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THE DARK ARTS

BY BEN MARCUS

On a dark winter morning at the Müllerhaus men's hostel, Julian Bledstein reached for his Dopp kit. At home, he could medicate himself blindfolded, but here, across the ocean, it wasn't so easy. The room stank, and more than one young man was snoring. The beds in the old gymnasium were singles, which didn't keep certain of the guests from coupling when the lights went out. Sometimes Julian could hear them going at it, fornicating as if with silencers on. He studied the sounds when he couldn't sleep, picturing the worst: animals strapped to breathing machines, children smothered under blankets. In the morning he could never tell just who had been making love. The men dressed and left for the day, avoiding eye contact, mesmerized in the glow of their cell phones.

Julian held his breath and squeezed the syringe, draining untold dollars' worth of questionable medicine into the flesh of his thigh. He clipped a bag holding the last of his money to the metal underside of his bed. His father's hard-earned money. Not enough euros left. Not nearly enough. He'd have to make a call, poor-mouth into the phone until his father's wallet spit out more bills.

He left the hostel and took the stone path down to nothing good. This morning he was on his way, yet again, to meet Hayley's train. Sweet, sweet Hayley. She would fail to appear today, no doubt, as she had failed to appear every day for the past two weeks. It seemed more and more likely that his lovely, explosively angry girlfriend wouldn't be joining him in Germany—even though they'd spent months planning the trip, Julian Googling deep into his unemployed afternoons back home, Hayley pinging him sexy links from work whenever she could. A food-truck map, day treks along the Königsallee. First they'd destroy England and France, lay waste to

the Old World, then drop into freaking Düsseldorf for the last, broken leg of the journey.

It was meant to be a romantic medical-tourist getaway, a young invalid and his lady friend sampling the experimental medicine of the Rhine. But they'd fought in France, and he'd come to Düsseldorf ahead of her. Now he waited not so hopefully, not so patiently—dragging himself between the hostel, the train station, and the Internet café, checking vainly for messages from Hayley—while seeking treatment at the clinic up on the hill.

Treatment—well, that perhaps wasn't the word for it. His was one of the incurable conditions. An allergy to his own blood, as he not so scientifically thought of it. An allergy to himself was more like it. His immune system was confused, fighting against the home team. Or his immune system knew *exactly* what it was doing. These days, autoimmune diseases were the most sophisticated way to undermine yourself, to be your own worst enemy.

Back home, he'd tried it all—the steroids, the nerve blocks, the premium plasma—and felt no different. He'd eaten only green food until it ran down his legs. Then for a long time he'd tried nothing. He'd tried school, then tried dropping out, living, in his mid-twenties, in his old room in his father's house. Through it all, though, he had mostly tried Hayley, as in really, really tried her, and he could see how very tried she'd become.

It was Hayley who'd pushed for this trip, so that Julian could finally have a shot at the new medical approach they'd read so much about, a possible breakthrough with rare autoimmune disorders. In Germany, a shining outpost on the medical fron-

tier, doctors tried what was forbidden or unconscionable elsewhere. And for a fee they'd try it on you. Massive doses of it. You could bathe in its miracle waters. You could practically get stem-cell Jell-O shooters at the bar on Thursday nights. So long as, you know, you waived—yes, waived—goodbye to your rights, your family, your life. It was not such a terrible trade.

On Julian's first day, the clinic staff had brandished a very fine needle. It had gleamed in the cold fluorescent light of the guinea-pig room. From Julian's wheezing torso, the doctors had drawn blood and marrow, his deep, private syrup—which they then boiled and spoon-fed back to him until he sizzled, until he just about *glowed*. Of course, the whole thing was more complicated than that, particularly the dark arts they conjured on his marrow once they'd smuggled it out of him. They spun it, purified it, damn near weaponized it, then sold it back to him for cash. Zero-sum medicine, since he'd grown it himself, in what Hayley, digging into his ribs, had called "the Julian Farm." Except that the sum was a good deal larger than zero.

And after a few weeks, or so the idea was, you'd be better. In his wellness fantasies, Julian always pictured himself scrubbed clean, nicely dressed, suddenly funny and charming. Better in every goddam way. But, of course, throughout these treatments, as he'd discovered, the frowning doctors hedged and balked and shat caveats, until the promise of recovery was off the table, out of the room, nowhere near the building.

This morning, he ducked the stares of shopkeepers, who guarded their doors against him, the pale American who spent no money. They must have come to recognize his sickly figure by now. What was left of it. God knows they gawked.

To Julian, it seemed that they could see right through his clothes, and they were not amused. You'd need more than clothing to hide a body like his. You'd need a shovel, a tarp. Tarps were *designed* to cover men like him.

Julian could only walk faster, wincing, until the shopkeepers released him from eye contact. Had anyone, he wondered, ever studied the biology of being seen? The ravaging, the way it literally burned when you fetched up in people's sight lines and they took aim at you with their minds? He wanted to summon a look of kindness and curiosity in return, a look that might make them forgive his miserly ways, his trespass on their ancient, superior city. But his face lacked the power to convey. He'd stopped trying to use it for silent communication—the gestures you tendered overseas, absent a shared language, to suggest that you were not a murderer. Such facial language was for apes, or some mime troupe in Vermont. Mummenschanz people who emoted for a living. He ate with his face and spoke with it. Sometimes he hid it in his hands. That should have been enough.

Anyway, why not let them think that he meant them harm, these people of Düsseldorf? Give them a good scare. A man dressed up as his own corpse, in a costume called simply "Julian." Too bad he couldn't distribute his gray pelt en masse, so that a population of sunken-eyed Julians could limp through Germany, begging for candy, muttering, "Trick or treat, *Süsses oder Saures*." For now, he was the only one who got to wear it.

It took him just one sucking sprint on a cigarette to reach the train station, a fearsome building in rust-colored stone. After a few mornings inside, braving the crush of travellers reeking of chowder, he figured he didn't need to enter the

dank space to wait for Hayley. A granite ledge opposite the station offered a perfect view of the decamping passengers. Every morning, locals poured out of the building wrapped in hemp and straw. The fancier ones wore the waxed canvas coats of hunters. Occasionally, an American or two spoiled the tasteful palette with vacation colors. They shot into the town square like clowns fired from a cannon, mugging their snack-smeared faces at some imagined camera and releasing high-strung moods as if by megaphone: *I have arrived in your historic city, and I am the happiest person you will ever know! Let me rub my joy on you!*

Even if some rare Americans were shrewd enough to go native, shoeing themselves in the earth-brown padabouts of Europeans, wearing sweaters and satchels instead of parkas and backpacks, their faces, haunted by the tourist advisories, gave them away. Julian pictured them on the train ride into town, the German landscape scrolling by in fairy-tale colors outside the window while they huddled over their Fodor's, steeling themselves when they came to the warning that visitors who showed fear or uncertainty were the first to be singled out. Targeted through binoculars by cunning locals, led down unmarked streets into alleys, where they'd be robbed and erased from the world. Even in modern Germany. Even in the civilized world. Especially in the civilized world!

Tourists and, for that matter, all people were merely accidents of physics, foamy chuff in the wake of a larger *activity*. That wouldn't be explicitly stated in the Fodor's. Not in so many words. Bodies were the jettisoned waste of something too great to comprehend. And the so-called "inner life" of these bodies was just biological sewage, produced by an organism that was, itself, a higher form of waste. Duh! People were sta-

tistically insignificant, a rounding error. Since he'd got sick, since he'd started frequenting online illness forums, particularly the terminal-illness ones, where the goddam sunny side of life was systematically shut down, this had become obvious. And boo freaking hoo.

Maybe, though, in terms of day-to-day survival, it was best to put this stuff out of his mind. One's smallness, the very, very convincing ways in which one's presence failed to matter, sometimes had to go without saying.

That was a tombstone inscription for you: *Julian Bledstein. He went without saying.*

Or: *Here lies Julian Bledstein. He lied to himself, and now he lies here.*

Two weeks had gone by like this. Trains had rolled in from Paris, Salzburg, Dresden, Berlin. A disappointment of trains, failing each time to spit from their insides the girl Julian had fought with in Strasbourg. In fact, he and Hayley had fought in several cities on this trip, a road show of freeze-outs and recriminations. For the most part, they'd warred silently, with so much stealth that sometimes Julian wasn't sure whether they were actually quarrelling. Hayley could look so serious beneath her pixie haircut. She was too stubbornly self-contained, too confident, too O.K. with it all, which was decidedly not O.K. with Julian. A self needed to spill out sometimes; a body should show evidence of what the hell went on inside it. But Hayley had built a firewall around her feelings and moods. There was no knowing her, and fuck you if you tried to pierce her privacy. You were a creep and an invader, and you'd be rebuffed, then shamed. Even in bed, as she hobby-horsed on top of him with the focus of a child doing homework, grimacing when her moment came, he wondered if she

was mad at him. Their mating activity was hardly sexier than a needle in the back. But at least he got to see her naked.

Hayley would fall quiet if Julian suddenly touched her hand, when all he wanted was to be touched back. That was the consolation prize available to the bottoms in a relationship, right? The mules, the dinguses, the shitbags? Touchbacks were supposed to be free. But she'd be clearly annoyed at the transparency of Julian's desire when out of nowhere he pounced. Poking her to be cute, which was not, he knew, *cute*. Was there a subcategory of shit-eating grin, depending on whose shit you ate? He'd gone to a different school of etiquette, the school of no shame, the school of I need *more* from you. He'd been fucking homeschooled in emotional helplessness, scoring off the charts. By touching Hayley and waiting for her response, Julian could pursue the kind of emotional research you didn't get to conduct in graduate school, a dissertation-level inquiry into the limits of revulsion regarding people who ostensibly love each other. Which always turned out to be a really stupid move. Hayley would smell his need, and it stank, it really, truly stank.

But she didn't flee, even though his salient feature as a man was his leavability. He created occasions for departure in others. Until now, Hayley had hung in there. Her loyalty alone was an aphrodisiac, even though his medication sometimes gave him the cold, dull crotch of a mannequin. Hayley also believed in Julian's illness, found it true and real and even pretty damn interesting, a faith that had turned out to be rare. Hayley and Julian's father and the occasional stranger on the Internet, where the ill go in search of one another, humping one another's empathy slots—these were the believers. Even if, sometimes, maybe, Julian did not entirely believe in the illness himself.

Hayley wasn't coming. It was pretty obvious. Julian sat shivering in the chill, listening for the 9:13. Then the 9:41. Then the 10:02. He was tired. In winter, he sometimes caught a fever. His arms burned hot, as if a flame were being held to his skin. This was the nerves dying, an Internet confidant had explained. Of course his immune system wanted him dead. *It knew.* It was making the call on behalf of the wider society. It was taking him out. In the larger project of the universe, of which he must necessarily be kept in the dark, his own existence appeared to be an obstacle. So the species makes an adjustment. It redacts.

No one else was waiting outside today. No one else was stupid enough to sit and freeze on a granite ledge in middle Germany, watching the trains come in. People here knew where their loved ones were. Loved ones' coördinates were simply available. Such was the nature, the very definition, of a loved one. Normal people didn't need to risk exposure and illness waiting outside and wondering, letting their minds work up end-times scenarios. They did not need to dream up future sorrows for themselves.

After the first trains of the morning failed to produce Hayley, Julian stood at a café for a scorched espresso, then returned to his lookout to wait. When Hayley still didn't come, he took shelter at the crêpe stand, where the day's crêpes had already been cloaked in black jam. A death bread, for two euros.

He wasn't hungry. He was never hungry. But some dim sense of duty haunted him, his father's voice, gentle and girlish, suggesting that food might help. Food, food, food. "Please, Julian, eat something," his father was always saying, as if noxious, soon to be spoiled material from the earth would do anything

but poison him further. For Julian's whole life, his father had stood at the stove and made pancakes for him, grilled cheese, oatmeal, eggs, burgers. Later, when the alternative-care community had thrust nutritional strategies their way, when the Prednisone and the Lyrica, the off-label intravenous immunoglobulin, and the chemotherapy worms had fattened and ruined and bleached and burned and defeated him, his father had steamed bushels of kale. But Julian had only ever picked at his plate, as if dissecting roadkill for shards of glass. His father, especially after Julian's mother travelled underground to spend the rest of eternity inside a luxury coffin, had removed Julian's untouched food and spooned it into the trash. Only to try again a few hours later, smiling and kind.

So now Julian thought that eating something might be smart, but the tourist's gesture for plain crêpe eluded him. Or perhaps the vender just enjoyed watching him pretend to scrape something foul from his hand. Scraping it and scraping it, souring his face to indicate his distaste for the jam, while the vender grinned at him and winked, as if Julian were demonstrating something the two of them might do together later, in private. Why were such gestures always considered sexual, one hand doing something untoward to the other hand? Why wasn't this seen as a semaphore of the beginning of the world, God the Creator digging life from the soil and brushing it off, sending it without a headlamp into the darkness? Julian might finally consent to play charades, maybe, if instead of celebrities the pantomime were restricted to events surrounding the big bang. Religious scenarios. The cold narrative of physics. Reënactments from the very, very beginning of time. Very fucking very. And, on the eighth day, God made his creatures so lonely they wept. Picture that charade, he thought.

Julian was early for his transfusion. This was probably good, because he had to navigate a ritual confusion at the clinic's front desk. It concerned the existence of Hayley.

"You do not come alone?" the receptionist quizzed him, as per fucking usual. She rose slightly in her chair and peered behind him. He stepped aside so that she could see the emptiness.

"I do."

As in, *regardez* how goddam alone I am. See it once and for all.

There seemed to be no way to permanently establish the fact of his solitude. He shrugged at her and showed, via sneer, what he considered to be justified disgust. It made his face ache.

The receptionist failed to notice.

"You are not supposed to be coming alone," she insisted, waving the form.

It was true. He'd agreed to be accompanied—they didn't give a shit by whom—because the treatments left you weak, woozy. The treatments left you worse than that. Supine, prone, drooling, horny. Never mind how problematic that was, how much that confirmed that "treatment" was the wrong word. What should you call it when afterward you needed to be led from the premises? When, owing to the obliterating immunosuppressants, which preceded the perfectly refreshing speedballs of marrow, the body lacked the power to remove itself? Probably they didn't care, at this first-class medical establishment, if the body was dumped in the Rhine. Just get it out of the clinic. Did they call it "the body"? Did they ask each other, peeking from behind their German curtain: Has *the body* gone? It is all clear, *ja*?

Anyway, he'd done fine most days without Hayley, weaving through the granite lobby after his treatment, baby-stepping down the broad white stairway overlooking the town. On some days, well, at least once, he'd even felt strong and alert, with a fresh dose of doctored stem cells running through his blood.

Julian leaned in, showed his teeth. These were the gray teeth, he knew, of someone threatening not to bite you but to crumble his mouth on your face, leaving bits of horrid ash.

"Would you like me to leave?" he hissed at her. "Because I will. Is that what you want?"

Ooh, boy. What a tremendous threat, not to follow through on his own treatment, which his father had already paid for! He really had her now. He'd backed her into a corner!

The receptionist sighed. She was a human being after all.

"This person exists for you?"

"Not just for me."

"And you say she is coming?" The receptionist struck a hopeful tone.

Oh, God, he thought, let's not be hopeful anymore. Where has it got us, really?

"No," Julian said. "I'd say she is not."

The clinic wasn't what he'd been expecting when he first arrived. The place lacked a porch with rocking chairs, where dignitaries convalesced deep in thought, staring out over a thundering gorge. Nurses did not come by with blankets to

cover your lap. You did not take the clean, healing air, or hike up mossy trails into the mountains. Convalescence here was presented as an essentially professional activity, like day-trading. The reception lounge was smartened up like a bank; the treatment rooms were hidden in vaults. Photographs of athletic prowess, framed in metal, lined the hallways. Bodies performing impossible maneuvers, in full color, glistening, mostly nude. These images were hung, no doubt, to flatter the rumored celebrity clients, who must have had their own entrance, their own goddam wing, because Julian never saw them. Rich and arthritic American athletes, willing to take injections of liquid horse penis or whatever into their stiff joints, able to afford exceedingly rare and hazardous attacks on their bodies. Sea sponge in the neck, cartilage-fortifying worms, administered via cream.

In the waiting room, patients gazed at their phones or read or looked anywhere but at one another. A certain shame lingered over people who were going out of pocket on experimental health care, paying too much to keep feeling worse far from home. How humiliating to be seen like this, failing to rage, rage against the dying of the light. Failing even to fucking *complain*.

When his name was called, the technician led him to the semi-private room where patients reclined in blue vinyl chairs, watching television they could not understand. In transfusion chair No. 3, Julian submitted to the usual pre-treatment shenanigans. He confirmed his name and birth date, signing, yet again, a German-language consent form. A nurse practitioner arrived to stick him for blood, filling a vial from his leg until it looked like a long black bullet. She waved it at him, and it foamed.

"You are O.K.," she said.

"I am?"

"Yes." She smirked. "I know this." She tapped her head. A universal sign of certainty. He needed to remember to tap his head when he spoke, no matter what. He should always tap his head.

"Ready?" the nurse asked, and he nodded to her. He wasn't.

She wheeled up the apparatus and switched it on. Inside its wire frame rested the clear bag sloshing with his new life, frothy and pink. It produced a not unpleasant hum.

He let his arm fall into the syringe basket and closed his eyes, waiting for the dreams that sometimes came when the long needle, loaded with marrow, was raised over his body.

After the treatment, Julian's father assured him from the lobby pay phone that money was not a problem. He'd wire it over on his lunch break, which meant that Julian could get it later tonight. But how was he feeling, his father wanted to know, and how were his side effects and was he able to sleep, because you don't get better if you don't sleep well, that's just common sense, and of course the city must be tempting, the museums and the old opera house and the Latin food festival that had begun last night, according to what his father had read online—what an exciting thing for Germany to be doing! his father said—but he shouldn't go crazy amid the delights of Düsseldorf. The delights! Was his hotel clean? He should take care of himself, and money, seriously, was not a problem.

This, Julian knew, was his father's way of not saying that money was a problem, a very big problem, and that his father worried about it night and day, but never spoke of it. Nev-

er. Julian was simply allowed to lick money from his father's body whenever he wanted to, and his father had pledged never to cry out in pain.

They would find a way, his father said. He'd send more than Julian had asked for, because worrying about money was the last thing Julian needed right now. He needed to heal. Was he healing?

Julian glanced at his needle-kissed arm. He imagined the German blood product sluicing through his body, trouncing the free radicals, persuading his white blood cells not to eat through bone.

He guessed that he was healing. Quite.

"How's Hayley?" his father asked. "She keeping you fed?"

Julian pictured Hayley prying his mouth open with her fist, pouring sauce down his throat.

"She's fine," Julian answered. No doubt this was true. Hayley was probably having a glass of wine, smoking, sitting at an outdoor café somewhere. France, still? Berlin? They'd spoken of Berlin in a vaguely flirty way, as if they might like each other more there.

"Is she with you now? Can you put her on?"

His father and Hayley and their whisper time: they were his armchair doctors, his medical curators, who earned their authority because they cared more about his health than he did.

"Oh, she went ahead to scout out a good place for dinner. I'm starving."

"That's what I like to hear," his father said.

How about that, having something you like to hear. For Julian, it would be what, exactly? Maybe something Hayley-related. Even just her name. Preferably spoken by her. As in: *Hey, Jules, it's me, Hayley. I miss you, and I'm on my way.*

"O.K., Dad, well, thank you."

His father breathed into the phone. He could tell, all the way from Germany, that back in New Jersey his father was O.K., maybe even smiling. He could feel it. This was something nice. It was very nice. It would do.

He should never, until the very second he died, stop knowing that he had a father who would do anything for him. What a crime to forget this. He was a criminal if he ever stopped thinking this for even a minute.

"I love you, honey," his father said, and they hung up.

Julian took a shortcut to the Old Town, up along Adersstrasse, dipping around the Graf-Adolf-Platz. Germany was deadly cold this time of year, the trees slick with ice, the grass so scarce it seemed the whole country had been poured in cement. The weathered stone, the weathered people—even the language was weathered. It was genius, Julian thought, to create a language from strangled cries, deathbed wheezing. There was perhaps no truer way to communicate. If he spoke German, his inanities would escalate into parable. Everything out of his mouth would be a eulogy. German was the end-times language, the only tongue worth speaking as the sun shrank and went cold.

Instead, Julian was stuck with whiny, nasal English, in which every word was a spoiled complaint, a bit of pouting. In En-

glish, no matter what you said, you sounded like a coddled human mascot with a giant head asking to have his wiener petted. Because you were lonely. Because you were scared. And your wiener would feel so much better if someone petted it. How freakishly impolite, how shameful, to let these things be revealed by one's language. At least overseas he didn't speak much English. He didn't speak much anything.

Julian ate no dinner. He found a wine bar and drank cautiously from a communal bottle of something red and sparkly, a kind of alcoholic soda. He sat in a sea of couches, and every now and then some grinning celebrant poured a swallow into his glass and raised it vaguely at the others. A kind of listless cheers, offered to the room. Each time, Julian raised his own glass in response, nodding his head. Cheers, indeed. When the bottle was empty, and he'd paid far more than he owed, he walked back down to the station and took his position on the ledge.

There was something tremendously good about sitting there and not looking out for Hayley, a habit he'd decided to break. He didn't even know the train schedule tonight. The trains could do what they liked. He would take an evening off from feeling incomplete without her. A paid vacation. He'd done this shit on his own so far, and if Hayley had been there he would have tried to scrape her, day and night, for pity and understanding. She would have been empty by now, empty and seething, but still he would have kept scraping with his spoon, digging deep into her sweetest parts until they were completely gone.

