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YOU ARE SO MINE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

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B.A. Columbia University, 1984
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May, 2006

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This collection is dedicated to my husband, Ales, and to my dear friends, Amanda and Joseph Boyden, without whose trust and support it never would have been written.

April 16, 2006

The story *She's A Little Bit Unsure about the Formation of Clouds* was previously published in *Wasafiri* (Volume 21, Issue 47, March 2006). The story *The Female of the Species* will be published in the May 2006 issue of *The Bryant Review*. The story *You Are So Mine* has been accepted for publication in *Prairie Schooner*. The story *Water* has been accepted for publication in *Nimrod International Journal*.

YOU ARE SO MINE

1.

I have been a stranger for a long time. For longer than I thought it possible to be. When I first arrived in this place, I thought that strangeness was a transitory quality: a quality that, like a tongue of mercury moving within a glass thermometer, could be measured by degrees of intensity. By heat, by fever: the body's natural reaction to contact with a foreign agent. I believed that, although I happened to find myself in a situation that caused the silvery liquid to climb up, up, up through the transparent bar, there would always be a countervailing tendency for it to fall back down again, toward some imaginary black line.

Toward a condition called normal.

But now, after having been strange for such a long time, I am no longer certain that this point of equilibrium – this black line – really exists.

I am no longer certain that the mercury must fall.

2.

Years ago, before I came to the place where I am now, Marat used to make love to me at my place. Or rather at the place where I lived then which wasn't really mine at all, but a tiny living room alcove in the apartment of a married couple who needed a little extra money to help pay the rent. Back then, I was oblivious to my surroundings. I was an invisible drop of water in a sea of invisible drops of water. That is until Marat appeared on the horizon: a tiny red sailing boat, a speck of bright color in the uniform blue. In those days, Marat, with his beautifully twisted nose and his beautifully twisted English, was the one strange and

marvelous thing in my existence. And, on the rare occasions when we could find somewhere to be alone, the one strange and marvelous thing inside of me.

I used to call him from my office when I knew the apartment would be empty.

“Three o’clock,” was all I needed to say.

Or: “Half past five.”

Or: “Nine fifteen tonight, but only for an hour,” and he knew exactly what I meant.

Be there. Then. And he always was.

When Marat made love to me in the wide marital bed of my absent roommates – their long-sleeved flannel pajamas tucked carefully under the pillow where I lay my head – he would lean in against me, press his body on top of mine, and whisper my name into my ear. That was always the first thing he did: before he kissed me or touched any part of my body with his long handsome fingers. My own name. In my own ear. Yet somehow his foreign tongue changed the shape of the familiar word and made it his own.

For me, the sound of my name on a lover’s lips has always meant the first step toward possession – his of me, mine of him. And it was no different with Marat. Only more so: perhaps because he mispronounced it.

Marat talked a lot during the course of our lovemaking – he was a real talker in bed. He started with my name, then phrases in my language and then, as his pleasure grew more insistent, he seemed to be pulled back toward his own language, toward some inner reservoir of expression. Then strange words poured out of him in a warm liquid rush, odd little incantations:

“ti si tako moja, ti si tako moja...”

I never asked what they meant. I liked not knowing. But the peculiar rhythm of the funny little staccato words ended up dislodging me, slowly and surely, from the one place I knew in the world. Bereft of meaning, the nonsense syllables acquired a power of their own.

Today I don't have an office. I don't have an apartment. I don't pay rent to cash-strapped roommates. I don't even have a telephone though, with a bit of luck, one may be installed in the coming months. I live in an old stone house on the island in the northern Adriatic where Marat spent his childhood. The island is actually two long slender islands: an abbreviated archipelago of sorts. On the map, the islands look like two dark worms hanging down from the mainland, consuming each other. A tiny bridge lies between the two islands. The bridge reaches a length of no more than ten feet or so, and can be opened with a hand crank so that high-masted sailboats can pass between the two islands and into the open sea. A sturdy young man, who as far as I can tell has no other function on the island, performs this odd little operation twice each day.

Marat is renovating the old house where we live, and he also runs his family's tourist agency. During high season, he goes out on one of those high-masted sailboats nearly every day. He takes tourists on junkets: trips to the mainland, trips to other islands, trips to the famed blue grotto. The comings and goings of the boat must be timed to the opening of the bridge, or he has to sail around the tip of the island to get home. During high season, virtually nothing gets done on the house – no improvements, no telephone installations, nothing – because, not only Marat, but every man, woman and child on the island is dedicated to the surge of foreigners that overwhelms them for three months each year. Houses are emptied for renters, private cars converted to taxis, fishing boats into pleasure crafts.

On days when I don't go out on the boat with Marat, I take walks, swim in the sea, and rattle in and out of the odd-shaped rooms of the old house. I feel like the only soul on the island that is not part of the binary equation of this place: neither local nor tourist. I belong to some strange in-between race.

It can happen on such days that the island and the sea suddenly, and with no warning at all, change places. And then I feel like I'm drowning on a solid piece of land. With no little red boat in sight.

Marat and I married last spring after I had spent less than a year on the island. I had come for a visit – or so I thought – at the beginning of the summer tourist season, and then just stayed on and on and on. And then got married the following spring. We have no plans for children. Not yet anyway. Although I sometimes think that's what I should do. If for no other reason, then just to pass the time.

4.

Back home on free mornings, I used to walk from my apartment into the city. Past rows of houses and rows of people, bus stops and coffee houses, office buildings and newspaper stands. Sometimes I took note of the individual elements as I went past, really saw them, let them sink into my retina and bounce around my neural passages. But usually I just walked by and everything blurred into backdrop.

Now each morning I walk from the stone house to the nearest village. To buy bread. Or to go the butcher shop or the fish market. Or just to have a baklava and espresso at the café in the square. On my bad days, I drink a tall beer and a shot of the local slivovitz.

My daily itinerary consists of a narrow serpentine road down to a small harbor and an old falling-down pier that takes me into the village on the other side. On these walks nothing escapes my gaze. Nothing blurs into backdrop. My sense of vision is sharpened to a painful point.

The walk is loveliest – softest – in the spring. Then the island has a solitary feel to it, with only a handful of tourists and locals about. And the landscape feels tender: the air soft

and pliant, the plants green and new – not the dull, dusty green of the end of summer – but a fresh lively green verging on yellow. In one sense at least, islands are good for exiles and strangers. They possess a finite number of elements distilled from nature: plants, people, colors. The vocabulary of an island is easily mastered, its dictionary concise.

Walking along the narrow path, I count the island's elements: turquoise sea lying all around, church belfry, chipped red and green masts making a helter-skelter scaffolding above the harbor, dark green rosemary climbing over dry stone walls, and one lone spider web beaded with dewdrops, suspended between the silvery trunks of two olive trees. In the springtime, these spare elements are painted over with a drunken yellow brush as uncontrollable cypress spurge covers the island: bright yellow spears poking up from the stony earth, running riot over the grassy meadows and down to the sea, forcing their way through the cracks in the pavement of the church courtyard, invading even the sacrosanct olive groves. Spurge is a nuisance, the villagers have told me: little better than a weed. But I admire its tough, hybrid nature: pale yellow as a bloom, dark green as conifer. Not one thing or another.

Today on my way home from the village, a toothless old man approached me on the narrow path. He was guiding a goat whose hindquarters had been marked broadly with a fluorescent pink dye. I've never seen the old man before, though I've noticed his goat grazing on the spurge-covered meadows. It stands out in the crowd: a perennially ridiculous outsider among its snow-white fellows.

As we avoided each other on the narrow path, I smiled at the old man, looking into his squinty eyes, seeking out a glint of fellowship.

Words leapt to my mind.

“Oh, so you're the one with the pink goat,” I wanted to say.

But the thoughts took shape in my language, not his, and so never made it from my brain to my tongue and into his ear. The old man passed along the narrow pathway.

5.

I am slowly learning Marat's language. I discovered that it has the same word – one word – for foreigner and stranger. It makes no distinction between the two. So if I meet someone I don't know, someone I've never seen before, I can only report to Marat that I've met a stranger. He would have no way of knowing whether the person I'd encountered had been someone as ordinary as a toothless old man walking a fluorescent pink goat on a tether, or a dark-skinned Nefertiti negotiating the island paths while balancing a brilliantly-colored turban high on top of her proud ebony head.

Strangeness is nothing more than a relationship: possessing or not possessing. It's personal and reciprocal. It's something like the ancient Greek concept of *xenos*, which a long time ago had nothing to do with ethnicity or nationality or foreignness, but simply meant "the same as us but not from here."

But what happens, I wonder, when the reverse is true? What does it mean if you are here, but not the same as us? What does that make you? What does that make me?

6.

Marat didn't come home last night. He took the boat out early in the morning for repairs. Toward evening, his mother stepped into the sunset-lit kitchen of the stone house. She was wearing, as always, a short-sleeved black dress and a threadbare cotton apron over her ample bosom. She told me that Marat had called the post office in the village: that he'd missed the

bridge opening and decided to go back to the mainland to stay overnight. The *bora* was rising, that high powerful wind out of the northeast, and it wouldn't be safe for him to sail around. The islanders say that the *bora*, despite its fearsome power, is an optimistic wind, pushing out stale air and bringing clear weather.

Marat's mother came with a neighbor, another cheerful ample-bosomed woman in a black dress. The two talked and laughed in the kitchen of Marat's house. They poked their fingers into the plants I had potted, peeked into the camp refrigerator, asked me what I had planned to cook Marat for dinner. Would some tasty morsel go to waste with no man at home to eat it? I answered the only way I could: in accented monosyllables, trying on the new language like an apron. Liking the feel of it. Resenting the feel of it.

Marat's mother crowed happily: "You see how she speaks. She's one of ours now! One of ours!"

That is the highest compliment on the island.

I slept alone in the house for the first time.

7.

The islanders will not call me by my given name. They use Marat's family name, Gromach, with the feminine possessive form tagged onto the end like a lure on a hook. So I have become Gromacheva. A feminine possession. At first I didn't mind the moniker. I rather liked it in fact. It recalled the heroines of Russian novels I had read in my youth – Anna Karenina – wife of Karenin, lover of Vronsky. It seemed romantic and exotic, and perhaps merely an innocuous way of categorizing islanders, of keeping relationships straight, dividing people into family clusters, but then I remembered Anna's fate.

Today I asked the butcher to change his custom. Pressing my fingers gently against the glass case in front of the various cuts of meat – sausage for grilled shish kebob, red chunks of veiny beef for goulash – I said: “Won’t you please call me by my first name?” I slowly lifted my fingers from the glass, leaving behind a set of transparent prints, and ordered a small portion of meat for goulash.

He wrapped the meat in white paper, wiped his big hands on his blood-smeared apron, handed the package over the counter with an accommodating smile, and said: “Here you are, Mrs. Gromacheva.”

I turned around and left the shop without taking the meat.

8.

In the evening, Marat returned. He wasn’t alone, but had brought along a friend of his, a tall, skinny, jovial fellow I have already met once or twice named Sasho. He also brought eggs, dry sausage and truffles from the mainland, and two liters of heavy red wine. So the lack of meat in the house went unnoticed.

Marat was in fine form, happy and manly, expansive. He had missed me. He leaned his lovely twisted nose into my face and kissed me long and hard. I ran a finger down the crooked ridge, and he grabbed me and kissed me longer and harder still. Sasho looked on, laughing. Island life suits Marat – or perhaps it is married life that suits him. He seems bigger than he did in the days when we made love in another man’s bed. He has more swagger, more confidence, and takes my breath away even more than he did when he was an empty-handed stranger.

Marat lit a fire in the fireplace, and we sat around eating eggs and truffles and hunks of spicy sausage, drinking the heavy red wine. Sasho is a great teller of jokes. On and on he

went through the long night, through the two liters of wine. Jokes about prostitutes and virgins, about presidents and Albanians, about menial workers who had emigrated to America.

“There once was a prostitute from Zadar..., there once was a virgin on the Split-Brač ferry line..., an American president, an Albanian president, and a Serbian president are on a private airline..., a Bosnian named Muja moves to Hollywood...” and so on and so forth.

Marat laughed uproariously at each punch line.

I laughed too, though perhaps not uproariously enough, because Sasho, even after having drunk plenty of wine, kept a sharp eye on me during his recitation, gauging how much I understood, looking to see if I faked a laugh at the punch line.

There are two kinds of islanders, I have found. The warm, careless ones – like Marat’s mother – and the ones who never cease measuring the temperature of outsiders, never cease checking the height of that miniscule bar of mercury.

Is she ours? Or is she not?

I don’t really like the second kind. They are more sensitive to my condition, it’s true. They know me, recognize me immediately for what I am. But at the same time, they rob me of the single great comfort of strangeness: the ability to not understand, to drift through meaning as if through a low sea fog.

9.

It’s summer again. The tourist season is in full swing. Marat has gone on a five-day island-to-island junket with a group of rich German tourists. I stayed behind.

10.

I have taken to translating little snippets of things. Tourist brochures, fish menus, hotel rate sheets, descriptions of outings to the famed blue grotto, even Sasho's endless strings of jokes. Translating is a bit like navigating upon a sea of language – not with a high-masted sailboat – but with a small leaky dinghy, equipped with one oar and a bucket for bailing the water, and a dictionary of course. Each day I try anew to smuggle tiny cargoes of meaning from one side of the water to the other. Some words – local fish and fauna for example – have no chance of surviving the crossing. They sink the moment they leave the shore. Other words almost make it, but then for some reason, begin to bobble dangerously just as they are about to strike land. Sasho's jokes are like that. Each of them has a tiny hairline fracture in it – a cultural eccentricity, a bit of island trivia, a word in a peculiar dialect – that makes them founder just as they are about to float majestically into port.

