his small finger quickly crosses over onto

her wrist.

She turns back into the house. Now her hand is held out in front of her. She walks

through the kitchen and up the stairs.

The patient turns to face her as she comes in. She touches his foot with the hand that

holds the ladybird. It leaves her, moving onto the dark skin. Avoiding the sea of white sheet,

it begins to make the long trek towards the distance of the rest of his body, a

bright redness

against what seems like volcanic flesh.

In the library the fuze box is in midair, nudged off the counter by

Caravaggio when he

turned to Hana’s gleeful yell in the hall. Before it reaches the floor Kip’s

body slides underneath

it, and he catches it in his hand.

Caravaggio glances down to see the young man’s face blowing out all the air

quickly

through his cheeks.

He thinks suddenly he owes him a life.

Kip begins to laugh, losing his shyness in front of the older man, holding up

the box of

wires.

Caravaggio will remember the slide. He could walk away, never see him

again, and he

would never forget him. Years from now on a Toronto street Caravaggio

will get out of a taxi

and hold the door open for an East Indian who is about to get into it, and he will think of Kip

then.

Now the sapper just laughs up towards Caravaggio's face and up past that towards the

ceiling.

"I know all about sarongs." Caravaggio waved his hand towards Kip and Hana as he

spoke. "In the east end of Toronto I met these Indians. I was robbing a house and it turned

out to belong to an Indian family. They woke from their beds and they were wearing these

cloths, sarongs, to sleep in, and it intrigued me. We had lots to talk about and they eventually

persuaded me to try it. I removed my clothes and stepped into one, and they immediately set

upon me and chased me half naked into the night."

"Is that a true story?" She grinned.

“One of many!”

She knew enough about him to almost believe it. Caravaggio was constantly diverted by the human element during burglaries. Breaking into a house during Christmas, he would become annoyed if he noticed the Advent calendar had not been opened up to the date to which it should have been. He often had conversations with the various pets left alone in houses, rhetorically discussing meals with them, feeding them large helpings, and was often greeted by them with considerable pleasure if he returned to the scene of a crime.

She walks in front of the shelves in the library, eyes closed, and at random pulls out a book. She finds a clearing between two sections in a book of poetry and begins to write there.

He says Lahore is an ancient city. London is a recent town compared with

Lahore. I say,

Well, 1 come from an even newer country. He says they have always known about gunpowder.

As far back as the seventeenth century, court paintings recorded fireworks displays.

He is small, not much taller than I am. An intimate smile up close that can charm

anything when he displays it. A toughness to his nature he doesn't show. The Englishman

says he's one of those warrior saints. But he has a peculiar sense of humour that is more

rambunctious than his manner suggests. Remember "I'll rewire him in the morning." Ooh la

la!

He says Lahore has thirteen gates— named for saints and emperors or where they lead to.

The word bungalow comes from Bengali.

At four in the afternoon they had lowered Kip into the pit in a harness until

he was

waist-deep in the muddy water, his body draped around the body of the Esau bomb. The

casing from fin to tip ten feet high, its nose sunk into the mud by his feet. Beneath the brown

water his thighs braced the metal casing, much the way he had seen soldiers holding women

in the corner of NAAFI dance floors. When his arms tired he hung them upon the wooden

struts at shoulder level, which were there to stop mud collapsing in around him. The sappers

had dug the pit around the Esau and set up the wood-shaft walls before he had arrived on the

site. In 1941, Esau bombs with a new Y fuze had started coming in; this was his second one.

It was decided during planning sessions that the only way around the new fuze was to

immunize it. It was a huge bomb in ostrich posture. He had come down

barefoot and he was
already sinking slowly, being caught within the clay, unable to get a firm hold down there in
the cold water. He wasn’t wearing boots— they would have locked within the clay, and when
he was pulleyed up later the jerk out of it could break his ankles.
He laid his left cheek against the metal casing, trying to think himself into warmth,
concentrating on the small touch of sun that reached down into the twenty-foot pit and fell on
the back of his neck. What he embraced could explode at any moment, whenever tumblers
tremored, whenever the gaine was fired. There was no magic or X ray that would tell anyone
when some small capsule broke, when some wire would stop wavering. Those small
mechanical semaphores were like a heart murmur or a stroke within the man crossing the

street innocently in front of you.

What town was he in? He couldn’t even remember. He heard a voice and looked up.

Hardy passed the equipment down in a satchel at the end of a rope, and it hung there while

Kip began to insert the various clips and tools into the many pockets of his tunic. He was

humming the song Hardy had been singing in the jeep on the way to the site—

They’re changing guard at Buckingham Palace—

Christopher Robin went down with Mice.

He wiped the area of fuze head dry and began moulding a clay cup around it. Then he

unstopped the jar and poured the liquid oxygen into the cup. He taped the cup securely onto

the metal. Now he had to wait again.

There was so little space between him and the bomb he could feel the change in

temperature already. If he were on dry land he could walk away and be back in ten minutes.

Now he had to stand there beside the bomb. They were two suspicious creatures in an

enclosed space. Captain Carlyle had been working in a shaft with frozen oxygen and the

whole pit had suddenly burst into flames. They hauled him out fast, already unconscious in

his harness.

Where was he? Lisson Grove? Old Kent Road?

Kip dipped cotton wool into the muddy water and touched it to the casing about twelve

inches away from the fuze. It fell away, so it meant he had to wait longer. When the cotton

wool stuck, it meant enough of the area around the fuze was frozen and he could go on. He

poured more oxygen into the cup.

The growing circle of frost was a foot in radius now. A few more minutes.

He looked at

the clipping someone had taped onto the bomb. They had read it with much laugh-

ter that morning in the update kit sent to all bomb disposal units.

When is explosion reasonably permissible?

If a man's life could be capitalized as X, the risk at Y, and the estimated damage from

explosion at V, then a logician might contend that if V is less than X over Y, the bomb should

be blown up; but if V over Y is greater than X, an attempt should be made to avoid explosion

in situ.

Who wrote such things?

He had by now been in the shaft with the bomb for more than an hour. He continued

feeding in the liquid oxygen. At shoulder height, just to his right, was a hose pumping down

normal air to prevent him from becoming giddy with oxygen. (He had seen

soldiers with

hangovers use the oxygen to cure headaches.) He tried the cotton wool again and this time it

froze on. He had about twenty minutes. After that the battery temperature within the bomb

would rise again. But for now the fuze was iced up and he could begin to remove it.

He ran his palms up and down the bomb case to detect any rips in the metal. The

submerged section would be safe, but oxygen could ignite if it came into contact with exposed

explosive. Carlyle's flaw. X over Y. If there were rips they would have to use liquid nitrogen.

"It's a two-thousand-pound bomb, sir. Esau." Hardy's voice from the top of the mud pit.

"Type-marked fifty, in a circle, B. Two fuze pockets, most likely. But we think the second

one is probably not armed. Okay?"

They had discussed all this with each other before, but things were being confirmed,

remembered for the final time.

“Put me on a microphone now and get back.”

“Okay, sir.”

Kip smiled. He was ten years younger than Hardy, and no Englishman, but Hardy was

happiest in the cocoon of regimental discipline. There was always hesitation by the soldiers

to call him “sir,” but Hardy barked it out loud and enthusiastically.

He was working fast now to prise out the fuze, all the batteries inert.

“Can you hear me? Whistle.... Okay, I heard it. A last topping up with oxygen. Will let it

bubble for thirty seconds. Then start. Freshen the frost. Okay, I’m going to remove the

dam,... Okay, dam gone.”

Hardy was listening to everything and recording it in case something went wrong. One

spark and Kip would be in a shaft of flames. Or there could be a joker in the bomb. The next

person would have to consider the alternatives.

“I’m using the quilter key.” He had pulled it out of his breast pocket. It was cold and he

had to rub it warm. He began to remove the locking ring. It moved easily and he told Hardy.

“They’re changing guard at Buckingham Palace,” Kip whistled. He pulled off the locking

ring and the locating ring and let them sink into the water. He could feel them roll slowly at

his feet. It would all take another four minutes.

“Alice is marrying one of the guard. ‘A soldier’s life is terrible hard,’ says Alice!”

He was singing it out loud, trying to get more warmth into his body, his chest painfully

cold. He kept trying to lean back far enough away from the frozen metal in front of him. And

he had to keep moving his hands up to the back of his neck, where the sun still was, then rub

them to free them of the muck and grease and frost. It was difficult to get the collet to grip the

head. Then to his horror the fuze head broke away, came off completely.

“Wrong, Hardy. Whole fuze head snapped off. Talk back to me, okay? The main body

of the fuze is jammed down there, I can’t get to it. There’s nothing exposed I can grip.”

“Where is the frost at?” Hardy was right above him. It had been a few seconds but he had

raced to the shaft.

“Six more minutes of frost.”

“Come up and we’ll blow it up.”

“No, pass me down some more oxygen.”

He raised his right hand and felt an icy canister being placed in it.

“I’m going to dribble the muck onto the area of exposed fuze — where the head

separated— then I’ll cut into the metal. Chip through till I can grip something. Get back now,
I’ll talk it through.”
He could hardly keep his fury back at what had happened. The muck, which was their
name for oxygen, was going all over his clothes, hissing as it hit the water. He waited for the
frost to appear and then began to shear metal off with a chisel. He poured more on, waited
and chiselled deeper. When nothing came off he ripped free a bit of his shirt, placed it
between the metal and the chisel, and then banged the chisel dangerously with a mallet,
chipping off fragments. The cloth of his shirt his only safety against a spark. What was more
of a problem was the coldness on his fingers. They were no longer agile, they were inert as
the batteries. He kept cutting sideways into the metal around the lost fuze

head. Shaving it off

in layers, hoping the freezing would accept this kind of surgery. If he cut down directly there

was always a chance he would hit the percussion cap that flashed the gaine.

It took five more minutes. Hardy had not moved from the top of the pit, instead was

giving him the approximate time left in the freezing. But in truth neither of them could be

sure. Since the fuze head had broken off, they were freezing a different area, and the water

temperature though cold to him was warmer than the metal.

Then he saw something. He did not dare chip the hole any bigger. The contact of the

circuit quivering like a silver tendril. If he could reach it. He tried to rub warmth into his

hands.

He breathed out, was still for a few seconds, and with the needle pliers cut the contact in

two before he breathed in again. He gasped as the freeze burned part of his hand when he

pulled it back out of the circuits. The bomb was dead.

“Fuze out. Gaine off. Kiss me.” Hardy was already rolling up the winch and Kip was

trying to clip on the halter; he could hardly do it with the burn and the cold, all his muscles

cold. He heard the pulley jerk and just held tight onto the leather straps still half attached

around him. He began to feel his brown legs being pulled from the grip of the mud, removed

like an ancient corpse out of a bog. His small feet rising out of the water. He emerged, lifted

out of the pit into the sunlight, head and then torso.

He hung there, a slow swivel under the tepee of poles that held the pulley. Hardy was

now embracing him and unbuckling him simultaneously, letting him free. Suddenly he saw

there was a large crowd watching from about twenty yards away, too close, far too close, for safety; they would have been destroyed. But of course Hardy had not been there to keep them back.

They watched him silently, the Indian, hanging onto Hardy's shoulder, scarcely able to walk back to the jeep with all the equipment— tools and canisters and blankets and the recording instruments still wheeling around, listening to the nothingness down in the shaft.

"I can't walk."

"Only to the jeep. A few yards more, sir. I'll pick up the rest."

They kept pausing, then walking on slowly. They had to go past the staring faces who were watching the slight brown man, shoeless, in the wet tunic, watching the drawn face that didn't recognize or acknowledge anything, any of them. All of them silent.

Just stepping back

to give him and Hardy room. At the jeep he started shaking. His eyes

couldn’t stand the glare

off the windshield. Hardy had to lift him, in stages, into the passenger seat.

When Hardy left, Kip slowly pulled off his wet trousers and wrapped

himself in the

blanket. Then he sat there. Too cold and tired even to unscrew the Thermos

of hot tea on

the seat beside him. He thought: I wasn’t even frightened down there. I was

just angry— with

my mistake, or the possibility that there was a joker. An animal reacting just

to protect myself.

Only Hardy, he realized, keeps me human now.

When there is a hot day at the Villa San Girolamo they all wash their hair,

first with

kerosene to remove the possibility of lice, and then with water. Lying back,

his hair spread

out, eyes closed against the sun, Kip seems suddenly vulnerable. There is a

shyness within

him when he assumes this fragile posture, looking more like a corpse from a myth than

anything living or human. Hana sits beside him, her dark brown hair already dry. These are

the times he will talk about his family and his brother in jail.

He will sit up and flip his hair forward, and begin to rub the length of it with a towel. She

imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quiet

civilisation. He speaks of warrior saints and she now feels he is one, stern and visionary,

pausing only in these rare times of sunlight to be godless, informal, his head back again on

the table so the sun can dry his spread hair like grain in a fan-shaped straw basket. Although

he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following

their codes like a dutiful son.

“Ah, but my brother thinks me a fool for trusting the English.” He turns to her, sunlight

in his eyes. “One day, he says, I will open my eyes. Asia is still not a free continent, and he is

appalled at how we throw ourselves into English wars. It is a battle of opinion we have always

had. ‘One day you will open your eyes,’ my brother keeps saying.”

The sapper says this, his eyes closed tight, mocking the metaphor. “Japan is a part of Asia,

I say, and the Sikhs have been brutalized by the Japanese in Malaya. But my brother ignores

that. He says the English are now hanging Sikhs who are fighting for independence.”

She turns away from him, her arms folded. The feuds of the world. The feuds of the

world. She walks into the daylight darkness of the villa and goes in to sit with the Englishman.

At night, when she lets his hair free, he is once more another constellation, the arms of a

thousand equators against his pillow, waves of it between them in their embrace and in their

turns of sleep. She holds an Indian goddess in her arms, she holds wheat and ribbons. As he

bends over her it pours. She can tie it against her wrist. As he moves she keeps her eyes open

to witness the gnats of electricity in his hair in the darkness of the tent.

He moves always in relation to things, beside walls, raised terrace hedges. He scans the

periphery. When he looks at Hana he sees a fragment of her lean cheek in relation to the

landscape behind it. The way he watches the arc of a linnet in terms of the space it gathers

away from the surface of the earth. He has walked up Italy with eyes that tried to see

everything except what was temporary and human.

The one thing he will never consider is himself. Not his twilit shadow or his arm reaching

for the back of a chair or the reflection of himself in a window or how they watch him. In the

years of war he has learned that the only thing safe is himself.

He spends hours with the Englishman, who reminds him of a fir tree he saw in England,

its one sick branch, too weighted down with age, held up by a crutch made out of another tree.

It stood in Lord Suffolk's garden on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the Bristol Channel like

a sentinel. In spite of such infirmity he sensed the creature within it was noble, with a memory

whose power rainbowed beyond ailment.