He'd been doing fine without Hayley, and he would do fine, and he fucking was fine. He sat and he froze and he shivered,

and it was perfectly terrific. He had no good reason to be at the station, and yet so far, since he'd arrived, this was his best night in Germany. He even felt sort of *healthy*, although it made him nervous to think so, and damned if he knew what healthy meant anymore. He'd long ago lost track of how he was supposed to feel, and on days like this, nights like this, treatment or not, it was hard not to be worried, a little bit, that some of the reactionary, conservative doctors whom Hayley had railed against at home, the ones who'd scorecarded Julian in the normal range, might actually have been right. Perhaps he had been fine this whole time. He wasn't legitimately sick. Perhaps this was just what it felt like to be alive.

Or so those doctors had seemed to be saying.

Did everyone else, he wondered, feel listless, strange, anxious, dull, scared—you could pretty much go shopping from a list of adjectives—and did other people just clench their jaws and endure it, without running to the doctor, as he did, again and again?

For hours, it seemed, no trains came into the station. The tracks were quiet and the whole city was perfectly still, as if perhaps there'd been some agreement, deep in the brain of the city, that all machines would be shut down at this hour, all vehicles grounded. A scheduled hiatus of activity on this clear, cold evening in Düsseldorf. Travellers still occasionally made their way out through the station's tall glass doors, locals mostly, pulling dark suitcases across the ice. How they'd got to town without a train was a mystery to Julian, until he realized that they must have arrived hours ago and waited inside, where it was warm, for someone to come and get them. That was what happened to arrivals. Not all of them got met. They'd stared out at the square all evening, as tiny, fuel-effi-

cient cars ripped here and there without stopping for them. Finally, they must have realized that their rides weren't coming, so they'd bundled up and walked out alone into the cold.

That night at the hostel, a visitor came to Julian's bed. Some uninvited man crept under his covers while he slept, and Julian woke up—suddenly, rudely, confused. This man was *taking liberties*. Before much could happen—before disgrace and shame and, who knows, the implication that he was even remotely O.K. with this—he'd fled to the bathroom.

His heart was blasting, his sleep shirt damp and twisted. From the bathroom, looking back out into the gymnasium, the air thick with sleep, he saw no sign of anything. No man, no sounds, just beds and bodies and darkness. It was as if the stranger had vanished. Hands had been on him while he slept, and when he thought about it he saw himself lying there *reciprocating*. He couldn't piece it together. What in the goddam hell had happened? He checked his body everywhere, testing. For evidence? Damage?

He'd been touched, that he was sure of. He'd been touched, it had happened, and now there was nothing to be done about it. He crouched in a bathroom stall, trying to think. Some scene in whatever he'd been dreaming—he'd been having some kind of *intense* dream, oh, God—had allowed this to happen, had made him stay longer in his bed than he should have. As if he were enjoying it. He'd been dreaming of cuddling, and not with Hayley, but big deal. That was how it worked. You could date the whole world in your dreams, and it was O.K. You could, actually, date-*rape* the whole world in a dream, too. You could kill and clean up after yourself. Or not—you could leave evidence all over the world and get

caught and go to jail forever and wake up crying. So fucking what. The point is, he was cuddling someone in his dream, and he was doing it in that squirming way, he had to admit, that he hoped might lead to more, and then he woke up beside a body, and what were you supposed to do? There was *no way* not to respond. Anyone would. It could have been a *dog* and he would have nuzzled into it, feeling something. He was aroused, technically, but he had been aroused *before* the man crawled into bed with him, so this was bullshit.

Oh, God. He wanted to cry foul.

In the morning he asked about other accommodations, and they offered him a private room, for twice the money. Then, no, they withdrew that offer, because it seemed those rooms were taken. The only available beds were in the Turnhalle, where he was staying, and if he would like to change beds he could do that, for a fee. Would sir like a bed in another part of the room?

He lurked outside the hostel, watching the men light their cigarettes and head into town. They filed out silently, squinting against the day. Which one of them had done this?

He realized, once the men were gone from Müllerhaus, that he was exaggerating his indignation. He was worked up for nothing. No one was watching, and he was putting on the fucking Ritz, for God's sake, as if there were something so terribly wrong with someone's kissing him in the night. Was he really supposed to care at this late date who kissed him? Wasn't it enough to be kissed by someone? What was the saying—beggars can't be complete and total losers?

"Your friend is here," the nurse told him as he was finishing his treatment that afternoon.

Friend, Julian thought. Not possible. The word made him picture animals. Pets he'd never had.

"Your friend waits there now," the nurse said, pointing up.

If he followed in the direction she was pointing, he'd float through the ceiling and into the sky before crashing to the ground. Head in this direction, sir, even if it takes you over a cliff. Waiting for you, maybe, will be someone who cares.

Julian cleaned up in the patients' bathroom. On his way out, a nurse directed him to the doctor's office, where his very own doctor, whom he hadn't seen for days, was hanging film in a light box.

The doctor greeted Julian and waved him over to a stool.

Julian, instead, stepped up to the light box. The scan was mostly black, a portrait of darkness.

"Is this me?" Julian asked. "My head?"

The doctor nodded.

"We are looking at your scan while you are here this day."

Julian studied the doctor. He was trim, and his skin glowed. Like most doctors, he seemed offensively healthy, as if he kept the real secret of vitality to himself. He would live forever while people crumbled and died around him. If necessary, he would eat you to survive.

"Well, we see something sometimes," the doctor was saying, "in this kind of white-blood person. The scan is really. This

is why we scan. And," the doctor continued, "we have this discovery to show you."

The doctor pointed his pen at a scuff in the film.

"A little discovery. You can discover it here."

The doctor traced the outline of nothing that was, perhaps, a shade lighter than the nothing around it.

Maybe Julian could see it. A very small shape, like a cloud. *In his brain.* Weather passing through. If you could draw a headache, this is what you would draw.

"This is a concern," the doctor said, looking at Julian hopefully.

"O.K.," Julian said. "Where is it?"

That mattered, right? His entire personality could perhaps be explained by this cloud. A cluster of rogue cells pushes on a nerve, blocks a vessel supplying blood to the deep limbic system, and suddenly you're funny, witty, and charming. That was what a personality was, the blood thirst of rogue cells, a growth in the mind.

The doctor pointed again at the cloud.

"It is here," he said, more slowly.

"No, I mean in *me*. Where is this thing?"

Julian tapped his head. Maybe it wasn't in the brain itself.

"This is not our work."

"You didn't make this tumor?" Julian grinned.

"Well, tumor," the doctor said, as if there might be some doubt. "We see a shape, yes? We do not make that name for it. We do not work on this kind of area. We do not fix this."

"Does anyone?"

"Someone must know what this is. Who treats the brain where you live."

Yes, someone must.

"We will be sending this scan to your American doctor. And we think that the stem-cell transfusions is not, for now, a good idea. Until this."

The doctor pointed at the cloud and tried, again, to look stumped.

"This first. To understand this. Then, maybe."

Julian was impressed. He had to hand it to him. The doctor had devised a pretty good tombstone inscription.

This first. To understand this. Then, maybe.

Julian laughed.

"What is it?" the doctor said, smiling. As in, thank God this moron is going into denial now. He's going to be one of those people who crack jokes after getting news of a tumor. I will not need to wash his tears from my doctor's coat.

"It's just that, if you tell me it's all in my head now," Julian said, "you won't be lying."

"Aha. I see what you say. This is truly funny. But we will not be lying to you ever, Mr. Bledstein."

Oh, feel free, Julian didn't say. Lie to me all you want.

The nurse brought in the papers to terminate his treatment, seal off liability, sever connections between Julian and the clinic. He signed and signed and signed.

The doctor, frowning thoughtfully, stood by.

"I am sorry we do not have a way to give you your money back," the doctor was saying.

"I could help you," Julian said. "If you want."

"Excuse me?"

"I could show you a way to give me my money back," Julian explained. "You know, how to transfer it back to my credit card. It's not so hard."

"Oh, you must misunderstand." The doctor blushed.

"Yes, I must," Julian said.

Outside the clinic, standing on the steps in her long corduroy thrift-store coat, nearly hidden by a plaid scarf, was Hayley. She gave him a shy little wave, sheepishly smiling, forgiving, forgetting, denying, all in one cute fucking face. How on earth.

"Jules! Oh, my God, you took *forever!*"

"I took forever?" He tried to sound arch. Here Hayley actually was. Jesus Christ.

"It's freezing," she said, laughing.

She had a gift for killing off oddity, making shit like this—sudden encounters in foreign countries—seem routine.

Julian agreed that it was cold. Germany in February and all that.

"Are you O.K.?" she asked. "You *look* good."

How nice if that were true. He'd never looked good, not even as a baby. Hayley should be ashamed of herself. *He looked good.* Still, he had to applaud her strategy. Cheer, denial, exuberance. If only he could.

"Come here already!" Hayley shouted. "Come hug me, you stupid bastard. How are you? Oh, my God, I can't believe I'm *seeing* you."

He succumbed to Hayley's hug, giving little back.

"Oh, you," she kept saying. "I missed you, you know."

They walked through the icy streets of Düsseldorf, stopping to sit and shiver on a cold metal bench by the Rheinturm. Julian took Hayley through the Old Town, along Carlsplatz, pointing out cultural zones with the indifference of a local. He lied, effortlessly, about places he hadn't even seen, like the Kunstakademie—looking at art was the last thing he'd wanted to do—and invented a day trip to Cologne. Which he'd taken last Wednesday? Or maybe Thursday? Hayley beamed up at him, her brave and adventurous boyfriend, snuggling into his coat as they walked.

Hayley kept saying that she couldn't believe she was here. I mean, could he? she asked. Could he believe it? And he disap-

pointed her by saying, that, well, yeah, he could, because she had been supposed to come, hadn't she?

"I know, but it's crazy, right?" she said.

Julian steered Hayley clear of Müllerhaus, but he kept it in his sights, a secret back door he could fall through. He didn't interrogate her on her whereabouts these past two weeks, on the matter of who or what had detained her in the brighter, more exciting ports of Europe, and she didn't mention it. She hardly spoke. Maybe they *hadn't* fought or maybe they weren't still, in some quiet, effortlessly Zen way, fighting right now. One day, people would swab each other with animosity sticks, and there'd be no way to hide it. Just as you could be tested for cancer, you could be tested for fury. Your anger would show, or your resentment, your detachment, your ambivalence, your reduced sexual attraction, no matter what you said or did. Your mood would be a chemical fact, and, if you lied about it, then poor, poor you. You'd be found out! Looking at Hayley, seeing her radiate, feeling her cozy up against him, it was ridiculously hard—in fact, it was impossible—not to feel that the affection she was suddenly smothering him with was meant for someone else.

Maybe that person shared his name, and looked like him—the poor fuck—but so what. Hayley wanted a stranger—*You are dead to me*, he wanted to say to himself—and Julian couldn't help her. Instead of breaking up with your girlfriend, could you break up with *yourself*?

"So I talked to your dad," Hayley said.

"Why?"

"Well." She looked at him funny. "Because I wanted to know where you were." She punched him softly in the arm.

Maybe she wanted to say: play along with this, Julian, please, please, because this is how it works. I am trying so hard right now.

"You knew exactly where I was," he said. "I've been right here the whole time. I've been at the clinic every day for two weeks. Where else would I be?"

"I wanted to know that you were doing O.K., and, you know, where you were staying."

"So you asked him?"

"I knew you'd have been in touch with him."

"Yeah."

"I can care about you, Julian."

"I know you can, Hale."

She could care about him in theory, and maybe in real life, too. But he must have migrated to some other place, because both of those territories seemed very far off to him now.

They crossed the Oberkassel bridge, where the wind destroyed them, and finally Hayley admitted to being impossibly, horribly cold. And hungry. The poor thing's nose was running, and her face was red. Could they maybe head back now? she wanted to know.

"Back where?" he said.

"To the room."

"Room? There is no room."

"At the Am Volksgarten. You know, where we . . . They had rooms. I didn't know where you were, and you weren't checked in there."

"Oh, are you Madame Düsseldorf now? What have you been here for, like, eleven minutes? Plus, I have a place to stay. And there isn't room there for you."

"What do you mean?"

Julian vowed not to look at that area of her that seemed to be crying.

"I am perfectly lodged, thank you."

"Would you please stop it?"

"I doubt it."

"Jules, please. I want to stay with you tonight."

He turned away and crossed the avenue, and she spoke his name, but not so urgently. This is what a favor looks like, he thought. Probably there was a favor being done right now. Except, as he turned uphill and left Hayley behind, he had to wonder who, exactly, was doing this favor, and who was the fucking favor even for?

It was getting dark. Soon the hostel lights would go off. The men would tuck in, and some of them would be snoring in seconds. The whole room would hum with desire, forty or fifty men who required darkness for their work. This was

where he belonged. This time, he'd stay in his bed, no matter what. He would not bolt. He'd listen all night for footsteps. If none came, then perhaps he would be the stranger. He would find someone sleeping in the Turnhalle, someone who needed badly to be visited, and he would oblige.

Julian would reach out his hand. He wouldn't say it out loud, but he could certainly think it. He'd been thinking it for so long now. *Wouldn't you like to join me*? And wouldn't that phrase serve as the perfect inscription on the tombstone they would finally, mercifully, place, when the time came, over his grave?

◆

LOVE IS BLIND AND DEAF

BY JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

Adam and Eve lived together happily for a few days. Being blind, Adam never had to see the oblong, splotchy birthmark across Eve's cheek, or her rotated incisor, or the gnawed remnants of her fingernails. And, being deaf, Eve never had to hear how weakly narcissistic Adam was, how selectively impervious to reason and unwonderfully childlike. It was good.

They ate apples when they ate and, after a while, they knew it all. Eve grasped the purpose of suffering (there is none), and Adam got his head around free will (a question of terminology). They understood why the new plants were green, and where breezes begin, and what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. Adam saw spots; Eve heard pulses. He saw shapes; she heard tones. And, at a certain point, with no awareness of the incremental process that had led them there, they were fully cured of their blindness and deafness. Cured, too, of their marital felicity.

What, each wondered, *have I got myself into*?

First they fought passively, then they despaired privately, then they used the new words ambiguously, then pointedly, then they conceived Cain, then they hurled the early creations, then they argued about who owned the pieces of what had never belonged to anybody. They hollered at each other from the opposite sides of the garden to which they'd retreated:

You're ugly!

You're stupid and wicked!

And then the first bruises spread across the first knees, as the first humans whispered the first prayers: *Diminish me until I can bear it.*

But God refused them, or ignored them, or simply didn't exist enough.

Neither Adam nor Eve needed to be right. Nor did they need anything that could be seen or heard in the world. None of the paintings, none of the books, no film or dance or piece of music, not even green nature itself was capable of filling the sieve of aloneness. They needed peace.

Adam went looking for Eve one night, as the newly named animals had their first dreams. Eve saw him and approached.

"I'm here," she told him, because his eyes were covered with fig leaves.

He reached in front of him and said, "Here I am," though she didn't hear him, because her ears were stuffed with rolled-up fig leaves.

It worked until it didn't. There were only apples to eat, so Adam bound his hands with fig-leaf stems and Eve stuffed her mouth with fig leaves. It was good until it wasn't. He went to bed before he was tired, pulling a fig-leaf quilt up to his nostrils, which were plugged with torn fig leaves. She squinted through a veil of fig leaves into her fig-leaf phone, the only light in the room of the world, and listened to herself listening to him struggle to breathe. They were always inventing new ways not to be aware of the canyon between them.

And the unseeing and unhearing God in whose image they were created sighed, "They're so close."

"Close?" the angel asked.

"They're always inventing new ways not to be aware of the canyon between them, but it's a canyon of tiny distances: a sentence or a silence here, a closing or an opening of space

there, a moment of difficult truth or of difficult generosity. That's all. They're always at the threshold."

"Of paradise?" the angel asked, watching the humans reach for each other yet again.

"Of peace," God said, turning the page of a book without edges. "They wouldn't be so restless if they weren't so close." ◆

SO YOU'RE JUST WHAT, GONE?

BY JUSTIN TAYLOR

It's one of those airlines where you get your seat assignment at the gate, and they're late to Logan and slow to get through security, so the lady at the counter can't seat Charity and her mom together. Which means five-plus hours of freedom—hallelujah! Nonetheless, she pouts about having to sit with a *total stranger*, all because her mom was a spaz about the body scanner and they had to wait while a female agent was summoned to conduct a pat-down. Charity went through the scanner without protest, hands up like a criminal—it was kind of fun—standing in her sock feet in the chamber. She hustled out, in order to catch a glimpse of the agent's screen, hoping to see her own skeleton, though she knew it wouldn't be there. This wasn't like X-rays at the doctor. What she saw was herself simplified to an outline: an empty female shape imposed over a green-gray field.

"There's more radiation in our phones, I bet," Charity says, still not quite ready to let the issue drop. She doesn't want to go to Seattle and visit Grams. Missing a week of school is cool, in theory, but her A.P. English teacher has assigned her a stupid compare-and-contrast about "A Tale of Two Cities," to make up for the classes she'll miss. Between that and a sheaf of Algebra 2 worksheets, she doesn't see how she's coming out ahead. She's almost sixteen; why couldn't she just have stayed home?

Outside, men in orange vests and earmuffs and yellow knit gloves pull bags from the back of a flatbed trailer and chuck them into the guts of the plane. It's drizzling, the dark tarmac streaky with reflections of pinkish guide lights. Six-thirty in the morning and they've been up since four.

Charity's seat turns out to be twenty rows in front of her mom's: another miracle. "Try to get some sleep, Sweetie," her

mom says, working a piece of Nicorette free from its blister pack as she kisses her daughter's cheek.

"I'm gonna do whatever I'm gonna do," she says. Case in point: she was up till almost one last night, Gchatting with her best friend, Lexie, and messing around on YouTube, trading links to cheesy nineties music videos and gross-out clips from medical reality shows.

Charity is stuck in the middle seat. The window seat is occupied by a fat woman wearing a gray sweatshirt that says "Hawaii" in knobby grapefruit-colored letters, her fingernails painted to match, which Charity can see clearly, because the woman's hands are pressed together in front of her. Head bowed and lips moving in silent prayer. Charity sits down in the empty aisle seat and begins her own prayer—that nobody will come, even though they keep announcing over the thing that the flight is full, no upgrades available, check rolling bags at the gate.

When the guy appears, he's older, way older—like thirty, maybe. He wears leather sandals and a powder-blue slim-cut dress shirt, untucked and with the sleeves rolled. When he lifts his black backpack up into the overhead compartment, Charity finds herself staring straight into his exposed navel, a bulging outie like a blind gold eye in his belly, which was waxed at some point and is now stubbled, like a face. The top of his boxers peeks up above the waist of what Charity just so happens to recognize as three-hundred-dollar True Religion jeans.

"Keeping my seat warm for me?" he says. She mumbles a few words, any one of which might be "Sorry," and heaves herself and her satchel-purse and her water bottle over to where she belongs, only to realize—*idiot*—that she's left her shoes under the guy's seat and has to ask him to move so she can get them.

He gives her a tight obliging smile and half-shifts his legs, kind of miming the concept of "getting out of the way" while still being in it. She has to reach between his ankles to grab her All Stars, which he could've just handed to her, though in fairness to him if the situation were reversed she wouldn't touch his shoes for anything. Those grody sandals. Guh. He has hairy feet and narrow toes.

She digs around in her bag and takes out "A Tale of Two Cities," but she isn't allowed to put the tray down yet and the book is heavy and the canned air is making her chilly. Ah, screw it. She'll close her eyes through the boring stuff: flight safety, weather update, taxiing, and then the liftoff rush.

Her eyes flutter open and she sees an attendant going around offering complimentary newspapers. Aisle Guy grabs a *Financial Times*. He frowns at it, then turns to Charity and grins at her, a dadlike grin, crinkles blossoming around his mouth and eyes. "What do you think the odds are of finding anything in here I care about?" he says.

"What?" she says. "I don't . . ." His eyes are a washed-out green. The world feels crude and unfocussed, a bad sketch of itself. And she was wrong a moment earlier: he does not look like anyone's dad.

"The future of the rupee," he says, laughing—to himself? At her? "Interest rates. Taiwan." But then, as abruptly as he's engaged her, a headline in the paper catches his interest and he disappears behind the salmon curtain, leaving her alone with Fat Hawaii, who stinks of sweat and is studying *SkyMall* like it's the lost fifth Gospel. "A Tale of Two Cities" is still splayed open in Charity's lap. She shoves it into the seat-back pocket, half hoping she'll forget it there. She reclines her seat its measly inch and closes her eyes again.

She wakes some time later to sunlight on her face: Fat Hawaii's window shade is up, and her vision is a sea of burnt orange, with swimmers of emerald and gold. At some point she must've slumped over—she can feel the armrest she shares with Aisle Guy digging into her ribs. He has his tray table down: empty Styrofoam cup, two crumpled pretzel bags, and a pile of documents, the pink newspaper beneath. He's leafing through the documents with his left hand, so as not to disturb her, since she's leaning on his right side. Her head, she's coming to realize, is on his shoulder, like you'd do with a boyfriend or something. Her neck is cricked and her breast is squished against his bicep and she can feel his heat, can smell his cologne or soap or deodorant or whatever it is—

Charity jolts herself upright.

"Hey there, sleepyhead," he says.

"Can I, like, get out?" she says, her throat parched, her voice a whisper. Did she sleep with her mouth open? Christ, what if she'd snored—or *drooled*?

Aisle Guy starts to do the leg-twist thing but then, thinking better of it, stands and steps into the aisle, but forward instead of backward, so he's still in her way, and they have to shimmy past each other. She walks to the lavatory on unsteady legs, feeling watched by every passenger as she makes her half-stumbling progress, pins and needles singing hotly in her feet.

There's no question of going back to sleep, so she reads for a while. But she can't keep Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton straight, and what does it matter? She has all week. She had planned to buy Wi-Fi for the flight but she slept so long it isn't worth it now, plus she'd have to go to the back of the plane

and ask her mom for the credit card. Eff that. She takes her phone and earbuds out of her bag and puts some music on. Thumbs whateverly at Candy Crush while she listens.