But happily, there is the odd expression, the occasional turn of phrase that arrives intact to the other side. There are even the few that thrive and gain something under my feeble stewardship. Yes, that does happen from time to time, and it feels wonderful when it does – almost as I imagine it must feel to save a life.

11.

I overheard a conversation in the village square today. I sat at a table sipping sweet ink-black espresso, and a conversation from a neighboring table floated up and entered my thoughts unbidden. It was in my language, which is why it leapt so readily to my senses: whole and comprehensible. The young woman at the table was from the mainland and was, I gathered, like me, married to a local man. She was complaining to her mother who had come for a

summer holiday to visit. The younger mother remarked that her two daughters, who went to local elementary schools, had begun to talk among themselves in a language that she – their own flesh and blood – had barely mastered.

“By the time they’re teenagers,” she fretted. “I’ll have no idea what they’re talking about. I won’t be able to understand them at all.”

The older woman opened her mouth and let out a loud raucous laugh, like the squawk of a gull. I could see by the glasses on the table that she’d been drinking slivovitz.

“No one understands teenagers,” she said emphatically.

The young mother shook her head sadly and spoke as if to herself. “I sometimes feel like I’m a stranger to them.”

Her mother closed her eyes. She tilted her head back to better capture the rays of the sun, and murmured. “We’re all strangers. We’re all strangers some of the time.”

I looked away from the women’s table and let my gaze travel over the water, at the bobbing masts of fishing boats, searching for a spot of red color in the blue. When I got up to pay the check, I asked the waiter to bring another slivovitz to the older woman. And one for her daughter too.

12.

I have too much time to think.

Too much time to just be.

13.

Marat arrives tonight. Weary of my daily routine of morning walk to the village, translation, afternoon swim, dinner, bed, I left the house in the early evening with no destination in mind.

Walking inland, I spotted the old man with the pink goat. He was heading up toward the bridge with the hand crank through a maze of dry stonewalls. The island is covered with these stone structures, a complicated network of walls and piles made with thousands and thousands of stones, but no grout, no cement, nothing at all to hold them together. Yet they withstand the ravages of time and weather. From the sky, the walls look utterly purposeless: a meandering gray mosaic of interlocking patterns, a tribute to the futile organizing energy of man, a snaky, out-of-control stone hedge. The greatest concentration of walls lies just below the bridge, a mile or so from the house where I live.

I followed along behind the old man who, despite his age and shrunken stature, moved at a good clip, his pink goat picking its way along the dusty path ahead of him. Entering the maze of walls, the old man – or his goat – always seemed to effortlessly find the break in one wall that allowed passage into another seemingly enclosed segment. It was hard to say who led, goat or man, but at one point, the old man stopped and turned his head towards to me.

The goat stopped and looked around as well.

The man called out: “Who’s there? Who are you?”

The man was blind. That’s why I never detected recognition in the wrinkled face when I passed him. For a long moment, I didn’t know how to answer his question.

Finally I said “Beatrice,” pronouncing my first name in the foreign way that Marat does. Be-a-tri-ci-a – each vowel separate and distinct, the *r* dramatically rolled, the soft *s* sliding by as an afterthought, all of it ending on a firm Latinate *a*.

“Yes, yes.” The old man waved his hand impatiently, mindless of the effort I had put into the strange pronunciation of something so familiar to me. He seemed to be staring at me intently, actually seeing me, though I now knew the visor of his cap shaded two empty eye sockets. “But who are you?” he insisted.

I hesitated, scrambling for a definition, and then relented. “Gromach,” I said.
“Gromacheva.”

“Ah,” he said, pulled off his cap with a flourish and flashed me a toothless, eyeless grin. “You’re Marat’s new wife.”

“Yes, Marat’s new wife.”

“You know what *gromach* means, don’t you?”

“No,” I answered.

“These walls are called *gromache*. You didn’t know that?” he pondered my ignorance. Then he shrugged and added: “Nobody knows how to make them like this any more. Nobody. Watch.”

First, he lifted one stone from the top of the nearest wall. It came loose with no effort at all. He held it up like a magician, and then put it back where it had been. Then he plucked a stone from the middle of the wall. With no glue to hold it, it also came free with a bit of prying. He held it up to me, and slid it back in where it belonged. And then, in a lunatic gesture, the little old man threw his whole wiry frame against the structure, pushing it with all his might. It held fast. It didn’t budge. Didn’t waver. Then he did it a second time: threw his little body against the wall, shoving wildly at the stones. And again it didn’t budge.

I held my breath.

He methodically wiped the dust from his thin cotton sleeves.

“Stronger than me. Stronger than you. Stronger than that stone house of yours. Stronger than whatever country you left to come here. Nothing can knock it down, not even the great *bora*,” he ended, referring to the island’s famous wind as if there were no greater earthly force.

“But what are they for?” I asked.

“They used to keep the olive groves and the vineyards separate. To show who owned what. Who was who. What must be passed on from father to son, mother to daughter. Now they just shelter goats and sheep from the wind. Nobody knows how to build them like this anymore,” he repeated. “Nobody. Your ancestors made the best *gromache* on the island, the strongest. They were masters, your ancestors. Artists.”

My ancestors.

And then I asked him a question that had been nagging at me. “Why is your goat pink, if you can’t see it?”

The old man’s eye sockets widened in surprise. “Pink! He’s pink?” He squatted down at the foot of the wall, overcome with laughter. He reached a withered hand in the general direction of the fluorescent goat. “Pink! My daughter-in-law must have dyed him. She doesn’t trust me. She doesn’t think a blind man can keep track of a goat.”

He laughed and laughed, and pulled the animal in to his wiry old body, stroking its head and its bearded chin. The goat’s vertical irises narrowed. “All the time you were pink, and I never knew, I never knew! The joke’s on me! Ha ha! The joke’s on me!”

I looked around. The sun had disappeared behind the horizon, though its light would continue to illuminate the maze of walls and arid earth for a while longer. “I have to go,” I said, leaving the old man to his merriment. “It’s getting dark, and Marat’s due home tonight.”

“Darkness is nothing,” he said, still laughing, wiping the dry tears from his cheeks.

“Goodbye,” I said in my own language. Cautiously, I picked my way down through the dry stonewalls in the fading light. When I had been walking for less than a minute, I heard the old man’s voice carried on the evening air:

“*Adio*, *Beatric-ia!*” he called out: “*Adio!*”

“*Adio*,” I whispered. “*Adio*.”

I had forgotten to ask his name.

The next morning, Marat and I walked together from the stone house to the village. We walked past the fields of yellow cypress spurge lost now to the summer haze, past the grazing goats, and across the old pier that is missing as many wooden slats as the old goatherd misses teeth.

Glimpses of blue sea underfoot.

Just as we were about to get to the other side, I lost my balance and Marat caught me as I fell toward the invisible drops of water below. He held me in his arms between the blueness of the sea and the blueness of the sky.

I looked into his familiar face and whispered a string of syllables to him:

“ti si tako moj, ti si tako moj”

You are so mine.

You are so mine.

WATER

In and out of the darkness we go. Round one curve and another and into a stretch of dim silvery light. Then darkness again. An unseen curve makes our bodies swivel out of control. A sudden splash of water to our faces takes our breath away. Voices float up and down the tunnel, terror and euphoria mingling in the narrow space. Is that me screaming? Or is it sweet Flora, nestled in between my legs? A sprinkling of red lights flickers briefly above our heads and is swallowed up in the blackness. We're two soft-haired bats swooping through a strange night sky. My arms cling tightly to my daughter's wet waist. My belly seizes up with excitement. Two more turns and we emerge from the chute like newborns: first Flora, then me, our four eyes blinking in surprise. Twin baby girls bursting into the chlorine light of the operating theatre. Only we don't cry this time. We laugh. We laugh a whole lot. We've been laughing almost non-stop since my husband, her father, disappeared two months ago. We don't know what other sound to make.

"Flora, baby!" I call up the stairs to wake her up. Monday morning. A school day. The last week of school before Christmas holidays. Sleet and rain forecast but not here yet, thank heaven. Water is the bane and the balm of our existence now. We have a water problem in the basement – moisture spots that bloom luxuriantly behind the plaster, floorboards so swollen that none of the doors down there close any more. Slam a door in our basement and it bounces back at you with a spongy thud. And there's a torrent, an actual waterfall that pours down the wall of our laundry room when it rains hard enough outside, or rains in a certain direction. The laundry room torrent is a font so copious, so insistent, that there aren't enough buckets and pots and tubs in the house, in the whole world it sometimes seems to me, to contain it.

That's the bane. But then, on the other side of the ledger, we have our Saturdays at the Atlantis Aqua Park and our thrilling journeys down into the Black Hole. Flora and I never tire of that slide. We wait in line over and over and over again: dripping, shivering, feet clammy and raw against the cold metal steps. At the top of the stairs, we lower ourselves into the shallow watery receptacle and wait again, this time for the miniature traffic light to turn green and give us the go-ahead to propel ourselves into our own private interval of darkness. It's worth the wait. The Black Hole comforts us with the knowledge – with the experience really – that it's okay to disappear, that it can be fun even. We love the water park, Flora and I. It's the balm, our balm.

“Fauna, mama!” Her voice, already crisp and awake and alive, floats down the stairs to the kitchen. She's taken to calling me Fauna lately – a new nickname that matches her given name and confirms that we've become a single interdependent ecosystem. If one of us is threatened with extinction, both of us are.

Standing at the sink rinsing yesterday's espresso pots and waiting for Flora to come down to breakfast, I watch the man hovering outside my kitchen window. He swings lazily in and out of view, floating down from the upper right hand pane, bouncing slowly out of sight again. At one point, when he's dead in front of my face, he lifts the visor of his protective helmet and wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of a well-used hand. He has a pleasant, wide, trusting face, a face as untroubled as that of an adolescent boy wading out into the surf on a cloudless day. He sends me a jovial wink and a wave from the seat of his mini-bulldozer, pushes his straw-colored hair back from his brow, and lowers the visor again. I should offer him coffee, I think. That's probably all he wants. Simplicity itself. But then again, he'll be here every morning for weeks on end, digging up the front of our house, inspecting the insulation, checking the pipes and the reserve tank, girding up the plumbing that connects us to the sewers. If I give him coffee today, I'll have to give it to him every day

from now on, maybe even twice a day, and that would be almost like marriage. Not so simple after all.

“Any news from Jocko?” Flora is standing at the kitchen counter flipping through the pile of mostly junk mail. She is fully dressed except for shoes and socks. She even has a pale green cloche tugged down around her face, like leaves around an upside-down tulip. She scratches the top of one bare foot with the toes of the other. Jocko is how we have jokingly referred to her father since he disappeared. His real name is Arnold, which, Flora quite rightly pointed out, is hardly the most suitable name for a man who disappears from one day to the next. So Jocko it is.

“Nope.” I pour the coffee from the still tarnished espresso pot into brightly chipped cups. Nine-tenths for me, one-tenth for Flora, and not a single drop for the fellow floating outside the window. At eleven, Flora is certainly not old enough to drink coffee, but she’s also not old enough to lose the man in her life, and it seems to me that in the realm of loss, one thing can compensate quite well for another. Coffee with warm milk and sugar is a perfectly sweet way to start the day.

“Who’s that?” Flora nods toward the figure hovering outside the kitchen window.

“That,” I look at the man in the bulldozer who is no longer winking and waving but expertly manipulating the controls of the machine in order to transfer a load of soil and debris from one side of the garden to the other, “is a contractor. A plumber. Jack-of-all-trades.” I scrupulously avoid Flora’s gaze. “He’s going to fix the leak in the basement.”

“I thought we were going to let it go until Jocko came back. Have our own little Atlantis in the basement, our own Black Hole.” She makes a fish face at me, a sign of scorn perhaps for my faint heart. Then she picks up her coffee and rolls it gently between the palms of her hands, fingers extended. A light splatter of raindrops strikes the window.

“Well,” I shrug, trying not to concede that I’ve disappointed her, that I’m not as courageous as I pretend to be, that we may not be twins after all. “Rainy season’s here. All that water on the way. Have to protect our investment.”

Jocko – or Arnold as we called him then – was not the kind of man you’d expect to walk out on his family, on his life’s investment. A down-to-earth guy, as the cliché goes, a workaday drudge who let the two women in his life flutter around him like jeweled hummingbirds around a solid branch from which, alas, most of the blossoms have already fallen. Arnold may once long ago have had an adventurous spirit, an impulse that might have yanked that branch from the ground, roots and all, but in recent years Flora and I had lost all sight of it.

Arnold didn’t disappear in the typical film-noir sort of way, walking out to buy a pack of cigarettes or a quart of milk and never coming back. He disappeared electronically. At least at first. In mid-October, he was slated to go – or so he told me – on his one of his company’s regular three-day R&R junkets. He worked developing patents at an industrial engineering company and project hours were often so grueling that engineers were given end-of-project, rejuice-the-battery trips on the company’s dime. When I called him – as was my habit – on his first evening away, a recorded female voice on the end of the line informed me that the number didn’t exist. The display on my cell phone clearly showed his name, so there could have been no human error involved, no manual mistake in entering the numbers. I tried again, and again got the recorded voice. I checked the number in my address book, entered the numbers manually, and got the voice again. Some sort of network problem, I figured. But when I tried the next day, the response was the same.

After that I sent an e-mail to his private mailbox, but the server bounced it back to me: delivery not possible, no such address. The same thing happened with his company e-mail. I inquired at his job and was informed that he had given notice fourteen days earlier, though not

before having filed a patent for a new kind of universal coding system and magnetic tracking device for which a nice fat bonus check had been deposited into our account. I inquired at the bank and discovered that indeed the money was there, but that Arnold's name on our joint bank account was not. I inquired with his parents who lived in the next state over and with whom I have a cool and dutiful relationship, and they told me they had heard nothing from Arnold in the past month or so.