He himself has no mirrors He wraps his turban outside in his garden, looking about at

the moss on trees. But he notices the swath scissors have made in Hana's hair. He is familiar

with her breath when he places his face against her body, at the clavicle, where the bone
lightens her skin. But if she asked him what colour her eyes are, although he has come to
adore her, he will not, she thinks, be able to say. He will laugh and guess, but if she,
black-eyed, says with her eyes shut that they are green, he will believe her. He may look
intently at eyes but not register what colour they are, the way food already in his throat or
stomach is just texture more than taste or specific object.
When someone speaks he looks at a mouth, not eyes and their colours, which, it seems
to him, will always alter depending on the light of a room, the minute of the day. Mouths
reveal insecurity or smugness or any other point on the spectrum of character. For him they
are the most intricate aspect effaces. He’s never sure what an eye reveals.

But he can read

how mouths darken into callousness, suggest tenderness. One can often misjudge an eye

from its reaction to a simple beam of sunlight.

Everything is gathered by him as part of an altering harmony. He sees her in differing

hours and locations that alter her voice or nature, even her beauty, the way the background

power of the sea cradles or governs the fate of lifeboats.

They were in the habit of rising with daybreak and eating dinner in the last available light.

Throughout the late evening there would be only one candle flaring into the darkness beside

the English patient, or a lamp half filled with oil if Caravaggio had managed to forage any. But

the corridors and other bedrooms hung in darkness, as if in a buried city.

They became used

to walking in darkness, hands out, touching the walls on either side with

their fingertips.

“No more light. No more colour.” Hana would sing the phrase to herself again and again.

Kip’s unnerving habit of leaping down the stairs one hand halfway down the rail had to be

stopped. She imagined his feet travelling through air and hitting the returning Caravaggio in

the stomach.

She had blown out the candle in the Englishman’s room an hour earlier. She had

removed her tennis shoes, her frock was unbuttoned at the neck because of summer heat,

the sleeves unbuttoned as well and loose, high up at the arm. A sweet disorder.

On the main floor of the wing, apart from the kitchen, library and deserted chapel, was a

glassed-in indoor courtyard. Four walls of glass with a glass door that let you into where there

was a covered well and shelves of dead plants that at one time must have flourished in the

heated room. This indoor courtyard reminded her more and more of a book opened to

reveal pressed flowers, something to be glanced at during passing, never entered.

It was two a.m.

Each of them entered the villa from a different doorway, Hana at the chapel entrance by

the thirty-six steps and he at the north courtyard. As he stepped into the house he removed

his watch and slid it into an alcove at chest level where a small saint rested. The patron of this

villa hospital. She would not catch a glance of phosphorus. He had already removed his

shoes and wore just trousers. The lamp strapped to his arm was switched off. He carried

nothing else and just stood there for a while in darkness, a lean boy, a dark

turban, the kara

loose on his wrist against the skin. He leaned against the corner of the vestibule like a spear.

Then he was gliding through the indoor courtyard. He came into the kitchen and

immediately sensed the dog in the dark, caught it and tied it with a rope to the table. He

picked up the condensed milk from the kitchen shelf and returned to the glass room in the

indoor courtyard. He ran his hands along the base of the door and found the small sticks

leaning against it. He entered and closed the door behind him, at the last moment snaking his

hand out to prop the sticks up against the door again. In case she had seen them. Then he

climbed down into the well. There was a cross-plank three feet down he knew was firm. He

closed the lid over himself and crouched there, imagining her searching for

him or hiding

herself. He began to suck at the can of condensed milk.

She suspected something like this from him. Having made her way to the library, she

turned on the light on her arm and walked beside the bookcases that stretched from her

ankles to unseen heights above her. The door was closed, so no light could reveal itself to

anyone in the halls. He would be able to see the glow on the other side of the French doors

only if he was outside. She paused every few feet, searching once again through the

predominantly Italian books for the odd English one that she could present to the English

patient. She had come to love these books dressed in their Italian spines, the frontispieces,

the tipped-in colour illustrations with a covering of tissue, the smell of them, even the sound

of the crack if you opened them too fast, as if breaking some minute unseen series of bones.

She paused again. The Charterhouse of Parma.

“If I ever get out of my difficulties,” he said to Clelia, “I shall pay a visit to the beautiful

pictures at Parma, and then will you deign to remember the name: Fabrizio del Dongo.”

Caravaggio lay on the carpet at the far end of the library. From his darkness it seemed

that Hana’s left arm was raw phosphorus, lighting the books, reflecting redness onto her dark

hair, burning against the cotton of her frock and its puffed sleeve at her shoulder.

He came out of the well.

The three-foot diameter of light spread from her arm and then was absorbed into

blackness, so it felt to Caravaggio that there was a valley of darkness between them. She

tucked the book with the brown cover under her right arm. As she moved, new books
emerged and others disappeared.
She had grown older. And he loved her more now than he loved her when he had
understood her better, when she was the product of her parents. What she was now was what
she herself had decided to become. He knew that if he had passed Hana on a street in
Europe she would have had a familiar air but he wouldn’t have recognized her. The night he
had first come to the villa he had disguised his shock. Her ascetic face, which at first seemed
cold, had a sharpness. He realized that during the last two months he had grown towards who
she now was. He could hardly believe his pleasure at her translation. Years before, he had
tried to imagine her as an adult but had invented someone with qualities

moulded out of her

community. Not this wonderful stranger he could love more deeply because she was made

up of nothing he had provided.

She was lying on the sofa, had twisted the lamp inward so she could read, and had already

fallen deep into the book. At some point later she looked up, listening, and quickly switched

off the light.

Was she conscious of him in the room? Caravaggio was aware of the noisiness of his

breath and the difficulty he was having breathing in an ordered, demure way. The light went

on for a moment and then was quickly shut off again.

Then everything in the room seemed to be in movement but Caravaggio. He could hear

it all around him, surprised he wasn’t touched. The boy was in the room. Caravaggio walked

over to the sofa and placed his hand down towards Hana. She was not there. As he straightened up, an arm went around his neck and pulled him down backwards in a grip. A light glared harshly into his face, and there was a gasp from them both as they fell towards the floor. The arm with the light still holding him at the neck. Then a naked foot emerged into the light, moved past Caravaggio's face and stepped onto the boy's neck beside him. Another light went on.

"Got you. Got you."

The two bodies on the floor looked up at the dark outline of Hana above the light. She was singing it, "I got you, 1 got you. I used Caravaggio— who really does have a bad wheeze! I knew he would be here. He was the trick."

Her foot pressed down harder onto the boy's neck. "Give up. Confess."

Caravaggio began to shake within the boy's grip, sweat already all over him, unable to
struggle out. The glare of light from both lamps now on him. He somehow had to climb and
crawl out of this terror. Confess. The girl was laughing. He needed to calm his voice before
he spoke, but they were hardly listening, excited at their adventure. He worked his way out of
the boy's loosening grip and, not saying a word, left the room.
They were in darkness again. "Where are you?" she asks. Then moves quickly. He
positions himself so she bangs into his chest, and in this way slips her into his arms. She puts
her hand to his neck, then her mouth to his mouth. "Condensed milk! During our contest?
Condensed milk?" She puts her mouth at his neck, the sweat of it, tasting him where her bare
foot had been. "I want to see you." His light goes on and he sees her, her

face streaked with

dirt, her hair spiked up in a swirl from perspiration. Her grin towards him.

He puts his thin hands up into the loose sleeves of her dress and cups her shoulders with

his hands. If she swerves now, his hands go with her. She begins to lean, puts all her weight

into her fall backwards, trusting him to come with her, trusting his hands to break the fall.

Then he will curl himself up, his feet in t he air, just his hands and arms and his mouth on her,

the rest of his body the tail of a mantis. The lamp is still strapped against the muscle and sweat

of his left arm. Her face slips into the light to kiss and lick and taste. His forehead towelling

itself in the wetness of her hair.

Then he is suddenly across the room, the bounce of his sapper lamp all over the place, in

this room he has spent a week sweeping of all possible fuzes so it is now

cleared. As if the

room has now finally emerged from the war, is no longer a zone or territory. He moves with

just the lamp, swaying his arm, revealing the ceiling, her laughing face as he passes her

standing on the back of the sofa looking down at the glisten of his slim body. The next time

he passes her he sees she is leaning down and wiping her arms on the skirt of her dress. “But

I got you, I got you,” she chants. “I’m the Mohican of Danforth Avenue.” Then she is riding on his back and her light swerves into the spines of books in the high

shelves, her arms rising up and down as he spins her, and she dead-weights forward, drops

and catches his thighs, then pivots off and is free of him, lying back on the old carpet, the

smell of the past ancient rain still in it, the dust and grit on her wet arms. He bends down to

her, she reaches out and clicks off his light. “I won, right?” He still has said nothing since he

came into the room. His head goes into that gesture she loves which is partly a nod, partly a

shake of possible disagreement. He cannot see her for the glare. He turns off her light so they

are equal in darkness.

There is the one month in their lives when Hana and Kip sleep beside each other. A

formal celibacy between them. Discovering that in lovemaking there can be a whole

civilisation, a whole country ahead of them. The love of the idea of him or her. I don’t want

to be fucked. I don’t want to fuck you. Where he had learned it or she had who knows, in

such youth. Perhaps from Caravaggio, who had spoken to her during those evenings about

his age, about the tenderness towards every cell in a lover that comes when

you discover your

mortality. This was, after all, a mortal age. The boy's desire completed itself only in his

deepest sleep while in the arms of Hana, his orgasm something more to do with the pull of

the moon, a tug of his body by the night.

All evening his thin face lay against her ribs. She reminded him of the pleasure of being

scratched, her fingernails in circles raking his back. It was something an ayah had taught him

years earlier. All comfort and peace during childhood, Kip remembered, had come from her,

never from the mother he loved or from his brother or father, whom he played with. When

he was scared or unable to sleep it was the ayah who recognized his lack, who would ease him

into sleep with her hand on his small thin back, this intimate stranger from South India who

lived with them, helped run a household, cooked and served them meals, brought up her
own children within the shell of the household, having comforted his older brother too in
earlier years, probably knowing the character of all of the children better than their real
parents did.

It was a mutual affection. If Kip had been asked whom he loved most he would have
named his ayah before his mother. Her comforting love greater than any blood love or sexual
love for him. All through his life, he would realize later, he was drawn outside the family to
find such love. The platonic intimacy, or at times the sexual intimacy, of a stranger. He would
be quite old before he recognized that about himself, before he could ask even himself that
question of whom he loved most.

Only once did he feel he had given her back any comfort, though she already understood
his love for her. When her mother died he had crept into her room and held her suddenly
old body. In silence he lay beside her mourning in her small servant's room where she wept
wildly and formally. He watched as she collected her tears in a small glass cup held against
her face. She would take this, he knew, to the funeral. He was behind her hunched-over body,
his nine-year-old hands on her shoulders, and when she was finally still, just now and then a
shudder, he began to scratch her through the sari, then pulled it aside and scratched her
skin— as Hana now received this tender art, his nails against the million cells of her skin, in his
tent, in 1945, where their continents met in a hill town.

IX

The Cave of Swimmers

I PROMISED to tell you how one falls in love.

A young man named Geoffrey Clifton had met a friend at Oxford who had mentioned what we were doing. He contacted me, got married the next day, and two weeks later flew with his wife to Cairo. They were on the last days of their honeymoon. That was the beginning of our story.

When I met Katharine she was married. A married woman. Clifton climbed out of the plane and then, unexpected, for we had planned the expedition with just him in mind, she emerged. Khaki shorts, bony knees. In those days she was too ardent for the desert. I liked his youth more than the eagerness of his new young wife. He was our pilot, messenger, reconnaissance. He was the New Age, flying over and dropping codes of

long coloured

ribbon to advise us where we should be. He shared his adoration of her constantly. Here

were four men and one woman and her husband in his verbal joy of honeymoon. They went

back to Cairo and returned a month later, and it was almost the same. She was quieter this

time but he was still the youth. She would squat on some petrol cans, her jaw cupped in her

hands, her elbows on her knees, staring at some constantly flapping tarpaulin, and Clifton

would be singing her praises. We tried to joke him out of it, but to wish him more modest

would have been against him and none of us wanted that.

After that month in Cairo she was muted, read constantly, kept more to herself, as if

something had occurred or she realized suddenly that wondrous thing about the human

being, it can change. She did not have to remain a socialite who had married an adventurer.

She was discovering herself. It was painful to watch, because Clifton could not see it, her

self-education. She read everything about the desert. She could talk about Uweinat and the

lost oasis, had even hunted down marginal articles.

I was a man fifteen years older than she, you understand. I had reached that stage in life

where I identified with cynical villains in a book. I don’t believe in permanence, in relationships

that span ages. I was fifteen years older. But she was smarter. She was hungrier to

change than I expected.

What altered her during their postponed honeymoon on the Nile estuary outside Cairo?

We had seen them for a few days — they had arrived two weeks after their Cheshire wedding.

He had brought his bride along, as he couldn’t leave her and he couldn’t break the
commitment to us. To Madox and me. We would have devoured him. So her bony knees
emerged from the plane that day. That was the burden of our story. Our situation.
Clifton celebrated the beauty of her arms, the thin lines of her ankles. He described
witnessing her swim. He spoke about the new bidets in the hotel suite. Her ravenous hunger
at breakfast.
To all that, I didn’t say a word. I would look up sometimes as he spoke and catch her
glance, witnessing my unspoken exasperation, and then her demure smile. There was some
irony. I was the older man. I was the man of the world, who had walked ten years earlier from
Dakhla Oasis to the Gilf Kebir, who charted the Farafra, who knew

Cyrenaica and had been

lost more than twice in the Sand Sea. She met me when I had all those labels. Or she could

twist a few degrees and see the labels on Madox. Yet apart from the Geographical Society we

were unknown; we were the thin edge of a cult she had stumbled onto because of this

marriage.

The words of her husband in praise of her meant nothing. But I am a man whose life in

many ways, even as an explorer, has been governed by words. By rumours and legends.

Charted things. Shards written down. The tact of words. In the desert to repeat something

would be to fling more water into the earth. Here nuance took you a hundred miles.

Our expedition was about forty miles from Uweinat, and Madox and I were to leave

alone on a reconnaissance. The Cliftons and the others were to remain behind. She had consumed all her reading and asked me for books. I had nothing but maps with me. “That book you look at in the evenings?” “Herodotus. Ahh. You want that?” “I don’t presume. If it is private.” “I have my notes within it. And cuttings. I need it with me.” “It was forward of me, excuse me.” “When I return I shall show it to you. It is unusual for me to travel without it.”

All this occurred with much grace and courtesy. I explained it was more a commonplace book, and she bowed to that. I was able to leave without feeling in any way selfish. I acknowledged her graciousness. Clifton was not there. We were alone. I had been packing in my tent when she had approached me. I am a man who has turned my back on much of the social

world, but sometimes I appreciate the delicacy of manner.