But *of course* at the exact moment that the captain announces the initial descent Fat Hawaii says she needs to use the bathroom. Charity and Aisle Guy both have to get up. This time, at least, he stands in the right place and there's room for everyone.

"You live in Seattle?" he asks as they sit down. She has one earbud back in and the other waiting in her hand.

"No, I'm visiting Grams—my grandmother. Me and my mom are. For, like, a week."

"I'm on the road," he says. "Boston, Seattle, then Dallas. This whole month."

"O.K.," Charity says, but then, feeling vaguely like she owes him, summons up a modicum of pity, clears her throat, and asks him about his job.

"Oh, it's boring. I don't know if they teach you this in school, but boredom is where money comes from. You plant boredom and money grows."

"Dude, if that was true I'd be rich as hell."

"You get bored, do you?"

She laughs—almost snorts. "Uh, *yeah*. They make all these movies about high school being whatever but then it's just like—*school*. You know?"

"I'm Mark," he says. "What's your name?"

"Charity."

"Charity. That's pretty."

She can feel her cheeks warming. "I don't know."

"No, really. It is. You are."

"O.K. I mean, thank you. Thanks."

Mark reaches into his shirt pocket and produces a cream-colored rectangle and an expensive-looking pen. There's a name and a title and an e-mail address and some logo printed on the front side—it does in fact look boring as hell—but then he flips it over. On the reverse side, he scribbles a phone number and a pair of words. His handwriting is crowded but precise. "This is my cell and where I'm staying," he says, reaching across her lap to slip the card between the pages of "A Tale of Two Cities." He pushes it all the way in until it disappears.

Mark moves his hand away from the book, and Charity thinks he might fake-accidentally brush her breast, the way boys at school sometimes do. But Mark is not a schoolboy and instead palms her inner thigh and squeezes it, two pumps, the second one a hard one, his wrist digging against the crotch of her jeans.

"Call me when you get bored, Charity," he says. His pretzel breath hot on her cheek. Then Fat Hawaii is back and he stands to greet her and Charity has no choice but to follow suit.

He ignores her for the rest of the flight, busying himself with his papers. Fat Hawaii prays loudly as the world rushes close out the window, then applauds when the plane touches down safely.

As soon as they finish taxiing, Mark unbuckles his seat belt and steps into the aisle. He gets his bag down and holds it in front of him and looks straight ahead. In the terminal, he takes hurried strides, and the crowds swallow him. When her mom emerges, finally, they ask each other how the flight was and both say it was fine.

"Did you sleep?" her mom asks.

"No," Charity says. "A little. You don't need to worry about me." She starts walking. They make their way through the teeming hall.

Charity establishes herself in Grams's basement; it's only lightly finished, and the foldout cot isn't super comfortable, but it beats sharing the guest room with her mom. The main thing is to avoid having to deal with anybody, which turns out to be easier than she thought it would be. After a couple of days she's kind of stir-crazy. When she isn't slogging through "A Tale of Two Cities," she keeps her earbuds in and texts with Lexie, or sometimes with Evan, who's this boy from school. She's hung out with Evan a few times, and once, at a party, in an upstairs bathroom, let him get to second base. Under the shirt but over the bra. But lately this girl, Jenna, who goes to private school, is all over his Instagram. Not like *in* pictures with him, just hearting every single post and sometimes leaving "first!" as a comment, which for Jenna's own sake Charity hopes is irony, but who can say. Lexie thinks Evan is a loser, which yeah maybe, but he's funny and easy to be around, so if he texts her she usually texts him back, sometimes right away and sometimes after waiting some random amount of time. And sometimes, like right now, she texts him first. "My grams is losing it. All she does is clean the same clean shit. She's like bleaching bleach."

It's three hours later in Boston. Last period at school, which for Evan is study hall, so he's either doodling in his notebook or messing around on his phone under the table, the latter, probably, since he texts her right back: "Whoa harsh." Charity can't tell if he means that what she's dealing with is harsh or if she herself is being harsh, so she parries with a nonsensical string of emoji: a crystal ball, a party horn, four or five roosters, a smirking moon.

The main mission of this trip is to see how bad things have got with Grams, and to try to figure out what should happen next. To get a sense of—and maybe some control over—Grams's finances: bank accounts; stocks and bonds, if there are any; plus of course the mortgage and will situations. This would be slow going even if Grams, a fiercely independent woman, were at her best. Now that she's forgetting stuff, she covers for her lapses with a viciousness that makes people scared to deal with her. Which is the point.

Charity is used to seeing Grams once or twice a year—Christmas in Boston, maybe a weeklong visit to Seattle in the summer or over spring break. But Grams has mostly stopped travelling and, come to think of it, this is the first time they've made it out to see her in two or three years. Life is busy and money's always tight and time gets away from you. That's what her mom says. And that the important thing is they're here now: spending quality time, getting the lay of the land. Charity's scared that Grams might need to come live with them. She is an only child and doesn't think that she can learn to share her space with someone who, while obviously the opposite of a child, will increasingly have a child's needs and make a child's demands. She hopes Grams can go live with Aunt Jan and Uncle Dennis in Florida. They have a big house all

to themselves, since Kyle is away at college. Or maybe Grams will want to stay in Seattle and they'll put her in a nursing home, though how would they pay for it and when would they ever visit her? The whole thing, when Charity tries to think about it, gets overwhelming really fast. She pushes it into a far corner of her mind and leaves it there, like how when she was a kid sometimes she'd want to help her mom clean the house but then get distracted between the broom part and the dustpan part, so the hair balls and dead bugs and other crud ended up heaped and forgotten in this nasty little pile in the corner, to be dealt with later—or else not.

No further word from Evan. She puts her phone down and goes upstairs.

Charity's mom is going stir-crazy, too, apparently, because she suggests that they all head downtown and do some sightseeing. Grams has "The View" going at top volume on all the TVs: living room, bedroom, and the little countertop one in the kitchen, where she stands in her nightgown, plunging a mop into a bucket of hot water. Charity's mom points out that the kitchen is spotless; the whole house is. "It may seem that way to *you*," Grams says, "but *some* of us have different *standards*." She hits the key words as though they were posts she's driving into the ground. She means to raise a high, strong fence around herself and then cower inside it alone.

"Will she be O.K.?" Charity asks as they get into Grams's car, which Grams never drives anymore. The engine sputters to life as if roused from a long but restless sleep.

"She's made it this far," her mom says. "The more immediate question is whether *I'm* going to be O.K."

"We," Charity says.

"Oh, Sweetie," her mom says. "Don't be dramatic. Of course you're going to be O.K."

After the Space Needle they go to Pike Place, where Charity takes a picture of her mom taking a picture of a group of Asian tourists who are taking turns posing for pictures in front of the original Starbucks. She texts the picture to Lexie and then separately to Evan. She makes her mom buy her a smoothie from a juice stall and they walk over to a little park to share it, but they can't find a spot far enough away from the homeless people so they go back to the market and shuffle up and down the row of stalls.

Charity wants to go to the aquarium, which is right down the block. They even talked about it earlier, but now her mom doesn't want to. She's doing that thing Charity hates, where she pretends to weigh options when really her mind is already made up. "I dunno, Sweetie. Probably we should get back to Grams sooner than later, don't you think. Maybe let's give it a shot another day, 'kay." Questions that don't end in question marks—this means they're never going to the aquarium.

"Whatever," Charity says.

They walk back to the car on a different street from the one they came down. Charity, lost in sulky reverie, keeps her eyes on her shoes and the black-gummed sidewalk as they make their way up a steep hill that she is pleased to notice leaves her mom short of breath. At the top, waiting for a light to change, Charity looks up and is utterly shocked to see, on the façade of a building kitty-corner from where she stands, the words Mark wrote on his card, tall and cut from metal and brightly lit.

She has meant to tell Lexie about Mark, has *almost* told her a few times, but then at the last second held back. Sharing her secret with her best friend would be fun in one way, but keeping it to herself—making it really her secret—is fun in a different way, at least for now. Besides, what if the story isn't over yet? She'd rather tell it all when she gets home and can enjoy the pink shock flushing across Lexie's face.

He did what? *And what did* you *do*? *Holy* fuck, *Char.*

Grams goes to bed after dinner and her mom isn't long in following. Charity finds Mark's card in her book. She punches his number into her phone but doesn't hit Call. She stares at the digits glowing black and thin in the iPhone font. She presses Create New Contact and saves him as "Mark Perv." She googles his area code: Phoenix. This tells her nothing. She could look up his company, but who cares? She maps his hotel and looks at the route suggestions. She scrolls through some photos of sample rooms. This is stupid. She sends Mark Perv a text that says, "Hey dude its charity from the plane"

She reads her book for a while, relishing being the last person awake in the house. When this small but definitive luxury has spent itself she changes into terry-cloth shorts and a T-shirt and pads upstairs to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

As she's going back down, she sees an angelic haze rising through the darkness and knows that it must be her phone. Sure enough, there's a text from Mark Perv.

"So u bored?"

She's workshopping witty retorts when he texts again.

"Whatre you wearing?"

“Pajamas I guess, like a shirt”

“Bra?”

“Who sleeps in a bra?”

“U near me?”

“I’m in some suburb”

“Tell me where ur at I’ll get a taxi”

“Can’t cuz of my family”

“I’ll pay for yours thats easy”

“Really can’t . . . Maybe tmrw i dunno”

“Can i get a pic then?”

“What? No way!”

“Cmon sumthing to look fwd to ur teasing me bad here”

“Will u send one back?”

“Now were talking”

She lies down on the floor, knees in the air, as if preparing to do sit-ups. She’s pleased with her thighs, smooth and blanched pale by the camera flash, but that’s not enough, somehow, so she pulls her shirt up to show off her hip bones and the downslope of her abdomen, extends her legs into a pseudo-yoga pose, and tries again.

Her purple-painted toenails like weird stars in the grainy basement sky.

The picture, she thinks, looks like an American Apparel ad. Her shorts are blue with white piping, and, because of how she positioned herself, are taut around her crotch, the bulge of it clearly articulated and more than she'd intended to show. But it's less revealing than some American Apparel ads, which are in, like, magazines and on the sides of buses, so whatever. She sends the picture to Mark. He replies with a closeup of the head of his cock, its skin nubbled and flushed, a shiny pearl of semen in the opening, which Charity has never before had occasion to notice is vertical, like a vagina.

The tip of Mark's penis looks like a tiny vagina.

Charity puts her phone on silent and sticks it down at the bottom of her purse. She needs a minute to think, or rather to not think, about some choices she is somewhat pleased to now have, but does not necessarily want to make right away. *I'm gonna do whatever I'm gonna do*, she thinks, and takes out "A Tale of Two Cities," knowing she won't be able to concentrate on it, but trying to anyway. One word and then the next, like rungs on a ladder. Sentences, paragraphs, pages. The revolution happens and everyone has such high hopes but then it all gets terrible. She puts the book down at the end of a chapter and wills herself to sleep.

The next morning she checks her phone and sees that the battery died during the night. She plugs it in and goes upstairs. Back home Lexie and Evan are already at lunch. Charity feels outside of time and the world a little, which is scary but also cool, and if it's true then maybe things that happen here in this other time register differently, matter less—or more, which is also possible—on the, like, cosmic or whatever scale.

She finds Grams seated at the kitchen table and joins her. Grams is holding a slice of toasted Pepperidge Farm white bread over a china saucer. No coffee cup or coffee to be seen.

"So he's gone, then," Grams says, putting the toast down.

"Huh?"

"I guess you wouldn't be here if he wasn't. Well, I'm sorry for you, sorrier for the baby, but not half sorry to see the last of that piece of shit. And it will be the last, or pretty nearly. You'll be lucky if he sends Charity a birthday card, much less child support."

"Grams," she says. "*I'm* Charity."

Grams slams the heel of her hand on the table, sending the toast and the saucer crashing to the floor.

"*Moooooom*," Charity cries, her voice rising like a siren, sounding even to her own ears like that of a frightened child.

Her mom emerges, a few long seconds later, bleary and grumbling, from the guest room, and this seems to calm Grams; her lucidity returns like a dislocated joint pulled back into place. Charity, her eyes wet, walks across the kitchen. She pulls a paper towel off the roll and runs it under the faucet, then kneels to clean the shards of toast and china from the floor. Grams announces that she is going to her room to get dressed. It's well past time, she says, to start the day.

When the bedroom door closes, Charity's mom grabs the cordless phone from its wall-mounted cradle and starts making calls—the G.P. first, then the neurologist, and then Aunt

Jan. Charity finishes cleaning up, then goes downstairs to recover her aloofness and get dressed, too.

When she gets back upstairs, Grams is still in her room, maybe hiding from them, while her mom sits at the kitchen table. There is a gray burst at the crown of her mom's head, and Charity knows that this is because her mom's regular appointment with the colorist had to be rescheduled. Because some things can be put off and others can't, or can't anymore.

Her mom's fingertips are at her temples, the cordless trapped between her ear and her shoulder as she stares down at a yellow scratch pad on which nothing is yet written. Charity says she wants to go downtown and see the aquarium. Her mom puts her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone; a pointless gesture, since she's on hold.

"Take two twenties from my purse. Check in in two hours. 'Kay?"

"Mom."

"Charity." They might have gone on like this, but then whoever has her mom on hold comes back on the line. The pen starts moving across the paper. Charity's sneakers are by the front door. As she laces and ties them, she thinks about going back into the kitchen, sitting down with her mom. She can almost see herself doing it. But she has her sliver of freedom to protect, a day of her own ahead of her.

"Love you," she calls out, then leaves without waiting for a reply.

On the light rail Charity has a whole bench to herself. She stretches her legs across the seats, then wriggles the phone out

of her jeans pocket and turns it on. There are literally dozens of texts from Mark Perv waiting for her, which is both surprising and not. She expected something from him, had been perhaps counting on something, but this is above and beyond. She scrolls up to the beginning and reads in order.

First he sent another shot of his junk, with the balls in it this time, then he asked for more pictures from Charity. His requests are super specific! They read like doctor's instructions—*open wide*—or the rules of some ridiculous game.

But, if this is a game, Charity thinks with rising indignation, Mark has cheated. They've barely begun playing and here he's gone and skipped all her turns.

His messages go from sweetly solicitous to powerfully angry, then back again. He accuses her of misleading him and calls her all sorts of names, then suddenly regains himself, tries to feign a degree of belated cool. He says he's sorry if he scared her or came on too strong; she can trust him. It's O.K.—really, honest—if she needs time to think. But also she's a stupid little bitch playing with fire and bound to get burned. He's going to fuck her ass so hard that when she goes back to the airport she'll need a wheelchair.

Jesus, she thinks. *Next he'll be offering to push the wheelchair.*

The last text, sent after a few hours' lapse, is time-stamped 5:57 A.M.

"So yr just what gone while im risk EVERTHING? so fuckin lame"

She imagines the thunder of Mark's blood in his ears as he harangued and pleaded. She wonders if he will hear that

thunder again when his life comes crashing down around him—that is, if she reports him, which she knows she should. She knows the guidance-counsellor language for what is happening here. But ratting out Mark will mean telling the story, having to explain herself, over and over, to anyone who can make her tell it, cops and her mom, kids at school, after word gets out. Evan, for example, who, come to think of it, still hasn't texted her back. She thinks about texting him: *So you're just what, gone*?

The Mark thing will make so much less sense out loud than it did when she did it, or even than it does now as she goes over it in her head. That's the most unfair part. Everyone will have their own version of "What were you thinking?" and "Why did you do that?" Like her life is some book she needs to write a report about, identifying key themes and meaning, when, really, texting Mark was like peeking in the doorway of a bar or the teachers' lounge—someplace you could get in trouble for going into but were curious to glimpse the inside of, just to be able to say that you knew what was in there. And maybe someone had dared you to do it and maybe you had had to dare yourself.

The aquarium is mobbed with schoolkids on a field trip, seven- and eight-year-olds in yellow polo shirts with a crest stitched over the breast. They stick their hands in the touch pools, stroking anemones, spiny urchins, and orange starfish you can see moving only if you look close. Gray stingrays, their venom removed, jockey for position as they take laps around a tank. Kids reach in to swipe at them as they go past.

When the tour guide calls the kids to attention and starts talking about the different kinds of sea life, Charity finds her-

self listening, following along as they make their way through the main hall to an outdoor pool, where some otters are playing in the sun.

An employee emerges from a door in the back wall, carrying a bucket of cut-up fish. Charity figures he'll make the otters do tricks for pieces, but instead he takes the bucket in both hands and swings it. With her phone, she takes a perfect shot of the mass as it unfurls over the water in a hail of innards and scales.

She turns her back on the feasting otters, moves away from the kids. She opens her mouth as wide as it will go and retracts her tongue, like an eel in its lair. She puts the phone in her mouth, its glass face clicking against the back of her top front teeth, warm metal resting on her lower lip. She takes a picture. The roof of her mouth is a spidery pink dome. Below it, the curve of her tongue is a half-sunk moon casting a shadow into the gulp of her throat, above which her uvula hangs like a second moon, a full one, this alien world within her, shining like surgery. She pairs the two pictures together in a single Instagram post, no filters. She tags Lexie and Evan and some of their friends, plus private-school Jenna and, for good measure, a few total strangers who somehow or other found her feed and, for whatever reason, became her followers.

Fish gutz / my gutz: Compare & contrast. ◆

MUSA

BY KAMEL DAOUD

Musa was my older brother. His head seemed to strike the clouds. He was quite tall, yes, and his body was thin and knotty from hunger and the strength that comes from anger. He had an angular face, big hands that protected me, and hard eyes, because our ancestors had lost their land. But when I think about it I believe that he already loved us then the way the dead do, with no useless words and a look in his eyes that came from the hereafter. I have only a few pictures of him in my head, but I want to describe them to you carefully. For example, the day he came home early from the neighborhood market, or maybe from the port, where he worked as a handyman and a porter, toting, dragging, lifting, sweating. Anyway, that day he came upon me while I was playing with an old tire, and he put me on his shoulders and told me to hold on to his ears, as if his head were a steering wheel. I remember the joy I felt as he rolled the tire along and made a sound like a motor. His smell comes back to me, too, a persistent mingling of rotten vegetables, sweat, and breath. Another picture in my memory is from the day of Eid one year. Musa had given me a hiding the day before for some stupid thing I'd done, and now we were both embarrassed. It was a day of forgiveness and he was supposed to kiss me, but I didn't want him to lose face and lower himself by apologizing to me, not even in God's name. I also remember his gift for immobility, the way he could stand stock still on the threshold of our house, facing the neighbors' wall, holding a cigarette and the cup of black coffee our mother brought him.

Our father had disappeared long ago and existed now in fragments in the rumors we heard from people who claimed to have run into him in France. Only Musa could hear his voice. He'd give Musa commands in his dreams, and Musa would relay them to us. My brother had seen our father just once since he left, and from such a distance that he wasn't even sure

it was him. As a child, I learned how to distinguish the days with rumors from the days without. When Musa heard people talking about my father, he'd come home all feverish gestures and burning eyes, and then he and Mama would have long, whispered conversations that ended in heated arguments. I was excluded from those, but I got the gist: for some obscure reason, my brother held a grudge against Mama, and she defended herself in a way that was even more obscure. Those were unsettling days and nights, filled with anger, and I lived in fear at the idea that Musa might leave us, too. But he'd always return at dawn, drunk, oddly proud of his rebellion, seemingly endowed with renewed vigor. Then he'd sober up and fade away. All he wanted to do was sleep, and in this way my mother would get him under her control again.

I have some pictures in my head—they're all I can offer you. A cup of coffee, some cigarette butts, his espadrilles, Mama crying and then recovering quickly to smile at a neighbor who'd come to borrow some tea or spices, moving from distress to courtesy so fast that it made me doubt her sincerity, as young as I was. Everything revolved around Musa, and Musa revolved around our father, whom I never knew and who left me nothing but our family name. Do you know what we were called in those days? *Uled el-assas*, the sons of the guardian. Of the watchman, to be more precise. My father had worked as a night watchman in a factory where they made I don't know what. One night, he disappeared. And that's all. That's the story I was told. It happened in the nineteen-thirties, right after I was born.

So Musa was a god for me, a simple god of few words. His thick beard and powerful arms made him seem like a giant who could have wrung the neck of any soldier in an ancient

Pharaoh's army. Which was why, on the day we learned of his death and the circumstances surrounding it, I didn't feel sad or angry at first; instead, I felt disappointed and offended, as if someone had insulted me. My brother was capable of parting the sea, and yet he died in insignificance, like a bit player, on a beach that is no longer there, beside the waves that should have made him famous forever.

As a child, I was allowed to hear only one story at night, only one deceptively wonderful tale. It was the story of Musa, my murdered brother, which took a different form each time, according to my mother's mood. In my memory, those nights are associated with rainy winters, with the dim light of the oil lamp in our hovel, and with Mama's murmuring voice. Such nights didn't come often, only when we were short on food, when it was cold, and, maybe, when Mama felt even more like a widow than usual. Oh, stories die, you know, and I can't remember exactly what the poor woman told me, but she knew how to summon up unlikely things, tales of hand-to-hand combat between Musa, the invisible giant, and the *gaouri*, the *roumi*, the big fat Frenchman, the obese thief of sweat and land. And so, in our imaginations, my brother Musa was commissioned to perform different tasks: repay a blow, avenge an insult, recover a piece of confiscated land, collect a paycheck. All of a sudden, this legendary Musa acquired a horse and a sword and the aura of a spirit come back from the dead to redress injustice. And, well, you know how it goes. When he was alive, he had a reputation as a quick-tempered man with a fondness for impromptu boxing matches. Most of Mama's tales, however, were chronicles of Musa's last day, which was also, in a way, the first day of his immortality. Mama could narrate the events of that day in such staggering detail that they almost came to life. She never described a

murder and a death; instead, she'd evoke a fantastic transformation, one that turned a simple young man from one of the poorer quarters of Algiers into an invincible, long-awaited hero, a kind of savior. The details would change. In some versions of the story, Musa had left the house a little earlier than usual, awakened by a prophetic dream or a terrifying voice that had pronounced his name. In others, he'd answered the call of some friends—*uled el-huma*, sons of the neighborhood—idle young men interested in skirts, cigarettes, and scars. An obscure discussion ensued and resulted in Musa's death. I'm not sure: Mama had a thousand and one stories, and the truth meant little to me at that age. What was most important at those moments was my almost sensual closeness with Mama, our silent reconciliation during the night to come. The next morning, everything was always back in its place, my mother in one world and me in another.