The whole episode reminded me of a news story from a couple of years back. An unmanned space probe circling around Jupiter, taking quite astonishing photographs of the planet and sending them back to earth, had gone missing, had simply vanished into the folds of the universe. There were fears at the time that the probe might have dropped into the enormous freezing ocean of Europa, one of Jupiter's larger moons. I remember the story vividly because the people at the space station were so completely undone by the disappearance – so heartbroken. There's really no other word for it. One very ordinary-looking scientist actually broke down and, pulling his glasses from his face in a gesture of despair, wept right then and there on the evening news hour. During the first days of the crisis when there was still hope that the probe would turn up again, a spokeswoman made regular announcements from the front of a control room. Behind her, row after row of technicians stared into their computer screens, tapping anxiously on keyboards, frantic to regain contact.

When Arnold disappeared, it struck me that perhaps he wasn't gone at all, just as that unmanned Jupiter space probe wasn't really gone. It was probably still out there somewhere, circling Jupiter years after its ostensible disappearance, taking snapshots if it still had enough film or batteries of whatever it needed to do the job it had been programmed to do. It was only the connection that had been ruptured, the network that should have linked the probe to all those heartsick scientists back in the control room. And likewise, for all I knew Arnold was still sitting across from me at the breakfast table in the morning, tinkering with his potential

discoveries in the laboratory all day, lying beside me in bed at night. The link between us had just gone haywire, the channels jammed up somehow. Or perhaps, as that recorded voice had informed me, the number we needed – the universal tracking device that allowed us to locate each other in space – didn't exist anymore. Circuits down.

But whatever the true nature of Arnold's disappearance, I had to tell Flora something. So a little less than a week after Arnold should have come home, I took Flora to the Atlantis Water Park on a Saturday evening. That was our first Saturday. It was late October, and the weather, though dry, was unseasonably cold. Together we swam out through the heavy plastic curtain that separated the indoor pool from the outdoor pool. The water around us remained as protectively warm as amniotic fluid, but the change in the air temperature was palpable and the sudden contrast between one and the other came as a life-affirming shock. A heavy mist hung over the pool, making it impossible to see for more than a couple of feet around. I studied the outline of Flora's sleek wet head in the wan fog. She looked like a seal surfacing for a quick gulp of oxygen. Her narrow shoulders jutted slightly out of the water beside her head like two smooth white moonstones.

"I don't think your father's coming back this time," I said abruptly. We were all alone out there, so it seemed easiest just to talk bluntly about the matter. For her part, Flora didn't answer right away but looked at me for a while with those wonderful clear young eyes of hers, brown flecked with gold. The colors I had memorized; I couldn't see them in the darkness. I did see something pass over her features though, something I couldn't quite identify. It might have been surprise, or a jolt of recognition, or hurt perhaps, or maybe just a shiver of cold. We were outside after all and, though the warm water surrounding us lessened the chill, the frigid air bit into our exposed skin nonetheless.

"Did he say anything about me?" she asked. "That he would still want to see me?" She assumed that we were separated in the normal sort of way. A single beam of light illuminated

the pool from below, and I could see Flora's oddly elongated limbs treading water beneath the surface.

"No." I smiled at her, trying to transmit a message of love and comfort, but wondering at the same time if I might appear inappropriately pleased or even jolly about Arnold's disappearance. "He's just gone, Flora," I said. "Gone, gone."

"Gone, gone," she echoed, and the repetition made the word sound funny – like gong rather than gone. Then she lowered herself smoothly under the surface, letting the water close over her head, a rope of wet brown hair disappearing last. And she was gone gone, too. I could no longer locate her pale limbs undulating under the water, could only see my own blurred form in the single beam of light. Beyond the light, a dense blackness spread all around. A knot of panic suddenly rose in my throat, the kind of panic you feel in substances that are not, no matter how well you've mastered them, truly your own. What if she didn't come up, I wondered. What if she never came up? How could I conduct a proper search in this strange viscous substance? No one would believe that she'd ever been here at all. True enough, her clothes were hanging in the locker but she had the ankle bracelet that opened it, and I couldn't even remember the number. She had picked a locker a little way from my own, in another row.

I've always believed that a good definition of insanity was to have this terrible feeling of uncertainty and fear in your own substance, at home, in the air. But, of course, the panic that overcame me at the aqua park wasn't insanity at all. It was just one of those queer passing sensations, probably brought on by recent events. And, of course, Flora did come up. She came up only a few feet away from me, lunging out of the water like a dynamo, like a powerful geyser shooting into the mist. She let out a huge lungful of air and yelled – "Jocko's gone, gone! Jocko's gone!" – and then she fell back into the water with a huge splash. A reassuring wave traveled from Flora to me. That was the first time she used the name Jocko

for her father. Not long afterwards, we swam inside through the plastic curtains and tried out the slides.

It would be fair to wonder if I showed sufficient care for Flora during the first days after Arnold's disappearance, to wonder if I was properly concerned about her initial reaction, and about all the laughter and the joking and the nicknames that followed. And I did think about it. I remembered the strange little blip in her expression before she went under the water. The obvious conclusion was that she was suppressing some deep sense of abandonment and that I, as her mother, should gently coax the pain to the surface. Reveal it. Probe it. Discuss it. And finally heal it. But it didn't actually seem to me that we were suppressing anything at all. We talked about the disappearance and about Arnold all the time. We talked about him every day. Sometimes we made jokes about him and sometimes we mentioned him in the same way we would have if he were still at home with us. And during these ongoing conversations, all the various details of the case gradually came out. The disconnected e-mail and mobile phone numbers. The distraught secretary. The bonus for the magnetic tracking and universal coding patent that would keep us afloat for at least a year to come. The various savings accounts that would keep us afloat even longer. His detached parents – slightly mystified by their son's disappearance but not interested, or not yet anyway, in throwing themselves into a full-throttled search.

During those first days, Flora and I often sat in front of the computer screen together, tapping at the keys, searching for clues. We found the official website of the FBI national crime center. It provided some truly astonishing statistics: that in 2004 (the last year for which data was available) there were 91,297 active missing persons cases and an accumulated total of 840,279 missing persons reported and still unaccounted for. These numbers were further broken down into other categories: juvenile cases (the vast majority), endangered cases

meaning that the person had disappeared in the company of another person or under circumstances indicating that his or her physical safety is in danger, involuntary cases which were defined as outright abductions or kidnappings. The numbers really were quite remarkable. Enough missing persons to fill dozens of high-rise office buildings, to occupy several decent-sized towns. Enough missing persons to marry one another, start families, and begin a new tribe if they wanted, a whole great nation of missing persons.

Flora and I stumbled across other less official sites. There was one called Missing Loved Ones that added meat to the FBI's skeletal statistics. I didn't care much for the site – it was so sentimental as to make me almost queasy. It featured hearts and crosses placed in regular intervals on a background rinsed in pink. A repeating poem ran down the side panel: "If tears could build a stairway and memories were a lane, I would walk a hundred miles to bring you home again." Author unknown. Missing perhaps, like all the others. Even the title of the site bothered me. I realized that I'd grown irritated with that cloying term: *loved one*. It had been overused lately and usually in the wrong context. After some tragedy – a collapsed mine or a fatal fire – news announcers would frequently use the phrase loved ones, rather than more neutral words like dead, deceased, disappeared. A television journalist might say, for example: "In the coming days, funerals will be held for the seventeen loved ones who perished in the mine, and after that the families will begin to ask tough questions." Or he might, during an interview with one of the widows, ask the woman when she had last talked to her loved one. The phrase struck me as overly familiar, ingratiating and, perhaps worst of all, presumptuous. After all, maybe the woman hadn't loved her husband at all. Maybe she'd despised him. Maybe they hadn't touched each other in years. Just because somebody has been crushed or burned or brutally murdered, or simply disappeared, it doesn't necessarily follow that he was loved. Certainly not loved as deeply and desperately as that Jupiter space probe had been loved.

But the site was useful all the same. It provided concrete examples and gave a sort of proportion and context to Arnold's disappearance. Strangely enough, one of the most common circumstances surrounding a disappearance was an abandoned car parked and locked somewhere, often containing the unmolested wallet and identity cards of the missing person. That seemed to be the red thread that ran through almost all the stories about adults who had vanished.

"Well, at least Jocko left the car," I said. "I'm no good at buying cars."

Flora didn't respond but kept scrolling down. "Look at this one," she said. "He should be easy to find."

"Why do you say that?" I peered at the picture. A man about fifty years old peered back at me, unshaven, a dark purple mark the size of dime on his cheek and a silver tooth nestled in his crooked grin. His name was Auburn Wallace and, sure enough, his locked and abandoned car had been found near a hiking area in Aurora, Colorado.

"Identifying marks. He's got loads of them." She read: "Birthmark on his right cheek, large scar running down his abdomen, scars on both knees, tattoo of a heart and ribbon on left forearm, capped left incisor. Wearing a Timex watch when he disappeared." She stopped scrolling. "Jocko doesn't have any identifying marks, does he?"

"Just a couple of moles," I confirmed.

Flora continued scrolling past all the names and faces: Mary Lou Lowry, Paula Lamonte, Jason Farge, Emily Belcher, Patrick Carney, William Sandborn aka "Willsy." Sometimes she paused and leaned in toward the computer screen to study a face or read the circumstances and location of a specific disappearance. "Look," Flora said. "They all have detectives on their cases." She scrolled back up and, she was right, after each entry, it said to contact detective so-and-so of the so-and-so sheriff's office or police department with any information or sightings of the missing person. "Does Jocko have a detective on his case?"

“No,” I said. “I didn’t report it. It seemed voluntary. What with all those disconnected phone and computer lines, giving notice at his job, depositing money in the bank for us. I mean he didn’t so much disappear as just leave. It couldn’t be one of those stolen identity cases. Why would they leave all that money in the bank?”

Flora stopped scrolling and turned toward me. “I still think Jocko should have a detective. Even if he did just leave. Even if we never list him on one of these sites. I just think he deserves to have a detective,” she said firmly. “Like everybody else.”

In mid-November – a little over a month after Arnold’s disappearance – I picked up Flora from school and we drove in the direction of the nearest precinct station. During the drive, I told her something about her early life that I’d never told her before. That Arnold had fallen down the basement stairs a little over a week before she was born and had broken not one, but both of his arms. Now that is something that someone named Arnold would do and something that a guy named Jocko emphatically would not. When I gave birth to beautiful baby Flora at the hospital eight days later, when I brought her home and laid her down in the middle of our bed, when she cried in the middle of the night or cooed charmingly in the middle of the afternoon, Arnold could do nothing. He was immobile, helpless, useless. He could only stand above her with his arms held stiffly across his chest like massive white polar bear paws. Never has a new father – except perhaps for an absent one or one who doesn’t even know that he has created new life – been so utterly marginal, so viscerally irrelevant.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that before?” Flora’s pale green cloche was pulled down over her cheeks. She looked straight ahead through the windshield. I could make out the pale sprinkling of freckles on the side of her nose, but couldn’t decipher the expression on her face or the one in her eyes.

“Your father didn’t want me to,” I answered. “He worried that you might think of him differently if you knew that he hadn’t held you for the first five weeks of your life. Hadn’t been able to touch you at all.” And I hadn’t wanted to tell her because I worried that she might think I had taken unfair advantage of this strange little mishap that occurred right at the starting line.

“So that’s why Jocko wasn’t in any of my early baby pictures,” she mused.

“Yeah, that’s why. And actually, come to think of it, we don’t really have all that many pictures from that time. He couldn’t take them. He couldn’t hold a camera, couldn’t press the shutter down, or operate the flash. And he couldn’t hold you either, and you were the whole reason for taking pictures.” I paused for a moment and thought incongruously of the absolutely amazing photographs taken by that space probe before it went missing: the complex swirling mosaic of Jupiter’s golden surface, the spluttering atmospheric plumes and shadowy volcanic craters, the tiny moons of Io and Europa hovering high above the massive planet. “Though there is a really cute one of you in your bassinette,” I said, returning to the subject of Flora’s own miraculous infancy and the extent to which it had been captured on film. “You were wearing that pale yellow bonnet, remember? The one with the green scalloped stitching around the edge? You can just barely make out the edge of one of your father’s casts in that picture. It’s a blur of white. You can’t tell what it is. It could be a finger blocking the viewfinder or some kind of unexplained mist.”

A few minutes later, I had parked and we had gotten out of the car and a business-like young woman was ushering us quickly through a warren of desks in the quiet low-ceiling office of the neighborhood police precinct. A stocky sandy-haired fellow about thirty-five years old sat behind his desk. He wore a blue uniform and a shield, and was preparing a form to take down the particulars of our missing person case. He had three sharpened pencils arranged on the

desk in front of him. His badge featured the name Detective Tim Flint. So now if we wanted to, we could put a line at the bottom of Arnold's future website providing instructions to report any information or sightings to one Detective Tim Flint. It was just what we needed: a good, solid, reliable name.

"He should have come home from a weekend company trip on October 15, but it turned out he never actually went." I dutifully reported the facts of the case and Detective Flint took notes as I answered his litany of questions. I recounted the details of Arnold's life and subsequent disappearance. Date of birth. Address. Work place. Home telephone. Work telephone. Cell number. Driver's license number. Bank account numbers. Credit card numbers. Considering the central enigma being described – the impenetrability of it – the interview was a bland and bureaucratic affair. Long on numbers, short on mystery.