We returned a week later. Much had happened in terms of findings and piecings

together. We were in good spirits. There was a small celebration at the camp. Clifton was

always one to celebrate others. It was catching.

She approached me with a cup of water. “Congratulations, I heard from Geoffrey

already— ” “Yes!” “Here, drink this.” I put out my hand and she placed the cup in my palm.

The water was very cold after the stuff in the canteens we had been drinking. “Geoffrey has

planned a party for you. He’s writing a song and wants me to read a poem, but I want to do

something else.” “Here, take the book and look through it.” I pulled it from my knapsack

and handed it to her.

After the meal and herb teas Clifton brought out a bottle of cognac he had

hidden from

everyone till this moment. The whole bottle was to be drunk that night during Madox's account

of our journey, Clifton's funny song. Then she began to read from The Histories— the

story of Candaules and his queen. I always skim past that story. It is early in the book and has

little to do with the places and period I am interested in. But it is of course a famous story. It

was also what she had chosen to talk about.

This Candaules had become passionately in love with his own wife; and having become

so, he deemed that his wife was fairer by far than all other women. To Gyges, the son of

Daskylus (for he of all his spearmen was the most pleasing to him), he used to describe the

beauty of his wife, praising it above all measure.

"Are you listening, Geoffrey?"

“Yes, my darling.”

He said to Gyges: “Gyges, I think that you do not believe me when I tell you of the beauty

of my wife, for it happens that men’s ears are less apt of belief than their eyes. Contrive

therefore means by which you may look upon her naked.”

There are several things one can say. Knowing that eventually I will become her lover,

just as Gyges will be the queen’s lover and murderer of Candaules. I would often open

Herodotus for a clue to geography. But Katharine had done that as a window to her life. Her

voice was wary as she read. Her eyes only on the page where the story was, as if she were

sinking within quicksand while she spoke.

“I believe indeed that she is of all women the fairest and I entreat you not to ask of me

that which it is not lawful for me to do.” But the King answered him thus:

“Be of good

courage, Gyges, and have no fear, either of me, that I am saying these words to try you, or of

my wife, lest any harm may happen to you from her. For I will contrive it so from the first that

she shall not perceive that she has been seen by you.”

This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from

Herodotus. I heard the words she spoke across the fire, never looking up, even when she

teased her husband. Perhaps she was just reading it to him. Perhaps there was no ulterior

motive in the selection except for themselves. It was simply a story that had jarred her in its

familiarity of situation. But a path suddenly revealed itself in real life. Even though she had

not conceived it as a first errant step in any way. I am sure.

“I will place you in the room where we sleep, behind the open door; and

after I have

gone in, my wife will also come to lie down. Now there is a seat near the entrance of the room

and on this she lays her garments as she takes them off one by one; and so you will be able to

gaze at her at full leisure.”

But Gyges is witnessed by the queen when he leaves the bedchamber. She understands

then what has been done by her husband; and though ashamed, she raises no outcry... she

holds her peace.

It is a strange story. Is it not, Caravaggio? The vanity of a man to the point where he

wishes to be envied. Or he wishes to be believed, for he thinks he is not believed. This was in

no way a portrait of Clifton, but he became a part of this story. There is something very

shocking but human in the husband’s act. Something makes us believe it.

The next day the wife calls in Gyges and gives him two choices.

“There are now two ways open to you, and I will give you the choice which of the two you

will prefer to take. Either you must slay Candaules and possess both me and the Kingdom of

Lydia, or you must yourself here on the spot be slain, so that you mayest not in future, by

obeying Candaules in all things, see that which you should not. Either he must die who

formed this design, or you who have looked upon me naked.”

So the king is killed. A New Age begins. There are poems written about Gyges in iambic

trimeters. He was the first of the barbarians to dedicate objects at Delphi. He reigned as King

of Lydia for twenty-eight years, but we still remember him as only a cog in an unusual love

story.

She stopped reading and looked up. Out of the quicksand. She was evolving.

So power

changed hands. Meanwhile, with the help of an anecdote, I fell in love.

Words, Caravaggio. They have a power.

When the Cliftons were not with us they were based in Cairo. Clifton doing other work

for the English, God knows what, an uncle in some government office. All this was before the

war. But at that time the city had every nation swimming in it, meeting at Groppi’s for the

soiree concerts, dancing into the night. They were a popular young couple with honour between

them, and I was on the periphery of Cairo society. They lived well. A ceremonial life

that I would slip into now and then. Dinners, garden parties. Events I would not normally

have been interested in but now went to because she was there. I am a man who fasts until I

see what I want.

How do I explain her to you? With the use of my hands? The way I can arc out in the air
the shape of a mesa or rock? She had been part of the expedition for almost a year. I saw her,
conversed with her. We had each been continually in the presence of the other. Later, when
we were aware of mutual desire, these previous moments flooded back into the heart, now
suggestive, that nervous grip of an arm on a cliff, looks that had been missed or
misinterpreted.
I was at that time seldom in Cairo, there about one month in three. I worked in the
Department of Egyptology on my own book, Recentes Explorations dans le Desert Libyque,
as the days progressed, coming closer and closer to the text as if the desert were there
somewhere on the page, so I could even smell the ink as it emerged from the

fountain pen.

And simultaneously struggled with her nearby presence, more obsessed if truth be known

with her possible mouth, the tautness behind the knee, the white plain of stomach, as I wrote

my brief book, seventy pages long, succinct and to the point, complete with maps of travel. I

was unable to remove her body from the page. I wished to dedicate the monograph to her, to

her voice, to her body that I imagined rose white out of a bed like a long bow, but it was a

book I dedicated to a king. Believing such an obsession would be mocked, patronized by her

polite and embarrassed shake of the head.

I began to be doubly formal in her company. A characteristic of my nature. As if awkward

about a previously revealed nakedness. It is a European habit. It was natural for me— having

translated her strangely into my text of the desert— now to step into metal clothing in her

presence.

The wild poem is a substitute

For the woman one loves or ought to love,

One wild rhapsody a fake for another.

On Hassanein Bey's lawn— the grand old man of the 1923 expedition— she walked over

with the government aide Roun-dell and shook my hand, asked him to get her a drink,

turned back to me and said, "I want you to ravish me." Roundell returned. It was as if she had

handed me a knife. Within a month I was her lover. In that room over the souk, north of the

street of parrots.

I sank to my knees in the mosaic-tiled hall, my face in the curtain of her gown, the salt

taste of these fingers in her mouth. We were a strange statue, the two of us,

before we began

to unlock our hunger. Her fingers scratching against the sand in my thinning hair. Cairo and

all her deserts around us.

Was it desire for her youth, for her thin adept boyishness? Her gardens were the gardens

I spoke of when I spoke to you of gardens.

There was that small indentation at her throat we called the Bosphorus. I would dive

from her shoulder into the Bos-phorus. Rest my eye there. I would kneel while she looked

down on me quizzical as if I were a planetary stranger. She of the quizzical look. Her cool

hand suddenly against my neck on a Cairo bus. Taking a closed taxi and our quick-hand love

between the Khedive Ismail Bridge and the Tipperary Club. Or the sun through her

fingernails on the third-floor lobby at the museum when her hand covered

my face.

As far as we were concerned there was only one person to avoid being seen by.

But Geoffrey Clifton was a man embedded in the English machine. He had a family genealogy going back to Canute. The machine would not necessarily have revealed to Clifton, married only eighteen months, his wife's infidelity, but it began to encircle the fault, the disease in the system. It knew every move she and I made from the first day of the awkward touch in the porte cochere of the Semiramis Hotel.

I had ignored her remarks about her husband's relatives. And Geoffrey Clifton was as innocent as we were about the great English web that was above us. But the club of bodyguards watched over her husband and kept him protected. Only Madox, who was an aristocrat with a past of regimental associations, knew about such discreet

convolutions. Only

Madox, with considerable tact, warned me about such a world.

I carried Herodotus, and Madox— a saint in his own marriage— carried

Anna Karenina,

continually rereading the story of romance and deceit. One day, far too late to avoid the

machinery we had set in motion, he tried to explain Clifton's world in terms of Anna

Karenina's brother. Pass me my book. Listen to this.

Half Moscow and Petersburg were relations or friends of Oblonsky. He was born into

the circle of people who were, or who became, the great ones of this earth. A third of the

official world, the older men, were his father's friends and had known him from the time he

was a baby in petticoats.... Consequently, the distributors of the blessings of this world were

all friends of his. They could not pass over one of their own.... It was only

necessary not to

raise objections or be envious, not to quarrel or take offence, which in accordance with his

natural kindliness he never did.

I have come to love the tap of your fingernail on the syringe, Caravaggio.

The first time

Hana gave me morphine in your company you were by the window, and at the tap of her nail

your neck jerked towards us. I know a comrade. The way a lover will always recognize the

camouflage of other lovers.

Women want everything of a lover. And too often I would sink below the surface. So

armies disappear under sand. And there was her fear of her husband, her belief in her

honour, my old desire for self-sufficiency, my disappearances, her suspicions of me, my

disbelief that she loved me. The paranoia and claustrophobia of hidden love.

“I think you have become inhuman,” she said to me.

“I’m not the only betrayer.”

“I don’t think you care— that this has happened among us. You slide past everything with

your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named. You think this

is a virtue. I think you are inhuman. If I leave you, who will you go to? Would you find

another lover?”

I said nothing.

“Deny it, damn you.”

She had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them. Words gave her clarity,

brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water.

She returned to her husband.

From this point on, she whispered, we will either find or lose our souls.

Seas move away, why not lovers? The harbours of Ephesus, the rivers of

Heraclitus

disappear and are replaced by estuaries of silt. The wife of Candaules becomes the wife of

Gyges. Libraries burn.

What had our relationship been? A betrayal of those around us, or the desire of another

life?

She climbed back into her house beside her husband, and I retired to the zinc bars.

I'll be looking at the moon,

but I'll be seeing you.

That old Herodotus classic. Humming and singing that song again and again, beating the

lines thinner to bend them into one's own life. People recover from secret loss variously. I

was seen by one of her retinue sitting with a spice trader. She had once received from him a

pewter thimble that held saffron. One of the ten thousand things.

And if Bagnold— having seen me sitting by the saffron trader— brought up the incident
during dinner at the table where she sat, how did I feel about that? Did it give me some
comfort that she would remember the man who had given her a small gift, a pewter thimble
she hung from a thin dark chain around her neck for two days when her husband was out of
town? The saffron still in it, so there was the stain of gold on her chest.
How did she hold this story about me, pariah to the group after some scene or other
where I had disgraced myself, Bagnold laughing, her husband who was a good man worrying
about me, and Madox getting up and walking to a window and looking out towards the south
section of the city. The conversation perhaps moved to other sigh tings. They were
mapmak-ers, after all. But did she climb down into the well we helped dig

together and hold

herself, the way I desired myself towards her with my hand?

We each now had our own lives, armed by the deepest treaty with the other.

“What are you doing?” she said running into me on the street. “Can’t you

see you are

driving us all mad.”

To Madox I had said I was courting a widow. But she was not a widow yet.

When Madox

returned to England she and I were no longer lovers. “Give my greetings to

your Cairo

widow,” Madox murmured. “Would’ve liked to have met her.” Did he know?

I always felt

more of a deceiver with him, this friend I had worked with for ten years, this

man I loved

more than any other man. It was 1939, and we were all leaving this country,

in any case, to the

war.

And Madox returned to the village of Marston Magna, Somerset, where he

had been

born, and a month later sat in the congregation of a church, heard the sermon in honour of

war, pulled out his desert revolver and shot himself.

I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that time may not draw the colour

from what Man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds manifested by

both Greeks and Barbarians... together with the reason they fought one another.

Men had always been the reciters of poetry in the desert. And Madox— to the

Geographical Society— had spoken beautiful accounts of our traversals and coursings.

Bermann blew theory into the embers. And I? I was the skill among them. The mechanic.

The others wrote out their love of solitude and meditated on what they found there. They

were never sure of what I thought of it all. “Do you like that moon?” Madox asked me after
he’d known me for ten years. He asked it tentatively, as if he had breached an intimacy. For
them I was a bit too cunning to be a lover of the desert. More like Odysseus. Still, I was. Show
me a desert, as you would show another man a river, or another man the metropolis of his
childhood.
When we parted for the last time, Madox used the old farewell. “May God make safety
your companion.” And I strode away from him saying, “There is no God.” We were utterly
unlike each other.
Madox said Odysseus never wrote a word, an intimate book. Perhaps he felt alien in the
false rhapsody of art. And my own monograph, I must admit, had been stern with accuracy.

The fear of describing her presence as I wrote caused me to burn down all sentiment, all rhetoric of love. Still, I described the desert as purely as I would have spoken of her. Madox asked me about the moon during our last days together before the war began. We parted. He left for England, the probability of the oncoming war interrupting everything, our slow unearthing of history in the desert. Good-bye, Odysseus, he said grinning, knowing I was never that fond of Odysseus, less fond of Aeneas, but we had decided Bagnold was Aeneas. But I was not that fond of Odysseus either. Good-bye, I said.

I remember he turned back, laughing. He pointed his thick finger to the spot by his Adam's apple and said, "This is called the vascular sizood." Giving that hollow at her neck an official name. He returned to his wife in the village of Marston Magna, took

only his favourite

volume of Tolstoy, left all of his compasses and maps to me. Our affection left unspoken.

And Marston Magna in Somerset, which he had evoked for me again and again in our

conversations, had turned its green fields into an aerodrome. The planes burned their

exhaust over Arthurian castles. What drove him to the act I do not know. Maybe it was the

permanent noise of flight, so loud to him now after the simple drone of the Gypsy Moth that

had putted over our silences in Libya and Egypt. Someone’s war was slashing apart his

delicate tapestry of companions. I was Odysseus, I understood the shifting and temporary

vetoes of war. But he was a man who made friends with difficulty. He was a man who knew

two or three people in his life, and they had turned out now to be the enemy.

He was in Somerset alone with his wife, who had never met us. Small gestures were enough for him. One bullet ended the war.

It was July 1939. They caught a bus from their village into Yeovil. The bus had been slow and so they had been late for the service. At the back of the crowded church, in order to find seats they decided to sit separately. When the sermon began half an hour later, it was jingoistic and without any doubt in its support of the war. The priest intoned blithely about battle, blessing the government and the men about to enter the war. Madox listened as the sermon grew more impassioned. He pulled out the desert pistol, bent over and shot himself in the heart. He was dead immediately. A great silence. Desert silence. Planeless silence.

They heard his body collapse against the pew. Nothing else moved. The

priest frozen in a

gesture. It was like those silences when a glass funnel round a candle in church splits and all

faces turn. His wife walked down the centre aisle, stopped at his row, muttered something,

and they let her in beside him. She knelt down, her arms enclosing him.