What can I tell you, Mr. Investigator, about a crime committed in a book? I don't know what happened on that particular day, in that gruesome summer, between six o'clock in the morning and two in the afternoon, the hour of Musa's death. And, in any case, after Musa was killed nobody came around to question us. There was no serious investigation. I have a hard time remembering what I myself did that day. In the morning, the usual neighborhood characters were awake and on the street. Down at one end, we had Tawi and his sons. Tawi was a heavyset fellow. Dragged his bad left leg, had a nagging cough, smoked a lot. And, early each morning, it was his habit to step outside and pee on a wall, as blithely as you please. Everybody knew him, because his ritual was so unvarying that he served as a clock; the broken cadence of his footsteps and his cough were the first signs that the new day had arrived on our street. Farther up on the right, there was

El-Hadj, "the pilgrim"—which he was by genealogy, not because he'd made the trip to Mecca. El-Hadj was just his given name. He, too, was the silent type. His main occupations seemed to be striking his mother and eying his neighbors with a permanent air of defiance. On the near corner of the adjacent alley, a Moroccan had a café called El-Blidi. His sons were liars and petty thieves, capable of stealing all the fruit off every tree. They'd invented a game: they would throw matches into the sidewalk gutters, where the wastewater ran, and then follow the course of those matches. They never tired of doing that. I also remember an old woman, Taïbia, big, fat, childless, and very temperamental. There was something unsettling and even a little voracious in the way she looked at us—other women's offspring—that made us giggle nervously. We were just a little collection of lice on the back of the huge geological animal that was the city, with its thousand alleys.

So, on that particular day, nothing unusual. Even Mama, who loved omens and was sensitive to spirits, failed to detect anything abnormal. A routine day, in short—women calling to one another, laundry hung out on the terraces, street venders. No one could have heard a gunshot from so far away, a shot fired downtown, on the beach. Not even at the devil's hour, two o'clock on a summer afternoon—the siesta hour. So, I repeat, nothing unusual. Later, of course, I thought about it and, little by little, I concluded that there had to be—among the thousand versions Mama offered, among her memory fragments and her still vivid intuitions—there had to be one version that was truer than the others.

By telling me so many implausible tales and outright lies, Mama eventually aroused my suspicions and put my own intuitions in order. I reconstructed the whole thing. Musa's fre-

quent binges during that period, the scent floating in the air, his proud smile when he ran into his friends, their overserious, almost comical confabs, the way my brother had of playing with his knife and showing me his tattoos: *Echedda fi Allah*, "God is my support." "March or die" on his right shoulder. "Be quiet" on his left forearm, under a drawing of a broken heart. This was the only book that Musa wrote. Shorter than a last sigh, just three sentences inscribed on the oldest paper in the world, his own skin. I remember his tattoos the way most people remember their first picture book. Other details? Oh, I don't know, his overalls, his espadrilles, his prophet's beard, his big hands, which tried to hold on to our father's ghost, and his history with a nameless, honorless woman.

Ah! The mystery woman! Provided that she existed at all. I know only her first name; at least, I presume it was hers. My brother had spoken it in his sleep that night, the night before his death: Zubida. A sign? Maybe. In any case, the day Mama and I left the neighborhood forever—Mama had decided to get away from Algiers and the sea—I'm sure I saw a woman staring at us. A very intense stare. She was wearing a short skirt and tacky stockings, and she'd done her hair the way the movie stars did in those days: although she was quite obviously a brunette, her hair was dyed blond. "Zubida forever," ha-ha! Perhaps my brother had those words tattooed somewhere on his body as well—I don't know for sure. But I am sure that it was her that day.

It was early in the morning. We were setting out, Mama and I, leaving the house for good, and there she was, holding a little red purse, staring at us from some distance away. I can still see her lips and her huge eyes, which seemed to be asking us for something. I'm almost certain that it was her. At the time,

I wanted it to be her, and I decided that it was, because that added something to the tale of my brother's demise somehow. I needed Musa to have had an excuse, a reason. Without realizing it, I rejected the absurdity of his death; I needed a story to give him a shroud. Well, then. I pulled Mama by her haik, so that she wouldn't see the woman. But she must have sensed something, because she made a horrible face and spat out a prodigiously vulgar insult. I turned around, but the woman had disappeared. And then we left.

I remember the road to our new home, in the village of Hadjout, the fields whose crops weren't destined for us, the naked sun, the other travellers on the dusty bus. The oil fumes nauseated me, but I loved the virile, almost comforting roar of the engine, like a kind of father that was snatching us, my mother and me, out of an enormous labyrinth of buildings, downtrodden people, shantytowns, dirty urchins, aggressive cops, and beaches fatal to Arabs. For the two of us, the city would always be the scene of the crime, the place where something pure and ancient was lost. Yes, Algiers, in my memory, is a dirty, corrupt creature, a dark, treacherous man-stealer.

Let's see, let me try to remember exactly. . . . How did we first learn of Musa's death? I remember a kind of invisible cloud hovering over our street, and angry grownups talking loudly and gesticulating. At first, Mama told me that a *gaouri* had killed one of our neighbor's sons while he was trying to defend an Arab woman and her honor. But, during the night, anxiety got inside our house, and I think Mama began to realize the truth. So did I, probably. And then, all of a sudden, I heard this long, low moan, swelling until it became immense, a huge mass of sound that destroyed our furniture and blew apart our walls and then the whole neighborhood and left me

all alone. I remember starting to cry for no reason, just because everyone was looking at me. Mama had disappeared, and I was shoved outside, ejected by something more important than me, absorbed into some kind of collective disaster. Strange, don't you think? I told myself, confusedly, that this probably had to do with my father, that he was definitely dead this time, which made me sob twice as hard. It was a long night; nobody slept. A constant stream of people came to offer their condolences. The grownups spoke to me solemnly. When I couldn't understand what they were telling me, I contented myself with looking at their hard eyes, their shaking hands, and their shabby shoes. By the time dawn came, I was very hungry, and I fell asleep I don't know where. No matter how much I dig around in my memory, I have no recollection at all of that day and the next, except of the smell of couscous. The days blurred into an interminable single day, like a broad, deep valley I meandered through. The last day of a man's life doesn't exist. Outside of storybooks, there's no hope, nothing but soap bubbles bursting. That's the best proof of our absurd existence, my dear friend: no one is granted a final day, only an accidental interruption of life.

These days, my mother's so old she looks like her own mother, or maybe her great-grandmother, or even her great-great-grandmother. Once we reach a certain age, time gives us the features of all our ancestors, combined in a soft jumble of reincarnations. And maybe that's what the next world is—an endless corridor where all your ancestors are lined up, one after another. They turn toward their living descendant and simply wait, without words, without movement, their patient eyes fixed on a date. I don't know my mother's age, just as she has no idea how old I am. Before Independence, people did without exact dates; the rhythms of life were marked by

births, epidemics, food shortages, and so on. My grandmother died of typhus, an episode that by itself served to establish a calendar. My father left on a December 1st, and since then that date has been a reference point for measuring the temperature of the heart, so to speak.

You want the truth? I rarely go to see my mother nowadays. She lives in a house under a sky where a dead man and a lemon tree loiter. She spends her days sweeping every corner of that house in Hadjout, formerly known as Marengo, seventy kilometres from the capital. That was where I spent the second half of my childhood and part of my youth, before going to Algiers to learn a profession (government land administration) and then returning to Hadjout to practice it. We—my mother and I—had put as much distance as possible between us and the sound of breaking waves.

Let's take up the chronology again. We left Algiers—on that famous day when I was sure I'd spotted Zubida—and went to stay with an uncle and his family, who barely tolerated us. We lived in a hovel before being kicked out by the very people who'd taken us in. Then we lived in a little shed on the threshing floor of a colonial farm, where we both had jobs, Mama as a maid and I as an errand boy. The boss was this obese guy from Alsace who ended up smothered in his own fat, I believe. People said that he used to torture slackers by sitting on their chests. They also said that he had a protruding Adam's apple because the body of an Arab he'd swallowed was lodged in his throat. I still have memories from that period: an old priest who sometimes brought us food, the jute sack my mother made into a kind of smock for me, the semolina dishes we'd eat on special occasions. I don't want to tell you about our troubles, because at that time they were a matter only of

hunger, not of injustice. In the evening, we kids would play marbles, and if one of us didn't show up the following day that would mean that he was dead—and we'd keep on playing. It was a period of epidemics and famines. Rural life was hard. It revealed what the cities kept hidden—namely, that the country was starving to death. I was afraid, especially at night, of hearing the bleak sound of men's footsteps, men who knew that Mama had no protector. Those were nights of waking and watchfulness, which I spent glued to her side. I was well and truly the *uld el-assas*, the night watchman's son and heir.

Strangely, we gravitated around Hadjout and the vicinity for years before we were able to settle down behind solid walls. Who knows how much cunning and patience it cost Mama to find us a house, the one she still lives in today? I don't. In any case, she figured out what the right move was: she got herself hired as a housekeeper and waited, with me perched on her back, for Independence. The truth of the matter is that the house had belonged to a family of settlers who left in a hurry, and we ended up taking it over during the first days of Independence. It's a three-room house with wallpapered walls, and in the courtyard a dwarf lemon tree that stares at the sky. There are two little sheds beside the house, and a wooden doorframe. I remember the vine that provided shade along the walls, and the strident peeping of the birds. Before we moved into the main house, Mama and I resided in an adjacent shack, which a neighbor uses as a grocery store today. You know, I don't like to remember that period. It's as if I were forced to beg for pity.

When I was fifteen, I found a job as a farm laborer. Work was rare, and the nearest farm was three kilometres from the village. Do you know how I got the job? I'm going to confess:

one day I got up before dawn and I let the air out of another worker's bicycle tires so that I could show up earlier than he did and take his place. Yes, indeed, that's hunger for you! I don't want to play the victim, but it took us years to cross the dozen or so metres that separated our hovel from the settlers' house, years of tiny, fettered steps, as if we were slogging through mud or quicksand in a nightmare. I believe more than ten years passed before we finally got our hands on that house and declared it liberated: our property! Yes, yes, we acted like everybody else during the first days of freedom: we broke down the door, took the tableware and the candlesticks. But where was I? It's a long story, and I'm getting a bit lost.

After Musa's murder, while we were still living in Algiers, my mother converted her anger into a long, spectacular period of mourning that won her the sympathy of the neighbor women and a kind of legitimacy that allowed her to go out on the street, mingle with men, work in other people's houses, sell spices, and do housework, without running the risk of being judged. Her femininity had died and, with it, men's suspicions. I saw little of her during that time. I'd spend entire days waiting for her while she walked all over the city, conducting her investigation into Musa's death, questioning people who knew him, recognized him, or had crossed his path for the last time in the course of that year, 1942. Some neighbor ladies kept me fed, and the other children in the neighborhood showed me the respect you give to seriously ill or broken people. I found my status—as "the dead man's brother"—almost agreeable; in fact, I didn't begin to suffer from it until I was approaching adulthood, when I learned to read and realized what an unjust fate had befallen my brother, who died in a book.

After his passing, the way my time was structured changed. I lived my life in absolute freedom for exactly forty days. The funeral didn't take place until then, you see. The neighborhood imam must have found the whole thing disturbing. For Musa's body was never found, and missing persons rarely have funerals. . . . My mother looked for my brother everywhere—in the morgue, at the police station in Belcourt—and she knocked on every door. To no avail. Musa had vanished; he was absolutely, perfectly, incomprehensibly dead. There had been two of them in that place of sand and salt, him and his killer only. Of the murderer we knew almost nothing. He was *el-roumi*, the foreigner, "the stranger." People in the neighborhood showed my mother his picture in the newspaper, but for us he was just like all the other colonists who'd grown fat on so many stolen harvests. There was nothing special about him, except for the cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth; his features were instantly forgotten, confused with those of his people.

My mother visited cemeteries, pestered my brother's former comrades. Her efforts were in vain, but they revealed her talent for idle chatter, and her mourning period evolved into a surprising comedy, a marvellous act she put on and refined until it became a masterpiece. Virtually widowed for the second time, she turned her personal drama into a kind of business that required all who came near her to make an effort of compassion. She invented a range of illnesses in order to gather the whole tribe of female neighbors around her whenever she had so much as a migraine headache. She often pointed a finger at me as if I were an orphan, and she withdrew her affection from me very quickly, replacing it with the narrowed eyes of suspicion and the hard gaze of admonition. Oddly enough, I was treated like the dead brother, and Musa like

a survivor whose coffee was prepared fresh at the end of the day, whose bed was made for him, and whose footsteps were listened for, even when he was coming from very far away, from downtown Algiers and the neighborhoods that were closed to us at the time. I was condemned to a secondary role because I had nothing in particular to offer. I felt guilty for being alive but also responsible for a life that wasn't my own. I was the guardian, the *assas*, like my father, watching over another body.

I also remember that weird funeral: crowds of people; discussions lasting well into the night; us children, attracted by the light bulbs and the many candles; and then an empty grave and a prayer for the departed. After the religious waiting period of forty days, Musa had been declared dead—swept away by the sea—and therefore, absurdly, the service that Islam prescribes for the drowned was performed. Then everyone left, except my mother and me.

It was morning. I was cold even under the blanket, shivering. Musa had been dead for weeks. I heard the outside sounds—a passing bicycle, old Tawi's coughing, the squeaking of chairs, the raising of iron shutters. In my head, every voice corresponded to a woman, a time of life, a concern, a mood, or even to the kind of wash that was going to be hung out that day. There was a knock at our door. Some women had come to visit Mama. I knew the script by heart: a silence, followed by sobs, then hugs and kisses; still more tears; then one of the women would lift the curtain that divided the room, look at me, smile distractedly, and grab the coffee jar or something else. The scene continued until sometime around noon. Only in the afternoon, after the ritual of the scarf soaked in orange-flower water and wrapped around her head, after some

interminable moaning and a long, very long silence, would Mama remember me and take me in her arms. But I knew that it was Musa she wanted to find there, not me. And I let her do it.

As I said, Musa's body was never found.

Consequently, my mother imposed on me a strict duty of reincarnation. For instance, as soon as I had grown a little, she made me wear my dead brother's clothes—his undershirts, his dress shirts, his shoes—even though they were still too big for me, and that went on until I wore them out. I was forbidden to wander away from her, to walk by myself, to sleep in unknown places, and, before we left Algiers, to venture anywhere near the beach. The sea was off-limits. Mama taught me to fear its mildest suction—so effectively that even today, when I'm walking along the shore, where the waves die, the sensation of the sand giving way under my feet feels like the beginning of drowning. Deep down, Mama wanted to believe that the water was the culprit, that the water had carried off her son's body. My body, therefore, became the only visible trace of her dead son, which likely explained my physical cowardice—which I, of course, compensated for with a restless but, to be frank, ambitionless intelligence. I was sick a lot. And throughout every illness she'd watch over my body with an almost sinful attention, with a concern tainted by a vague undercurrent of incest. She'd reproach me for getting the smallest scratch, as if I had wounded Musa himself.

And so I was deprived of the healthy joys of youth, the awakening of the senses, the clandestine eroticism of adolescence. I grew silent and ashamed. I avoided hammams and playing with others, and in the winter I wore djellabahs that hid me

from people's eyes. It took me years to become reconciled with my body, with myself. In fact, to this day I don't know if I have. I've always had a stiffness in my bearing, owing to my guilt at being alive. Like a true night watchman's son, I sleep very little, and badly—I panic at the idea of closing my eyes and falling I don't know where without my name to anchor me. Mama gave me her fears, and Musa his corpse. What could a teen-ager do, trapped like that between death and his mother?

I remember the rare days when I accompanied my mother as she walked the streets of Algiers in search of information about my vanished brother. She would set a brisk pace and I'd follow, my eyes fixed on her haik so as not to lose her. And thus an amusing intimacy was created, the source of a brief period of tenderness between us. With her widow's language and her calculated whimpering, Mama collected clues and mixed genuine information with scraps from the previous night's dream. I can still see her with one of Musa's friends, clinging fearfully to his arm as we passed through French neighborhoods, where we were considered intruders.

Yes, we made an odd couple, roaming the streets of the capital like that! Much later, after the story of Musa's death had become a famous book and departed the country, leaving my mother and me in oblivion—even though we were the ones who had suffered the loss of the book's sacrificial victim—I often went back in memory to the Belcourt neighborhood and our investigations, remembering how we'd scrutinize windows and building façades, looking for clues. One day, Mama finally got a fragile lead she could follow: someone had given her an address. Now Algiers seemed a frightening labyrinth whenever we ventured outside our perimeter, but Mama walked without stopping, passing a cemetery and a covered

market and some cafés, through a jungle of stares and cries and car horns, until she finally stopped short and gazed at a house across the street from us. It was a fine day, and I was lagging behind her, panting, because she'd been walking very fast. All along the way, I'd heard her muttering insults and threats, praying to God and her ancestors, or maybe to the ancestors of God himself, who knows. I resented her excitement a little, without knowing exactly why. It was a two-story house, and the windows were closed—nothing else to report. The *roumis* in the street were eying us with great distrust.

We remained there in silence for a long time. An hour, maybe two, and then Mama, without so much as a glance at me, crossed the street and knocked resolutely on the door. An old Frenchwoman opened it. The light behind Mama made it hard for the lady to see her, but she put her hand over her brow like a visor and examined her visitor carefully, and I watched uneasiness, incomprehension, and finally terror come over her face. She turned red, fear rose in her eyes, and she seemed about to scream. Then I realized that Mama was reeling off the longest string of curses she'd ever uttered. Agitated, the lady at the door tried to push Mama away. I was afraid for Mama; I was afraid for us. All of a sudden, the Frenchwoman collapsed unconscious on her doorstep. People had stopped to watch. I could make out their shadows behind me—little groups had formed here and there—and then someone shouted the word "Police!" A woman cried out in Arabic, telling Mama to hurry, to get away fast. That was when Mama turned around and shouted, as if she were addressing all the *roumis* in the world, "The sea will swallow you all!" Then she grabbed me, and we took off running, like a pair of maniacs. Once we had got back home, she barricaded herself behind a wall of silence. We went to bed without sup-

per. Later, she would explain to the neighbors that she had found the house where the murderer grew up and had insulted his grandmother, maybe, and then she'd add, "Or one of his relatives, or at least a *roumia* like him."

The murderer had lived somewhere in a neighborhood not far from the sea. There was a building with a vaguely sagging upper story above a café, poorly protected by a few trees, but its windows were always closed in those days, so I think Mama had insulted an anonymous old Frenchwoman with no connection to our tragedy. Long after Independence, a new tenant opened the shutters and eliminated the last possibility of a mystery. This is all to tell you that no one we met was ever able to say that he'd crossed the murderer's path or looked into his eyes or understood his motives. Mama questioned a great many people, so many that I eventually felt ashamed for her, as if she were begging for money and not clues. Her investigations served as a ritual to lessen her pain, and her comings and goings in the French part of the city turned, however incongruously, into opportunities for extended walks.

I recall the day when we finally arrived at the sea. The sky was gray, and a few metres away from me was our family's huge and mighty adversary, the thief of Arabs, the killer of young men in overalls. It was indeed the last witness on Mama's list. As soon as we got there, she pronounced Sidi Abderrahman's name and then, several times, the name of God, ordered me to stay away from the water, sat down, and massaged her aching ankles. I stood behind her, a child facing the immensity of both the crime and the horizon. What did I feel? Nothing except the wind on my skin—it was autumn, the autumn after the murder. I tasted the salt. I saw the dense gray waves. That's all. The sea was like a wall with soft, moving edges.

Far off, up in the sky, there were some heavy white clouds. I started picking up things that were lying on the sand: seashells, glass shards, bottle caps, clumps of dark seaweed. The sea told us nothing, and Mama remained motionless on the shore, like someone bending over a grave. Finally, she stood up straight, looked attentively right and left, and said, in a hoarse voice, "God's curse be upon you!" Then she took me by the hand and led me away from the sand, as she'd done so often before. I followed her.

One more memory: the visits to the hereafter, on Fridays, at the summit of Bab-el-Oued. I'm talking about the El-Kettar Cemetery, otherwise known as "the Perfumery," because of the former jasmine distillery situated nearby. Every other Friday, we'd go to the cemetery to visit Musa's empty grave. Mama would whimper, which I found uncalled for and ridiculous, because there was nothing in that hole. I remember the mint that grew in the cemetery, the trees, the winding aisles, Mama's white haik against the too blue sky. Everybody in the neighborhood knew that the hole was empty, knew that Mama filled it with her prayers and her inventions. That cemetery was the place where I awakened to life. It was where I became aware that I had a right to the fire of my presence in the world—yes, I had a right to it!—despite the absurdity of my condition, which consisted of pushing a corpse to the top of a hill before it rolled back down, endlessly. Those days, the cemetery days, were the first days when I turned to pray not toward Mecca but toward the world. Nowadays, I'm working on better versions of those prayers. But back then I had discovered, in some obscure way, a form of sensuality. How can I explain it to you? The angle of the light, the vigorous blue of the sky, and the wind woke in me something more disturbing than the simple satisfaction you feel after a need

has been met. Remember, I wasn't quite ten years old, and therefore still clinging to my mother's breast. That cemetery had the attraction of a playground for me. My mother never guessed that it was there that I definitively buried Musa one day, mutely shouting at him to leave me alone. Precisely there, in El-Kettar, an Arab cemetery. Today, it's a dirty place, inhabited by fugitives and drunks. I'm told that marble is stolen from the tombs each and every night. You want to go and see it? It'll be a waste of time—you won't find anyone there, and you especially won't find a trace of that grave, which was dug like the prophet Yusuf's well. If the body's not in it, you can't prove anything. Mama wasn't entitled to anything. Not to apologies before Independence, not to a pension afterward.