"Was there anybody he was close to at work? Any women you knew of? Troubles in the marriage?" Flint cast an apologetic look at Flora sitting beside me in her pale green hat. She lowered her head into her hands and her narrow shoulders trembled slightly beneath her brown parka.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said Detective Flint who probably thought Flora was crying, though I knew right from the start that she was laughing and doing her best to hide it. "It's alright. You have to ask." I responded to his questions in the negative, and Flint checked another box on the form. I wondered why he was doing it in pencil. It seemed less permanent. He reached down, opened a drawer, and pulled out a second form from his desk. "I just need to fill out this physical description chart." He wrote Arnold's name on the top line, picked up a new pencil, and held it above the second line. "How tall a man was your husband?" I hesitated. I've never been very good with heights. "Would you mind standing up for me?"

Flint stood up. He was a medium sized man with a powerful build. He gave the impression – one that we've all grown familiar with from years of watching police serials on

television – of a bristling masculine type, the kind of man who hates being trapped behind a desk, who'd rather be out there looking for whatever needs to be found.

“He’s about your height, I’d say. Just a little bit shorter, a slightly smaller build, a little less muscle.”

Flint blushed slightly, sat down, and filled in the data. “Hair color?”

“Light brown. Short. Same as yours,” I said almost apologetically. I wished I could provide a more compelling portrait. “Brown eyes.”

“Identifying marks?”

Flora’s head went down into her hands again and she snorted loudly, trying to distort the nature of the sound.

“Just a scattering of moles on his back.” I struggled to suppress a smile. Flora practically wailed with laughter. “He wasn’t too keen on sunbathing,” I said, trying to distract attention from Flora. “Ultraviolet rays, skin cancer risk, you know...” But the inanity of my comments only made her laugh all the more.

Flint looked up at us sharply. “I didn’t realize this was so amusing,” he said, showing an unexpected flash of anger, or perhaps an emotion that came closer to disgust.

Flora lifted her head and looked at Flint with surprise. Her cheeks went all red, and suddenly she seemed so forlorn, so young, just a child really, a little girl. This was the very first suggestion since her father had disappeared, and a rather authoritative one at that coming from a uniformed police officer, that there might be another way to react, a more suitable way. All of a sudden, she began to cry as uncontrollably as she had been laughing before. The tears flowed down her cheeks and into the collar of her turtleneck.

“She’s a bit overwrought,” I said to Detective Flint, though for the moment I had no idea whether Flora’s tears were motivated by genuine grief or mortification at being scolded.

“In fact, it was her idea to come here,” I added, hoping to prop up her credentials as a

properly overwrought daughter, and perhaps at the same time to prop up Arnold's as a missing loved one.

"Yeah, that reminds me," said Flint. "Why did you wait so long to report it? Your husband disappeared on October 15, and it's November 17 today. More than a month has passed." His eyes darted from my face to Flora's tear-stained one as if the suspicion of foul play had just occurred to him.

"Because I thought he had left, not disappeared." For the first time since Arnold had gone, this interpretation of events seemed slightly embarrassing to me, seemed to cast a questionable light on me as a wife, a woman, a mother.

"You should always report this sort of thing immediately," Flint said, standing up and closing the file. Any idea of foul play had apparently already left his mind. "You never know what might have happened. A couple of weeks ago there was a DOA at Mercy Hospital, a John Doe who answered a description similar to that of your husband's."

Flora and I were both on our feet in an instant, our bodies tense with a possible outcome that we had never once even begun to consider. As Detective Flint backed away from the desk, pushing his chair into it and slipping the file under his arm, we both leaned in toward him like trees bending in a strong wind. The atmosphere reeked of sudden danger, of floods and hunters, of an approaching storm.

"It wasn't him," he said, realizing that his casual admonishment had inadvertently provoked this response. "The DOA wasn't your husband. I just think it's important that a missing person be reported. That's the only way we can figure out who he is if someone else turns up," he continued almost nonsensically. Flora and I kept leaning in toward Detective Flint. It hardly mattered what he said. It was as if he had cast some kind of spell on us, and we couldn't break away from it. "We identified the man," he reassured us. "He was a drifter who froze to death during that cold snap last month. He was fished out of a pond over on the east

side of town. Patrick Barney, or Carney, or something like that. He'd been missing for a couple of years and if the family hadn't filed the initial report, we wouldn't have been able to inform them." Flora and I exchanged a glance, the spell broken at last. Our exchanged glance was one of recognition. They hadn't taken him off that website yet, or perhaps they had in the meantime, in the last week or so, but I doubted it. There are many ways of keeping people alive, of giving the missing their own little pocket in the universe. "Well, thanks for coming in," said Detective Flint. "Better late than never. You let us know if he turns up at home, and we'll let you know if we get any word on his whereabouts."

Whereabouts. Foul play. John Doe. DOA.

There are certainly a lot of euphemisms in this realm of loss.

I often dream about Arnold now. I dream about him much more than I did when he was sleeping right next to me. Once I dreamt he was talking to me from behind the laundry room torrent. I could see his face quite clearly behind the rush of water. His lips were moving. He was trying to tell me something but the sound of the water made the words sound like a different language. Flora thought that the dream meant that he was trying to come back to us, trying to communicate. My friend, Tanya, said that it meant he was dead. Water and death are always connected in dreams, she said with eerie certainty. My friend, Emily, said it meant that his whereabouts were somewhere in the southern hemisphere, in the tropics maybe, but definitely somewhere where another language was spoken.

Last night, I dreamt that I woke up in the middle of the night and he was lying there next to me. I rolled up on to my side and whispered into the half-darkness of the bedroom. I wasn't sure if he was asleep or not. In fact, I wasn't sure if he was there at all. I asked him where he'd gone. He didn't answer right away, but he was awake, definitely there and awake, and so tender, so terribly tender at that moment that it reminded me of the way he had been in

the very beginning, years ago, before I put Flora down in the bed between us, before I lay down on one side, my swollen breasts throbbing in the darkness, and he on the other, his plastered arms shedding their wan light. In the dream, he reached out a bare hand and wiped a strand of hair from my cheek. Then he left his palm resting on my cheek, and I realized then that in fact I had missed him, that I had missed him a lot, and that that was what the term missing really signified. Not so much being lost or gone, but being missed. I had the sudden urge to tell him this, but his image started to break up. It broke up into geometrical shapes, those cubist squares and rectangles that appear on the television screen when there's some sort of trouble with the satellite transmission.

“Wait,” I called out when I could no longer feel his hand on my cheek. His image reassembled once more, but only briefly, and then it broke up again, and there was just the blank screen, the dark room.

I didn't tell anybody about that dream. I'm not sure if it really was a dream.

It is Christmas day, a glorious sunny day, and I suggest to Flora that we take a walk up to the little hilltop chapel of Saint John the Baptist on the eastern side of town. The chill gray of the past autumn, that terrible cold snap, the days of icy rain, have all been banished today in favor of this low, warm, wintry sun. On the way out of town, we drive past Atlantis. It's open. I called and checked, a trip to the water park having been one of the possible ideas for how to spend our first Christmas without Arnold. As we pass by, Flora and I both glance at the series of blue tubes emanating from the top of the building, winding and twisting their way down towards street level. We smile at each other, both of us picturing the same thing: the pale worm-like bodies in the tubes, spaced at regular intervals, screaming out loud, moving in and out of the darkness, in and out of the light. It's funny to know that they're there, to know

exactly what it feels like to be there yourself, but not to be able to see them. It makes you wonder if they're really there at all.

Flora and I hold hands during most of the walk up to the chapel. We don't talk much. It's steep in places and we breathe heavily at times, not used to the climb. At the top, we walk several times around the chapel, stopping for a while on the side with the best view: a vista of snow-covered hills far off, then dark blue woodlands in the middle ground, and a detailed pattern of light brown meadows and darker tilled fields coming toward us. Several horses are grazing on the meadows, heads bent down toward the sallow grass. It feels like we're miles from town, miles from anywhere. The sun is shining so warmly up here at the top of the world that I take off my parka and place it on the ground. Flora tells me she's going to go explore the chapel, and I lie down on my parka and close my eyes against the sun. We couldn't have chosen a better way to spend the day, I think, before dozing off.

Some time later I sense a person standing above me and blocking the sun. I open my eyes. The figure looks otherworldly, almost as if it were inside of a halo, the rays of sun emanating from behind it in a regular circular pattern. I sit up, blocking my eyes with my hand, and squinting. It's not Flora. The figure's too big to be Flora. It's a man.

"Arnold?"

I feel so confused. As if I am lost once again in a substance not my own. A knot rises in my throat and I can't find my voice. I scramble to my feet, still using my hand as an improvised visor.

"Arnold?"

And yet I'm not at all sure that the man in front of me, sandy-haired and with a medium build, is Arnold. It's so hard to recognize someone, even someone very familiar, who is out of context. And this man seems somehow bigger than Arnold, somehow more solid.

"Detective Flint?"

My voice now sounds like the voice of an old woman. It's little more than a croak. I see Flora from the corner of my eye. She's come out of the chapel already and she's standing right behind the pair of us. "Mom," she says. I can tell she senses my confusion, my terrible disorientation. "Mom." She takes hold of my elbow with her hand and steadies me. "It's the contractor, Mom. The plumber. The jack-of-all-trades, remember? The guy fixing the leak in the basement."

Once she says it, once she identifies him, I can see it right away. Of course it's him. I see him every morning; I've seen him every day for the last two weeks. He's the guy I don't give coffee to. He's the one bouncing in and out of view on the seat of his bulldozer, hovering in the frame of the kitchen window. No wonder I didn't recognize him removed from his frame.

"Oh my god." There are tears streaming down my face. "I'm so sorry. I just couldn't figure out who you were for a minute..."

"It's alright." His embarrassment is palpable, floating about us in the winter sunshine like great motes of dust. "I'll see you after New Years then," he says, backing away. "It won't take much longer now." The poor man practically runs away. He's wearing athletic gear and jogs in the direction of the path.

"Merry Christmas!" I call after him.

"Merry Christmas!" Flora echoes, waving her hand in the air.

On our way down, I give Flora a parental lecture. I start the lecture to hide my embarrassment, to camouflage the frightening sense of being old and addled that had overwhelmed me at the top of the hill. I speak in a confident manner, with a clear voice, the way adults often speak when they are talking to children about things that are mysterious or terrifying or simply inevitable. I tell her that I know how hard it must be to have her father go away like this. But that love, any kind of love, is a risk. That it's best just to appreciate it each

day, to appreciate each moment you share with a person you love, because you can never know when that person won't be there anymore. I tell her that I love her more fiercely than I've ever loved anybody and that, at the same time, I know for a fact that she'll leave me one day, to go to college, or get married, or have a brilliant career. These are two contradictory things that I hold in my heart simultaneously: my love for her and my eventual loss of her. People always leave. They die. They disappear. Some, like her father, suddenly and for no reason at all. It doesn't necessarily make sense, but it doesn't have to. Because it's worth the pain of loss to have loved. To love is to lose.

In the middle of this lecture that I am actually starting to believe myself and that, more to the point, has begun to dissipate the emotions from the encounter at the top of the hill, Flora suddenly stops. She turns and faces me full on. She looks straight into my eyes with her own beautiful, brown, gold-flecked ones in a way that is completely new to me. She's not laughing anymore. She's not conspiratorial. Not sisterly at all.

"That's not why he left," she says. "He didn't leave because we loved him too much. He left because we didn't love him enough."

Flora pulls her hand roughly from mine. It is a desolate feeling, an ecosystem being ripped apart like that. She continues down the path away from me. I catch a glimpse of movement in front of her. It is the back of the contractor in his winter jogging clothes as he disappears around a bend and into the blue woodland. Without Flora's hand in mine, I don't know where to look next. I don't know what to see. I don't know which part of the vista should hold my eye. I look up into the sky and spot a glint of silver. It's the space probe, I think improbably. But then the glint is gone again as if it had never been there at all. The sky seems so huge and empty, and yet I know it contains a truly astonishing number of things. Just think of Jupiter. Enormous Jupiter. A planet twice as big as all the planets in the solar system put together, a planet so large that its gravitational pull makes the sun wobble slightly

in its orbit. A planet with twenty-eight moons circling around it. Io, Callisto, Europa... And on Europa – a moon, a mere moon – a frozen ocean containing more salt water than all of the oceans on earth. Enough water to fill an almost infinite number of aqua parks and water slides, enough water to fill the deepest of black holes.

“Come back,” I whisper into the empty sky. “Come back.”

SHE'S A LITTLE BIT UNSURE ABOUT
THE FORMATION OF CLOUDS

For most of the day, the television screen in the living room is a dull, lifeless gray. At times, it almost seems to function as a cipher: obliterated by the winter sun that floods the room at midday, reflecting the bright stacks of cumulus clouds that float through the afternoon sky, capturing the outlines of a shadow as it glides through the room. At one minute before three, just such a shadow moves across the dead surface of the screen. It is the shadow of a woman about forty years old: slender, dressed in blue jeans, a black short-sleeved turtleneck, low-heeled shoes. She enters the room, leans in toward a low glass coffee table positioned in front of a red couch, picks up a slender, black, rectangular box and points it at the television. Dust motes explode outward, escaping the heat with a soft static blast. A bright orange three-lettered logo begins to take shape in the darkness. The woman, focusing intently on the letters that have replaced the impressionist blur of clouds, lowers herself to the couch. She wears no make-up and her features are so pale and expressionless as to be nearly monochromatic. She throws her head back against the sofa and lets her arms flop outward and open at her sides, exposing the tiny bluish veins running down the crooks. She is ready for her daily dose.

It usually comes in three discreet acts:

TSUNAMI IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
CAR BOMB IN IRAQ
DEADLY MUDSLIDES IN CALIFORNIA

or:

CAR BOMB IN IRAQ
TSUNAMI IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
MULTIPLE SHOOTINGS IN GAZA

or:

TSUNAMI IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
FATAL AVALANCHES IN UTAH
POLITICAL ASSASSINATION IN IRAQ

or:

TSUNAMI IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
STAMPEDES IN HINDI RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL
SUICIDE BOMBER IN IRAQ

The order doesn't much matter. The shifting trios of events seem to fit a random cyclical variation. There is the occasional spike, the occasional dull dip, but day after day, the number of dead rises and falls, rises and falls, creating what over time becomes a regular, even monotonous pattern.