How did Odysseus die? A suicide, wasn't it? I seem to recall that. Now. Maybe the desert

spoiled Madox. That time when we had nothing to do with the world. I keep thinking of the

Russian book he always carried. Russia has always been closer to my country than to his. Yes,

Madox was a man who died because of nations.

I loved his calmness in all things. I would argue furiously about locations on a map, and

his reports would somehow speak of our "debate" in reasonable sentences. He wrote calmly

and joyfully about our journeys when there was joy to describe, as if we

were Anna and

Vronsky at a dance. Still, he was a man who never entered those Cairo dance halls with me.

And I was the man who fell in love while dancing.

He moved with a slow gait. I never saw him dance. He was a man who wrote, who

interpreted the world. Wisdom grew out of being handed just the smallest sliver of emotion.

A glance could lead to paragraphs of theory. If he witnessed a new knot among a desert tribe

or found a rare palm, it would charm him for weeks. When we came upon messages on our

travels— any wording, contemporary or ancient, Arabic on a mud wall, a note in English

written in chalk on the fender of a jeep— he would read it and then press his hand upon it as

if to touch its possible deeper meanings, to become as intimate as he could with the words.

He holds out his arm, the bruised veins horizontal, facing up, for the raft of morphine. As
it floods him he hears Caravaggio drop the needle into the kidney-shaped enamel tin. He
sees the grizzled form turn its back to him and then reappear, also caught, a citizen of
morphia with him.
There are days when I come home from arid writing when all that can save me is
“Honeysuckle Rose” by Django Rein-hardt and Stephane Grappelly performing with the
Hot Club of France. 1935. 1936. 1937. Great jazz years. The years when it floated out of the
Hotel Claridge on the Champs-Elysees and into the bars of London, southern France, Morocco,
and then slid into Egypt, where the rumour of such rhythms was introduced in a hush
by an unnamed Cairo dance band. When I went back into the desert, I took

with me the

evenings of dancing to the 78 of “Souvenirs” in the bars, the women pacing like greyhounds,

leaning against you while you muttered into their shoulders during “My Sweet.” Courtesy of

the Societe Ultraphone Franchise record company. 1938. 1939. There was the whispering of

love in a booth. There was war around the corner.

During those final nights in Cairo, months after the affair was over, we had finally

persuaded Madox into a zinc bar for his farewell. She and her husband were there. One last

night. One last dance. Almasy was drunk and attempting an old dance step he had invented

called the Bosphorus hug, lifting Katharine Clifton into his wiry arms and traversing the floor

until he fell with her across some Nile-grown aspidistras.

Who is he speaking as now? Caravaggio thinks.

Almasy was drunk and his dancing seemed to the others a brutal series of movements. In those days he and she did not seem to be getting on well. He swung her from side to side as if she were some anonymous doll, and smothered with drink his grief at Madox's leaving. He was loud at the tables with us. When Almasy was like this we usually dispersed, but this was Madox's last night in Cairo and we stayed. A bad Egyptian violinist mimicking Stephane Grappelly, and Almasy like a planet out of control. "To us— the planetary strangers," he lifted his glass. He wanted to dance with everyone, men and women. He clapped his hands and announced, "Now for the Bosphorus hug. You, Bernhardt? Hetherton?" Most pulled back.

He turned to Clifton's young wife, who was watching him in a courteous rage, and she went

forward as he beckoned and then slammed into her, his throat already at her left shoulder on

that naked plateau above the sequins. A maniac's tango ensued till one of them lost the step.

She would not back down from her anger, refused to let him win by her walking away and

returning to the table. Just staring hard at him when he pulled his head back, not solemn but

with an attacking face. His mouth muttering at her when he bent his face down, swearing the

lyrics of "Honeysuckle Rose," perhaps.

In Cairo between expeditions no one ever saw much of Almasy. He seemed either

distant or restless. He worked in the museum during the day and frequented the South Cairo

market bars at night. Lost in another Egypt. It was only for Madox they had all come here.

But now Almasy was dancing with Katharine Clifton. The line of plants

brushed against her

slimness. He pivoted with her, lifting her up, and then fell. Clifton stayed in his seat, half

watching them. Almasy lying across her and then slowly trying to get up, smoothing back his

blond hair, kneeling over her in the far corner of the room. He had at one time been a man

of delicacy.

It was past midnight. The guests there were not amused, except for the easily amused

regulars, accustomed to these ceremonies of the desert European. There were women with

long tributaries of silver hanging off their ears, women in sequins, little metal droplets warm

from the bar's heat that Almasy in the past had always been partial towards, women who in

their dancing swung the jagged earrings of silver against his face. On other nights he danced

with them, carrying their whole frame by the fulcrum of rib cage as he got drunker. Yes, they
were amused, laughing at Almasy's stomach as his shirt loosened, not charmed by his weight,
which leaned on their shoulders as he paused during the dance, collapsing at some point later
during a schottische onto the floor.
It was important during such evenings to proceed into the plot of the evening, while the
human constellations whirled and skidded around you. There was no thought or forethought.
The evening's field notes came later, in the desert, in the landforms between Dakhla and
Kufra. Then he would remember that doglike yelp at which he looked around for a dog on
the dance floor and realized, now regarding the compass disc floating on oil, that it may have
been a woman he had stepped on. Within sight of an oasis he would pride

himself on his

dancing, waving his arms and his wristwatch up to the sky.

Cold nights in the desert. He plucked a thread from the horde of nights and put it into his

mouth like food. This was during the first two days of a trek out, when he was in the zone of

limbo between city and plateau. After six days had passed he would never think about Cairo

or the music or the streets or the women; by then he was moving in ancient time, had adapted

into the breathing patterns of deep water. His only connection with the world of cities was

Herodotus, his guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies. When he discovered the

truth to what had seemed a lie, he brought out his glue pot and pasted in a map or news

clipping or used a blank space in the book to sketch men in skirts with faded unknown

animals alongside them. The early oasis dwellers had not usually depicted cattle, though

Herodotus claimed they had. They worshipped a pregnant goddess and their rock portraits

were mostly of pregnant women.

Within two weeks even the idea of a city never entered his mind. It was as if he had

walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone

between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller.

Sandford called it geomorphology. The place they had chosen to come to, to be their best

selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. Here, apart from the sun compass and the odometer

mileage and the book, he was alone, his own invention. He knew during these times how the

mirage worked, the fata morgana, for he was within it.

He awakens to discover Hana washing him. There is a bureau at waist level. She leans

over, her hands bringing water from the porcelain basin to his chest. When she finishes she

runs her wet fingers through her hair a few times, so it turns damp and dark. She looks up

and sees his eyes are open, and smiles.

When he opens his eyes again, Madox is there, looking ragged, weary, carrying the

morphinic injection, having to use both hands because there are no thumbs. How does he

give it to himself? he thinks. He recognizes the eye, the habit of the tongue fluttering at the lip,

the clearness of the man’s brain catching all he says. Two old coots.

Caravaggio watches the pink in the man’s mouth as he talks. The gums perhaps the light

iodine colour of the rock paintings discovered in Uweinat. There is more to discover, to

divine out of this body on the bed, nonexistent except for a mouth, a vein in the arm,

wolf-grey eyes. He is still amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks

sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he

is Almasy.

“Who was talking, back then?”

“ ‘Death means you are in the third person.

All day they have shared the ampoules of morphine. To unthread the story out of him,

Caravaggio travels within the code of signals. When the burned man slows down, or when

Caravaggio feels he is not catching everything— the love affair, the death of Madox— he picks

up the syringe from the kidney-shaped enamel tin, breaks the glass tip off an ampoule with

the pressure of a knuckle and loads it. He is blunt about all this now with

Hana, having

ripped the sleeve off his left arm completely. Almasy wears just a grey

singlet, so his black

arm lies bare under the sheet.

Each swallow of morphine by the body opens a further door, or he leaps

back to the cave

paintings or to a buried plane or lingers once more with the woman beside

him under a fan,

her cheek against his stomach.

Caravaggio picks up the Herodotus. He turns a page, comes over a dune to

discover the

Gilf Kebir, Uweinat, Gebel Kissu. When Almasy speaks he stays alongside

him reordering

the events. Only desire makes the story errant, flickering like a compass

needle. And this is

the world of nomads in any case, an apocryphal story. A mind travelling east

and west in the

disguise of sandstorm.

On the floor of the Cave of Swimmers, after her husband had crashed their plane, he had
cut open and stretched out the parachute she had been carrying. She lowered herself onto it,
grimacing with the pain of her injuries. He placed his fingers gently into her hair, searching
for other wounds, then touched her shoulders and her feet.
Now in the cave it was her beauty he did not want to lose, the grace of her, these limbs.
He knew he already had her nature tight in his fist.
She was a woman who translated her face when she put on makeup.
Entering a party,
climbing into a bed, she had painted on blood lipstick, a smear of vermilion over each eye.
He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into
her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hands thick with

red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin, so her knee that had

poked out of the plane that first day was saffron. The pubis. Hoops of colour around her legs

so she would be immune to the human. There were traditions he had discovered in

Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in

whatever world made them eternal— a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing.

It was already cold in the cave. He wrapped the parachute around her for warmth. He lit

one small fire and burned the acacia twigs and waved smoke into all the corners of the cave.

He found he could not speak directly to her, so he spoke formally, his voice against the

bounce of the cave walls. I’m going for help now, Katharine. Do you understand? There is

another plane nearby, but there is no petrol. I might meet a caravan or a jeep, which means I

will be back sooner. I don’t know. He pulled out the copy of Herodotus and placed it beside

her. It was September 1939. He walked out of the cave, out of the flare of firelight, down

through darkness and into the desert full of moon.

He climbed down the boulders to the base of the plateau and stood there.

No truck. No plane. No compass. Only moon and his shadow. He found the old stone

marker from the past that located the direction of El Taj, north-northwest. He memorized

the angle of his shadow and started walking. Seventy miles away was the souk with the street

of clocks. Water in a skin bag he had filled from the ain hung from his shoulder and sloshed

like a placenta.

There were two periods of time when he could not move. At noon, when the

shadow was
under him, and at twilight, between sunset and the appearance of the stars. Then everything
on the disc of the desert was the same. If he moved, he might err as much as ninety degrees
off his course. He waited for the live chart of stars, then moved forward reading them every
hour. In the past, when they had had desert guides, they would hang a lantern from a long
pole and the rest of them would follow the bounce of light above the star reader.
A man walks as fast as a camel. Two and a half miles an hour. If lucky, he would come
upon ostrich eggs. If unlucky, a sandstorm would erase everything. He walked for three days
without any food. He refused to think about her. If he got to El Taj he would eat abra, which
the Goran tribes made out of colocynth, boiling the pips to get rid of

bitterness and then

crushing it along with dates and locusts. He would walk through the street of clocks and

alabaster. May God make safety your companion, Madox had said.

Good-bye. A wave.

There is God only in the desert, he wanted to acknowledge that now. Outside of this there

was just trade and power, money and war. Financial and military despots shaped the world.

He was in broken country, had moved from sand to rock. He refused to think about her.

Then hills emerged like mediaeval castles. He walked till he stepped with his shadow into the

shadow of a mountain. Mimosa shrubs. Colocynths. He yelled out her name into the rocks.

For echo is the soul of the voice exciting itself in hollow places.

Then there was El Taj. He had imagined the street of mirrors for most of his journey.

When he got to the outskirts of the settlements, English military jeeps surrounded him and

took him away, not listening to his story of the woman injured at Uweinat, just seventy miles

away, listening in fact to nothing he said.

“Are you telling me the English did not believe you? No one listened to you?”

“No one listened.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t give them a right name.”

“Yours?”

“I gave them mine.”

“Then what— ”

“Hers. Her name. The name of her husband.”

“What did you say?”

He says nothing.

“Wake up! What did you say?”

“I said she was my wife. I said Katharine. Her husband was dead. I said she

was badly

injured, in a cave in the Gilf Kebir, at Uweinat, north of the Ain Dua well.

She needed water.

She needed food. I would go back with them to guide them. I said all I

wanted was a jeep.

One of their damn jeeps... Perhaps I seemed like one of those mad desert

prophets after the

journey, but I don't think so. The war was beginning already. They were just

pulling spies in

out of the desert. Everyone with a foreign name who drifted into these small

oasis towns was

suspect. She was just seventy miles away and they wouldn't listen. Some

stray English outfit in

El Taj. I must have gone berserk then. They were using these wicker prisons,

size of a shower.

I was put into one and moved by truck. I was flailing around in there until I

fell off onto the

street, still in it. I was yelling Katharine's name. Yelling the Gilf Kebir.

Whereas the only

name I should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton's.

"They hauled me up into the truck again. I was just another possible

second-rate spy. Just

another international bastard."

Caravaggio wants to rise and walk away from this villa, the country, the detritus of a war.

He is just a thief. What Caravaggio wants is his arms around the sapper and Hana or, better,

people of his own age, in a bar where he knows everyone, where he can dance and talk with

a woman, rest his head on her shoulder, lean his head against her brow, whatever, but he

knows first he must get out of this desert, its architecture of morphine. He needs to pull away

from the invisible road to El Taj. This man he believes to be Almasy has used him and the

morphine to return to his own world, for his own sadness. It no longer matters which side he was on during the war.

But Caravaggio leans forward.

“I need to know something.”

“What?”

“I need to know if you murdered Katharine Clifton. That is, if you murdered Clifton, and in so doing killed her.”

“No. I never even imagined that.”

“The reason I ask is that Geoffrey Clifton was with British Intelligence. He was not just an innocent Englishman, I’m afraid. Your friendly boy. As far as the English were concerned, he was keeping an eye on your strange group in the Egyptian-Libyan desert. They knew the desert would someday be a theatre of war. He was an aerial photographer. His death

perturbed them, still does. They still raise the question. And Intelligence knew about your affair with his wife, from the beginning. Even if Clifton didn't. They thought his death may have been engineered as protection, hoisting up the drawbridge. They were waiting for you in Cairo, but of course you turned back into the desert. Later, when I was sent to Italy, I lost the last part of your story. I didn't know what had happened to you."

"So you have run me to earth."

"I came because of the girl. I knew her father. The last person I expected to find here in this shelled nunnery was Count Ladislaus de Almasy. Quite honestly, I've become more fond of you than most of the people I worked with."

The rectangle of light that had drifted up Caravaggio's chair was framing his chest and head so that to the English patient the face seemed a portrait. In muted light

his hair

appeared dark, but now the wild hair lit up, bright, the bags under his eyes

washed out in the

pink late daylight.

He had turned the chair around so he could lean forward on its back, facing

Almasy.

Words did not emerge easily from Caravaggio. He would rub his jaw, his

face creasing up,

the eyes closed, to think in darkness, and only then would he blurt out

something, tearing

himself away from his own thoughts. It was this darkness that showed in

him as he sat in the

rhomboid frame of light, hunched over a chair beside Almasy's bed. One of

the two older

men in this story.