After Musa died, my mother turned fierce, in a way. Try to imagine the woman: snatched away from her tribe, given in marriage to a husband who didn't know her and who hastened to get away from her, the mother of two sons, one dead and one a child too silent to give her the proper cues, a woman who lost two men and was forced to work for *roumis* in order to survive. She developed a taste for her martyrdom. Did I love her? Of course. For us, a mother is half the world. But I've never forgiven her for the way she treated me. She resented me for a death she felt I had somehow refused to undergo, and so she punished me. I don't know—I had a lot of resistance in me, and she could sense that, in a confused sort of way.

Mama knew the art of making ghosts live and, conversely, was very good at annihilating those close to her, drowning them in the monstrous torrents of her made-up tales. She can't read, but I promise you, my friend, she would have told you the story of our family and my brother better than I can. She lied not out of a desire to deceive but in order to

correct reality and to mitigate the absurdity that had struck her world and mine. Musa's passing destroyed her, but, paradoxically, it also introduced her to the morbid pleasure of a never-ending mourning. For a long time, not a year passed without my mother swearing that she'd found Musa's body, heard his breathing or his footsteps, recognized the imprint of his shoes. And, for a long time, this made me feel impossibly ashamed of her—and, later, it pushed me to learn a language that could serve as a barrier between her frenzies and me. Yes, the language. The one I read, the one I speak today, the one that's not hers. Hers is rich, full of imagery, vitality, sudden jolts, and improvisations, but not too big on precision. Mama's grief lasted so long that she needed a new idiom in which to express it. In her language, she spoke like a prophetess, recruited extemporaneous mourners, and cried out against the double outrage that had consumed her life: a husband swallowed up by air, a son by water. I had to learn a different language. To survive. After my presumed fifteenth birthday, when we withdrew to Hadjout, I became a stern and serious scholar. Books gradually enabled me to name things, to organize the world with my own words.

In Hadjout, I also discovered trees and a sky that I could almost reach. Eventually I was admitted to a school where there were a few other little natives like me. That helped to distract me from Mama and her disturbing way of watching me eat and grow, as if she were fattening me up for a sacrifice. Those were strange years. I felt alive when I was on the street, in school, or at the farms where I worked, but going home meant stepping into a grave or, at least, falling ill. Mama and Musa were both waiting for me, each in a different way, and I was almost obliged to explain myself, to justify the hours I'd wasted not sharpening the knife of our family's vengeance.

In the neighborhood, our shack was considered a sinister place. The other children referred to me as "the widow's son." People were afraid of Mama, but they also suspected her of having committed a crime, a bizarre crime—otherwise, why leave the city to come here and wash dishes for the *roumis*? We must have presented a peculiar spectacle when we arrived in Hadjout: a mother hiding her carefully folded newspaper clippings in her bosom, a teen-ager with his eyes on his bare feet, and some raggedy baggage. Right around that time, the murderer was climbing the last steps of his fame. It was the nineteen-fifties; the Frenchwomen wore short, flowered dresses, and the sun bit at their breasts. ◆

(Translated, from the French, by John Cullen.)

THE PROSPECTORS

BY KAREN RUSSELL

The entire ride would take eleven minutes. That was what the boy had promised us, the boy who never showed.

To be honest, I hadn't expected to find the chairlift. Not through the maze of old-growth firs and not in the dwindling light. Not without our escort. A minute earlier, I'd been on the brink of suggesting that we give up and hike back to the logging road. But at the peak of our despondency we saw it: the lift, rising like a mirage out of the timber woods, its four dark cables striping the red sunset. Chairs were floating up the mountainside, forty feet above our heads. Empty chairs, upholstered in ice, swaying lightly in the wind. Sailing beside them, just as swiftly and serenely, a hundred chairs came down the mountain. As if a mirror were malfunctioning, each chair separating from a buckle-bright double. Nobody was manning the loading station; if we wanted to take the lift we'd have to do it alone. I squeezed Clara's hand.

A party awaited us at the peak. Or so we'd been told by Mr. No-Show, Mr. Nowhere, a French boy named Eugene de La Rochefoucauld.

"I bet his real name is Burt," Clara said angrily. We had never been stood up before. "I bet he's actually from Tennessee."

Well, he had certainly seemed European, when we met him coming down the mountain road on horseback, one week ago this night. He'd had that hat! Such a convincingly stupid goatee! He'd pronounced his name as if he were coughing up a jewel. Eugene de La Rochefoucauld had proffered a nasally invitation: would we be his guests next Saturday night, at the gala opening of the Evergreen Lodge? We'd ride the new chairlift with him to the top of the mountain, and be among

the first visitors to the marvellous new ski resort. The President himself might be in attendance.

Clara, unintimidated, had flirted back. "Two dates—is that not being a little greedy, Eugene?"

"No less would be acceptable," he'd said, smiling, "for a man of my stature." (Eugene was five feet four; we'd assumed he meant education, wealth.) The party was to be held seven thousand feet above Lucerne, Oregon, the mountain town where we had marooned ourselves, at nineteen and twenty-two; still pretty (Clara was beautiful), still young enough to attract notice, but penniless, living week to week in a "historic" boarding house. "Historic" had turned out to be the landlady's synonym for "haunted." "Turn-of-the-century sash windows," we'd discovered, meant "pneumonia holes."

We'd waited for Eugene for close to an hour, while Time went slinking around the forest, slyly rearranging its shadows; now a red glow clung to the huge branches of the Douglas firs. When I finally spoke, the bony snap in my voice startled us both.

"We don't need him, Clara."

"We don't?"

"No. We can get there on our own."

Clara turned to me with blue lips and flakes daggering her lashes. I felt a pang: I could see both that she was afraid of my proposal and that she could be persuaded. This is a terrible knowledge to possess about a friend. Nervously, I counted my silver and gold bracelets, meting out reasons for making the journey. If we did not make the trip, I would have to pawn

them. I argued that it was riskier *not* to take this risk. (For me, at least; Clara had her wealthy parents waiting back in Florida. As much as we dared together, we never risked our friendship by bringing up that gulf.) I touched the fake red flower pinned to my black bun. What had we gone to all this effort for? We owed our landlady twelve dollars for January's rent. Did Clara prefer to wait in the drifts for our prince, that fake frog, Eugene, to arrive?

For months, all anybody in Lucerne had been able to talk about was this lodge, the centerpiece of a new ski resort on Mt. Joy. Another New Deal miracle. In his Fireside Chats, Roosevelt had promised us that these construction projects would lift us out of the Depression. Sometimes I caught myself squinting hungrily at the peak, as if the government money might be visible, falling from the actual clouds. Out-of-work artisans had flocked to northern Oregon: carpenters, masons, weavers, engineers. The Evergreen Lodge, we'd heard, had original stonework, carved from five thousand pounds of native granite. Its doors were cathedral huge, made of hand-cut ponderosa pine. Murals had been commissioned from local artists: scenes of mountain wildflowers, rearing bears. Quilts covered the beds, hand-crocheted by the New Deal men. I loved to picture their callused black thumbs on the bridally white muslin. Architecturally, what was said to stun every visitor was the main hall: a huge hexagonal chamber, with a band platform and "acres for dancing, at the top of the world!"

W.P.A. workers cut trails into the side of Mt. Joy, assisted by the Civilian Conservation Corps boys from Camp Thistle and Camp Bountiful. I'd seen these young men around town, on leave from the woods, in their mud-caked boots and khaki shirts with the government logo. Their greasy faces clumped

together like olives in a jar. They were the young mechanics who had wrenched the lift out of a snowy void and into skeletal, functioning existence. To raise bodies from the base of the mountain to the summit in eleven minutes! It sounded like one of Jules Verne's visions.

"See that platform?" I said to Clara. "Stand there, and fall back into the next chair. I'll be right behind you."

At first, the climb was beautiful. An evergreen army held its position in the whipping winds. Soon, the woods were replaced by fields of white. Icy outcroppings rose like fangs out of a pink-rimmed sky. We rose, too, our voices swallowed by the cables' groaning. Clara was singing something that I strained to hear, and failed to comprehend.

Clara and I called ourselves the Prospectors. Our fathers, two very different kinds of gambler, had been obsessed with the Gold Rush, and we grew up hearing stories about Yukon fever and the Klondike stampeders. We knew the legend of the farmer who had panned out a hundred and thirty thousand dollars, the clerk who dug up eighty-five thousand, the blacksmith who discovered a haul of the magic metal on Rabbit Creek and made himself a hundred grand richer in a single hour. This period of American history held a special appeal for Clara's father, Mr. Finisterre, a bony-faced Portuguese immigrant to southwestern Florida who had wrung his modest fortune out of the sea-damp wallets of tourists. My own father had killed himself outside the dog track in the spring of 1931, and I'd been fortunate to find a job as a maid at the Hotel Finisterre.

Clara Finisterre was the only other maid on staff—a summer job. Her parents were strict and oblivious people. Their thousand rules went unenforced. They were very busy with their

guests. A sea serpent, it was rumored, haunted the coastline beside the hotel, and ninety per cent of our tourism was serpent-driven. Amateur teratologists in Panama hats read the newspaper on the veranda, drinking orange juice and idly scanning the horizon for fins.

"Thank you," Mr. Finisterre whispered to me once, too sozzled to remember my name, "for keeping the secret that there is no secret." The black Atlantic rippled emptily in his eyeglasses.

Every night, Mrs. Finisterre hosted a cocktail hour: cubing green and orange melon, cranking songs out of the ivory gramophone, pouring bright malice into the fruit punch in the form of a mentally deranging Portuguese rum. She'd apprenticed her three beautiful daughters in the Light Arts, the Party Arts. Clara was her eldest. Together, the Finisterre women smoothed arguments and linens. They concocted banter, gab, palaver, patter—every sugary variety of small talk that dissolves into the night. I hated the cocktail hour, and, whenever I could, I escaped to beat rugs and sweep leaves on the hotel roof. One Monday, however, I heard footsteps ringing on the ladder. It was Clara. She saw me and froze.

Bruises were thickening all over her arms. They were that brilliant pansy-blue, the beautiful color that belies its origins. Automatically, I crossed the roof to her. We clacked skeletons; to call it an "embrace" would misrepresent the violence of our first collision. To soothe her, I heard myself making stupid jokes, babbling inanities about the weather, asking in my vague and meandering way what could be done to help her; I could not bring myself to say, plainly, *Who did this to you*? Choking on my only real question, I offered her my cardi-

gan—the way you'd hand a sick person a tissue. She put it on. She buttoned all the buttons. You couldn't tell that anything was wrong now. This amazed me, that a covering so thin could erase her bruises. I'd half-expected them to bore holes through the wool.

"Don't worry, O.K.?" she said. "I promise, it's nothing."

"I won't tell," I blurted out—although of course I had nothing to tell beyond what I'd glimpsed. Night fell, and I was shivering now, so Clara held me. Something subtle and real shifted inside our embrace—nothing detectable to an observer, but a change I registered in my bones. For the duration of our friendship, we'd trade off roles like this: anchor and boat, beholder and beheld. We must have looked like some Janus-faced statue, our chins pointing east and west. An unembarrassed silence seemed to be on loan to us from the distant future, where we were already friends. Then I heard her say, staring over my shoulder at the darkening sea: "What would you be, Aubby, if you lived somewhere else?"

"I'd be a prospector," I told her, without batting an eye. "I'd be a prospector of the prospectors. I'd wait for luck to strike them, and then I'd take their gold."

Clara laughed and I joined in, amazed—until this moment, I hadn't considered that my days at the hotel might be eclipsing other sorts of lives. Clara Finisterre was someone whom I thought of as having a fate to escape, but I wouldn't have dignified my own prospects that way, by calling them "a fate."

A week later, Clara took me to a débutante ball at a tacky mansion that looked rabid to me, frothy with white marble balconies. She introduced me as "my best friend, Aubergine."

Thus began our secret life. We sifted through the closets and the jewelry boxes of our hosts. Clara tutored me in the social graces, and I taught Clara what to take, and how to get away with it.

One night, Clara came to find me on the roof. She was blinking muddily out of two black eyes. Who was doing this—Mr. Finisterre? Someone from the hotel? She refused to say. I made a deal with Clara: she never had to tell me who, but we had to leave Florida.

The next day, we found ourselves at the train station, with all our clothes and savings.

Those first weeks alone were an education. The West was very poor at that moment, owing to the Depression. But it was still home to many aspiring and expiring millionaires, and we made it our job to make their acquaintance. One aging oil speculator paid for our meals and our transit and required only that we absorb his memories; Clara nicknamed him the "allegedly legendary wit." He had three genres of tale: business victories; sporting adventures that ended in the death of mammals; and eulogies for his former virility.

We met mining captains and fishing captains, whose whiskers quivered like those of orphaned seals. The freckled heirs to timber fortunes. Glazy baronial types, with portentous and misguided names: Romulus and Creon, who were pleased to invite us to gala dinners, and to use us as their gloating mirrors. In exchange for this service, Clara and I helped ourselves to many fine items from their houses. Clara had a magic satchel that seemed to expand with our greed, and we stole everything it could swallow. Dessert spoons, candlesticks, a poodle's jewelled collar. We strode out of parties wearing our

hostess's two-toned heels, woozy with adrenaline. Crutched along by Clara's sturdy charm, I was swung through doors that led to marmoreal courtyards and curtained salons and, in many cases, master bedrooms, where my skin glowed under the warm reefs of artificial lighting.

But winter hit, and our mining prospects dimmed considerably. The Oregon coastline was laced with ghost towns; two paper mills had closed, and whole counties had gone bankrupt. Men were flocking inland to the mountains, where the rumor was that the W.P.A. had work for construction teams. I told Clara that we needed to follow them. So we thumbed a ride with a group of work-starved Astoria teen-agers who had heard about the Evergreen Lodge. Gold dust had drawn the first prospectors to these mountains; those boys were after the weekly three-dollar salary. But if government money was snowing onto Mt. Joy, it had yet to reach the town below. I'd made a bad miscalculation, suggesting Lucerne. Our first night in town, Clara and I stared at our faces superimposed over the dark storefront windows. In the boarding house, we lay awake in the dark, pretending to believe in each other's theatrical sleep; only our bellies were honest, growling at each other. *Why did you bring us here*? Clara never dreamed of asking me. With her generous amnesia, she seemed already to have forgotten that leaving home had been my idea.

Day after day, I told Clara not to worry: "We just need one good night." We kept lying to each other, pretending that our hunger was part of the game. Social graces get you meagre results in a shuttered town. We started haunting the bars around the C.C.C. camps. The gaunt men there had next to nothing, and I felt a pang lifting anything from them. Back in the boarding house, our fingers spidering through wallets,

we barely spoke to each other. Clara and I began to disappear into adjacent rooms with strangers. *She was better off before*, my mind whispered. For the first time since we'd left Florida, it occurred to me that our expedition might fail.

The chairlift ascended seven thousand two hundred and fifty feet—I remembered this figure from the newspapers. It had meant very little to me in the abstract. But now I felt our height in the soles of my feet. For whole minutes, we lost sight of the mountain in an onrush of mist. Finally, hands were waiting to catch us. They shot out of the darkness, gripping me under the arms, swinging me free of the lift. Our empty chairs were whipped around by the huge bull wheel before starting the long flight downhill. Hands, wonderfully warm hands, were supporting my back.

"Eugene?" I called, my lips numb.

"Who's *You-Jean*?" a strange voice chuckled.

The man who was not Eugene turned out to be an ursine mountaineer. With his lantern held high, he peered into our faces. I recognized the drab green C.C.C. uniform. He looked about our age to me, although his face kept blurring in the snow. The lantern, battery powered, turned us all jaundiced shades of gold. He had no clue, he said, about any *Eugene*. But he'd been stationed here to escort guests to the lodge.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw tears freezing onto Clara's cheeks. Already she was fluffing her hair, asking this government employee how he'd gotten the enviable job of escorting beautiful women across the snows. How quickly she was able to snap back into character! I could barely move my frozen tongue, and I trudged along behind them.

"How old are you girls?" the C.C.C. man asked, and "Where are you from?," and every lie that we told him made me feel safer in his company.

The lodge was a true palace. Its shadow alone seemed to cover fifty acres of snow. Electricity raised a yellowish aura around it, so that the resort loomed like a bubble pitched against the mountain sky. Its A-frame reared out of the woods with the insensate authority of any redwood tree. Lights blazed in every window. As we drew closer, we saw faces peering down at us from several of these.

The terror was still with us. The speed of the ascent. My blood felt carbonated. Six feet ahead of us, Not-Eugene, whose name we'd failed to catch, swung the battery-powered lamp above his head and guided us through a whale-gray tunnel made of ice. "Quite the runway to a party, eh?"

Two enormous polished doors blew inward, and we found ourselves in a rustic ballroom, with fireplaces in each corner shooting heat at us. Amethyst chandeliers sent lakes of light rippling across the dance floor; the stone chimneys looked like indoor caves. Over the bar, a mounted boar grinned tuskily down at us. Men mobbed us, handing us fizzing drinks, taking our coats. Deluged by introductions, we started giggling, handing our hands around: "Nilson, Pauley, Villanueva, Obadiah, Acker . . ." Proudly, each identified himself to us as one of the C.C.C. "tree soldiers" who had built this fantasy resort: masons and blacksmiths and painters and foresters. They were boys, I couldn't help but think, boys our age. More faces rose out of the shadows, beaming hard. I guessed that, like us, they'd been waiting for this night to come for some time. Someone lit two cigarettes, passed them our way.

I shivered now with expectation. Clara threaded her hand through mine and squeezed down hard—time to dive into the sea. We'd plunged into stranger waters, socially. How many nights had we spent together, listening to tourists speak in tongues, relieved of their senses by Mrs. Finisterre's rum punch? Most of the boys were already drunk—I could smell that. Some rocked on their heels, desperate to start dancing.

They led us toward the bar. Feeling came flooding back into my skin, and I kept laughing at everything these young men were saying, elated to be indoors with them. Clara had to pinch me through the puffed sleeve of my dress:

"Aubby? Are we the only girls here?"

Clara was right: where were the socialites we'd expected to see? The Oregon state forester, with his sullen red-lipped wife? The governor, the bank presidents? The ski experts from the Swiss Alps? Fifty-two paying guests, selected by lottery, had rooms waiting for them—we'd seen the list of names in Sunday's Oregon *Gazette*.

I turned to a man with wise amber eyes. He had unlined skin and a wispy blond mustache, but he smiled at us with the mellow despair of an old goat.

"Excuse me, sir. When does the celebration start?"

Clara flanked him on the left, smiling just as politely.

"Are we the first guests to arrive?"

But now the goat's eyes flamed: "Whadda you talkin' about? This party is *under way*, lady. You got twenty-six dancing partners to choose from out there—that ain't enough?"

The strength of his fury surprised us; backing up, I bumped my hip against a bannister. My hand closed on what turned out to be a tiny beaver, a carved ornament. Each cedar newel post had one.

"The woodwork is beautiful."

He grinned, soothed by the compliment.

"My supervisor is none other than O. B. Dawson."

"And your name?"

The thought appeared unbidden: *Later, you'll want to know what to scream*.

"Mickey Loatch. Got a wife, girls, I'm chagrined to say. Got three kids already, back in Osprey. I'm here so they can eat." Casually, he explained to us the intensity of his loneliness, the loneliness of the entire corps. They'd been driven by truck, eight miles each day, from Camp Thistle to the deep woods. For months at a time, they lived away from their families. Drinking water came from Lister bags; the latrines were saddle trenches. Everyone was glad, glad, glad, he said, to have the work. "There wasn't anything for us, until the Emerald Lodge project came along."

Mr. Loatch, I'd been noticing, had the strangest eyes I'd ever seen. They were a brilliant dark yellow, the color of that magic metal, gold.

Swallowing, I asked the man, "Excuse me, but I'm a bit confused. Isn't this the *Evergreen* Lodge?"

"The Evergreen Lodge?" the man said, exposing a mouthful of chewed pink sausage. "Where's dat, gurrls?" He laughed at his own cartoony voice.

A suspicion was coming into focus, a dreadful theory; I tried to talk it away, but the harder I looked, the keener it became. A quick scan of the room confirmed what I must have registered and ignored when I first walked through those doors. Were all of the boys' eyes this same hue? Trying to stay calm, I gripped Clara's hand and spun her around like a weathervane: gold, gold, gold, gold.

"Oh my God, Clara."

"Aubby? What's wrong with you?"

"Clara," I murmured, "I think we may have taken the wrong lift."

Two lodges existed on Mt. Joy. There was the Evergreen Lodge, which would be unveiled tonight, in a ceremony of extraordinary opulence, attended by the state forester and the President. Where Eugene was likely standing, on the balcony level, raising a flute for the champagne toast. There had once been, however, on the southeastern side of this same mountain, a second structure. This place lived on in local memory as demolished hope, as unconsummated blueprint. It was the failed original, crushed by an avalanche two years earlier, the graveyard of twenty-six workers from Company 609 of the Oregon Civilian Conservation Corps.

"Unwittingly," our landlady, who loved a bloody and unjust story, had told us over a pancake breakfast, "those workers were building their own casket." With tobogganing runs and a movie theatre, and more windows than Versailles, it was to have been even more impressive than the Evergreen Lodge. But the unfinished lodge had been completely covered in the collapse.

Mickey Loatch was still steering us around, showing off the stonework.