Today the anchor begins the broadcast by reporting an upward revision in the death toll from around 225,000 to more than 250,000 from the tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean on the day after Christmas. The anchor adds that the numbers will probably go up again: that now it is more a matter of numerical estimates – historical population figures, missing persons reported, statistical extrapolations of one kind or another – than an actual physical body count. The woman almost wishes that they would provide her with some sort of a ceiling, an upward figure, so that she could align her expectations, put a theoretical cap on this natural holocaust. The unsettling vision of a sideways figure eight hovers briefly in her mind. *Infinity*. No ceiling. The roof blown clear off.

From the first day the tsunami appeared on her television screen, the numbers had been too large for her to grasp in any meaningful, non-statistical way: too large in other words for them to represent anything but an abstract idea. It was like the mathematical term asymptote that defines the remote end of a curve, a point you can get infinitely close to, but never actually touch or measure or put on a graph. Five hundred thousand people had attended the presidential inauguration in Washington DC the week before and she had watched the

mass of affluent-looking Americans captured in the camera lens as they surged through the cold gray streets of the capital, flooding the intersections, pouring into the monumental squares. She squinted at the broad aerial shot that filled the screen, closing one of her eyes and then the other, trying to imagine that half of those people were no longer there. But she couldn't do it. It didn't work. There were simply too many of them.

The anchor segues smoothly into acts two and three where the numbers are more manageable: one hundred and one killed in a stampede at a religious festival in India, thirty-one killed in various incidents in Iraq. One hundred and one is a prime number, the atomic weight of mendelevium, exactly half of the number of students that were enrolled in the natural science and mathematics doctoral program at Northwestern University in 2002, the year she finished her dissertation. Thirty-one: another prime number – she marvels briefly at the coincidence – equal to the square root of 961, the atomic weight of gallium, the number of children in her daughter's sixth grade class minus one.

In general, she prefers anecdotal stories: stories about individuals that don't slip into mathematical abstraction. During the opening days of the tsunami stories, she used to lean forward expectantly whenever the anchor turned to the experiences of Western tourists caught up in events. A couple of years back, she had complained to her husband about always going to his mother's for Christmas. She wanted to alter the routine and go to the Maldives one year for a change. A colleague in her program had gone and said it was heaven on earth. So when she listened to the accounts of survivors, she could quite easily imagine herself and Martin and the children being swept up by the great waves. How they would have had only an instant to choose which of the three children to hold on to. She could take Sybil, the eldest, who was a decent swimmer and not prone to panic, and Martin could take care of the twins. But then he wouldn't be able to grab hold of anything else – a tree or a fence post – to stay afloat, and might have to let go of one of them. She could let Sybil swim on her own and then she and

Martin could each hang on to a twin, and have one arm free. Still, levelheaded or not, Sybil was only eleven, a pretty fragile eleven at that, and might not be strong enough to withstand the powerful currents. Chances were good that at least one of the children would be drowned. She pondered the various combinations: how breakfasts would be without Henry, the family comic whose infectious laughter allowed her to indulge in a secret smile when she heard it from the pantry. How would they manage without gentle Max, the conciliator, or – oh! – without her beloved Sybil. She allowed a shudder to pass through her body and a thrilling sort of horror to engulf her mind as she wondered at how she would react to such a loss. Would she blame Martin for letting one of the twins go? Would he blame her for suggesting the Maldives – just to get her out of her doldrums? Would she finally be cured of the malaise that had seized her since her babies were grown and her doctoral studies finished? Cured from what she sardonically termed her meaning-of-life crisis?

A mechanized song explodes in the room. She picks up the cell phone from the table and glances at the numerical display. At the same time, she points the remote control toward the television, muting the sound but leaving the images.

“Yes,” she says to her husband.

“Belle.” His voice is subdued, solemn even. He is not supposed to call her from work. His boss admonished him the week before when he stepped out of an interminable meeting in legal in order to check up on her. “How are you doing?” he whispers into the phone.

“Okay.” She stares into the screen at a mangled wreck of a burnt car. “Same.” Wisps of smoke hover above the black skeletal beast, while in front of it a puddle of dark liquid – gasoline or blood – widens on the pavement.

“What are you doing?” His voice barely registers.

“Watching the three o’clock news.” A man in dungarees runs across the street in front of the smoking hull. His mouth is open in a ragged oval shape. He holds his arms in front of

him: blood runs in thick rivulets from his hands to his elbows. He is yelling frantically to someone beyond the camera's field of vision. She cannot hear his voice, only the sigh let out by Martin on the other side of town. "What's the tally today?" he asks.

Belle closes her eyes and rapidly calculates. "Twenty-five thousand one-hundred and forty-two."

"Jesus Christ." The volume of his voice rises. "What the hell happened?"

"Nothing," she picks up the remote and flicks off the television. "Nothing. Just an upward revision of the tsunami numbers."

She stares at the tall, cottony clouds that fill the dead screen. She can sense her husband's presence on the end of the line. Even when not speaking, he seems to saturate the airwaves with impotent concern. "What are you going to do now?" he asks, voice low and controlled again.

"Pick up the kids. What else would I do?" The words quiver with a bright sarcasm and a sort of put-on despair. She doesn't know why they come out of her mouth like that. She had wanted him to call.

"Hey, Belle. I talked to someone today about a job possibility for you. It's not great, but it's something. And it would get you out of the house a couple of days a week."

"What is it?" Now she moulds her voice into a dull and unresponsive shape, disguising the nearly imperceptible quickening of blood in her veins, the sense of something dilating and expanding inside of her. Another voice is silently screaming: *Stop! Stop!*

Stop what? she wonders to herself. *Stop what?*

"Substitute teaching. Not university level. High school. Evanston High. Math, geometry, maybe a little calculus."

Without saying goodbye, she presses another button on the little phone and places it quietly on the table in front of her.

Across the street from the house stands a low factory that was built in the 1940s and abandoned in the 1990s. It squats behind a red-and-white property sale sign in a thinning copse of oak trees. Two silos rise above the dull concrete mass. A faded black and white dairy cow is painted on the side of the first silo, an ear of pale yellow corn on the second. The images strike her as relics from another civilization, from a distant time – like hieroglyphics or cave paintings that have yet to be catalogued in the archives of a natural history museum.

Belle steps out into the world and regards the quiet afternoon. A dusting of fresh snow lies on the ground, the temperature not having risen sufficiently during the day to melt it. White crystalline sleeves of frost cling to the branches of the oak trees, lending them a fairy-tale aspect. A flock of dark birds, startled perhaps by the slam of the house door or by the beep and flash emitted by the remote auto-lock device, take sudden flight, circling and swooping around the abandoned factory, and then ascending. Their black silhouettes traverse the fragile eggshell sky and disappear into the vault of clouds.

She stands entranced for a moment. How perfectly beautiful are these natural creations – frost, branch, bird – next to the brute ugliness of the factory. She is often struck by the contrast. And yet, as she opens the car and lowers herself into its metal frame, she asks herself: isn't this car also natural? And what of that terrible wave? What of that terrible war? All part of the natural order of things, she shrugs, though she seems to have lost the will to penetrate the meaning of this order. Belle had once prided herself on her ability to penetrate the meaning of things, and she had once been – or so she thought – something of an expert on natural cycles, or at least natural cycles at their most mathematically abstract. She wrote her dissertation on the classification of rational symmetry and periodic cycles of order in three-dimensional space. She knows – as intimately as she knows the contours of Martin's long telephone silences, or the slope of Sybil's downcast eyelids – that every point in space is attracted to periodic cycles of order, and that she herself is no exception to that rule. She too

has tried to draw comfort from cycles. Not from the long, nearly linear cycle from birth to death – that one is too ruthless, too inexorable – but from the repetitive everyday cycles of rising and sleeping, nutrition and elimination, evaporation and precipitation. Martin often urges her: “Don’t always take the long view. Just forget about publishing your dissertation, or getting the perfect job – at least for now. Enjoy the small moments of each day. That’s the key to happiness.”

The critically finite, she calls this compromise. Though Martin is certainly right: his words, banal but true. Words to live by, and she had tried. One advantage of being pregnant or writing a doctoral dissertation or having small babies is that, for a brief spell, the world is indeed critically finite and meaning-of-life issues all but disappear. During those years, she and her life possessed a clear purpose. She was a vessel: a container for something other than herself. But such clarity, such purpose rarely endures. Eventually the small periodic cycles of order breed tedium and despair: the endless piles of laundry to be washed and folded and worn and piled up again, the university job listings to be checked, cover letters written, stamps licked, envelopes posted, food bought at the grocery store, put into bags, taken out of bags, cooked and swallowed and turned into shit, asses to be wiped, diapers changed, only to be filled with more shit. The sheer physical relentlessness of it all makes her think of the fingernails and hair on corpses that continue to grow even as the living calcium in the bones is slowly transformed to dust.

She often yearns for the abstraction of numbers, or perhaps for an even deeper abstraction. When Sybil was still an infant, Martin had taught Belle – who had somehow never bothered to learn – how to drive a car. They practiced on the same Evanston streets that she now traverses to get to the elementary school. They practiced on the highway from the university into Chicago. Once she mastered the basics of highway driving, she used to project her gaze out over the orderly rows of traffic in front of her and imagine her car careening off

the side of the road and into the dividing wall. She visualized the accordion crunch of metal, the baby's car seat lurching violently in the backseat, the path of her own head as it soared forward into the steering column and bounced back again: the parting of skin, the snap of vertebrae.

"What's the matter?" Martin had once asked her from the passenger seat. "You just shuddered."

"Sorry," she shook the vision out of her mind. "I was imagining the car crashing on the divider – what would happen to me, the baby, the car. Don't you ever do that?" she asked. "Not just with cars, but at all? Sometimes I stand at the top of a flight of stairs and imagine my toe catching the step, and me tumbling down, falling into a heap at the bottom. Or I imagine an explosion blasting out the front windowpanes of our house – the heat of it, the destructive force."

He turned and gave her a long look with his dark hazel eyes. "No, Belle," he announced the two syllables slowly as if he were addressing a beloved lunatic. "I don't do that."

"Oh, come on," she insisted. "You never project your life forward toward some tragic, violent incident – plane crash, earthquake – whatever? Everybody does that, don't they?"

"I don't think I do that," Martin reflected. A few minutes passed in silence and then he suddenly remembered. "When I used to take the L-train to work, I would imagine stepping forward and nonchalantly shoving someone off the platform in front of an oncoming train. I'd imagine the mayhem that would follow: the body being taken off the tracks, the arrest, a trial maybe, the victim's family sitting in the front row all righteous, teary-eyed, bewildered. With one impulsive gesture, my life would change into something totally different from what it was supposed to be."

Today recalling this conversation as she turns the car down Fourth Street where her three children stand on the curb waiting for her to pull up, she has to admit that Martin's homicidal vision possesses a certain perverse logic. When he dreams of a single violent, transformative instant that would catapult his life out of its ordinary cyclical routine, he imagines a stranger's death, not his own. Or hers. Or the children's. Which make more sense in a way than her endless fantasies about precisely what she fears the most, more sense than her strange brooding on impossible choices – which child to be carried away in a tidal wave, which crushed in a car accident, which blown to bits by a bomb. And sometimes she has to wonder: what does she truly fear most? Years ago, when she was still nursing the twins, she sat on the edge of the bed massaging her breasts and looking at the two baby boys in a rare moment of simultaneous sleep. All of a sudden her fingers stumbled upon an unmistakable lump in her right breast, and vast quantities of survival-driven adrenaline pumped into her system. In the end, it turned out to be nothing more than a clogged milk duct, but in that second of discovery, a thought – a prayer really – had sprung fully-formed into her mind: “Don't take me. Take one of them instead of me. Take one of the children.”

At times, she can't escape the feeling that she has become a walking anachronism: a mathematician spooked by infinity; a melancholic clinging to a life barely lived; a suicide terrified of her own extinction.

She pulls up beside her row of offspring, their three small heads poised on delicate necks, their growing bodies hidden beneath the Armour of down parkas, their backs bent slightly beneath the burden of school bags. “Get in.” Belle unlocks the back door. The children tumble noisily into the backseat, pulling off hats, making adjustments, storing their backpacks between their knees. “How was your day?” Belle asks the routine question as she pulls out from the curb.

“I have a test tomorrow,” Sybil’s responds.

“In what?”

“Environmental studies.”

“What’s going to be on it?”

“You know, the usual: the hydrosphere, clouds, rain, pollution, the ozone layer, global warming, stuff like that.”

“Can I see your notebook,” Sybil passes the notebook forward and, while waiting at a red light, Belle flips through the pages, her gaze traveling down the neatly written section headings:

PRECIPITATION
CONVERGENCE
FRONTAL LIFTING

“What about you boys?” she asks the seven year olds. “Anything going on in your class?” They don’t answer. The light turns green. Reluctantly she pulls her eyes away from the bold capital letters and presses her foot down on the accelerator, the lovely words still floating though her mind:

NIMBUS
CIRRUS
STRATUS
CUMULUS

“We’re not supposed to talk about it,” Max answers at last.

“What do you mean you’re not supposed to talk about it?”

“They’re really not supposed to,” Sybil rushes to their defense. “The teacher said...”

“What happened?” Belle glances around quickly, looking at the children in the back seat, wondering at the suddenly somber mood in the car. “You can trust me. I won’t tell anyone. Who would I tell?”