"I can talk with you, Caravaggio, because I feel we are both mortal. The girl,

the boy, they

are not mortal yet. In spite of what they have been through. Hana was

greatly distressed when

I first met her."

"Her father was killed in France."

"I see. She would not talk about it. She was distant from everybody. The only way I could

get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me... Do you realize neither of us has

children?"

Then pausing, as if considering a possibility.

"Do you have a wife?" Almasy asked.

Caravaggio sat in the pink light, his hands over his face to erase everything so he could

think precisely, as if this was one more gift of youth that did not come so easily to him any

longer.

"You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some

creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of

corridors, lies, loose

vegetation, pockets of stones."

"Thieves like us were used a great deal during this war. We were legitimized. We stole.

Then some of us began to advise. We could read through the camouflage of deceit more

naturally than official intelligence. We created double bluffs. Whole campaigns were being

run by this mixture of crooks and intellectuals. I was all over the Middle East, that's where I

first heard about you. You were a mystery, a vacuum on their charts. Turning your

knowledge of the desert into German hands."

"Too much happened at El Taj in 1939, when I was rounded up, imagined to be a spy."

"So that's when you went over to the Germans."

Silence.

"And you still were unable to get back to the Cave of Swimmers and

Uweinat?”

“Not till I volunteered to take Eppler across the desert.”

“There is something I must tell you. To do with 1942, when you guided the spy into

Cairo ...”

“Operation Salaam.”

“Yes. When you were working for Rommel.”

“A brilliant man.... What were you going to tell me?”

“I was going to say, when you came through the desert avoiding Allied troops, travelling

with Eppler— it was heroic. From Gialo Oasis all the way to Cairo. Only you could have

gotten Rommel’s man into Cairo with his copy of Rebecca.”

“How did you know that?”

“What I want to say is that they did not just discover Eppler in Cairo. They knew about

the whole journey. A German code had been broken long before, but we couldn’t let

Rommel know that or our sources would have been discovered. So we had to wait till Cairo

to capture Eppler.

“We watched you all the way. All through the desert. And because Intelligence had your

name, knew you were involved, they were even more interested. They wanted you as well.

You were supposed to be killed... If you don’t believe me, you left Gialo and it took you

twenty days. You followed the buried-well route. You couldn’t get near Uweinat because of

Allied troops, and you avoided Abu Ballas. There were times when Eppler had desert fever

and you had to look after him, care for him, though you say you didn’t like him....

“Planes supposedly ‘lost’ you, but you were being tracked very carefully. You were not

the spies, we were the spies. Intelligence thought you had killed Geoffrey

Clifton over the

woman. They had found his grave in 1939, but there was no sign of his wife. You had

become the enemy not when you sided with Germany but when you began your affair with

Katharine Clifton."

"I see."

"After you left Cairo in 1942, we lost you. They were supposed to pick you up and kill

you in the desert. But they lost you. Two days out. You must have been haywire, not rational,

or we would have found you. We had mined the hidden jeep. We found it exploded later,

but there was nothing of you. You were gone. That must have been your great journey, not

the one to Cairo. When you must have been mad."

"Were you there in Cairo with them tracking me?"

"No, I saw the files. I was going into Italy and they thought you might be

there.”

“Here.”

“Yes.”

The rhomboid of light moved up the wall leaving Caravaggio in shadow. His hair dark

again. He leaned back, his shoulder against the foliage.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” Almasy murmured.

“Do you want morphine?”

“No. I’m putting things into place. I was always a private man. It is difficult to realize I was

so discussed.”

“You were having an affair with someone connected with Intelligence. There were some

people in Intelligence who knew you personally.”

“Bagnold probably.”

“Yes.”

“Very English Englishman.”

“Yes.”

Caravaggio paused.

“I have to talk to you about one last thing.”

“I know.”

“What happened to Katharine Clifton? What happened just before the war to make you

all come to the Gilf Kebir again? After Madox left for England.”

I was supposed to make one more journey to the Gilf Kebir, to pack up the last of the

base camp at Uweinat. Our life there was over. I thought nothing more would happen

between us. I had not met her as a lover for almost a year. A war was preparing itself

somewhere like a hand entering an attic window. And she and I had already retreated behind

our own walls of previous habit, into seeming innocence of relationship. We no longer saw

each other very much.

During the summer of 1939 I was to go overland to the Gilf Kebir with

Gough, pack up

the base camp, and Gough would leave by truck. Clifton would fly in and pick me up. Then

we would disperse, out of the triangle that had grown up among us.

When I heard the plane, saw it, I was already climbing down the rocks of the plateau.

Clifton was always prompt.

There is a way a small cargo plane will come down to land, slipping from the level of

horizon. It tips its wings within desert light and then sound stops, it drifts to earth. I have

never fully understood how planes work. I have watched them approach me in the desert and

I have come out of my tent always with fear. They dip their wings across the light and then

they enter that silence.

The Moth came skimming over the plateau. I was waving the blue tarpaulin. Clifton

dropped altitude and roared over me, so low the acacia shrubs lost their leaves. The plane
veered to the left and circled, and sighting me again realigned itself and came straight towards
me. Fifty yards away from me it suddenly tilted and crashed. I started running towards it.
I thought he was alone. He was supposed to be alone. But when I got there to pull him
out, she was beside him. He was dead. She was trying to move the lower part of her body,
looking straight ahead. Sand had come in through the cockpit window and had filled her lap.
There didn’t seem to be a mark on her. Her left hand had gone forward to cushion the
collapse of their flight. I pulled her out of the plane Clifton had called Rupert and carried her
up into the rock caves. Into the Cave of Swimmers, where the paintings were.
Latitude 23°3o’

on the map, longitude 25°!5’. I buried Geoffrey Clifton that night.

Was I a curse upon them? For her? For Madox? For the desert raped by war, shelled as

if it were just sand? The Barbarians versus the Barbarians. Both armies would come through

the desert with no sense of what it was. The deserts of Libya. Remove politics, and it is the

loveliest phrase I know. Libya. A sexual, drawn-out word, a coaxed well. The b and the y.

Madox said it was one of the few words in which you heard the tongue turn a corner.

Remember Dido in the deserts of Libya? A man shall be as rivers of water in a dry place....

I do not believe I entered a cursed land, or that I was ensnared in a situation that was evil.

Every place and person was a gift to me. Finding the rock paintings in the Cave of Swimmers.

Singing “burdens” with Madox during expeditions. Katharine’s appearance

among us in the

desert. The way I would walk towards her over the red polished concrete floor and sink to

my knees, her belly against my head as if I were a boy. The gun tribe healing me. Even the

four of us, Hana and you and the sapper.

Everything I have loved or valued has been taken away from me.

I stayed with her. I discovered three of her ribs were broken. I kept waiting for her

wavering eye, for her broken wrist to bend, for her still mouth to speak.

How did you hate me? she whispered. You killed almost everything in me.

Katharine... you didn’t—

Hold me. Stop defending yourself. Nothing changes you.

Her glare was permanent. I could not move out of the target of that gaze. I will be the last

image she sees. The jackal in the cave who will guide and protect her, who will never deceive

her.

There are a hundred deities associated with animals, I tell her. There are the ones linked

to jackals— Anubis, Duamutef, Wepwawet. These are creatures who guide you into the

afterlife— as my early ghost accompanied you, those years before we met. All those parties in

London and Oxford. Watching you. I sat across from you as you did schoolwork, holding a

large pencil. I was there when you met Geoffrey Clifton at two a.m. in the Oxford Union

Library. Everybody's coats were strewn on the floor and you in your bare feet like some

heron picking your way among them. He is watching you but I am watching you too, though

you miss my presence, ignore me. You are at an age when you see only good-looking men.

You are not yet aware of those outside your sphere of grace. The jackal is not used much at

Oxford as an escort. Whereas I am the man who fasts until I see what I want. The wall

behind you is covered in books. Your left hand holds a long loop of pearls that hangs from

your neck. Your bare feet picking their way through. You are looking for something. You

were more plump in those days, though aptly beautiful for university life.

There are three of us in the Oxford Union Library, but you find only Geoffrey Clifton. It

will be a whirlwind romance. He has some job with archaeologists in North Africa, of all

places. “A strange old coot I’m working with.” Your mother is quite delighted at your

adventure.

But the spirit of the jackal, who was the “opener of the ways,” whose name was

Wepwawet or Almasy, stood in the room with the two of you. My arms folded, watching your

attempts at enthusiastic small talk, a problem as you both were drunk. But what was

wonderful was that even within the drunkenness of two a.m., each of you somehow

recognized the more permanent worth and pleasure of the other. You may have arrived with

others, will perhaps cohabit this night with others, but both of you have found your fates.

At three a.m. you feel you must leave, but you are unable to find one shoe. You hold the

other in your hand, a rose-coloured slipper. I see one half buried near me and pick it up. The

sheen of it. They are obviously favourite shoes, with the indentation of your toes. Thank you,

you say accepting it, as you leave, not even looking at my face.

I believe this. When we meet those we fall in love with, there is an aspect of our spirit that

is historian, a bit of a pedant, who imagines or remembers a meeting when

the other had

passed by innocently, just as Clifton might have opened a car door for you a year earlier and

ignored the fate of his life. But all parts of the body must be ready for the other, all atoms

must jump in one direction for desire to occur.

I have lived in the desert for years and I have come to believe in such things. It is a place

of pockets. The trompe 1’oeil of time and water. The jackal with one eye that looks back and

one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are pieces of the past he delivers to

you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known.

Her eyes looked at me, tired of everything. A terrible weariness. When I pulled her from

the plane her stare had tried to receive all things around her. Now the eyes were guarded, as

if protecting something inside. I moved closer, and sat on my heels. I leaned forward and put

my tongue against the right blue eye, a taste of salt. Pollen. I carried that taste to

her mouth. Then the other eye. My tongue against the fine porousness of the eyeball,

wiping off the blue; when I moved back there was a sweep of white across her gaze. I parted

the lips on her mouth, this time I let the fingers go in deeper and prised the teeth apart, the

tongue was “withdrawn,” and I had to pull it forward, there was a thread, a breath of death in

her. It was almost too late. I leaned forward and with my tongue carried the blue pollen to her

tongue. We touched this way once. Nothing happened. I pulled back, took a breath and then

went forward again. As I met the tongue there was a twitch within it.

Then the terrible snarl, violent and intimate, came out of her upon me. A

shudder

through her whole body like a path of electricity. She was flung from the propped position

against the painted wall. The creature had entered her and it leapt and fell against me. There

seemed to be less and less light in the cave. Her neck flipping this way and that.

I know the devices of a demon. I was taught as a child about the demon lover. I was told

about a beautiful temptress who came to a young man’s room. And he, if he were wise, would

demand that she turn around, because demons and witches have no back, only what they

wish to present to you. What had I done? What animal had I delivered into her? I had been

speaking to her I think for over an hour. Had I been her demon lover? Had I been Madox’s

demon friend? This country— had I charted it and turned it into a place of

war?

It is important to die in holy places. That was one of the secrets of the desert. So Madox

walked into a church in Somerset, a place he felt had lost its holiness, and he committed what

he believed was a holy act.

When I turned her around, her whole body was covered in bright pigment. Herbs and

stones and light and the ash of acacia to make her eternal. The body pressed against sacred

colour. Only the eye blue removed, made anonymous, a naked map where nothing is

depicted, no signature of lake, no dark cluster of mountain as there is north of the

Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti, no lime-green fan where the Nile rivers enter the open palm of

Alexandria, the edge of Africa.

And all the names of the tribes, the nomads of faith who walked in the

monotone of the

desert and saw brightness and faith and colour. The way a stone or found metal box or bone

can become loved and turn eternal in a prayer. Such glory of this country she enters now and

becomes part of. We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swal lowed,

bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed

into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body

when I am dead. I believe in such cartography— to be marked by nature, not just to label

ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal

histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience.

All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps.

I carried Katharine Clifton into the desert, where there is the communal book of

moonlight. We were among the rumour of wells. In the palace of winds.

Almasy's face fell to the left, staring at nothing— Caravag-gio's knees perhaps.

"Do you want some morphine now?"

"No."

"Can I get you something?"

"Nothing."

X

August

CARAVAGGIO CAME DOWN the stairs through darkness and into the kitchen. Some

celery on the table, some turnips whose roots were still muddy. The only light came from a

fire Hana had recently started. She had her back to him and had not heard his steps into the

room. His days at the villa had loosened his body and freed his tenseness, so

he seemed bigger,

more sprawled out in his gestures. Only his silence of movement remained.

Otherwise

there was an easy inefficiency to him now, a sleepiness to his gestures.

He dragged out the chair so she would turn, realize he was in the room.

“Hello, David.”

He raised his arm. He felt that he had been in deserts for too long.

“How is he?”

“Asleep. Talked himself out.”

“Is he what you thought he was?”

“He’s fine. We can let him be.”

“I thought so. Kip and I are both sure he is English. Kip thinks the best

people are

eccentrics, he worked with one.”

“I think Kip is the eccentric myself. Where is he, anyway?”

“He’s plotting something on the terrace, doesn’t want me out there.

Something for my

birthday.” Hana stood up from her crouch at the grate, wiping her hand on

the opposite

forearm.

“For your birthday I’m going to tell you a small story,” he said.

She looked at him.

“Not about Patrick, okay?”

“A little about Patrick, mostly about you.”

“I still can’t listen to those stories, David.”

“Fathers die. You keep on loving them in any way you can. You can’t hide him away in

your heart.”

“Talk to me when the morphia wears off.”

She came up to him and put her arms around him, reached up and kissed his cheek. His

embrace tightened around her, his stubble like sand against her skin. She loved that about

him now; in the past he had always been meticulous. The parting in his hair like Yonge Street

at midnight, Patrick had said. Caravaggio had in the past moved like a god in

her presence.

Now, with his face and his trunk filled out and this greyness in him, he was a friendlier

human.

Tonight dinner was being prepared by the sapper. Caravaggio was not looking forward to

it. One meal in three was a loss as far as he was concerned. Kip found vegetables and presented

them barely cooked, just briefly boiled into a soup. It was to be another purist meal,

not what Caravaggio wished for after a day such as this when he had been listening to the man

upstairs. He opened the cupboard beneath the sink. There, wrapped in damp cloth, was

some dried meat, which Caravaggio cut and put into his pocket.

“I can get you off the morphine, you know. I’m a good nurse.”

“You’re surrounded by madmen...”

“Yes, I think we are all mad.”

When Kip called them, they walked out of the kitchen and onto the terrace, whose

border, with its low stone balustrade, was ringed with light.

It looked to Caravaggio like a string of small electric candles found in dusty churches, and

he thought the sapper had gone too far in removing them from a chapel, even for Hana's

birthday. Hana walked slowly forward with her hands over her face. There was no wind. Her

legs and thighs moved through the skirt of her frock as if it were thin water. Her tennis shoes

silent on the stone.