"Have you gals been to the Cloud Cap Inn? That's hitched to the mountain with wire cables. See, what we done is—"

"Mr. Loatch?" Swilling a drink, I steadied my voice. "How late does the chairlift run?"

"Oh dear." He pursed his lips. "You girls gotta be somewhere? I'm afraid you're stuck with us, at least until morning. You're the last we let up. They shut that lift down until dawn."

Next to me, I heard Clara in my ear: "Are you crazy? We just got here, and you're talking about leaving? Do you know how rude you sound?"

"They're dead."

"What are you talking about? Who's dead?"

"Everyone. Everyone but us."

Clara turned from me, her jaw tensing. At a nearby table, five green-clad boys were watching our conversation play out with detached interest, as if it were a sport they rarely followed. Clara wet her lips and smiled down at them, drumming her red nails on their table's glossy surface.

"This is so beautiful!" she cooed.

All five of the dead boys blushed.

"Excuse us," she fluttered. "Is there a powder room? My friend here is just a mess!"

"The Ladies Room" read a bronzed sign posted on an otherwise undistinguished door. At other parties, this room had always been our sanctuary. Once the door was shut, we stared at each other in the mirror, transferring knowledge across the glass. Her eyes were still brown, I noted with relief, and mine were blue. I worried that I might start screaming, but I bit back my panic, and I watched Clara do the same for me. "Your nose," I finally murmured. Blood poured in bright bars down her upper lip.

"I guess we must be really high up," she said, and started to cry.

"Shh, shh, shh . . . "

I wiped at the blood with a tissue.

"See?" I showed it to her. "At least we *are*, ah, at least we can still . . ."

Clara sneezed violently, and we stared at the reddish globules on the glass, which stood out with terrifying lucidity against the flat, unreal world of the mirror.

"What are we going to do, Aubby?"

I shook my head; a horror flooded through me until I could barely breathe.

Ordinarily, I would have handled the logistics of our escape—picked locks, counterfeited tickets. Clara would have corrected my lipstick and my posture, encouraging me to look more like a willowy seductress and less like a baseball umpire. But tonight it was Clara who formulated the plan. We had to tiptoe around the Emerald Lodge. We had to dim our own

lights. And, most critical to our survival here, according to Clara: We had to persuade our dead hosts that we believed they were alive.

At first, I objected; I thought these workers deserved to know the truth about themselves.

"Oh?" Clara said. "How principled of you."

And what did I think was going to happen, she asked, if we told the men what we knew?

"I don't know. They'll let us go?"

Clara shook her head.

"Think about it, Aubby—what's keeping this place together?"

We had to be very cautious, very *amenable*, she argued. We couldn't challenge our hosts on any of their convictions. The Emerald Lodge was a real place, and they were breathing safely inside it. We had to admire their handiwork, she said. Continue to exclaim over the lintel arches and the wrought-iron grates, the beams and posts. As if they were real, as if they were solid. Clara begged me to do this. Who knew what might happen if we roused them from their dreaming? The C.C.C. workers' ghosts had built this place, Clara said; we were at their mercy. If the men discovered they were dead, we'd die with them. We needed to believe in their rooms until dawn—just long enough to escape them.

"Same plan as ever," Clara said. "How many hundreds of nights have we staked a claim at a party like this?"

Zero, I told her. On no occasion had we been the only living people.

"We'll charm them. We'll drink a little, dance a little. And then, come dawn, we'll escape down the mountain."

Somebody started pounding on the door: "Hey! What's the holdup, huh? Somebody fall in? You girls wanna dance or what?"

"Almost ready!" Clara shouted brightly.

On the dance floor, the amber-eyed ghosts were as awkward and as touching, as unconvincingly brash as any boys in history on the threshold of a party. Innocent hopefuls with their hats pressed to their chests.

"I feel sorry for them, Clara! They have no idea."

"Yes. It's terribly sad."

Her face hardened into a stony expression I'd seen on her only a handful of times in our career as prospectors.

"When we get back down the mountain, we can feel sad," she said. "Right now, we are going to laugh at all their jokes. We are going to celebrate this stupendous American landmark, the Emerald Lodge."

Clara's mother owned an etiquette book for women, the first chapter of which advises, *Make Your Date Feel Like He Is the Life of the Party!* People often mistake laughing girls for foolish creatures. They mistake our merriment for nerves or weakness, or the hysterical looning of desire. Sometimes, it is that. But not tonight. We could hold our wardens hostage, too, in this careful way. Everybody needs an audience.

At other parties, our hosts had always been very willing to believe us when we feigned interest in their endless rehearsals of the past. They used our black pupils to polish up their antique triumphs. Even an ogreish salmon-boat captain, a bachelor again at eighty-seven, was convinced that we were both in love with him. Nobody ever invited Clara and me to a gala to hear our honest opinions.

At the bar, a calliope of tiny glasses was waiting for me: honey and cherry and lemon. Flavored liquors, imported from Italy, the bartender smiled shyly. "Delicious!" I exclaimed, touching each to my lips. Clara, meanwhile, had been swept onto the dance floor. With her mauve lipstick in place and her glossy hair smoothed, she was shooting colors all around the room. Could you scare a dead boy with the vibrancy of your life? "Be careful," I mouthed, motioning her into the shadows. Boys in green beanies kept sidling up to her, vying for her attention. It hurt my heart to see them trying. Of course, news of their own death had not reached them—how could that news get up the mountain, to where the workers were buried under snow?

Perched on the barstool, I plaited my hair. I tried to think up some good jokes.

"Hullo. Care if I join you?"

This dead boy introduced himself as Lee Covey. Black bangs flopped onto his brow. He had the small, recessed, comically despondent face of a pug dog. I liked him immediately. And he was so funny that I did not have to theatricalize my laughter. Lee's voluble eyes made conversation feel almost unnecessary; his conviction that he was alive was contagious.

"I'm not much of a dancer," Lee apologized abruptly. As if to prove his point, he sent a glass crashing off the bar.

"Oh, that's O.K. I'm not, either. See my friend out there?" I asked. "In the green dress? She's the graceful one."

But Lee kept his golden eyes fixed on me, and soon it became difficult to say who was the mesmerist and who was succumbing to hypnosis. His Camp Thistle stories made me laugh so hard that I worried about falling off the barstool. Lee had a rippling laugh, like summer thunder; by this point I was very drunk. Lee started in on his family's sorry history: "Daddy the Dwindler, he spent it all, he lost everything we had, he turned me out of the house. It fell to me to support the family . . . "

I nodded, recognizing his story's contours. How had the other workers washed up here? I wondered. Did they remember their childhoods, their lives before the avalanche? Or had those memories been buried inside them?

It was the loneliest feeling, to watch the group of dead boys dancing. Coupled off, they held on to each other's shoulders. "For practice," Lee explained. They steered each other uncertainly around the hexagonal floor, swaying on currents of song.

"Say, how about it?" Lee said suddenly. "Let's give it a whirl—you only live once."

Seconds later, we were on the floor, jitterbugging in the center of the hall.

"Oh, oh, oh," he crooned.

When Lee and I kissed, it felt no different from kissing a living mouth. We sank into the rhythms of horns and strings and harmonicas, performed by a live band of five dead mountain brothers. With the naïve joy of all these ghosts, they tootled their glittery instruments at us.

A hand grabbed my shoulder.

"May I cut in?"

Clara dragged me off the floor.

Back in the powder room, Clara's eyes looked shiny, raccoon-beady. She was exhausted, I realized. Some grins are only reflexes, but others are courageous acts—Clara's was the latter. The clock had just chimed ten-thirty. The party showed no signs of slowing. At least the clock is moving, I pointed out. We tried to conjure a picture of the risen sun, piercing the thousand windows of the Emerald Lodge.

"You doing O.K.?"

"I have certainly been better."

"We're going to make it down the mountain."

"Of course we are."

Near the western staircase, Lee waited with a drink in hand. Shadows pooled unnaturally around his feet; they reminded me of peeling paint. If you stared too long, they seemed to curl slightly up from the floorboards.

"Jean! There you are!"

At the sound of my real name, I felt electrified—hadn't I introduced myself by a pseudonym? Clara and I had a telephone book of false names. It was how we dressed for parties. We chose alter egos for each other, like jewelry.

"It's Candy, actually." I smiled politely. "Short for Candace."

"Whatever you say, *Jean*," Lee said, playing lightly with my bracelet.

"Who told you that? Did my friend tell you that?"

"You did."

I blinked slowly at Lee, watching his grinning face come in and out of focus.

I'd had plenty more to drink, and I realized that I didn't remember half the things we'd talked about. What else, I wondered, had I let slip?

"How did you get that name, huh? It's a really pretty name, Jeannie."

I was unused to being asked personal questions. Lee put his arms around me, and then, unbelievably, I heard my voice in the darkness, telling the ghost a true story.

Jean, I told him, is what I prefer to go by. In Florida, most everybody called me Aubby.

My parents named me Aubergine. They wanted me to have a glamorous name. It was a luxury they could afford to give me, a spell of protection. "Aubergine" was a word that my father had learned during his wartime service, the French word for

"dawn," he said. A name like that, they felt, would envelop me in an aura of mystery, from swaddling to shroud. One night, on a rare trip to a restaurant, we learned the truth from a fellow-diner, a bald, genteel eavesdropper.

"Aubergine," he said thoughtfully. "What an *interesting* name."

We beamed at him eagerly, my whole family.

"It is, of course, the French word for 'eggplant.' "

"Oh, darn!" my mother said, unable to contain her sorrow.

"Of course!" roared old dad.

But we were a family long accustomed to reversals of fortune; in fact, my father had gone bankrupt misapprehending various facts about the dog track and his own competencies.

"It suits you," the bald diner said, smiling and turning the pages of his newspaper. "You are a little fat, yes? Like an eggplant!"

"We call her Jean for short," my mother had smoothly replied.

Clara was always teasing me. "Don't fall in love with anybody," she'd say, and then we'd laugh for longer than the joke really warranted, because this scenario struck us both as so unlikely. But as I leaned against this ghost I felt my life falling into place. It was the spotlight of his eyes, those radiant beams, that gently drew motes from the past out of me—and I loved this. He had got me talking, and now I didn't want to shut up. His eyes grew wider and wider, golden nets woven with golden fibers. I told him about my father's suicide, my

mother's death. At the last second, I bit my tongue, but I'd been on the verge of telling him about Clara's bruises, those mute blue coördinates. Not to solicit Lee's help—what could this phantom do? No, merely to keep him looking at me.

Hush, Aubby, I heard in Clara's tiny, moth-fluttery voice, which was immediately incinerated by the hot pleasure of Lee's gaze.

We kissed a second time. I felt our teeth click together; two warm hands cupped my cheeks. But when he lifted his face, his anguish leapt out at me. His wild eyes were like bees trapped on the wrong side of a window, bouncing along the glass. "You . . . " he began. He stroked at my cheek. "You feel . . . " Very delicately, he tried kissing me again. "You taste . . . " Some bewildered comment trailed off into silence. One hand smoothed over my dress, while the other rose to claw at his pale throat.

"How's that?" he whispered hoarsely in my ear. "Does that feel all right?"

Lee was so much in the dark. I had no idea how to help him. I wondered how honest I would have wanted Lee to be with me, if he were in my shoes. *Put him out of his misery*, country people say of sick dogs. But Lee looked very happy. Excited, even, about the future.

"Should we go upstairs, Jean?"

"But where did Clara go?" I kept murmuring.

It took great effort to remember her name.

"Did she disappear on you?" Lee said, and winked. "Do you think she's found her way upstairs, too?"

Crossing the room, we spotted her. Her hands were clasped around the hog stubble of a large boy's neck, and they were swaying in the center of the hexagon. I waved at her, trying to get her attention, and she stared right through me. A smile played on her face, while the chandeliers plucked up the red in her hair, strumming even the subtlest colors out of her.

Grinning, Lee lifted a hand to his black eyebrow in a mock salute. His bloodless hand looked thin as paper. I had a sharp memory of standing at a bay window, in Florida, and feeling the night sky change direction on me—no longer lapping at the horizon but rolling inland. Something was pouring toward me now, a nothingness exhaled through the floury membrane of the boy. If Lee could see the difference in the transparency of our splayed hands, he wasn't letting on.

Now Clara was kissing her boy's plush lips. Her fingers were still knitted around his tawny neck. *Clara, Clara, we have abandoned our posts.* We shouldn't have kissed them; we shouldn't have taken that black water onboard. Lee may not have known that he was dead, but my body did; it seemed to be having some kind of stupefied reaction to the kiss. I felt myself sinking fast, sinking far below thought. The two boys swept us toward the stairs with a courtly synchronicity, their uniformed bodies tugging us into the shadows, where our hair and our skin and our purple and emerald party dresses turned suddenly blue, like two candles blown out.

And now I watched as Clara flowed up the stairs after her stocky dancing partner, laughing with genuine abandon, her neck flung back and her throat exposed. I followed right behind her, but I could not close the gap. I watched her ascent, just as I had on the lift. Groggily, I saw them moving down a

posy-wallpapered corridor. Even squinting, I could not make out the watery digits on the doors. All these doors were, of course, identical. One swung open, then shut, swallowing Clara. I doubted we would find each other again. By now, however, I felt very calm. I let Lee lead me by the wrist, like a child, only my bracelets shaking.

Room 409 had natural wood walls, glowing with a piney shine in the low light. Lee sat down on a chair and tugged off his work boots, flushed with the yellow avarice of 4 A.M. Darkness flooded steadily out of him, and I absorbed it. "Jean," he kept saying, a word that sounded so familiar, although its meaning now escaped me. I covered his mouth with my mouth. I sat on the ghost boy's lap, kissing his neck, pretending to feel a pulse. Eventually, grumbling an apology, Lee stood and disappeared into the bathroom. I heard a faucet turn on; Lord knows what came pouring out of it. The room had a queen bed, and I pulled back a corner of the soft cotton quilt. It was so beautiful, edelweiss white. I slid in with my dress still pinned to me. I could not stop yawning; seconds from now, I'd drop off. I never wanted to go back out there, I decided. Why lie about this? There was no longer any chairlift waiting to carry us home, was there? No mountain, no fool's-gold moon. The Earth we'd left felt like a photograph. And was it such a terrible thing, to live at the lodge?

Something was descending slowly, like a heavy theatre curtain, inside my body; I felt my will to know the truth ebbing into a happy, warm insanity. We could all be dead—why not? We could be in love, me and a dead boy. We could be sisters here, Clara and I, equally poor and equally beautiful.

Lee had come back and was stroking my hair onto the pillow.

"Want to take a little nap?" he asked.

I had never wanted anything more. But then I looked down at my red fingernails and noticed a tiny chip in the polish, exposing the translucent blue enamel. Clara had painted them for me yesterday morning, before the party—eons ago. *Clara*, I remembered. *What was happening to Clara*? I dug out of the heavy coverlet, struggling up. At precisely that moment, the door began to rattle in its frame; outside, a man was calling for Lee.

"He's here! He's here! He's here!" a baritone voice growled happily. "Goddammit, Lee, button up and get downstairs!"

Lee rubbed his golden eyes and palmed his curls. I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"I regret the interruption, my dear. But this we cannot miss." He grinned at me, exposing a mouthful of holes. "You wanna have your picture taken, don'tcha?"

Clara and I found each other on the staircase. What had happened to her, in her room? That's a lock I can't pick. Even on ordinary nights, we often split up, and afterward we never discussed those unreal intervals in the boarding house. On our prospecting expeditions, whatever doors we closed stayed shut. Clara had her arm around her date, who looked doughier than I recalled, his round face almost featureless, his eyebrows vanished; even the point of his green toothpick seemed blurred. Lee ran up to greet him, and we hung back while the two men continued downstairs, racing each other to reach the photographer. This time we did not try to disguise our relief.

"I was falling asleep!" Clara said. "And I wanted to sleep so badly, Aubby, but then I remembered you were here somewhere, too."

"I was falling asleep," I said, "but then I remembered your face."

Clara redid my bun, and I straightened her hem. We were fine, we promised each other.

"I didn't get anything," Clara said. "But I'm not leaving empty-handed."

I gaped at her. Was she still talking about prospecting?

"You can't steal from this place."

Clara had turned to inspect a sculpted flower blooming from an iron railing; she tugged at it experimentally, as if she thought she might free it from the bannister.

"Clara, wake up. That's not—"

"No? That's not why you brought me here?"

She flicked her eyes up at me, her gaze limpid and accusatory. And I felt I'd become fluent in the language of eyes; now I saw what she'd known all along. What she'd been swallowing back on our prospecting trips, what she'd never once screamed at me, in the freezing boarding house: *You use me. Every party, you bait the hook, and I dangle. I let them, I am eaten, and what do I get? Some scrap metal?*

"I'm sorry, Clara . . . "

My apology opened outward, a blossoming horror. I'd used her bruises to justify leaving Florida. I'd used her face to open

doors. Greed had convinced me I could take care of her up here, and then I'd disappeared on her. How long had Clara known what I was doing? I'd barely known myself.

But Clara, still holding my hand, pointed at the clock. It was 5 A.M.

"Dawn is coming." She gave me a wide, genuine smile. "We are going to get home."

Downstairs, the C.C.C. boys were shuffling around the dance floor, positioning themselves in a triangular arrangement. The tallest men knelt down, and the shorter men filed behind them. When they saw us watching from the staircase, they waved.

"Where you girls been? The photographer is *here*."

The fires were still burning, the huge logs unconsumed. Even the walls, it seemed, were trembling in anticipation. This place wanted to go on shining in our living eyes, was that it? The dead boys feasted on our attention, but so did the entire structure.

Several of the dead boys grabbed us and hustled us toward the posed and grinning rows of uniformed workers. We spotted a tripod in the corner of the lodge, a man doubled over, his head swallowed by the black cover. He was wearing a flamboyant costume: a ragged black cape, made from the same smocky material as the camera cover, and bright-red satin trousers.

"Picture time!" his voice boomed.

Now the true light of the Emerald Lodge began to erupt in rhythmic bursts. We winced at the metallic flash, the

sun above his neck. The workers stiffened, their lean faces plumped by grins. It was an inversion of the standard firing squad: two dozen men hunched before the photographer and his mounted cannon. "*Cheese!*" the C.C.C. boys cried.

We squinted against the radiant detonations. These blasts were much brighter and louder than any shutter click on Earth.

With each flash, the men grew more definite: their chins sharpening, cheeks ripening around their smiles. Dim brows darkened to black arcs; the gold of their eyes deepened, as if each face were receiving a generous pour of whiskey. Was it life that these ghosts were drawing from the camera's light? No, these flashes—they imbued the ghosts with something else.

"Do not let him shoot you," I hissed, grabbing Clara by the elbow. We ran for cover. Every time the flashbulb illuminated the room, I flinched. "Did he get you? Did he get me?"

With an animal instinct, we knew to avoid that light. We could not let the photographer fix us in the frame, we could not let him capture us on whatever film still held them here, dancing jerkily on the hexagonal floor. *If that happens, we are done for,* I thought. *We are here forever.*

With his unlidded eye, the photographer spotted us where we had crouched behind the piano. Bent at the waist, his head cloaked by the wrinkling purple-black cover, he rotated the camera. Then he waggled his fingers at us, motioning us into the frame.

"Smile, ladies," Mickey Loatch ordered, as we darted around the cedar tables.

We never saw his face, but he was hunting us. This devil—excuse me, let us continue to call him "the party photographer," as I do not want to frighten anyone unduly—spun the tripod on its rolling wheels, his hairy hands gripping its sides, the cover flapping onto his shoulders like a strange pleated wig. His single blue lens kept fixing on our bodies. Clara dove low behind the wicker chairs and pulled me after her.

The C.C.C. boys who were assembled on the dance floor, meanwhile, stayed glacially frozen. Smiles floated muzzily around their faces. A droning rose from the room, a sound like dragonflies in summer, and I realized that we were hearing the men's groaning effort to stay in focus: to flood their faces with ersatz blood, to hold still, hold still, and smile.

Then the chair tipped; one of our pursuers had lifted Clara up, kicking and screaming, and began to carry her back to the dance floor, where men were shifting to make a place for her.

"Front and center, ladies," the company Captain called urgently. "Fix your dress, dear. The straps have gotten all twisted."

I had a terrible vision of Clara caught inside the shot with them, her eyes turning from brown to umber to the deathlessly sparkling gold.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Let her go! She—"

She's alive, I did not risk telling them.

"She does not photograph well!"

With aqueous indifference, the camera lifted its eye.

"Listen, forgive us, but we cannot be in your photograph!"

"Let *go!*" Clara said, cinched inside an octopus of restraining arms, every one of them pretending that this was still a game.

We used to pledge, with great passion, always to defend each other. We meant it, too. These were easy promises to make, when we were safely at the boarding house; but on this mountain even breathing felt dangerous.

But Clara pushed back. Clara saved us.

She directed her voice at every object in the lodge, screaming at the very rafters. Gloriously, her speech gurgling with saliva and blood and everything wet, everything living, she began to howl at them, the dead ones. She foamed red, my best friend, forming the words we had been stifling all night, the spell-bursting ones:

"It's done, gentlemen. It's over. Your song ended. You are news font; you are characters. I could read you each your own obituary. None of this—"

"Shut her up," a man growled.

"Shut up, shut up!" several others screamed.

She was chanting, one hand at her throbbing temple: "None of this, none of this, none of this *is!*"

Some men were thumbing their ears shut. Some had braced themselves in the doorframes, as they teach the children of the West to do during earthquakes. I resisted the urge to cover my own ears as she bansheed back at the shocked ghosts:

"Two years ago, there was an avalanche at your construction site. It was terrible, a tragedy. We were all so sorry . . . "

She took a breath.

"You are dead."

Her voice grew gentle, almost maternal—it was like watching the wind drop out of the world, flattening a full sail. Her shoulders fell, her palms turned out.

"You were all buried with this lodge."