“Somebody’s mother died,” Henry blurts out the terrible words and then, with the power of a breaking dam, the interior of the closed car fills with palpable excitement and

release. The children's voices overlap and interrupt, rising in agitation as they search for the right expressions, the expressions adults might use in such an extraordinary situation.

"I was so upset when I heard..."

"The teachers couldn't stop talking about it all day long..."

"...something in her brain."

"...out of the blue..."

"... a stroke or something..."

"She was so nice, so pretty..."

"Stop!" cried Belle. She despises their excitement, recognizing her own. "Whose mother?"

"Tommy's," answers Max, who is crying now, rubbing his eyes with the back of his mittened hands, contemplating, perhaps for the first time in his short life, the potential of the world to strike such a personal blow.

"Did I know her?" Belle asks, trying to visualize the woman, to create a person out of the abstract number one – another prime number, the first prime number. When Henry describes her short red wavy hair, the rectangular black-framed glasses, the plaid car coat, she realizes that she and Tommy's mother had spoken briefly outside the school last Friday afternoon, only three days ago, the day before she died. About trivial everyday things: the weather, winter break, husbands.

"What happened to her?"

"She was driving home from the grocery store on Saturday afternoon, and she pulled her car over to the side of the road – she must have felt funny – and then she just closed her eyes and died. They're not sure why. That's how they found her," Sybil explains in a serious voice. "Alone in the car. Dead."

Belle spots a gap in the line of parked cars on the right side of the street, and pulls into it, turning off the engine as she coasts in. It's a quiet residential street not far from her own. She looks to the left where two leggy teenage girls stand conferring in front of a bright red clump of dogwood that glimmers flame-like above the dull gray sidewalk. The two girls, heads together, peek into a small plastic bag. One pulls out a silky something, and the other touches it gently, and makes a whistling sound. They move down the street laughing. Belle looks to the right where an old man wearing bedroom slippers emerges from an apartment building and turns over a garbage pail into a dumpster. Then she leans in close to the windshield, places both palms of her hands on the glass, and looks up into the wan winter sky, the towering clouds turning a pale shade of purple as afternoon heads toward night. *Cumulus, nimbus, cirrus*: she mouths the silent incantation.

“What are you doing, mommy?” Max's voice sounds small and unsure.

I'm trying to see what she saw in the last instant of her life.

“Mommy?”

I'm trying to sort it out.

“Are you okay?”

Belle rests her back against the seat and closes her eyes.

“Did they tell you how to treat Tommy when he comes back to school?”

“Yeah,” Henry says. “The nurse came and said we should treat him normally, *not* avoid him, but *not* ask about her – about his mother. We're supposed to talk about the usual stuff: like homework, cafeteria food, football, whatever.”

Aha, thinks Belle, trapped in our small periodic cycles of order, we thirst for the occasional statistical spike, and when it comes, we turn away. We retreat into the routine, into the splendid ordinary.

She starts the engine again, flicking on the right-hand blinker as she pulls out.

“Oh yeah, and we’re supposed to bring five dollars for a wreath tomorrow.”

Martin comes home at six fifteen on the dot. He’s a good man that way. Reliable. The television screen records his shadow crossing the room to the liquor cabinet where he pours himself his single bourbon of the day. “Anything new?” he calls out to the kitchen where Belle and the children sit around the table drawing and doing homework.

“The daily tally went up by one.”

“One, huh?” Martin says, staring into the liquid as it swirls around his glass. “They don’t usually report one death. Must have been someone important.”

It was.

“But then again,” Martin waxes philosophical as he enters the kitchen, drink in hand, and leans against the frame of the door, “everyone’s important.”

Infinity equals one. It makes no sense at all.

“What are you all doing?” he looks down fondly at the four bent heads.

“Getting ready for Sybil’s test. Environmental studies.” Belle turns her face up toward Martin and examines him as if she is seeing him for the first time after a long separation – his slouching comma-shaped frame in the rumpled tan jacket, the shadow of a black beard coming in gray in patches, the lines of concern that have recently become a permanent feature of his complexion, the dark hazel irises surrounded by even darker black rings. When they were first falling in love she used to spend what seemed like hours gazing at those dense planetary rings, searching for – and finding more often than not – the meaning of life right there in his eyes.

“Is she ready for it?”

“Well,” Belle pauses, and a terrible and inexplicable surge of emotion rises in her throat, the kind of overwhelming feeling she used to get when standing in a church full of singing people, their collective voice rising up toward the rafters.

“She’s a little bit unsure about the formation of clouds.”

“Hey,” Martin puts down his drink on the counter, strides over to the table and places a rough hand on Belle’s wet cheek. “What is it?” he laughs softly. His eyes are working overtime now, trying to reach into hers and catch hold of her foundering soul. “We’re all a little bit unsure about the formation of clouds,” he says reassuringly. “Aren’t we, Sybil? Isn’t that right, Henry? Max, back me up here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the children begin uncertainly, catching hold of their father’s stray wisp of gaiety. “We’re all a little bit unsure...” they echo. Martin leans over and kisses Belle, passing his bourbon-wet tongue over her front teeth.

“Stop,” Belle says. “Stop it.”

Stop what? she wonders to herself, but she’s smiling now and for once not trying to hide it. “You know, Martin, I was wondering...” She looks beyond Martin out of the kitchen window into the night sky. “I was wondering: do you think they teach the theory of quantum entanglement at Evanston High?”

“I have no idea. I don’t even know what quantum entanglement is.”

“It’s the theory that two particles – photons or electrons – that have once interacted in some way will always retain a connection, always, even if they are spatially separated by incredible distances, even if one ceases to exist.”

“I don’t know, Belle, I kind of doubt it. But there’s one way to find out.”

Her gaze returns to the night sky. A light snow is falling through the darkness outside. The street light in front of the house illuminates a broad halo of individual silver flakes, catching just a small part of their long descent to earth.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

A strange woman came to me early this morning. I think she must have appeared at around six in the morning: just about an hour before the alarm clock was set to ring and some time after the September sun had begun to penetrate the pale white blinds on my bedroom window. Come to think of it, it must have been after six already, because I remember that the morning train that goes by our house on the hour and half-hour had already rumbled past. The mattress had swayed slightly beneath my body and awakened me with a vague sense of alarm, as if an explosion had detonated somewhere in the distance. I calmed myself by resting a hand on the still form of my husband lying next to me and watching the cords on the blinds swing gently back and forth, back and forth.

And then I must have drifted off to sleep again.

I woke a short time later with the sensation that somebody was watching me. And sure enough, there was: a dark, cloaked, feminine figure standing motionless in the doorway. She looked rather romantic standing there, leaning gracefully against the doorframe. She silently surveyed the bedroom, her dark eyes taking in the broad white bed, the man and the woman sleeping there. As I watched her through half-shut eyelids, her black silhouette seemed to assume the blurred form of a woman from a distant century, the shape of her torso distorted slightly by what might have been a corset and a bustle. She looked so dark in the white frame of the doorway that she could have been a nun in a habit reclining against an arch in a cloistered courtyard. Or a lady in mourning, resting against a column in a ballroom, observing the revelry, but not allowed, because of her widowed state, to dance.

Suddenly she moved. The strange figure moved. Not only did she move, but she spoke to me. First she lifted a waxy finger up to her veil in a gesture as if to silence me – though I had made no noise. I had yet to even fully open my eyes. Then with the one hand before her

curtained face, she lifted the other one and beckoned to me. A motion of her hand and a whispered word:

“Come,” she said: “Come.”

I obeyed. I don't know why I did. Maybe I was afraid that if she remained there in the doorway, she would waken my husband. Or perhaps I was simply curious. Whatever my reasons, I rose from the bed wearing only my thin cotton nightgown. I turned to cover my husband with the duvet, letting my hand graze briefly against his back. I pressed down the button on the alarm clock to keep it from ringing at seven o'clock and then, pausing to reconsider, pulled the button back up again before crossing the cool planks of the floor toward a figure I half expected to vanish once I reached the doorway.

I could make out virtually nothing of her features: only her two white hands and a strip of eyes between head cover and veil. As I came towards her, she reached out a hand out from the abundant folds of black and I met it with my own. I was surprised at that moment by the warmth of her skin. It seemed so real to me. So alive.

“Come,” she repeated softly, and guided me through the hallway toward the children's room. Walking behind her, I observed how cautiously she maneuvered through the narrow corridor, taking special care not to bump her draped bulk against the doorframe or against the chair that always stood by the bathroom covered in yesterday's discarded garments.

She led me into the children's bedroom, and we stood, she and I, side by side, for what seemed like a very long time, looking down at my two sleeping daughters. Two girls, six and nine, sharing one bed, though they each have their own. What is it about sleeping children? They're so lovely. Though lovely is hardly an adequate word to describe them. Heart-wrenching. Otherworldly. Divine. I don't know. There may be no word. I used to study my husband's eyelids as he slept, trying to figure out what the difference was: why watching the girls sleep made the breath catch in my throat, and watching him sleep just made me feel love

of the ordinary kind. Is it something as simple as the age of the skin that covers the eyes? The physical quality of the lids? Its smoothness? The tiny blue veins snaking their way through the papery membrane? The power of mother-love has always struck me as something mysterious and overwhelming. I have taught literature at the neighborhood high school for over a decade now and I once assumed that I would end up writing something myself. But I lost any desire for literary creation once I had the girls. Not because they were too troublesome or time-consuming, but simply because they were too perfect. What phrase, what series of words could ever compare to such everyday perfection?

The murmur of fabric reminded me of the presence of the veiled woman beside me. “Do you have children?” I asked absently, still thinking of my own.

“I did,” she said.

“Ah.” I articulated the meaningless syllable with a tone of feminine compassion, though I understood little of such loss and had wearied at times of trying. My husband is a Balkan studies scholar at the university, and I have heard my fair share of tragic stories: children lost to war, families broken up by emigration, grandparents spending their final years in a refugee camp. We lived in Zagreb for a year after our first daughter was born and I remember one day receiving a visit from an Albanian émigré writer who had heard about my husband’s work. It was a brilliant sunny day and he sat on a yellow couch in our living room, a blanket of pastel colored elephants and giraffes hanging incongruously on the back of it. I had just had my first baby, while this man, sitting in our living room, had just been released from the jail cell in Tirana where he had spent the last eight years of his life. He recounted to my husband how his father had been killed by the former regime (suicided, he called it), how his mother had died in prison, how his young wife had been made to divorce him, she and their only child sent into exile. He sat on the yellow couch and told this story, lifting his hands up to his face in a frequent gesture as if to wipe away a particularly persistent fly. As I listened to him, I looked

down just as frequently into the sleeping face of my baby, and each time I felt the most magnificent surge of joy. I was struck at that moment how such extremes of circumstances and emotions – this man’s misery and my happiness – could occupy the same world, let alone the same sun-filled room.

So I did not ask the woman why she possessed her children only in the past tense. I knew so little about her as it was and this seemed a treacherous place to begin our acquaintance. I knew only that she was here somehow. And that she wore traditional Muslim dress. But other than that: nothing. I didn’t even know, for example, if it was her habit to drink coffee in the morning or not.

“Do you drink coffee in the morning?” I asked her as we slipped quietly out of the girls’ room and into the hallway.

Her eyes glittered above the veil. I couldn’t tell whether it was from tears or from amusement at the sheer banality of the question asked of her in these circumstances. Maybe it was from something else altogether. The eyes are the windows onto something – that’s the cliché anyway – but when the rest of the face is covered, they betray remarkably little. If they are windows, they serve better for seeing out of than for seeing into.

“Yes, sometimes,” she answered. “Though we used to take coffee in the afternoon, and tea in the morning.”

“Well, do you mind having coffee now,” I suggested. “I can’t wake up properly without it.” And we walked down the staircase together, side by side, hand in hand, like two sisters. “But you’ll have to take that off, won’t you?” I nodded toward the veil.

“My *niquaab*?” She raised her free hand to her covered face, and the foreign word floated out from behind the opaque fabric, lingering for a while in the still morning air.

“You can’t drink with it on, can you? Anyhow,” I said to reassure her, “we’re all women here. My husband sleeps like the dead.”

“Some clerics say that we shouldn’t show our faces to any non-believers, not even to other women, though I...” Her voice was momentarily drowned out by the sound of the six-thirty commuter train going past. At that instant, we were walking past the large floor-length mirror in the downstairs front hall. I caught a glimpse of the two of us in the mirror: she covered head-to-toe in black, me in a billowing white nightgown. The glass in the mirror shuddered and our positive-negative images wavered in it. I froze for a second, bracing myself for something, though I wasn’t sure what. She released my hand for a second and unhooked the sides of her veil and pushed back her headscarf

“It’s nothing,” she smiled. Now it was she reassuring me.

I was surprised to see that her hair was even shorter than mine, cut severely, in an almost monastic way. She was otherwise very pretty: pronounced cheek bones, dark red lips that went down slightly at the corners even when she smiled. She looked several years younger than me, which also surprised me, or perhaps she was simply better preserved. But the sight of her face, after the impenetrable blackness of the veil, was an epiphany. It was as if a spotlight had suddenly illuminated the scenery on a darkened stage.

I made coffee and we sat together at the kitchen table to drink it. I took one sugar; she took three. “So what do you call this?” I touched the headscarf that had fallen down around her neck and shoulders.

“*Khimar*. If you are not wearing a veil, it can be pulled across to cover your face when an unknown man enters, or,” she added with what seemed like a playful jab at me, “a non-believing woman.” She demonstrated by pulling it up over her face and presenting me once again with the riddle of her eyes.

“*Khimar*,” I repeated. And she unraveled the piece of fabric and laid it on the table next to the veil.

“And the dress...”

“...is called *abaya*. If it were not so warm today, I would also be wearing a long cotton overcoat, a *jilbab*.”