"I kept finding dead shells wherever I was digging," the sapper said.

They still didn't understand. Caravaggio bent over the flutter of lights. They were snail

shells filled with oil. He looked along the row of them; there must have been about forty.

"Forty-five," Kip said, "the years so far of this century. Where I come from,

we celebrate

the age as well as ourselves.”

Hana moved alongside them, her hands in her pockets now, the way Kip loved to see her

walk. So relaxed, as if she had put her arms away for the night, now in simple armless

movement.

Caravaggio was diverted by the startling presence of three bottles of red wine on the table.

He walked over and read the labels and shook his head, amazed. He knew the sapper

wouldn’t drink any of it. All three had already been opened. Kip must have picked his way

through some etiquette book in the library. Then he saw the corn and the meat and the potatoes.

Hana slid her arm into Kip’s and came with him to the table.

They ate and drank, the unexpected thickness of the wine like meat on their tongues.

They were soon turning silly in their toasts to the sapper— ”the great forager”— and to the English patient. They toasted each other, Kip joining in with his beaker of water. This was when he began to talk about himself. Caravaggio pressing him on, not always listening, sometimes standing up and walking around the table, pacing and pacing with pleasure at all this. He wanted these two married, longed to force them verbally towards it, but they seemed to have their own strange rules about their relationship. What was he doing in this role. He sat down again. Now and then he noticed the death of a light. The snail shells held only so much oil. Kip would rise and refill them with pink paraffin.

“We must keep them lit till midnight.”

They talked then about the war, so far away. “When the war with Japan is over, everyone

will finally go home," Kip said. "And where will you go?" Caravaggio asked. The sapper
rolled his head, half nodding, half shaking it, his mouth smiling. So Caravaggio began to talk,
mostly to Kip.
The dog cautiously approached the table and laid its head on Caravaggio's lap. The
sapper asked for other stories about Toronto as if it were a place of peculiar wonders. Snow
that drowned the city, iced up the harbour, ferryboats in the summer where people listened
to concerts. But what he was really interested in were the clues to Hana's nature, though she
was evasive, veering Caravaggio away from stories that involved some moment of her life. She
wanted Kip to know her only in the present, a person perhaps more flawed or more compassionate
or harder or more obsessed than the girl or young woman she had been then.

In her

life there was her mother Alice her father Patrick her stepmother Clara and Caravaggio. She

had already admitted these names to Kip as if they were her credentials, her dowry. They

were faultless and needed no discussion. She used them like authorities in a book she could

refer to on the right way to boil an egg, or the correct way to slip garlic into a lamb. They were

not to be questioned.

And now— because he was quite drunk— Caravaggio told the story of Hana's singing the

"Marseillaise," which he had told her before. "Yes, I have heard the song," said Kip, and he

attempted a version of it. "No, you have to sing it out," said Hana, "you have to sing it

standing up!"

She stood up, pulled her tennis shoes off and climbed onto the table. There

were four

snail lights flickering, almost dying, on the table beside her bare feet.

“This is for you. This is how you must learn to sing it, Kip. This is for you.”

She sang up into darkness beyond their snail light, beyond the square of light from the

English patient’s room and into the dark sky waving with shadows of cypress. Her hands

came out of their pockets.

Kip had heard the song in the camps, sung by groups of men, often during strange

moments, such as before an impromptu soccer match. And Caravaggio when he had heard it

in the last few years of the war never really liked it, never liked to listen to it. In his heart he

had Hana’s version from many years before. Now he listened with a pleasure because she

was singing again, but this was quickly altered by the way she sang. Not the passion of her at

sixteen but echoing the tentative circle of light around her in the darkness. She was singing it
as if it was something scarred, as if one couldn't ever again bring all the hope of the song
together. It had been altered by the five years leading to this night of her twenty-first birthday
in the forty-fifth year of the twentieth century. Singing in the voice of a tired traveller, alone
against everything. A new testament. There was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer
could only be one voice against all the mountains of power. That was the only sureness. The
one voice was the single unspoiled thing. A song of snail light. Caravaggio realized she was
singing with and echoing the heart of the sapper.

In the tent there have been nights of no talk and nights full of talk. They are never sure
what will occur, whose fraction of past will emerge, or whether touch will be

anonymous and

silent in their darkness. The intimacy of her body or the body of her

language in his ear— as

they lie upon the air pillow he insists on blowing up and using each night. He has been

charmed by this Western invention. He dutifully releases the air and folds it into three each

morning, as he has done all the way up the landmass of Italy.

In the tent Kip nestles against her neck. He dissolves to her scratching fingernails across

his skin. Or he has his mouth against her mouth, his stomach against her wrist.

She sings and hums. She thinks him, in this tent's darkness, to be half bird— a quality of

feather within him, the cold iron at his wrist. He moves sleepily whenever he is in such

darkness with her, not quite quick as the world, whereas in daylight he glides through all that

is random around him, the way colour glides against colour.

But at night he embraces torpor. She cannot see his order and discipline without seeing

his eyes. There isn't a key to him. Everywhere she touches braille doorways. As if organs, the

heart, the rows of rib, can be seen under the skin, saliva across her hand now a colour. He

has mapped her sadness more than any other. Just as she knows the strange path of love he

has for his dangerous brother. "To be a wanderer is in our blood. That is why jailing is most

difficult for his nature and he would kill himself to get free."

During the verbal nights, they travel his country of five rivers. The Sutlej, Jhelum, Ravi,

Chenab, Beas. He guides her into the great gurdwara, removing her shoes, watching as she

washes her feet, covers her head. What they enter was built in 1601, desecrated in 1757 and

built again immediately. In 1830 gold and marble were applied. “If I took you before
morning you would see first of all the mist over the water. Then it lifts to reveal the temple in
light. You will already be hearing the hymns of the saints— Ramananda, Nanak and Kabir.
Singing is at the centre of worship. You hear the song, you smell the fruit from the temple
gardens— pomegranates, oranges. The temple is a haven in the flux of life, accessible to all. It
is the ship that crossed the ocean of ignorance.”
They move through the night, they move through the silver door to the shrine where the
Holy Book lies under a canopy of brocades. The ragis sing the Book’s verses accompanied
by musicians. They sing from four in the morning till eleven at night. The Granth Sahib is
opened at random, a quotation selected, and for three hours, before the mist

lifts off the lake

to reveal the Golden Temple, the verses mingle and sway out with unbroken reading.

Kip walks her beside a pool to the tree shrine where Baba Gujhaji, the first priest of the

temple, is buried. A tree of superstitions, four hundred and fifty years old. “My mother came

here to tie a string onto a branch and beseeched the tree for a son, and when my brother was

born returned and asked to be blessed with another. There are sacred trees and magic water

all over the Punjab.”

Hana is quiet. He knows the depth of darkness in her, her lack of a child and of faith. He

is always coaxing her from the edge of her fields of sadness. A child lost. A father lost.

“I have lost someone like a father as well,” he has said. But she knows this man beside

her is one of the charmed, who has grown up an outsider and so can switch allegiances, can

replace loss. There are those destroyed by unfairness and those who are not. If she asks him

he will say he has had a good life — his brother in jail, his comrades blown up, and he risking

himself daily in this war.

In spite of the kindnesses in such people they were a terrible unfairness. He could be all

day in a clay pit dismantling a bomb that might kill him at any moment, could come home

from the burial of a fellow sapper, his energy saddened, but whatever the trials around him

there was always solution and light. But she saw none. For him there were the various maps

of fate, and at Amritsar’s temple all faiths and classes were welcome and ate together. She

herself would be allowed to place money or a flower onto the sheet spread

upon the floor

and then join in the great permanent singing.

She wished for that. Her inwardness was a sadness of nature. He himself would allow her

to enter any of his thirteen gates of character, but she knew that if he were in danger he would

never turn to face her. He would create a space around himself and concentrate. This was his

craft. Sikhs, he said, were brilliant at technology. “We have a mystical closeness... what is it?”

“Affinity.” “Yes, affinity, with machines.”

He would be lost among them for hours, the beat of music within the crystal set whacking

away at his forehead and into his hair. She did not believe she could turn fully to him and be

his lover. He moved at a speed that allowed him to replace loss. That was his nature. She

would not judge it in him. What right did she have. Kip stepping out each

morning with his

satchel hanging off his left shoulder and walking the path away from the Villa San Girolamo.

Each morning she watched him, seeing his freshness towards the world perhaps for the last

time. After a few minutes he would look up into the shrapnel-torn cypresses, whose middle

branches had been shelled away. Pliny must have walked down a path like this, or Stendahl,

because passages in The Charterhouse of Parma had occurred in this part of the world too.

Kip would look up, the arch of the high wounded trees over him, the path in front of him

mediaeval, and he a young man of the strangest profession his century had invented, a sapper,

a military engineer who detected and disarmed mines. Each morning he emerged from the

tent, bathed and dressed in the garden, and stepped away from the villa and

its surroundings,

not even entering the house— maybe a wave if he saw her— as if language, humanity, would

confuse him, get, like blood, into the machine he had to understand. She would see him forty

yards from the house, in a clearing of the path.

It was the moment he left them all behind. The moment the drawbridge closed behind

the knight and he was alone with just the peacefulness of his own strict talent. In Siena there

was that mural she had seen. A fresco of a city. A few yards outside the city walls the artist's

paint had crumbled away, so there was not even the security of art to provide an orchard in

the far acres for the traveller leaving the castle. That was where, she felt, Kip went during the

day. Each morning he would step from the painted scene towards dark bluffs of chaos. The

knight. The warrior saint. She would see the khaki uniform flickering through the cypresses.

The Englishman had called himfato profugus— fate's fugitive. She guessed that these days began for him with the pleasure of lifting his eyes up to the trees.

They had flown the sappers into Naples at the beginning of October 1943, selecting the best from the engineering corps that were already in southern Italy, Kip among the thirty men who were brought into the booby-trapped city.

The Germans in the Italian campaign had choreographed one of the most brilliant and terrible retreats in history. The advance of the Allies, which should have taken a month, took a year. There was fire in their path. Sappers rode the mudguards of trucks as the armies moved forward, their eyes searching for fresh soil disturbances that signalled land mines or

glass mines or shoe mines. The advance impossibly slow. Farther north in the mountains,

partisan bands of Garibaldi communist groups, who wore identifying red handkerchiefs,

were also wiring explosives over the roads which detonated when German trucks passed over

them.

The scale of the laying of mines in Italy and in North Africa cannot be imagined. At the

Kismaayo-Afmadu road junction, 260 mines were found. There were 300 at the Omo River

Bridge area. On June 30, 1941, South African sappers laid 2,700 Mark 11 mines in Mersa

Matruh in one day. Four months later the British cleared Mersa Matruh of 7,806 mines and

placed them elsewhere.

Mines were made out of everything. Forty-centimetre galvanized pipes were filled with

explosives and left along military paths. Mines in wooden boxes were left in homes. Pipe
mines were filled with gelignite, metal scraps and nails. South African sappers packed iron
and gelignite into four-gallon petrol cans that could then destroy armoured cars.
It was worst in the cities. Bomb disposal units, barely trained, were shipped out from
Cairo and Alexandria. The Eighteenth Division became famous. During three weeks in
October 1941, they dismantled 1,403 high-explosive bombs.
Italy was worse than Africa, the clockwork fuzes nightmar-ishly eccentric, the
spring-activated mechanisms different from the German ones that units had been trained in.
As sappers entered cities they walked along avenues where corpses were strung from trees or
the balconies of buildings. The Germans often retaliated by killing ten

Italians for every

German killed. Some of the hanging corpses were mined and had to be blown up in midair.

The Germans evacuated Naples on October i, 1943. During an Allied raid the previous

September, hundreds of citizens had walked away and begun living in the caves outside the

city. The Germans in their retreat bombed the entrance to the caves, forcing the citizens to

stay underground. A typhus epidemic broke out. In the harbour scuttled ships were freshly

mined underwater.

The thirty sappers walked into a city of booby traps. There were delayed-action bombs

sealed into the walls of public buildings. Nearly every vehicle was rigged. The sappers became

permanently suspicious of any object placed casually in a room. They distrusted

everything they saw on a table unless it was placed facing “four o’clock.” Years after the war a

sapper putting a pen on a table would position it with the thicker end facing four o’clock.

Naples continued as a war zone for six weeks and Kip was there with the unit for the

whole period. After two weeks they discovered the citizens in the caves. Their skin dark with

shit and typhus. The procession of them back into the city hospitals was one of ghosts.

Four days later the central post office blew up, and seventy-two were killed or wounded.

The richest collection of mediaeval records in Europe had already burned in the city

archives.

On the twentieth of October, three days before electricity was to be restored, a German

turned himself in. He told authorities that there were thousands of bombs

hidden in the

harbour section of the city that were wired to the dormant electrical system. When power was

turned on, the city would dissolve in flames. He was interrogated more than seven times, in

differing stages of tact and violence— at the end of which the authorities were still uncertain

about his confession. This time an entire area of the city was evacuated. Children and the old,

those almost dead, those pregnant, those who had been brought out of the caves, animals,

valuable jeeps, wounded soldiers out of the hospitals, mental patients, priests and monks and

nuns out of the abbeys. By dusk on the evening of October 22, 1943, only twelve sappers

remained behind.

The electricity was to be turned on at three p.m. the next day. None of the sappers had

ever been in an empty city before, and these were to be the strangest and most disturbing
hours of their lives.
During the evenings thunderstorms roll over Tuscany. Lightning drops towards any
metal or spire that rises up out of the landscape. Kip always returns to the villa along the
yellow path between the cypresses around seven in the evening, which is when the thunder, if
there is going to be thunder, begins. The mediaeval experience.
He seems to like such temporal habits. She or Caravaggio will see his figure in the
distance, pausing in his walk home to look back towards the valley to see how far away the
rain is from him. Hana and Caravaggio return to the house. Kip continues his half-mile uphill
walk on the path that curls slowly to the right and then slowly to the left. There is the noise of

his boots on the gravel. The wind reaches him in bursts, hitting the cypresses broadside so
they tilt, entering the sleeves of his shirt.
For the next ten minutes he walks, never sure if the rain will overtake him. He will hear
the rain before he feels it, a clicking on the dry grass, on the olive leaves. But for now he is in
the great refreshing wind of the hill, in the foreground of the storm.
If the rain reaches him before he gets to the villa, he continues walking at the same pace,
snaps the rubber cape over his haversack and walks on within it.
In his tent he hears the pure thunder. Sharp cracks of it overhead, a coach-wheel sound
as it disappears into the mountains. A sudden sunlight of lightning through the tent wall,
always, it seems to him, brighter than sunlight, a flash of contained phosphorus, something
machinelike, to do with the new word he has heard in the theory rooms and

through his

crystal set, which is “nuclear.” In the tent he unwinds the wet turban, dries his hair and weaves

another around his head.