Their eyes turned to us, incredulous. Hard and yellow, dozens of spiny armadillos. After a second, the C.C.C. company burst out laughing. Some men cried tears, they were howling so hard at Clara. Lee was among them, and he looked much changed, his face as smooth and flexibly white as an eel's belly.

These men—they didn't believe her!

And why should we ever have expected them to believe us, two female nobodies, two intruders? For these were the master carpenters, the master stonemasons and weavers, the master self-deceivers, the ghosts.

"Dead," one sad man said, as if testing the word out.

"Dead. Dead. Dead," his friends repeated, quizzically.

But the sound was a shallow production, as if each man were scratching at topsoil with the point of a shovel. Aware, perhaps, that if he dug with a little more dedication he would find his body lying breathless under this world's surface.

"Dead." "Dead."

"Dead."

"Dead."

"Dead."

"Dead."

They croaked like pond frogs, all across the ballroom. "Dead" was a foreign word which the boys could pronounce perfectly, soberly and matter-of-factly, without comprehending its meaning.

One or two of them, however, exchanged a glance; I saw a burly blacksmith cut eyes at the ruby-cheeked trumpet player. It was a guileful look, a what-can-be-done look.

So they knew; or they almost knew; or they'd buried the knowledge of their deaths, and we had exhumed it. Who can say what the dead do or do not know? Perhaps the knowledge of one's death, ceaselessly swallowed, is the very food you need to become a ghost. They burned that knowledge up like whale fat, and continued to shine on.

But then a quaking began to ripple across the ballroom floor. A chandelier, in its handsome zigzag frame, burst into a spray of glass above us. One of the pillars, three feet wide, cracked in two. Outside, from all corners, we heard a rumbling, as if the world were gathering its breath.

"Oh, God," I heard one of them groan. "It's happening again."

My eyes met Clara's, as they always do at parties. She did not have to tell me: *Run*.

On our race through the lodge, in all that chaos and din, Clara somehow heard another sound. A bright chirping. A sound like gold coins being tossed up, caught, and fisted. It stopped her cold. The entire building was shaking on its foundations, but through the tremors she spotted a domed cage, hanging in the foyer. On a tiny stirrup, a yellow bird was swinging. The cage was a wrought-iron skeleton, the handiwork of phantoms, but the bird, we both knew instantly, was real. It was agitating its wings in the polar air, as alive as we were. Its shadow was denser than anything in that ice palace. Its song split our eardrums. Its feathers burned into our retinas, rich with solar color, and its small body was stuffed with life.

At the Evergreen Lodge, on the opposite side of the mountain, two twelve-foot doors, designed and built by the C.C.C., stand sentry against the outside air—seven hundred pounds of hand-cut ponderosa pine, from Oregon's primeval woods. Inside the Emerald Lodge, we found their phantom twins, the dream originals. Those doors still worked, thank God. We pushed them open. Bright light, real daylight, shot onto our faces.

The sun was rising. The chairlift, visible across a pillowcase of fresh snow, was running.

We sprinted for it. Golden sunlight painted the steel cables. We raced across the platform, jumping for the chairs, and I will never know how fast or how far we flew to get back to Earth. In all our years of prospecting in the West, this was our greatest heist. Clara opened her satchel and lifted the yellow bird onto her lap, and I heard it shrieking the whole way down the mountain. ◆

KINO

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

The man always sat in the same seat, the stool farthest down the counter. When it wasn't occupied, that is, but it was nearly always free. The bar was seldom crowded, and that particular seat was the most inconspicuous and the least comfortable. A staircase in the back made the ceiling slanted and low, so it was hard to stand up there without bumping your head. The man was tall, yet, for some reason, preferred that cramped, narrow spot.

Kino remembered the first time the man had come to his bar. His appearance had immediately caught Kino's eye—the bluish shaved head, the thin build yet broad shoulders, the keen glint in his eye, the prominent cheekbones and wide forehead. He looked to be in his early thirties, and he wore a long gray raincoat, though it wasn't raining. At first, Kino tagged him as a yakuza, and was on his guard around him. It was seven-thirty, on a chilly mid-April evening, and the bar was empty. The man chose the seat at the end of the counter, took off his coat, and in a quiet voice ordered a beer, then silently read a thick book. After half an hour, finished with the beer, he raised his hand an inch or two to motion Kino over, and ordered a whiskey. "Which brand?" Kino asked, but the man said he had no preference.

"Just an ordinary sort of Scotch. A double. Add an equal amount of water and a little bit of ice, if you would."

Kino poured some White Label into a glass, added the same amount of water and two small, nicely formed ice cubes. The man took a sip, scrutinized the glass, and narrowed his eyes. "This will do fine."

He read for another half hour, then stood up and paid his bill in cash. He counted out exact change so that he wouldn't get any coins back. Kino breathed a small sigh of relief as soon as

he was out the door. But after the man had left his presence remained. As Kino stood behind the counter, he glanced up occasionally at the seat the man had occupied, half expecting him still to be there, raising his hand a couple of inches to order something.

The man began coming regularly to Kino's bar. Once, at most twice, a week. He would invariably have a beer first, then a whiskey. Sometimes he would study the day's menu on the blackboard and order a light meal.

The man hardly ever said a word. He always came fairly early in the evening, a book tucked under his arm, which he would place on the counter. Whenever he got tired of reading (at least, Kino guessed that he was tired), he looked up from the page and studied the bottles of liquor lined up on the shelves in front of him, as if examining a series of unusual taxidermied animals from faraway lands.

Once Kino got used to the man, though, he never felt uncomfortable around him, even when it was just the two of them. Kino never spoke much himself, and didn't find it hard to remain silent around others. While the man read, Kino did what he would do if he were alone—wash dishes, prepare sauces, choose records to play, or page through the newspaper.

Kino didn't know the man's name. He was just a regular customer who came to the bar, enjoyed a beer and a whiskey, read silently, paid in cash, then left. He never bothered anybody else. What more did Kino need to know about him?

Back in college, Kino had been a standout middle-distance runner, but in his junior year he'd torn his Achilles tendon

and had to give up on the idea of joining a corporate track team. After graduation, on his coach's recommendation, he got a job at a sports-equipment company, and he stayed there for seventeen years. At work, he was in charge of persuading sports stores to stock his brand of running shoes and leading athletes to try them out. The company, a mid-level firm headquartered in Okayama, was far from well known, and lacked the financial power of a Nike or an Adidas to draw up exclusive contracts with the world's best runners. Still, it made carefully handcrafted shoes for top athletes, and quite a few swore by its products. "Do an honest job and it will pay off" was the slogan of the company's founder, and that low-key, somewhat anachronistic approach suited Kino's personality. Even a taciturn, unsociable man like him was able to make a go of sales. Actually, it was because of his personality that coaches trusted him and athletes took a liking to him. He listened carefully to each runner's needs, and made sure that the head of manufacturing got all the details. The pay wasn't much to speak of, but he found the job engaging and satisfying. Although he couldn't run anymore himself, he loved seeing the runners race around the track, their form textbook perfect.

When Kino quit his job, it wasn't because he was dissatisfied with his work but because he discovered that his wife was having an affair with his best friend at the company. Kino spent more time out on the road than at home in Tokyo. He'd stuff a large gym bag full of shoe samples and make the rounds of sporting-goods stores all over Japan, also visiting local colleges and companies that sponsored track teams. His wife and his colleague started sleeping together while he was away. Kino wasn't the type who easily picked up on clues. He thought everything was fine with his marriage, and nothing

his wife said or did tipped him off to the contrary. If he hadn't happened to come home from a business trip a day early, he might never have discovered what was going on.

When he got back to Tokyo that day, he went straight to his condo in Kasai, only to find his wife and his friend naked and entwined in his bedroom, in the bed where he and his wife slept. His wife was on top, and when Kino opened the door he came face to face with her and her lovely breasts bouncing up and down. He was thirty-nine then, his wife thirty-five. They had no children. Kino lowered his head, shut the bedroom door, left the apartment, and never went back. The next day, he quit his job.

Kino had an unmarried aunt, his mother's older sister. Ever since he was a child, his aunt had been nice to him. She'd had an older boyfriend for many years ("lover" might be the more accurate term), and he had generously given her a small house in Aoyama. She lived on the second floor of the house, and ran a coffee shop on the first floor. In front was a small garden and an impressive willow tree, with low-hanging, leafy branches. The house was on a narrow backstreet behind the Nezu Museum, not exactly the best location for drawing customers, but his aunt had a gift for attracting people, and her coffee shop did a decent amount of business.

After she turned sixty, though, she hurt her back, and it became increasingly difficult for her to run the shop alone. She decided to move to a resort condo in the Izu Kogen Highlands. "I was wondering if eventually you might want to take over the shop?" she asked Kino. This was three months before he discovered his wife's affair. "I appreciate the offer," he told her, "but right now I'm happy where I am."

After he submitted his resignation at work, he phoned his aunt to ask if she'd sold the shop yet. It was listed with a real-estate agent, she told him, but no serious offers had come in. "I'd like to open a bar there if I can," Kino said. "Could I pay you rent by the month?"

"But what about your job?" she asked.

"I quit a couple of days ago."

"Didn't your wife have a problem with that?"

"We're probably going to get divorced soon."

Kino didn't explain the reason, and his aunt didn't ask. There was silence for a time on the other end of the line. Then his aunt named a figure for the monthly rent, far lower than what Kino had expected. "I think I can handle that," he told her.

He and his aunt had never talked all that much (his mother had discouraged him from getting close to her), but they'd always seemed to have a kind of mutual understanding. She knew that Kino wasn't the type of person to break a promise.

Kino used half of his savings to transform the coffee shop into a bar. He purchased simple furniture, and had a long, sturdy bar installed. He put up new wallpaper in a calming color, brought his record collection from home, and lined a shelf in the bar with LPs. He owned a decent stereo—a Thorens turntable, a Luxman amp, and small JBL two-way speakers—that he'd bought when he was single, a fairly extravagant purchase back then. But he had always enjoyed listening to old jazz records. It was his only hobby, one that he didn't share with anyone else he knew. In college, he'd worked part time as a bartender at a pub in Roppongi, so he was well versed in the art of mixing cocktails.

He called his bar Kino. He couldn't come up with a better name. The first week he was open, he didn't have a single customer, but he wasn't perturbed. After all, he hadn't advertised the place, or even put out an eye-catching sign. He simply waited patiently for curious people to stumble across this little backstreet bar. He still had some of his severance pay, and his wife hadn't asked for any financial support. She was already living with his former colleague, and she and Kino had decided to sell their condo in Kasai. Kino lived on the second floor of his aunt's house, and it looked as though, for the time being, he'd be able to get by.

As he waited for his first customer, Kino enjoyed listening to whatever music he liked and reading books he'd been wanting to read. Like dry ground welcoming the rain, he let the solitude, silence, and loneliness soak in. He listened to a lot of Art Tatum solo-piano pieces. Somehow they seemed to fit his mood.

He wasn't sure why, but he felt no anger or bitterness toward his wife, or the colleague she was sleeping with. The betrayal had been a shock, for sure, but, as time passed, he began to feel as if it couldn't have been helped, as if this had been his fate all along. In his life, after all, he had achieved nothing, had been totally unproductive. He couldn't make anyone else happy, and, of course, couldn't make himself happy. Happiness? He wasn't even sure what that meant. He didn't have a clear sense, either, of emotions like pain or anger, disappointment or resignation, and how they were supposed to feel. The most he could do was create a place where his heart—devoid now of any depth or weight—could be tethered, to keep it from wandering aimlessly. This little bar, Kino, tucked into a backstreet, became that place. And it became, too—not by design, exactly—a strangely comfortable space.

It wasn't a person who first discovered what a comfortable place Kino was but a stray cat. A young gray female with a long, lovely tail. The cat favored a sunken display case in a corner of the bar and liked to curl up there to sleep. Kino didn't pay much attention to the cat, figuring it wanted to be left alone. Once a day, he fed it and changed its water, but nothing beyond that. And he constructed a small pet door so that it could go in and out of the bar whenever it liked.

The cat may have brought some good luck along with it, for after it appeared so did a scattering of customers. Some of them started to come by regularly—ones who took a liking to this little backstreet bar with its wonderful old willow tree, its quiet middle-aged owner, vintage records spinning on a turntable, and the gray cat sacked out in a corner. And these people sometimes brought other new customers. Still far from thriving, the bar at least earned back the rent. For Kino, that was enough.

The young man with the shaved head started coming to the bar about two months after it opened. And it was another two months before Kino learned his name, Kamita.

It was raining lightly that day, the kind of rain where you aren't sure if you really need an umbrella. There were just three customers in the bar, Kamita and two men in suits. It was seven-thirty. As always, Kamita was at the farthest stool down the counter, sipping a White Label and water and reading. The two men were seated at a table, drinking a bottle of Pinot Noir. They had brought the bottle with them, and asked Kino if he would mind their drinking it there, for a five-thousand-yen cork fee. It was a first for Kino, but he had no reason to refuse. He opened the bottle and set down two wineglasses

and a bowl of mixed nuts. Not much trouble at all. The two men smoked a lot, though, which for Kino, who hated cigarette smoke, made them less welcome. With little else to do, Kino sat on a stool and listened to the Coleman Hawkins LP with the track "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." He found the bass solo by Major Holley amazing.

At first, the two men seemed to be getting along fine, enjoying their wine, but then a difference of opinion arose on some topic or other—what it was, Kino had no idea—and the men grew steadily more worked up. At some point, one of them stood, tipping the table and sending the full ashtray and one of the wineglasses crashing to the floor. Kino hurried over with a broom, swept up the mess, and put a clean glass and ashtray on the table.

Kamita—though at this time Kino had yet to learn his name—was clearly disgusted by the men's behavior. His expression didn't change, but he kept tapping the fingers of his left hand lightly on the counter, like a pianist checking the keys. I have to get this situation under control, Kino thought. He went over to the men. "I'm sorry," he said politely, "but I wonder if you'd mind keeping your voices down a bit."

One of them looked up at him with a cold glint in his eye and rose from the table. Kino hadn't noticed it until now, but the man was huge. He wasn't so much tall as barrel-chested, with enormous arms, the sort of build you'd expect of a sumo wrestler.

The other man was much smaller. Thin and pale, with a shrewd look, the type who was good at egging people on. He slowly got up from his seat, too, and Kino found himself face to face with both of them. The men had apparently decided to

use this opportunity to call a halt to their quarrel and jointly confront Kino. They were perfectly coördinated, almost as if they had secretly been waiting for this very situation to arise.

"So, you think you can just butt in and interrupt us?" the larger of the two said, his voice hard and low.

The suits they wore seemed expensive, but closer inspection showed them to be tacky and poorly made. Not full-fledged yakuza, though whatever work they were involved in was, clearly, not respectable. The larger man had a crew cut, while his companion's hair was dyed brown and pulled back in a high ponytail. Kino steeled himself for something bad to happen. Sweat began to pour from his armpits.

"Pardon me," another voice said.

Kino turned to find that Kamita was standing behind him.

"Don't blame the staff," Kamita said, pointing to Kino. "I'm the one who asked him to request that you keep it down. It makes it hard to concentrate, and I can't read my book."

Kamita's voice was calmer, more languid, than usual. But something, unseen, was beginning to stir.

"Can't read my book," the smaller man repeated, as if making sure that there was nothing ungrammatical about the sentence.

"What, don't ya got a home?" the larger man asked Kamita.

"I do," Kamita replied. "I live nearby."

"Then why don't ya go home and read there?"

"I like reading here," Kamita said.

The two men exchanged a look.

"Hand over the book," the smaller man said. "I'll read it for you."

"I like to read by myself, quietly," Kamita said. "And I'd hate it if you mispronounced any of the words."

"Aren't you a piece of work," the larger man said. "What a funny guy."

"What's your name, anyway?" Ponytail asked.

"My name is Kamita," he said. "It's written with the characters for 'god'—*kami*—and 'field': 'god's field.' But it isn't pronounced 'Kanda,' as you might expect. It's pronounced 'Kamita.' "

"I'll remember that," the large man said.

"Good idea. Memories can be useful," Kamita said.

"Anyway, how about we step outside?" the smaller man said. "That way, we can say exactly what we want to."

"Fine with me," Kamita said. "Anywhere you say. But, before we do that, could you pay your check? You don't want to cause the bar any trouble."

Kamita asked Kino to bring over their check, and he laid exact change for his own drink on the counter. Ponytail extracted a ten-thousand-yen bill from his wallet and tossed it onto the table.

"I don't need any change back," Ponytail told Kino. "But why don't ya buy yourself some better wineglasses? This is expensive wine, and glasses like these make it taste like shit."

"What a cheap joint," the larger man said, sneeringly.

"Correct. A cheap bar with cheap customers," Kamita said. "It doesn't suit you. There's got to be somewhere else that does. Not that I know where."

"Now, aren't you the wise guy," the large man said. "You make me laugh."

"Think it over later on, and have a good, long laugh," Kamita said.

"No way you're gonna tell me where I should go," Ponytail said. He slowly licked his lips, like a snake sizing up its prey.

The large man opened the door and stepped outside, Ponytail following behind. Perhaps sensing the tension in the air, the cat, despite the rain, leaped outside after them.

"Are you sure you're O.K.?" Kino asked Kamita.

"Not to worry," Kamita said, with a slight smile. "You don't need to do anything, Mr. Kino. Just stay put. This will be over soon."

Kamita went outside and shut the door. It was still raining, a little harder than before. Kino sat down on a stool and waited. It was oddly still outside, and he couldn't hear a thing. Kamita's book lay open on the counter, like a well-trained dog waiting for its master. About ten minutes later, the door opened, and in strode Kamita, alone.

"Would you mind lending me a towel?" he asked.

Kino handed him a fresh towel, and Kamita wiped his head. Then his neck, face, and, finally, both hands. "Thank you. Everything's O.K. now," he said. "Those two won't be showing their faces here again."

"What in the world happened?"

Kamita just shook his head, as if to say, "Better you don't know." He went over to his seat, downed the rest of his whiskey, and picked up where he'd left off in his book.

Later that evening, after Kamita had gone, Kino went outside and made a circuit of the neighborhood. The alley was deserted and quiet. No signs of a fight, no trace of blood. He couldn't imagine what had taken place. He went back to the bar to wait for other customers, but no one else came that night. The cat didn't return, either. He poured himself some White Label, added an equal amount of water and two small ice cubes, and tasted it. Nothing special, about what you'd expect. But that night he needed a shot of alcohol in his system.

About a week after the incident, Kino slept with a female customer. She was the first woman he'd had sex with since he left his wife. She was thirty, or perhaps a little older. He wasn't sure if she would be classified as beautiful, but there was something unique about her, something that stood out.

The woman had been to the bar several times before, always in the company of a man of about the same age who wore tortoiseshell-framed glasses and a beatnik-like goatee. He had unruly hair and never wore a tie, so Kino figured he was probably not your typical company employee. The woman always

wore a tight-fitting dress that showed off her slender, shapely figure. They sat at the bar, exchanging an occasional hushed word or two as they sipped cocktails or sherry. They never stayed long. Kino imagined they were having a drink before they made love. Or else after. He couldn't say which, but the way they drank reminded him of sex. Drawn-out, intense sex. The two of them were strangely expressionless, especially the woman, whom Kino had never seen smile. She spoke to him sometimes, always about the music that was playing. She liked jazz and was collecting LPs herself. "My father used to listen to this music at home," she told him. "Hearing it brings back a lot of memories."

From her tone, Kino couldn't tell if the memories were of the music or of her father. But he didn't venture to ask.

Kino actually tried not to have too much to do with the woman. It was clear that the man wasn't very pleased when he was friendly to her. One time he and the woman did have a lengthy conversation—exchanging tips on used-record stores in Tokyo and the best way to take care of vinyl—and, after that, the man kept shooting him cold, suspicious looks. Kino was usually careful to keep his distance from any sort of entanglement. Nothing was worse than jealousy and pride, and Kino had had a number of awful experiences because of one or the other. It struck him at times that there was something about him that stirred up the dark side in other people.

That night, though, the woman came to the bar alone. There were no other customers, and when she opened the door cool night air crept in. She sat at the counter, ordered a brandy, and asked Kino to play some Billie Holiday. "Something really old, if you could." Kino put a Columbia record on the

turntable, one with the track "Georgia on My Mind." The two of them listened silently. "Could you play the other side, too?" she asked, when it ended, and he did as she requested.

She slowly worked her way through three brandies, listening to a few more records—Erroll Garner's "Moonglow," Buddy DeFranco's "I Can't Get Started." At first, Kino thought she was waiting for the man, but she didn't glance at her watch even once. She just sat there, listening to the music, lost in thought, sipping her brandy.

"Your friend isn't coming today?" Kino decided to ask as closing time drew near.

"He isn't coming. He's far away," the woman said. She stood up from the stool and walked over to where the cat lay sleeping. She gently stroked its back with her fingertips. The cat, unperturbed, went on sleeping.

"We're thinking of not seeing each other anymore," the woman said.

Kino didn't know how to respond, so he said nothing, and continued to straighten up behind the counter.

"I'm not sure how to put it," the woman said. She stopped petting the cat and went back to the bar, high heels clicking. "Our relationship isn't exactly . . . normal."

"Not exactly normal." Kino repeated her words without really considering what they meant.

She finished the small amount of brandy left in her glass. "I have something I'd like to show you, Mr. Kino," she said.

Whatever it was, Kino didn't want to see it. Of that he was certain. But he didn't manage to produce the words to say so.

The woman removed her cardigan and placed it on the stool. She reached both hands behind her and unzipped her dress. She turned her back to Kino. Just below her white bra clasp he saw an irregular sprinkling of marks the color of faded charcoal, like bruises. They reminded him of constellations in the winter sky. A dark row of depleted stars.

The woman said nothing, just displayed her bare back to Kino. Like someone who cannot even comprehend the meaning of the question he has been asked, Kino just stared at the marks. Finally, she zipped up and turned to face him. She put on her cardigan and fixed her hair.