“*Khimar, abaya, jilbab*...” I repeated. Scarf, dress, overcoat. We were like two foreigners in a train compartment, teaching each other ordinary words for ordinary objects to pass the time. “*Kimar, abaya, jilbab*...”

“And when do girls start wearing this?” I asked, fingering the crisp black veil.

“When they begin to bleed, or when they get their first hair.” She gestured vaguely.

“Down there. It is called drawing the *khimar* over the face, lifting the screen.”

I thought of my own nine-year old sleeping upstairs. By that measure, she wouldn't have too many years left.

“But I didn't start wearing it until later. Until after the children...”

“...were born.” I finished her sentence.

“...were killed.” She gave it another ending.

“Ah.” again that useless syllable. I still didn't want to hear her story. I preferred the harmless exchange of feminine vocabulary. I've known other women who've lost children. I've listened to their stories. I've nodded my head in demure sympathy. I met one woman at a teachers' conference whose thirteen-year-old girl had died the summer before in a car accident. She carried a picture of her dead daughter around with her and showed it to anyone willing to contemplate that shining young face poised forever on the brink of womanhood. I knew another woman whose first child died of crib death at eight months. And a friend of my sister's who carried a dead baby inside her womb for the last month of her pregnancy, knowing all the while that the creature nurtured inside of her had become a cold and monstrous thing. The truth is, that if we really followed our instincts when we met such women, we would not quietly listen to their stories.

No. We would not.

If we followed our true impulses, we would wave amulets before their faces. Give them the evil eye. Cast them out. For they embody precisely what we fear most.

But the woman told me her story anyway and I said no curses, waved no amulets in her face. I just stared into the blackness of the veil she had placed on the table and, working the material between my fingers, absorbed what I could of the recounted events. It had happened in one of those places that one hears so much about these days: Grozny or Gaza or Fallujah. A bomb struck her cinderblock apartment building at exactly seven o'clock in the morning and the whole structure collapsed in on itself. She remembered the hour because she was already up and about, making tea and preparing the boys' satchels for school. She had let her two boys, seven and ten years old, sleep a little longer that morning in their shared bed – the only bed. She couldn't help but think that if she had woken them (the eternal if, if, ifs of mother-love), they might have survived as she herself had, because the kitchen was on the other side of the apartment from where the blast hit. But she hadn't woken them. She had let them sleep that morning.

She told me that it took several hours to get them out. And when they were finally pulled from the rubble, they appeared completely unharmed. "The sun was high and hot when they were finally laid down next to each other on the pavement outside," she told me. "I remember noticing how the shadow of their eyelashes fell upon their white cheeks, like the shadow of a sun dial in an empty square. How beautiful they looked. As if they were still sleeping."

Yes, sleeping children are lovely, aren't they? Though lovely may not be a sufficient word to describe that particular quality. There may, in fact, be no such word.

In the lull that followed the telling of her story, I was seized by a sudden desire. I wouldn't be able to say precisely what drove me at that moment. Whether it was the wish to

erase her words somehow, or to actually change places with her, lend her some of the comfort of my existence. Or simply to move, to react, to do something.

“Come,” I said and pulled her into the hallway and in front of the big mirror. I tugged my white nightgown over my head and stood naked before her. “We’re the same, you and I. Like sisters. Look at our hair and our bodies. These black and white clothes; it’s just an accident of fate or birth or the place where we happened to grow up. It’s nothing more than that. It’s *only* that,” I said eagerly. “Take your dress off. Take off your *abaya*.” I reached over and pulled her dress over her head. She stood stock-still, stiff though not resisting.

“See. Look at us. Look at our bodies. Our hips. Our breasts. We’re the same.”

And it was true that both of us occupied that median point in life when the seductive curves of our past youth could be discerned in the very same shapes that held the wilting forms of the old women we would one day become. Our breasts, still nice enough, hung a bit lower than they once did. The skin around the nipples was slightly imploded by the years of infants tugging at them.

But I still could not see her stomach. I could not see the stretch marks on the skin that had become swollen and distended in just the same way as mine had, having first made room for the two babies that had grown inside of us and then deflating after the new lives had been expelled. I could not see her stomach because, wrapped tightly beneath her waist, was a belt of explosives: the complicated system of buckles and ties; the row of slender, discreet pockets; the two pull cords hanging in front of the hips where they could be quickly and easily reached. It was this contraption strapped to her body that had given her dark silhouette in the bedroom door that slightly old-fashioned form – the faint outline of a bustle bulging out below her waist. It was this hidden presence under her robes that had caused her to walk with such exaggerated caution.

“Take that off too.” I pointed at it.

I continued to speak as she complied with my demand, untying and unbuckling the cumbersome thing.

“Now I know why you came to me, why I dreamed you,” I said.

“I’m not a dream,” she said angrily, insulted that that I – a woman like her, a non-believing woman at that – insisted on seeing her as nothing more than a dream, nothing more than a figment.

“I saw you on television last night, just before I went to bed,” I continued, ignoring her anger. “There was a long documentary program about the massacre at that elementary school. At school number one.” I hated that they called it that, as if there would inevitably follow school number two and three and four. “You were on the video. You were standing in the doorway of the gymnasium, just as you stood upstairs in my bedroom. You were looking out calmly over the room filled with hostages, over all the children there. You stood in the doorway at that school in the very same pose you had when you came to me this morning.”

She had at last succeeded in unstrapping the belt. She knelt down and laid it on the floor between us. And then we stood, side by side, studying each other in the mirror.

“You don’t have a mark on your belly,” I observed.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Like the spider. The black widow. That’s what they call you. The lethal female of the species has a red hourglass-shaped mark on her abdomen.”

“I’m not a spider,” she said coldly.

“There was a little girl on the television show last night. A little schoolgirl, seven or eight-years-old. One of the survivors of the siege, remarkably self-possessed. She told her story clearly, matter-of-factly. Children are quite amazing that way, don’t you think? How they live through such a thing, and somehow remain so artless, so trusting – somehow remain children. The only sign of trauma she showed was when she spoke of her brother who had not

made it out of the school. She said that he was waiting until it was safe to come home. That he was waiting in the city, or under a bridge somewhere, as if it were all a bizarre fairytale.” I paused to catch my breath. I had been speaking in a rush. “She also said something about you.”

The woman – without her black drapery, without her veil, without the grief strapped round her body – seemed to take an interest in what the little girl had to say about her. The anger she had shown before had disappeared and, as if on cue, we both kneeled down together and sat on our haunches before the mirror, the belt between us.

“What did she say?” she asked.

“She said you were her friend.”

“Her friend?” She seemed puzzled by this.

“Yes, her friend,” I replied. “The interviewer was also surprised by this remark and asked the girl to repeat it. And she did. Emphatically. She said you were her friend. She said you gave her water on the second day of the siege.”

“Oh,” the woman said. “Water. Yes. I did give her water.”

And we looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment, both of us recognizing the truth of the matter. For we had both given water to other women’s children. I had done it countless times during family visits or when my girls had their little friends over to play. I had stood at the sink in the very kitchen where I had just made coffee. I had pulled a plastic cup from the cupboard, filled it with cool water from the tap and passed it to some child or another who had gulped it down with an absent look in his or her open, unseeing eyes. Each occasion contained the same familiar set of ingredients: the muscles of the smooth young throat working convulsively up and down, the sharp expulsion of air when the cup was emptied, the automatic return of the cup to the woman at the sink, and the just as automatic return of the child to play, to growing, to life.

Yes, we had both given water to other women's children, and we knew that it was an entirely different thing than giving water to one's own.

"If we are the same," she said, pushing the belt of explosives toward me, "why don't you try this on?"

"The same," I repeated, and laid a finger on the belt. It felt as I had known it would. Hot and cold to the touch at the same time. Greasy, like some filthy killing thing, but also clean and powerful. This belt gave its wearer the power over life and death, or at least the power to choose its timing, the power of a god who grants life and then takes it away at will. Though such power, no doubt, would have been more precious to this woman had she possessed it on another morning and not on this one.

I lifted the belt and felt its weight in my hands.

"It's heavy," I said.

"Yes it is," she said. "It's even heavier when you wear it around your waist."

She repeated the instruction: "Try it on."

Again I hesitated. And then I slowly pulled it up and held it around my naked waist, testing it. It made me remember the backaches that used to plague me during the last months of pregnancy. How I would awaken with the sensation that the burden carried in front of me had turned my lower back into hot molten liquid.

But having lifted the belt to my waist, I also felt something small and cold and metallic against my skin, something affixed to its interior side that I hadn't noticed before. I lowered the belt to look for the source of the sensation and realized, almost with a pang of regret and pity, that the female of the species rarely exercises that kind of power. For there was another fuse in addition to the pull cords in the front. There was a cell phone wired to the inside of the belt, a cell phone that almost certainly allowed for remote detonation.

I looked at the tiny phone. The digital clock on it displayed the hour of 6:59. One more minute, I thought, one more minute. As the three digits switched to the next set of numbers, I felt the floor tremble beneath me. I looked one last time into the woman's face: her warm lips, her dark shining eyes, her shorn hair so similar to my own.

"Sisters," she whispered, the corners of her mouth drifting downward into a sad smile. And noting the fear in my eyes, she added: "It's nothing..."

Her voice was swallowed up by the sound of the 7:00 commuter train screaming past.

I leapt to my feet and ran upstairs. I ran past the bedroom that contained my husband's motionless body, the alarm clock sounding a relentless mechanized wail beside him. I ran down the hallway to wake my children from their lovely living slumber.

THE PERFECT COLLISION

The wind lifted. The sky above Sandro's head was filled with a flurry of little yellow leaves. Frantically airborne, they resisted for one last instant the inevitability of the fall. Sandro sat on a wooden bench, his elbows resting on the picnic table behind him, and gazed up at the sudden pandemonium. He marveled at the precision of the moment, at the particular configuration of circumstances, the wind gusting just enough to dislodge hundreds and hundreds of tiny stems from the bark and then to hold them briefly aloft. He marveled at the perfect collision between the force of the air and the weakness of the leaves' grip on life. The girl lying on the picnic table behind Sandro remained absorbed in her newspaper. When its pages also began to flutter, to lift from the table, she too glanced up at the bright yellow conflagration.

Then the wind quieted and the leaves fell.

"Pretty," she said, and bent her head back down to the newspaper.

Some time later she spoke again.

"What I can't figure out," she said, not lifting her head, "is why they go out at all? Why they leave their houses? If I were in their shoes, I'd just stay home. Buy a lot of food and hunker down."

"What I can't figure out," Sandro said as if in response, though he did not look at the girl but around him at the wooded park – first at the picnic area that lay under a carpet of fallen leaves, and then beyond the perimeter of the picnic area at the nearby road which, closed to traffic for the marathon, had been divided down the middle by a strip of red-and-white security tape that snapped jauntily in the autumn air, and finally up through the golden branches of the surrounding oaks – "is why there are still so many leaves on the trees."

Sandro had met the girl almost a month ago in the main corridor of Philosophy Hall after the two had sat for an exam in a survey course on pre-war German thinkers. He was majoring in philosophy, she in French literature. From her overstuffed bag, she had dropped on to the floor a small lined notebook and a package of Gitane cigarettes; he had retrieved first the notebook and then the cigarettes and handed them back to her, lightly touching her extended fingers. She lived with a boyfriend, a slighter older guy, someone who held down a job, earned money, and owned an apartment in a decent residential neighborhood in town. Sandro, almost by way of contrast, lived in the ground floor apartment of a grim housing complex in one of the more depressed neighborhoods. His studio apartment was furnished with one mattress, one computer, one naked light bulb, and several teetering stacks of books. Lately the girl had been spending the better part of her free time on Sandro's mattress, looking suspiciously content beneath that single naked bulb, flipping lazily through the collected works of Walter Benjamin or a volume of Franz Kafka's short stories. Sandro could tell she liked talking to him. About all sorts of things: politics and sex, sacrifice and honor, atheism and the elusive meaning of life.

And he could tell she liked doing other less ethereal things with him as well.

He worried that she might be falling in love.

"Who?" Sandro asked, picking up the thread of conversation. "Who should just stay at home?"

"Oh," the girl sighed and looked up from the newspaper. "Hundreds of Iraqis were trampled in some religious procession yesterday. Nearly a thousand Shi'a Iraqis" she read monotonously, flattening the paper against the table with her palms and elbows, "mostly women and children, fell to their death from a narrow pedestrian bridge during the most important annual religious procession. The stampede was said to have been triggered by –" she stopped reading abruptly, turned her head toward Sandro, and sighed again, "– oh it

hardly matters what triggered it. It just seems to me that they have enough problems as it is. I would have just stayed home. Skipped the religious procession. It doesn't seem worth it."

A muffled subterranean thunder could be heard in the distance. Both Sandro and the girl directed their eyes toward the road, wondering perhaps if they had conjured a phantom procession of black-robed women and their multitude of children running toward them in a mad suicidal rush. But it was just the first wave of marathoners whose feet came pounding around the bend, kicking up the bright parchment leaves that paved the asphalt road. They wore not robes, but brightly colored nylon running suits, big bold numbers affixed to white fields that were taped to their chests and backs. Some of the numbers hung slightly askew – a wobbling fifteen, a crooked two hundred and fifty-six. The runners looked as haggard and pale as martyrs arriving at the last station of the cross. Their sinewy legs labored beneath the weight of their emaciated bodies. They'd been running for nearly four hours and their eyes were haunted by the finish line.