The storm rolls out of Piedmont to the south and to the east. Lightning falls upon the

steeples of the small alpine chapels whose tableaux reenact the Stations of the Cross or the

Mysteries of the Rosary. In the small towns of Varese and Varallo,

larger-than-life terra-cotta

figures carved in the i6oos are revealed briefly, depicting biblical scenes. The bound arms of

the scourged Christ pulled back, the whip coming down, the baying dog,

three soldiers in the

next chapel tableau raising the crucifix higher towards the painted clouds.

The Villa San Girolamo, located where it is, also receives such moments of light— the

dark halls, the room the Englishman lies in, the kitchen where Hana is laying

a fire, the

shelled chapel— all lit suddenly, without shadow. Kip will walk with no qualms under the trees

in his patch of garden during such storms, the dangers of being killed by lightning pathetically

minimal compared with the danger of his daily life. The naive Catholic images from those

hillside shrines that he has seen are with him in the half-darkness, as he counts the seconds

between lightning and thunder. Perhaps this villa is a similar tableau, the four of them in

private movement, momentarily lit up, flung ironically against this war.

The twelve sappers who remained behind in Naples fanned out into the city. All through

the night they have broken into sealed tunnels, descended into sewers, looking for fuze lines

that might be linked with the central generators. They are to drive away at two p.m., an hour

before the electricity is to be turned on.

A city of twelve. Each in separate parts of the town. One at the generator, one at the

reservoir, still diving— the authorities most certain destruction will be caused by flooding.

How to mine a city. It is unnerving mostly because of the silence. All they hear of the human

world are barking dogs and bird songs that come from apartment windows above the streets.

When the time comes, he will go into one of the rooms with a bird. Some human thing in this

vacuum. He passes the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, where the remnants of Pompeii and

Herculaneum are housed. He has seen the ancient dog frozen in white ash.

The scarlet sapper light strapped to his left arm is turned on as he walks, the only source

of light on the Strada Carbonara. He is exhausted from the night search, and now there

seems little to do. Each of them has a radiophone, but it is to be used only for an emergency

discovery. It is the terrible silence in the empty courtyards and the dry fountains that makes

him most tired.

At one p.m. he traces his way towards the damaged Church of San Giovanni a Carbonara,

where he knows there is a chapel of the Rosary. He had been walking through the church a

few evenings earlier when lightning filled the darkness, and he had seen large human figures

in the tableau. An angel and a woman in a bedroom. Darkness replaced the brief scene and

he sat in a pew waiting, but there was to be no more revelation.

He enters that corner of the church now, with the terracotta figures painted the colour of

white humans. The scene depicts a bedroom where a woman is in conversation with an angel.

The woman’s curly brown hair reveals itself under the loose blue cape, the fingers of her left
hand touching her breastbone. When he steps forward into the room he realizes everything
is larger than life. His own head is no higher than the shoulder of the woman. The angel’s
raised arm reaches fifteen feet in height. Still, for Kip, they are company. It is an inhabited
room, and he walks within the discussion of these creatures that represent some fable about
mankind and heaven.

He slips his satchel from his shoulder and faces the bed. He wants to lie on it, hesitating
only because of the presence of the angel. He has already walked around the ethereal body
and noticed the dusty light bulbs attached to its back beneath the dark coloured wings, and he
knows in spite of his desire that he could not sleep easily in the presence of

such a thing.

There are three pairs of stage slippers, a set designer’s subtlety, peeking out from under the

bed. It is about one-forty.

He spreads his cape on the floor, flattens the satchel into a pillow and lies down on the

stone. Most of his childhood in Lahore he slept on a mat on the floor of his bedroom. And in

truth he has never gotten accustomed to the beds of the West. A pallet and an air pillow are

all he uses in his tent, whereas in England when staying with Lord Suffolk he sank

claustro-phobically into the dough of a mattress, and lay there captive and awake until he

crawled out to sleep on the carpet.

He stretches out beside the bed. The shoes too, he notices, are larger than life. The feet

of Amazonians slip into them. Above his head the tentative right arm of the

woman. Beyond
his feet the angel. Soon one of the sappers will turn on the city's electricity, and if he is going
to explode he will do so in the company of these two. They will die or be secure. There is
nothing more he can do, anyway. He has been up all night on a final search for caches of
dynamite and time cartridges. Walls will crumble around him or he will walk through a city of
light. At least he has found these parental figures. He can relax in the midst of this mime of
conversation.
He has his hands under his head, interpreting a new toughness in the face of the angel he
didn't notice before. The white flower it holds has fooled him. The angel too is a warrior. In
the midst of this series of thoughts his eyes close and he gives in to tiredness.

He is sprawled out with a smile on his face, as if relieved finally to be sleeping, the luxuriousness of such a thing. The palm of his left hand facedown on the concrete. The colour of his turban echoes that of the lace collar at the neck of Mary. At her feet the small Indian sapper, in uniform, beside the six slippers. There seems to be no time here. Each of them has selected the most comfortable of positions to forget time.

So we will be remembered by others. In such smiling comfort when we trust our surroundings. The tableau now, with Kip at the feet of the two figures, suggests a debate over his fate. The raised terra-cotta arm a stay of execution, a promise of some great future for this sleeper, childlike, foreign-born. The three of them almost at the point of decision, agreement.

Under the thin layer of dust the angel’s face has a powerful joy. Attached to its back are

the six light bulbs, two of which are defunct. But in spite of that the wonder of electricity

suddenly lights its wings from underneath, so that their blood-red and blue and goldness the

colour of mustard fields shine animated in the late afternoon.

Wherever Hana is now, in the future, she is aware of the line of movement Kip’s body

followed out of her life. Her mind repeats it. The path he slammed through among them.

When he turned into a stone of silence in their midst. She recalls everything of that August

day— what the sky was like, the objects on the table in front of her going dark under the

thunder.

She sees him in the field, his hands clasped over his head, then realizes this is a gesture

not of pain but of his need to hold the earphones tight against his brain. He is a hundred

yards away from her in the lower field when she hears a scream emerge from his body which

had never raised its voice among them. He sinks to his knees, as if unbuckled. Stays like that

and then slowly gets up and moves in a diagonal towards his tent, enters it, and closes the

flaps behind him. There is the dry crackle of thunder and she sees her arms darken.

Kip emerges from the tent with the rifle. He comes into the Villa San Girolamo and

sweeps past her, moving like a steel ball in an arcade game, through the doorway and up the

stairs three steps at a time, his breath metronomed, the hit of his boots against the vertical

sections of stairs. She hears his feet along the hallway as she continues to sit at the table in the

kitchen, the book in front of her, the pencil, these objects frozen and shadowed in the

pre-storm light.

He enters the bedroom. He stands at the foot of the bed where the English patient lies.

Hello, sapper.

The rifle stock is against his chest, its sling braced against his triangled arm.

What was going on outside?

Kip looks condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping.

The body turns

and fires into the old fountain, and the plaster explodes dust onto the bed. He pivots back so

the rifle points at the Englishman. He begins to shudder, and then everything in him tries to

control that.

Put down the gun, Kip.

He slams his back against the wall and stops his shaking. Plaster dust in the air around

them.

I sat at the foot of this bed and listened to you, Uncle. These last months. When I was a kid I did that, the same thing. I believed I could fill myself up with what older people taught me. I believed I could carry that knowledge, slowly altering it, but in any case passing it beyond me to another.

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country.

Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had

the histories and printing presses?

You and then the Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian

soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be pukkah. You had wars like cricket. How

did you fool us into this? Here... listen to what you people have done.

He throws the rifle on the bed and moves towards the Englishman. The crystal set is at

his side, hanging off his belt. He unclips it and puts the earphones over the black head of the

patient, who winces at the pain on his scalp. But the sapper leaves them on him. Then he

walks back and picks up the rifle. He sees Hana at the door.

One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki.

He swerves the rifle towards the alcove. The hawk in the valley air seems to float

intentionally into the V sight. If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls

across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the

shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom.

He watches the English patient, earphones on, the eyes focused inwards, listening. The

rifle sight moves down the thin nose to the Adam's apple, above the collarbone. Kip stops

breathing. Braced at exact right angles to the Enfield rifle. No waver.

Then the Englishman's eyes look back at him.

Sapper.

Caravaggio enters the room and reaches for him, and Kip wheels the butt of the rifle into

his ribs. A swat from the paw of an animal. And then, as if part of the same movement, he is

back in the braced right-angle position of those in firing squads, drilled into him in various

barracks in India and England. The burned neck in his sights.

Kip, talk to me.

Now his face is a knife. The weeping from shock and horror contained, seeing everything,

all those around him, in a different light. Night could fall between them, fog could fall, and

the young man’s dark brown eyes would reach the new revealed enemy.

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract

makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them.

But we, oh, we were easily impressed— by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What

have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For

this to happen?

What is it? Jesus, tell us!

I’ll leave you the radio to swallow your history lesson. Don’t move again, Caravaggio. All

those speeches of civilisation from kings and queens and presidents... such

voices of abstract

order. Smell it. Listen to the radio and smell the celebration in it. In my country, when a

father breaks justice in two, you kill the father.

You don’t know who this man is.

The rifle sight unwavering at the burned neck. Then the sapper swerves it up towards the

man’s eyes.

Do it, Almasy says.

The eyes of the sapper and the patient meet in this half-dark room crowded now with the

world.

He nods to the sapper.

Do it, he says quietly.

Kip ejects the cartridge and catches it as it begins to fall. He throws the rifle onto the bed,

a snake, its venom collected. He sees Hana on the periphery.

The burned man untugs the earphones off his head and slowly places them

down in front

of him. Then his left hand reaches up and pulls away the hearing aid, and drops it to the

floor.

Do it, Kip. I don’t want to hear any more.

He closes his eyes. Slips into darkness, away from the room.

The sapper leans against the wall, his hands folded, head down. Caravaggio can hear air

being breathed in and out of his nostrils, fast and hard, a piston.

He isn’t an Englishman.

American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world,

you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry

Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English.

No. Not him. Mistake. Of all people he is probably on your side.

He would say that doesn’t matter, Hana says.

Caravaggio sits down in the chair. He is always, he thinks, sitting in this

chair. In the room

there is the thin squawking from the crystal set, the radio still speaking in its underwater voice.

He cannot bear to turn and look at the sapper or look towards the blur of Hana's frock. He

knows the young soldier is right. They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white

nation.

The sapper walks out of the room, leaving Caravaggio and Hana by the bed. He has left

the three of them to their world, is no longer their sentinel. In the future, if and when the

patient dies, Caravaggio and the girl will bury him. Let the dead bury the dead. He has never

been sure what that meant. Those few callous words in the Bible.

They will bury everything except the book. The body, the sheets, his clothes, the rifle.

Soon he will be alone with Hana. And the motive for all this on the radio. A

terrible event

emerging out of the shortwave. A new war. The death of a civilisation.

Still night. He can hear nighthawks, their faint cries, the muted thud of wings as they turn.

The cypress trees rise over his tent, still on this windless night. He lies back and stares into the

dark corner of the tent. When he closes his eyes he sees fire, people leaping into rivers into

reservoirs to avoid flame or heat that within seconds burns everything, whatever they hold,

their own skin and hair, even the water they leap into. The brilliant bomb carried over the sea

in a plane, passing the moon in the east, towards the green archipelago. And released.

He has not eaten food or drunk water, is unable to swallow anything. Before light failed

he stripped the tent of all military objects, all bomb disposal equipment, stripped all insignia

off his uniform. Before lying down he undid the turban and combed his hair out and then

tied it up into a topknot and lay back, saw the light on the skin of the tent slowly disperse, his

eyes holding onto the last blue of light, hearing the drop of wind into windlessness and then

hearing the swerve of the hawks as their wings thudded. And all the delicate noises of the air.

He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia. He steps away from the

many small bombs of his career towards a bomb the size, it seems, of a city, so vast it lets the

living witness the death of the population around them. He knows nothing about the weapon.

Whether it was a sudden assault of metal and explosion or if boiling air scoured itself towards

and through anything human. All he knows is, he feels he can no longer let anything

approach him, cannot eat the food or even drink from a puddle on a stone bench on the

terrace. He does not feel he can draw a mateh out of his bag and fire the lamp, for he believes

the lamp will ignite everything. In the tent, before the light evaporated, he had brought out

the photograph of his family and gazed at it. His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know

what he is doing here.

He stands now under the trees in the August heat, untur-banned, wearing only a kurta.

He carries nothing in his hands, just walks alongside the outline,of hedges, his bare feet on

the grass or on terrace stone or in the ash of an old bonfire. His body alive in its sleeplessness,

standing on the edge of a great valley of Europe.

In the early morning she sees him standing beside the tent. During the evening she had

watched for some light among the trees. Each of them in the villa had eaten alone that night,

the Englishman eating nothing. Now she sees the sapper’s arm sweep out and the canvas

walls collapse on themselves like a sail. He turns and comes towards the house, climbs the

steps onto the terrace and disappears.

In the chapel he moves past the burned pews towards the apse, where under a tarpaulin

weighted down with branches is the motorbike. He begins dragging the covering off the machine.

He crouches down by the bike and begins nuzzling oil into the sprockets and cogs.

When Hana comes into the roofless chapel he is sitting there leaning his back and head

against the wheel.

Kip.

He says nothing, looking through her.

Kip, it’s me. What did we have to do with it?

He is a stone in front of her.

She kneels down to his level and leans forward into him, the side of her head against his

chest, holding herself like that.

A beating heart.

When his stillness doesn’t alter she rolls back onto her knees.

The Englishman once read me something, from a book: “Love is so small it can tear itself

through the eye of a needle.”

He leans to his side away from her, his face stopping a few inches from a rain puddle.

A boy and a girl.

While the sapper unearthed the motorcycle from under the tarpaulin, Caravaggio leaned

forward on the parapet, his chin against his forearm. Then he felt he couldn’t bear the mood

of the house and walked away. He wasn’t there when the sapper gunned the

motorbike to life

and sat on it while it half bucked, alive under him, and Hana stood nearby. Singh touched her arm and let the machine roll away, down the slope, and only then

revved it to life.

Halfway down the path to the gate, Caravaggio was waiting for him, carrying the gun. He

didn't even lift it formally towards the motorbike when the boy slowed down, as Caravaggio

walked into his path. Caravaggio came up to him and put his arms around him. A great hug.

The sapper felt the stubble against his skin for the first time. He felt drawn in, gathered into

the muscles. "I shall have to learn how to miss you," Caravaggio said. Then the boy pulled

away and Caravaggio walked back to the house.

The machine broke into life around him. The smoke of the Triumph and dust and fine

gravel fell away through the trees. The bike leapt the cattle grid at the gates, and then he was

weaving down out of the village, passing the smell of gardens on either side of him that were

tacked onto the slopes in their treacherous angle.