"Those are cigarette burns," she said simply.

Kino was at a loss for words. But he had to say something. "Who did that to you?" he asked, his voice parched.

The woman didn't reply, and Kino realized that he wasn't hoping for an answer.

"I have them in other places, too," she said finally, her voice drained of expression. "Places that are . . . a little hard to show."

Kino had felt, from the first, that there was something out of the ordinary about the woman. Something had triggered an instinctive response, warning him not to get involved with her. He was basically a cautious person. If he really needed to sleep with a woman, he could always make do with a professional. And it wasn't as if he were even attracted to this woman.

But that night she desperately wanted a man to make love to her—and it seemed that he was the man. Her eyes were depthless, the pupils strangely dilated, but there was a decisive glitter in them that would brook no retreat. Kino didn't have the power to resist.

He locked up the bar, and the two of them went upstairs. In the bedroom, the woman quickly took off her dress, peeled off her underwear, and showed him the places that were a little hard to show. Kino couldn't help averting his eyes at first, but then was drawn back to look. He couldn't understand, nor did he want to understand, the mind of a man who would do something so cruel, or of a woman who would willingly endure it. It was a savage scene from a barren planet, light-years away from where Kino lived.

The woman took his hand and guided it to the scars, making him touch each one in turn. There were scars on her breasts, and beside her vagina. He traced those dark, hard marks, as if he were using a pencil to connect the dots. The marks seemed to form a shape that reminded him of something, but he couldn't think what it was.

They had sex on the tatami floor. No words exchanged, no foreplay, no time even to turn off the light or lay out the futon. The woman's tongue slid down his throat, her nails dug into his back. Under the light, like two starving animals, they devoured the flesh they craved. When dawn began to show outside, they crawled onto the futon and slept, as if dragged down into darkness.

Kino awoke just before noon, and the woman was gone. He felt as if he'd had a very realistic dream, but of course it hadn't been a dream. His back was lined with scratches, his arms

with bite marks, his penis wrung by a dull ache. Several long black hairs swirled around his white pillow, and the sheets had a strong scent he'd never smelled before.

The woman came to the bar several times after that, always with the goateed man. They would sit at the counter, speak in subdued voices as they drank a cocktail or two, and then leave. The woman would exchange a few words with Kino, mostly about music. Her tone was the same as before, as if she had no memory of what had taken place between them that night. Still, Kino could detect a glint of desire in her eyes, like a faint light deep down a mineshaft. He was sure of it. And it brought everything vividly back to him—the stab of her nails into his back, the sting of his penis, her long, slithering tongue, the odor on his bedding.

As he and the woman spoke, the man with her carefully observed Kino's expression and behavior. Kino sensed something viscous entwining itself about the couple, as if there were a deep secret only the two of them shared.

At the end of the summer, Kino's divorce was finalized, and he and his wife met at his bar one afternoon, before it opened, to take care of a few last matters.

The legal issues were quickly settled, and the two of them signed the necessary documents. Kino's wife was wearing a new blue dress, her hair cut short. She looked healthier and more cheerful than he'd ever seen her. She'd begun a new, no doubt more fulfilling, life. She glanced around the bar. "What a wonderful place," she said. "Quiet, clean, and calm—very you." A short silence followed. "But there's nothing here that really moves you": Kino imagined that these were the words she wanted to say.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

"A little red wine, if you have some."

Kino took out two wineglasses and poured some Napa Zinfandel. They drank in silence. They weren't about to toast to their divorce. The cat padded over and, surprisingly, leaped into Kino's lap. Kino petted it behind its ears.

"I need to apologize to you," his wife said finally.

"For what?" Kino asked.

"For hurting you," she said. "You were hurt, a little, weren't you?"

"I suppose so," Kino said, after giving it some thought. "I'm human, after all. I was hurt. But whether it was a lot or a little I can't say."

"I wanted to see you and tell you I'm sorry."

Kino nodded. "You've apologized, and I've accepted your apology. No need to worry about it anymore."

"I wanted to tell you what was going on, but I just couldn't find the words."

"But wouldn't we have arrived at the same place, anyway?"

"I guess so," his wife said.

Kino took a sip of wine.

"It's nobody's fault," he said. "I shouldn't have come home a day early. Or I should have let you know I was coming. Then we wouldn't have had to go through that."

His wife didn't say anything.

"When did you start seeing that guy?" Kino asked.

"I don't think we should get into that."

"Better for me not to know, you mean? Maybe you're right about that," Kino admitted. He kept on petting the cat, which purred deeply. Another first.

"Maybe I don't have the right to say this," his wife said, "but I think it'd be good for you to forget about what happened and find someone new."

"Maybe," Kino said.

"I know there must be a woman out there who's right for you. It shouldn't be that hard to find her. I wasn't able to be that person for you, and I did a terrible thing. I feel awful about it. But there was something wrong between us from the start, as if we'd done the buttons up wrong. I think you should be able to have a more normal, happy life."

Done the buttons up wrong, Kino thought.

He looked at the new dress she was wearing. They were sitting facing each other, so he couldn't tell if there was a zipper or buttons at the back. But he couldn't help thinking about what he would see if he unzipped or unbuttoned her clothes. Her body was no longer his, so all he could do was imagine it. When he closed his eyes, he saw countless dark-brown burn marks wriggling on her pure-white back, like a swarm of worms. He shook his head to dispel that image, and his wife seemed to misinterpret this.

She gently laid her hand on top of his. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm truly sorry."

Fall came and the cat disappeared.

It took a few days for Kino to realize that it was gone. This cat—still nameless—came to the bar when it wanted to and sometimes didn't show up for a while, so if Kino didn't see it for a week, or even ten days, he wasn't particularly worried. He was fond of the cat, and the cat seemed to trust him. It was also like a good-luck charm for the bar. Kino had the distinct impression that as long as it was asleep in a corner nothing bad would happen. But when two weeks had passed he began to be concerned. After three weeks, Kino's gut told him that the cat wouldn't be coming back.

Around the time that the cat disappeared, Kino started to notice snakes outside, near the building.

The first snake he saw was a dull brown and long. It was in the shade of the willow tree in the front yard, leisurely slithering along. Kino, a bag of groceries in hand, was unlocking the door when he spotted it. It was rare to see a snake in the middle of Tokyo. He was a bit surprised, but he didn't worry about it. Behind his building was the Nezu Museum, with its large gardens. It wasn't inconceivable that a snake might be living there.

But two days later, as he opened the door just before noon to retrieve the paper, he saw a different snake in the same spot. This one was bluish, smaller than the other one, and slimy-looking. When the snake saw Kino, it stopped, raised its head slightly, and stared at him, as if it knew him. Kino hesitated, unsure what to do, and the snake slowly lowered

its head and vanished into the shade. The whole thing gave Kino the creeps.

Three days later, he spied the third snake. It was also under the willow tree in the front yard. This snake was considerably smaller than the others and blackish. Kino knew nothing about snakes, but this one struck him as the most dangerous. It looked poisonous, somehow. The instant it sensed his presence, it slipped away into the weeds. Three snakes within the space of a week, no matter how you considered it, was too many. Something strange was going on.

Kino phoned his aunt in Izu. After bringing her up to date on neighborhood goings on, he asked if she had ever seen snakes around the house in Aoyama.

"Snakes?" his aunt said loudly, in surprise. "I lived there for a long time but can't recall ever seeing any snakes. I wonder if it's a sign of an earthquake or something. Animals sense disasters coming and start to act strange."

"If that's true, then maybe I'd better stock up on emergency rations," Kino said.

"That might be a good idea. Tokyo's going to get hit with a huge earthquake someday."

"But are snakes that sensitive to earthquakes?"

"I don't know what they're sensitive to," his aunt said. "But snakes are smart creatures. In ancient legends, they often help guide people. But, when a snake leads you, you don't know whether it's taking you in a good direction or a bad one. In most cases, it's a combination of good and evil."

"It's ambiguous," Kino said.

"Exactly. Snakes are essentially ambiguous creatures. In these legends, the biggest, smartest snake hides its heart somewhere outside its body, so that it doesn't get killed. If you want to kill that snake, you need to go to its hideout when it's not there, locate the beating heart, and cut it in two. Not an easy task, for sure."

How did his aunt know all this?

"The other day I was watching a show on NHK comparing different legends around the world," she explained, "and a professor from some university was talking about this. TV can be pretty useful—when you have time, you ought to watch more TV."

Kino began to feel as if the house were surrounded by snakes. He sensed their quiet presence. At midnight, when he closed the bar, the neighborhood was still, with no sound other than the occasional siren. So quiet he could almost hear a snake slithering along. He took a board and nailed shut the pet door he'd built for the cat, so that no snakes would get inside the house.

One night, just before ten, Kamita appeared. He had a beer, followed by his usual double White Label, and ate a stuffed-cabbage dish. It was unusual for him to come by so late, and stay so long. Occasionally, he glanced up from his reading to stare at the wall in front of him, as if pondering something. As closing time approached, he remained, until he was the last customer.

"Mr. Kino," Kamita said rather formally, after he'd paid his bill. "I find it very regrettable that it's come to this."

"Come to this?" Kino repeated.

"That you'll have to close the bar. Even if only temporarily."

Kino stared at Kamita, not knowing how to respond. Close the bar?

Kamita glanced around the deserted bar, then turned back to Kino. "You haven't quite grasped what I'm saying, have you?"

"I don't think I have."

"I really liked this bar a lot," Kamita said, as if confiding in him. "It was quiet, so I could read, and I enjoyed the music. I was very happy when you opened the bar here. Unfortunately, though, there are some things missing."

"Missing?" Kino said. He had no idea what this could mean. All he could picture was a teacup with a tiny chip in its rim.

"That gray cat won't be coming back," Kamita said. "For the time being, at least."

"Because this place is missing something?"

Kamita didn't reply.

Kino followed Kamita's gaze, and looked carefully around the bar, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He did, though, get a sense that the place felt emptier than ever, lacking vitality and color. Something beyond the usual, just-closed-for–the-night feeling.

Kamita spoke up. "Mr. Kino, you're not the type who would willingly do something wrong. I know that very well. But

there are times in this world when it's not enough just not to do the wrong thing. Some people use that blank space as a kind of loophole. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Kino didn't understand.

"Think it over carefully," Kamita said, gazing straight into Kino's eyes. "It's a very important question, worth some serious thought. Though the answer may not come all that easily."

"You're saying that some serious trouble has occurred, not because I did something wrong but because I didn't do the right thing? Some trouble concerning this bar, or me?"

Kamita nodded. "You could put it that way. But I'm not blaming just you, Mr. Kino. I'm at fault, too, for not having noticed it earlier. I should have been paying more attention. This was a comfortable place not just for me but for anybody."

"Then what should I do?" Kino asked.

"Close the bar for a while and go far away. There's nothing else you can do at this point. I think it's best for you to leave before we have another long spell of rain. Excuse me for asking, but do you have enough money to take a long trip?"

"I guess I could cover it for a while."

"Good. You can worry about what comes after that when you get to that point."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm just a guy named Kamita," Kamita said. "Written with the characters for *kami,* 'god,' and *ta,* 'field,' but not read as 'Kanda.' I've lived around here for a long time."

Kino decided to plunge ahead and ask. "Mr. Kamita, I have a question. Have you seen snakes around here before?"

Kamita didn't respond. "Here's what you do. Go far away, and don't stay in one place for long. And every Monday and Thursday make sure to send a postcard. Then I'll know you're O.K."

"A postcard?"

"Any kind of picture postcard of where you are."

"But who should I address it to?"

"You can mail it to your aunt in Izu. Do not write your own name or any message whatsoever. Just put the address you're sending it to. This is very important, so don't forget."

Kino looked at him in surprise. "You know my aunt?"

"Yes, I know her quite well. Actually, she asked me to keep an eye on you, to make sure that nothing bad happened. Seems like I fell down on the job, though."

Who in the world is this man? Kino asked himself.

"Mr. Kino, when I know that it's all right for you to return I'll get in touch with you. Until then, stay away from here. Do you understand?"

That night, Kino packed for the trip. *It's best for you to leave before we have another long spell of rain.* The announcement was so sudden, and its logic eluded him. But Kamita's words had a strange persuasive power that went beyond logic. Kino didn't doubt him. He stuffed some clothes and toiletries into a me-

dium-sized shoulder bag, the same bag he'd used on business trips. As dawn came, he pinned a notice to the front door: "Our apologies, but the bar will be closed for the time being."

Far away, Kamita had told him. But where he should actually go he had no idea. Should he head north? Or south? He decided that he would start by retracing a route he often used to take when he was selling running shoes. He boarded a highway express bus and went to Takamatsu. He would make one circuit of Shikoku and then head over to Kyushu.

He checked into a business hotel near Takamatsu Station and stayed there for three days. He wandered around the town and went to see a few movies. The cinemas were deserted during the day, and the movies were, without exception, mind-numbing. When it got dark, he returned to his room and switched on the TV. He followed his aunt's advice and watched educational programs, but got no useful information from them. The second day in Takamatsu was a Thursday, so he bought a postcard at a convenience store, affixed a stamp, and mailed it to his aunt. As Kamita had instructed him, he wrote only her name and address.

"Think it over carefully," Kamita had told him. "It's a very important question, worth some serious thought." But, no matter how seriously he considered it, Kino couldn't work out what the problem was.

A few days later, Kino was staying at a cheap business hotel near Kumamoto Station, in Kyushu. Low ceiling, narrow, cramped bed, tiny TV set, minuscule bathtub, crummy little fridge. He felt like some awkward, bumbling giant. Still, except for a trip to a nearby convenience store, he stayed holed up in the room all day. At the store, he purchased a small flask

of whiskey, some mineral water, and some crackers to snack on. He lay on his bed, reading. When he got tired of reading, he watched TV. When he got tired of watching TV, he read.

It was his third day in Kumamoto now. He still had money in his savings account and, if he'd wanted to, he could have stayed in a much better hotel. But he felt that, for him, just now, this was the right place. If he stayed in a small space like this, he wouldn't have to do any unnecessary thinking, and everything he needed was within reach. He was unexpectedly grateful for this. All he wished for was some music. Teddy Wilson, Vic Dickenson, Buck Clayton—sometimes he longed desperately to listen to their old-time jazz, with its steady, dependable technique and its straightforward chords. He wanted to feel the pure joy they had in performing, their wonderful optimism. But his record collection was far away. He pictured his bar, quiet since he'd closed it. The alleyway, the large willow tree. People reading the sign he'd posted and leaving. What about the cat? If it came back, it would find its door boarded up. And were the snakes still silently encircling the house?

Straight across from his eighth-floor window was the window of an office building. From morning till evening, he watched people working there. He had no idea what kind of business it was. Men in ties would pop in and out, while women tapped away at computer keyboards, answered the phone, filed documents. Not exactly the sort of scene to draw one's interest. The features and the clothes of the people working there were ordinary, banal even. Kino watched them for hours for one simple reason: he had nothing else to do. And he found it unexpected, surprising, how happy the people sometimes looked. Some of them occasionally burst out laughing. Why?

Working all day in such an unglamorous office, doing things that (at least to Kino's eyes) seemed totally uninspired—how could they do that and still feel so happy? Was there some secret hidden there that he couldn't comprehend?

It was about time for him to move on again. Don't stay in one place for long, Kamita had told him. Yet somehow Kino couldn't bring himself to leave this cramped little Kumamoto hotel. He couldn't think of anywhere he wanted to go. The world was a vast ocean with no landmarks, Kino a little boat that had lost its chart and its anchor. When he spread open the map of Kyushu, wondering where to go next, he felt nauseated, as if seasick. He lay down in bed and read a book, glancing up now and then to watch the people in the office across the way.

It was a Monday, so he bought a postcard in the hotel gift shop with a picture of Kumamoto Castle, wrote his aunt's name and address, and slapped on a stamp. He held the postcard for a while, vacantly gazing at the castle. A stereotypical photo, the kind you expect to see on a postcard: the castle keep towering grandly in front of a blue sky and puffy white clouds. No matter how long he looked at the photo, Kino could find no point of contact between himself and that castle. Then, on an impulse, he turned the postcard over and wrote a message to his aunt:

How are you? How is your back these days? As you can see, I'm still travelling around by myself. Sometimes I feel as if I were half transparent. As if you could see right through to my internal organs, like a fresh-caught squid. Other than that, I'm doing O.K. I hope to visit sometime. Kino

Kino wasn't at all sure what had motivated him to write that. Kamita had strictly forbidden it. But Kino couldn't restrain

himself. I have to somehow get connected to reality again, he thought, or else I won't be me anymore. I'll become a man who doesn't exist. And, before he could change his mind, he hurried out to a mailbox near the hotel and slipped the postcard inside.

When he awoke, the clock next to his bed showed two-fifteen. Someone was knocking on his door. Not a loud knock but a firm, compact sound, like that of a skilled carpenter pounding a nail. The sound dragged Kino out of a deep sleep until his consciousness was thoroughly, even cruelly, clear.

Kino knew what the knocking meant. And he knew that he was supposed to get out of bed and open the door. Whatever was doing the knocking didn't have the strength to open the door from the outside. It had to be opened by Kino's own hand.

It struck him that this visit was exactly what he'd been hoping for, yet, at the same time, what he'd been fearing above all. This was ambiguity: holding on to an empty space between two extremes. "You were hurt, a little, weren't you?" his wife had asked. "I'm human, after all. I was hurt," he'd replied. But that wasn't true. Half of it, at least, was a lie. I wasn't hurt enough when I should have been, Kino admitted to himself. When I should have felt real pain, I stifled it. I didn't want to take it on, so I avoided facing up to it. Which is why my heart is so empty now. The snakes have grabbed that spot and are trying to hide their coldly beating hearts there.

"This was a comfortable place not just for me but for anybody," Kamita had said. Kino finally understood what he meant.

Kino pulled the covers up, shut his eyes, and covered his ears with his hands. I'm not going to look, not going to listen, he told himself. But he couldn't drown out the sound. Even if he ran to the far corners of the earth and stuffed his ears full of clay, as long as he was still alive those knocks would relentlessly track him down. It wasn't a knocking on a door in a business hotel. It was a knocking on the door to his heart. A person couldn't escape that sound.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but he realized that the knocking had stopped. The room was as hushed as the far side of the moon. Still, Kino remained under the covers. He had to be on his guard. The being outside his door wouldn't give up that easily. It was in no hurry. The moon wasn't out. Only the withered constellations darkly dotted the sky. The world belonged, for a while longer, to those other beings. *They* had many different methods. They could get what they wanted in all kinds of ways. The roots of darkness could spread everywhere beneath the earth. Patiently taking their time, searching out weak points, they could break apart the most solid rock.

Finally, as Kino had expected, the knocks began once more. But this time they came from another direction. Much closer than before. Whoever was knocking was right outside the window by his bed. Clinging to the sheer wall of the building, eight stories up, tap–tap-tapping on the rain-streaked glass.

The knocking kept the same beat. Twice. Then twice again. On and on without stopping. Like the sound of a heart beating with emotion.

The curtain was open. Before he fell asleep, he'd been watching the patterns the raindrops formed on the glass. Kino

could imagine what he'd see now, if he stuck his head outside the covers. No—he couldn't imagine it. He had to extinguish the ability to imagine anything. I shouldn't look at it, he told himself. No matter how empty it may be, this is still my heart. There's still some human warmth in it. Memories, like seaweed wrapped around pilings on the beach, wordlessly waiting for high tide. Emotions that, if cut, would bleed. I can't just let them wander somewhere beyond my understanding.

"Memories can be helpful," Kamita had said. A sudden thought struck Kino: that Kamita was somehow connected with the old willow tree in front of his house. He didn't grasp how this made sense, exactly, but once the thought took hold of him things fell into place. Kino pictured the limbs of the tree, covered in green, sagging heavily down, nearly to the ground. In the summer, they provided cool shade to the yard. On rainy days, gold droplets glistened on their soft branches. On windy days, they swayed like a restless heart, and tiny birds flew over, screeching at one another, alighting neatly on the thin, supple branches only to take off again.

Under the covers, Kino curled up like a worm, shut his eyes tight, and thought of the willow. One by one, he pictured its qualities—its color and shape and movements. And he prayed for dawn to come. All he could do was wait like this, patiently, until it grew light out and the birds awoke and began their day. All he could do was trust in the birds, in all the birds, with their wings and beaks. Until then, he couldn't let his heart go blank. That void, the vacuum created by it, would draw *them* in.

When the willow tree wasn't enough, Kino thought of the slim gray cat, and its fondness for grilled seaweed. He remem-

bered Kamita at the counter, lost in a book, young runners going through gruelling repetition drills on a track, the lovely Ben Webster solo on "My Romance." He remembered his wife in her new blue dress, her hair trimmed short. He hoped that she was living a healthy, happy life in her new home. Without, he hoped, any wounds on her body. She apologized right to my face, and I accepted that, he thought. I need to learn not just to forget but to forgive.

But the movement of time seemed not to be fixed properly. The bloody weight of desire and the rusty anchor of remorse were blocking its normal flow. The continuing rain, the confused hands of the clock, the birds still fast asleep, a faceless postal worker silently sorting through postcards, his wife's lovely breasts bouncing violently in the air, something obstinately tapping on the window. As if luring him deeper into a suggestive maze, this ever-regular beat. *Tap tap*, *tap tap*, then once more—*tap tap*. "Don't look away, look right at it," someone whispered in his ear. "This is what your heart looks like."

The willow branches swayed in the early-summer breeze. In a small dark room, somewhere inside Kino, a warm hand was reaching out to him. Eyes shut, he felt that hand on his, soft and substantial. He'd forgotten this, had been apart from it for far too long. Yes, I am hurt. Very, very deeply. He said this to himself. And he wept.

All the while the rain did not let up, drenching the world in a cold chill. ◆

(*Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.*)