His body slipped into a position of habit, his chest parallel with, almost touching, the

petrol tank, his arms horizontal in the shape of least resistance. He went south, avoiding Florence

completely. Through Greve, across to Montevarchi and Ambra, small towns ignored by

war and invasion. Then, as the new hills appeared, he began to climb the spine of them

towards Cortona.

He was travelling against the direction of the invasion, as if rewinding the spool of war, the

route no longer tense with military. He took only roads he knew, seeing the familiar castle

towns from a distance. He lay static on the Triumph as it burned under him in its tear along
the country roads. He carried little, all weapons left behind. The bike hurled through each
village, not slowing for town or memory of war. “The earth shall reel to and fro like a
drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage.”
She opened up his knapsack. There was a pistol wrapped in oilskin, so that its smell was
released when she uncovered it. Toothbrush and tooth powder, pencil sketches in a
notebook, including a drawing of her— she was sitting on the terrace and he had been looking
down from the Englishman’s room. Two turbans, a bottle of starch. One sapper lamp with its
leather straps, to be worn in emergencies. She flicked it on and the knapsack filled with
crimson light.

In the side pockets she found pieces of equipment to do with bomb disposal, which she

didn’t wish to touch. Wrapped up in another small piece of cloth was the metal spile she had

given him, which was used for tapping maple sugar out of a tree in her country.

From within the collapsed tent she unearthed a portrait that must have been of his family.

She held the photograph in her palm. A Sikh and his family.

An older brother who was only eleven in this picture. Kip beside him, eight years old.

“When the war came my brother sided with whoever was against the English,”

There was also a small handbook that had a map of bombs. And a drawing of a saint

accompanied by a musician.

She packed everything back in except the photograph, which she held in her free hand.

She carried the bag through the trees, walked across the loggia and brought it into the house.

Each hour or so he slowed to a stop, spat into the goggles and wiped dust off with the

sleeve of his shirt. He looked into the map again. He would go to the Adriatic, then south.

Most of the troops were at the northern borders.

He climbed into Cortona, the high-pitched gunning of the bike all around him. He rode

the Triumph up the steps to the door of the church and then walked in. A statue was there,

bandaged in scaffold. He wanted to get closer to the face, but he had no rifle telescope and

his body felt too stiff to climb up the construction pipes. He wandered around underneath

like somebody unable to enter the intimacy of a home. He walked the bike down the church

steps, and then coasted down through the shattered vineyards and went on to

Arezzo.

At Sansepolcro he took a winding road into the mountains, into their mist, so he had to

slow to minimal speed. The Bocca Trabaria. He was cold but locked the weather out of his

mind. Finally the road rose above the whiteness, the mist a bed behind him. He skirted

Urbino where the Germans had burned all the field horses of the enemy. They had fought

here in this region for a month; now he slid through in minutes, recognizing only the Black

Madonna shrines. The war had made all the cities and towns similar.

He came down towards the coast. Into Gabicce Mare, where he had seen the Virgin

emerge from the sea. He slept on the hill, overlooking cliff and water, near where the statue

had been taken. That was the end of his first day.

Dear Clara— Dear Maman,

Maman is a French word, Clara, a circular word, suggesting cuddles, a personal word that

can be even shouted in public. Something as comforting and as eternal as a barge. Though

you, in spirit, I know are still a canoe. Can swerve one around and enter a creek in seconds.

Still independent. Still private. Not a barge responsible for all around you. This is my first

letter in years, Clara, and I am not used to the formality of them. I have spent the last few

months living with three others, and our talk has been slow, casual. I am not used to talking in

any way but that now.

The year is 194-. What? For a second I forget. But I know the month and the day. One

day after we heard the bombs were dropped in japan, so it feels like the end of the world.

From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If

we can

rationalize this we can rationalize anything.

Patrick died in a dove-cot in France. In France in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries they built them huge, larger than most houses. Like this.

The horizontal line one-third of the way down was called the rat ledge— to stop rats

running up the brick, so the doves would be safe. Safe as a dove-cot. A sacred place. Like a

church in many ways. A comforting place. Patrick died in a comforting place.

At five a.m. he kicked the Triumph to life, and the rear wheel threw gravel in a skirt. He

was still in darkness, still unable to distinguish sea in the vista beyond the cliff. For the journey

from here to the south he had no maps, but he could recognize the war roads and follow the

coast route. When sunlight came he was able to double his speed. The rivers

were still ahead

of him.

Around two in the afternoon he reached Ortona, where the sappers had laid the Bailey

bridges, nearly drowning in the storm in mid-river. It began to rain and he stopped to put on

a rubber cape. He walked around the machine in the wetness. Now, as he travelled, the

sound in his ears changed. The shush shush replacing the whine and howl, the water flung

onto his boots from the front wheel. Everything he saw through the goggles was grey. He

would not think of Hana. In all the silence within the bike’s noise he did not think of her.

When her face appeared he erased it, pulled the handlebars so he would swerve and

have to concentrate. If there were to be words they would not be hers; they would be names

on this map of Italy he was riding through.

He feels he carries the body of the Englishman with him in this flight. It sits on the petrol

tank facing him, the black body in an embrace with his, facing the past over his shoulder,

facing the countryside they are flying from, that receding palace of strangers on the Italian hill

which shall never be rebuilt. “And my words which I have put in thy mouth shall not depart

out of thy mouth. Nor out of the mouth of thy seed. Nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed.”

The voice of the English patient sang Isaiah into his ear as he had that afternoon when the

boy had spoken of the face on the chapel ceiling in Rome. “There are of course a hundred

Isaiahs. Someday you will want to see him as an old man— in southern France the abbeys

celebrate him as bearded and old, but the power is still there in his look.”

had sung out into the painted room. “Behold, the Lord will carry thee away with a mighty

captivity, and He will surely cover thee. He will surely violently turn and toss thee like a ball

into a large country.”

He was riding deeper into thick rain. Because he had loved the face on the ceiling he had

loved the words. As he had believed in the burned man and the meadows of civilisation he

tended. Isaiah and Jeremiah and Solomon were in the burned man’s bedside book, his holy

book, whatever he had loved glued into his own. He had passed his book to the sapper, and

the sapper had said we have a Holy Book too.

The rubber lining on the goggles had cracked during the past months and the rain now

began filling each pocket of air in front of his eyes. He would ride without

them, the shush

shush a permanent sea in his ears, and his crouched body stiff, cold, so there was only the

idea of heat from this machine he rode so intimately, the white spray of it as he slid through

villages like a slipping star, a half-second of visitation when one could make a wish. “For the

heavens shall vanish away like smoke and the earth shall wax old like a garment. And they

that dwell therein shall die in like manner. For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and

the worms shall eat them like wool.” A secret of deserts from Uweinat to Hiroshima.

He was removing the goggles as he came out of the curve and onto the bridge over the

Ofanto River. And with his left arm up holding the goggles free he began to skid. He dropped

them and calmed the bike but was not prepared for the iron bounce onto the

lip of the bridge,

the bike lying down to the right underneath him. He was suddenly sliding with it along the

skin of rainwater down the centre of the bridge, blue sparks from the scratching metal around

his arms and face.

Heavy tin flew off and shouldered past him. Then he and the bike veered to the left,

there was no side to the bridge, and they hurtled out parallel to the water, he and the bike

sideways, his arms flung back above his head. The cape released itself away from him, from

whatever was machine and mortal, part of the element of air.

The motorbike and the soldier stilled in midair, then pivoted down into the water, the

metal body between his legs as they slammed into it, jarring a white path through it,

disappearing, the rain too entering the river. “He will toss thee like a ball

into a large

country.”

How did Patrick end up in a dove-cot, Clara? His unit had left him, burned and wounded.

So burned the buttons of his shirt were part of his skin, part of his dear chest. That I kissed

and you kissed. And how was my father burned? He who could swerve like an eel, or like

your canoe, as if charmed, from the real world. In his sweet and complicated innocence. He

was the most unverbal of men, and I am always surprised women liked him. We tend to like

a verbal man around us. We are the rationalists, the wise, and he was often lost, uncertain,

unspoken.

He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you

understand the sadness of geography? I could have saved him or at least

been with him till

the end. I know a lot about burning. How long was he alone with doves and rats? With the

last stages of blood and life in him? Doves over him. The flutter when they thrashed around

him. Unable to sleep in the darkness. He always hated darkness. And he was alone, without

lover or kin.

I am sick of Europe, Clara. 1 want to come home. To your small cabin and pink rock in

Georgian Bay. I will take a bus up to Parry Sound. And from the mainland send a message

over the shortwave radio out towards the Pancakes. And wait for you, wait to see the

silhouette of you in a canoe coming to rescue me from this place we all entered, betraying

you. How did you become so smart? How did you become so determined? How were you

not fooled like us? You that demon for pleasure who became so wise. The purest among us,

the darkest bean, the greenest leaf.

Hana

The sapper’s bare head comes out of the water, and he gasps in all the air above the river.

Caravaggio has made a one-strand bridge with hemp rope down to the roof of the next

villa. The rope is tightened at this end round the waist of the statue of Demetrius and then

secured to the well. The rope barely higher than the tops of the two olive trees along his path.

If he loses his balance he will fall into the rough dusty arms of the olive.

He steps onto it, his socked feet gripping the hemp. How valuable is that statue? he once

asked Hana casually, and she told him the English patient had said all statues of Demetrius

were worthless.

She seals the letter and stands up, moves across the room to close the window, and at that

moment lightning slips through the valley. She sees Caravaggio in midair halfway across the

gorge that lies like a deep scar alongside the villa. She stands there as if in one of her dreams,

then climbs into the window alcove and sits there looking out.

Every time there is lightning, rain freezes in the suddenly lit night. She sees the buzzard

hawks flung up into the sky, looks for Caravaggio.

He is halfway across when he smells the rain, and then it begins to fall all over his body,

clinging to him, and suddenly there is the greater weight of his clothes.

She puts her cupped palms out of the window and combs the rain into her hair.

The villa drifts in darkness. In the hallway by the English patient’s bedroom the last

candle burns, still alive in the night.

Whenever he opens his eyes out of sleep, he sees the old wavering yellow light.

For him now the world is without sound, and even light seems an unneeded thing. He will tell the girl in the morning he wants no candle flame to accompany him while he sleeps.

Around three a.m. he feels a presence in the room. He sees, for a pulse of a moment, a figure at the foot of his bed, against the wall or painted onto it perhaps, not quite discernible in the darkness of foliage beyond the candlelight. He mutters something, something he had wanted to say, but there is silence and the slight brown figure, which could be just a night shadow, does not move. A poplar. A man with plumes. A swimming figure. And he would not be so lucky, he thinks, to speak to the young sapper again.

He stays awake in any case this night, to see if the figure moves towards him.

Ignoring the

tablet that brings painless-ness, he will remain awake till the light dies out and the smell of

candle smoke drifts into his room and into the girl’s room farther down the hall. If the figure

turns around there will be paint on his back, where he slammed in grief against the mural of

trees. When the candle dies out he will be able to see this. His hand reaches out slowly and

touches his book and returns to his dark chest. Nothing else moves in the room.

Now where does he sit as he thinks of her? These years later. A stone of history

skipping over the water, bouncing up so she and he have aged before it touches the surface

again and sinks.

Where does he sit in his garden thinking once again he should go inside and write a letter

or go one day down to the telephone depot, fill out a form and try to contact her in another

country. It is this garden, this square patch of dry cut grass that triggers him back to the

months he spent with Hana and Caravaggio and the English patient north of Florence in the

Villa San Girolamo. He is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife. He is permanently

busy in this city. At six p.m. he removes his white lab coat. Underneath he wears dark

trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. He closes up the clinic, where all the paperwork has

weights of various kinds— stones, inkpots, a toy truck his son no longer plays with— to keep it

from being blown away by the fan. He climbs onto his bicycle and pedals the four miles

home, through the bazaar. Whenever he can he swerves his bicycle over to the shadowed

part of the street. He has reached an age when he suddenly realizes that the sun of India
exhausts him.
He glides under the willows by the canal and then stops at a small neighbourhood of
houses, removes his cycle clips and carries the bicycle down the steps into the small garden
his wife has nurtured.
And something this evening has brought the stone out of the water and allowed it to move
back within the air towards the hill town in Italy. It was perhaps the chemical burn on the arm
of the girl he treated today. Or the stone stairway, where brown weeds grow ardently along
the steps. He had been carrying his bicycle and was halfway up the steps before he
remembered. This had been on the way to work, so the trigger of memory was postponed

when he got to the hospital and ran into seven hours of constant patients and administration.

Or it might have been the burn on the young girl's arm. He sits in the garden. And he watches

Hana, her hair longer, in her own country. And what does she do? He sees her always, her

face and body, but he doesn't know what her profession is or what her circumstances are,

although he sees her reactions to people around her, her bending down to children, a white

fridge door behind her, a background of noiseless tram cars. This is a limited gift he has

somehow been given, as if a camera's film reveals her, but only her, in silence. He cannot

discern the company she moves among, her judgement; all he can witness is her character

and the lengthening of her dark hair, which falls again and then again into her eyes.

She will, he realizes now, always have a serious face. She has moved from being a young
woman into having the angular look of a queen, someone who has made her face with her
desire to be a certain kind of person. He still likes that about her. Her smartness, the fact that
she did not inherit that look or that beauty, but that it was something searched for and that it
will always reflect a present stage of her character. It seems every month or two he witnesses
her this way, as if these moments of revelation are a continuation of the letters she wrote to
him for a year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his silence.
His character, he supposed.
Now there are these urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were
most intimate at in the tent or in the English patient’s room, both of which

contained the

turbulent river of space between them. Recalling the time, he is just as fascinated at himself

there as he is with her— boyish and earnest, his lithe arm moving across the air towards the girl

he has fallen in love with. His wet boots are by the Italian door, the laces tied together, his

arm reaches for her shoulder, there is the prone figure on the bed.

During the evening meal he watches his daughter struggling with her cutlery, trying to

hold the large weapons in her small hands. At this table all of their hands are brown. They

move with ease in their customs and habits. And his wife has taught them all a wild humour,

which has been inherited by his son. He loves to see his son's wit in this house, how it

surprises him constantly, going beyond even his and his wife's knowledge and humour— the

way he treats dogs on the streets, imitating their stroll, their look. He loves the fact that this

boy can almost guess the wishes of dogs from the variety of expressions at a dog’s disposal.

And Hana moves possibly in the company that is not her choice. She, at even this age,

thirty-four, has not found her own company, the ones she wanted. She is a woman of honour

and smartness whose wild love leaves out luck, always taking risks, and there is something in

her brow now that only she can recognize in a mirror. Ideal and idealistic in that shiny dark

hair! People fall in love with her. She still remembers the lines of poems the Englishman read

out loud to her from his commonplace book. She is a woman I don’t know well enough to

hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life.

And so Hana moves

and her face turns and in a regret she

lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges.

Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and

gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his

spectacles.

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