"People have to go out," Sandro said flatly. "If not for religious processions, then for something else. Just look at this bunch." He nodded toward the runners. "Even we went out today, though we had plenty of reason to stay in." He turned himself fully around toward the girl on the table, knelt on the bench, and propped himself above her supine body. The upswing of her small behind made a perfect curve below him and, for a moment, it almost looked as if he were praying. Then he lowered himself toward her and she wriggled around to face him, letting him insinuate his tongue into her mouth. After a while, Sandro pulled back and studied her face as if it held the answer to some deep epistemological question. The newspaper beneath her, opened to the international page, provided a peculiar backdrop to the smooth young plains of her face, to her half-parted lips, her half-open eyes.

"Even we went out today," he repeated, "if only to look at the leaves."

“Yeah, I know.” She shot him a flushed look and, somehow evading his hovering bulk, managed to rise from her prone position to sit on the table, erect and cross-legged like a slender child-goddess. She burrowed around in her bag for a while, fished out a cigarette and placed it between her lips. “People do have to go out, but we’re talking about extraordinary circumstances here.” She searched in her bag for a lighter. “Not looking at the leaves. Not taking a recreational run.”

“Twenty-six miles is hardly recreational,” Sandro remarked, returning to his previous position on the bench, his back to her once again. He heard the repetitive friction of flint against metal as she tried to light the cigarette in the wind.

“Let’s just say,” she exhaled a long jet of smoke just over his head and watched as the vapor lost its shape in the cool gusts of air, “that you’re a mother in Baghdad. You’re husband’s gone. Dead maybe. You don’t have much left in this world, just two little brown-eyed boys. They’re the only bright spot in your life, your sole reason for living. It’s the biggest Shi’a holy day of the year and you’re no fool. You know that on one side there’s god,” she opened her left hand, the one unencumbered by the cigarette, and held it up as if it were one of the small metal plates hanging from an old-fashioned scale.

“Allah,” Sandro interrupted her.

“Okay, Allah,” she conceded. “And on the other side,” she held up her right hand, the one with the cigarette smoking between her fingers, “there’s them. The boys. You know if you go out – to the mosque or the procession or the bridge or wherever – there’s bound to be trouble. There always is. You know it’s possible that tomorrow you’ll be one of those poor women moaning and swaying over the dead bodies of her children on the pavement. So what do you do? Stay home or go out?” She took another pull on her cigarette and exhaled heavenward. “What do you do?”

“I read an interview a couple of years ago,” said Sandro, staring out toward the now empty road, “and it always stuck in my mind. Some Orthodox Jewish mother living in the occupied territories defending the mortal danger she put her children in every single day by living where she chose to live. She said that the purpose of life is not just living. The purpose of life is not just more life.” Sandro’s eyes caught the motion of a little boy running across the play area and he watched the small stick figure as it kicked a path through the yellow leaves, scrambling up the rungs of a metal slide that had been made in the shape of an elephant and sliding down the other side. Then the boy ran round again, kicking the leaves, and then up and then down, up and down in a relentless circle. “That stuck in my mind,” he said.

A bus appeared and roared past on the far side of the security tape.

“I thought the street was closed today,” she said.

“It is to most traffic. It’s just opened for the number six. And for the marathoners. And for us.”

During the lull the bus left in its wake, Sandro’s mind dwelled on images of their sex. The images that flitted obsessively through his mind after the event had passed possessed an cinematic quality. The girl looked so good. Almost pornographically good. So beautiful and smooth and perfect. They had fucked several times that day as they usually did when they hung out at his place, and they had fucked once in a way that he had wanted for a while now. Not long after they’d begun sleeping together, he’d started urging her to let him do it that way, but up until today she had resisted. He didn’t know why he wanted it, why he insisted – he had not been so bold with the few other women he had known – but he kept pressing for something more than she was willing to give, kept pushing her to bust open some taboo. This surplus of want in him – for more, always more – felt to him like a necessary imperative of his gender. He needed more of her. He needed to go farther into her. And she had resisted – which was probably nothing more than an imperative of her gender.

But today she gave in.

When they finished, he asked her if she had liked it. She lay beneath him, still breathing audibly, the pupils of her eyes reflecting the unlit bulb behind his head. “Not really,” she said, and then a funny little smirk crossed her face and she whispered “yuk,” making her seem even younger, even more tender, than she was. Her eyes had focused meaningfully on his. “But it’s okay,” she added. “I don’t mind.”

Somehow this sacrifice, this permitted violation, preoccupied him now, troubled him. Made him feel obliged to her.

“So if the purpose of life is more than just more life,” she persisted, “then what’s worth dying for? Not for some cult notion of god, I hope.” She lingered scornfully on the words cult and god. Sandro knew from their conversations that she was in a phase of what he liked to call defiant atheism. She was young and smug and happy, and didn’t think she needed guidance or meaning from anything beyond the borders of her own skin, anything beyond the borders of her own will and desires. And she thought that anyone who did was pathetic, weak, the fall guy in some dumb pyramid scheme.

“Let’s make a list,” the girl said, stubbing her cigarette on the wooden picnic table and flicking it into the leaves. She plunged into her bag again, this time retrieving the little lined notebook and a pen. She flipped back the cover and wrote the word god in capital block letters – *G-O-D* – on the first lined sheet. “Come on, Sandro, what’s worth dying for?” she challenged him, and while she waited for the answer, she ran a line through the three-letter word she had just written and wrote a four-letter word beneath it. “Would you die for love, Sandro?”

“Oh Jesus,” he groaned, “let’s not start with love right away. Let’s start with something more than just biology. Some higher purpose.”

The girl looked at him and narrowed her eyes slightly. Her pen still hovered above the note pad. Then she wrote the words *HIGHER PURPOSE*. “What then?”

“Well,” he considered. “What about a bodyguard. A simple working stiff. Or a professional soldier. A guy whose paid to die for something or for something other than himself. Paid to take a bullet.”

A clutch of runners straggled by on the road. They were on their last legs. One lone walker strode along behind them, his pace lagging only slightly behind the runners. His head was bowed in defeat and his hands hung at his side.

“That’s not a higher purpose,” she said. “That’s just another kind of prostitution, only life is the commodity. It’s immoral.”

“Or heroic. Just depends on how you look at it.”

She wrote the words *TAKE A BULLET* and looked down at them with her head tilted to one side. “It’s kind of a sexy phrase,” she said, reaching out her hand and combing her fingers through Sandro’s hair. “But not,” she withdrew her hand, “a higher purpose.” She drew a line through the words.

“What about honor?” Sandro asked. “Dying to defend your honor, like in a duel or something?”

The girl considered this option and the wind began to rise again. A sudden downdraft sent a little brown leaf with a long stem careening rapidly toward the ground. It looked as if it were trapped inside an eddy of air, caught in a solitary spiral as all the lighter leaves fluttered upward. Sandro and the girl stared as the single leaf rocketed down. The little boy who had been playing at the slide before, had approached them in the meantime, and he too now paused to watch the leaf’s dive.

“Wow!” the girl gasped in delight. “It looks like a ballerina.”

“No, it’s doesn’t,” Sandro scoffed. “It looks like a missile.”

The little boy, who until then had been loitering at the sidelines, lunged forward and seized the leaf in mid-flight. He grabbed the stem and a high-pitched whistling emerged from between his teeth. Then, with a series of percussive blasts, he made the leaf ricochet off the side of the picnic table several times before it crashed to the ground where it landed among the other dead leaves.

“Men.” The girl rolled her eyes. She folded the windblown newspaper as neatly as she could, rolled it up, and shoved it into her bag. Then she lay down on her back on the picnic table and gazed up through the branches of the oaks. “And, no, in answer to your question. Dueling also won’t cut it. It’s not a higher purpose. It’s just more self-centered male egotism. Only love will do,” she said, “only love.”

“French lit majors.” Sandro sighed. He watched the little boy skitter across the length of the playground, dodging imaginary bullets along the way. That little boy isn’t going to go to take a bullet today, Sandro thought, and neither am I. Then he lay down on the table beside the girl and gazed up at the sky through the trees.

“And thus, of love, he died at her side,” she said.

“What?”

“Tristan and Isolde. We just finished reading it last week in my medieval troubadour course. That’s the last line of the book. Or something like it. Isolde dies of a broken heart because she thinks Tristan isn’t coming back to her, thinks he’s dead. But it’s actually just a mix-up. Tristan had gone away on some manly adventure and before he left, he told Isolde that his ship would fly a white sail if he lived and a black one if he died. And someone, I forget who, told Isolde that the sail was black. But it wasn’t. It was white. But thinking it was black, that Tristan was dead, she lays down on the street that leads to the harbor and dies of a broken heart. And when Tristan finds her, he lays down beside her. So he ends up dying anyway. Only of love instead.”

“Seems kind of pointless to me,” Sandro said, “and also just a kind of self-centered egotism. Just being all wrapped up with each other. Living for each other, dying for each other. No world outside. No other people. No higher purpose.” And yet lying there holding the girl’s warm hand in his, looking up with her through the canopy, knowing that they were both seeing exactly same thing, he felt a sort of calm, a feeling that he could stay like this forever, that he might be able to stop searching, stop relentlessly wanting more.

“I’m thinking of leaving my boyfriend, of moving out,” she said. The wind rustled faintly through the remaining foliage. “To be with you.”

“Art is a higher purpose.” Sandro sent out the words like a test balloon, letting them float up from the table toward the speared branches of the trees.

The girl returned abruptly to a sitting position. Her slender vertebrae seemed to Sandro even more erect than usual. She placed her feet carefully on the bench before her. Her bag with the newspaper sat beside her. She picked up the pen and wrote three letters in her notepad. “*A-R-T*.” She said the letters aloud as she wrote them and Sandro heard the slight waver in her voice. An interval passed and then she said acidly: “I didn’t know art was life-threatening.”

Any trace of a waver in her voice was gone.

“I didn’t know love was,” came the cold response.

“Did you hear what I said before?” the girl turned around toward him. Her voice was stony. “About leaving my boyfriend?”

Sandro sat up beside her. “Yeah, I heard you.” He leaned forward and looked out toward the empty road, feeling the girl’s gaze at the back of his head. “Don’t.”

The girl jumped off the table and stared at Sandro. “What about today then? Didn’t that mean anything at all?”

“What do you mean: what about today? What was so different about today?”

“I can’t believe you,” she screamed at him. “I can’t believe you, Sandro. Fuck you. And fuck art. And fuck your higher purpose.” She turned on her heel and ran away from him, away from the picnic table and the play area, in the direction of the road. As if responding to some distant cue, the wind gusted strongly and once again the air was filled with a tempest of little yellow leaves. Sandro watched the dark figure of the girl as she ran through the leaves. The golden wafers danced around her in the air and rose playfully about her feet. He watched her as she curved gracefully at the waist, dipping her torso down to avoid the red-and-white security tape that divided the road, and then lifting it again as she got to the other side, away from him. He felt a word rising in his throat, a word that might call her back, that might ask forgiveness for his nonchalance, for the absurdity of his fears. But he was so transfixed by the sight of the slender girl-goddess frolicking through the saffron cloud that no sound at all emerged. The only sound was the whoosh of the wind and a distant rumble as the number six rounded the corner. And for an instant, amidst the pandemonium of dancing leaves and the deafening roar of the bus, Sandro lost sight of her.

Sandro leapt up from the bench. Where was she? Where had she gone? Had she been struck by the bus? Or gone under its wheels? Or somehow managed to get on the bus? He walked out into the road, tentatively at first, because the whole episode had the quality of a dream, and so he walked as if he were part of the dream. He turned and watched the bus disappear around the bend, the puff of smoke emitted from its rear exhaust pipe the only visible trace of it left. Surely if the bus had struck her, the driver would have felt the impact and stopped to investigate. Though if the bus had struck her, Sandro couldn’t help but think, the collision would be the perfect coda to their conversation, the perfect illustration of his argument that it isn’t worth dying for love.

And yet now that he was all alone on the road, he felt much less sure of himself.

Sandro took a few more steps forward, paused, and gazed around at the wooded park as he had earlier. He looked back at the picnic area and the playground. The little boy who had been there earlier was gone. Another small group of marathoners appeared on the road, staggering in a pained slow motion toward Sandro. Sandro stood motionless and watched them approach. They looked like specters. As they passed by him, he could smell their sour ashy perspiration and hear the ragged breath in their chests, but they took no notice of him. They ran wearily past as if he weren't there.

Sandro bent at the waist, as she had before him, ducking under the security tape and crossing to the other side. The road empty of runners again, he called out the girl's name and the meekness of his own voice startled him. It reminded of that classic philosophical question of whether a tree falling in an empty forest makes a sound if no one is there to hear it. The question seemed somehow irrelevant, old-fashioned even. It seemed almost nostalgic to even consider such a question these days. Thousands of the meek call out every single day, and the whole world hears them, sees them, watches their fate on television screens all over the world. But so what? Idle interest and casual compassion doesn't make them real. He looked back at the picnic table where he had sat with the girl. He glanced around the playground where the little boy had run up and down, had come to stand beside them as all three watched a single leaf fall. But the boy had gone too now. No one had seen Sandro and the girl together except him. They didn't live together. She wasn't really his girlfriend. She had a boyfriend, some other guy, living in some apartment in another part of town. There was nothing, nothing at all – except perhaps the survey course on pre-war German thinkers – that tied them together.

Sandro took a deep breath and waded into the bramble and trees on the far side of the road. He pushed aside the branches and called out to her in a cautious whisper, but somehow he miscalculated and no sound at all came out of him. The leaves felt damp and rancid under his feet, and the smell in this dark and unpeopled part of the park was as sour and ashen as the

marathoners' perspiration. Someone must have had a fire here the night before. A blackened area of damp leaves spread at the base of large tree trunk. The bark on the trunk had been marred by some sharp instrument, probably a knife. There were initials and hearts and arrows. The words: we were here. A discarded bottle rested on the ground nearby, a shiny tin cap, green shards of glass and cigarette butts scattered here and there. A charred piece of thin knitted fabric, part of a woman's garment perhaps, lay crumpled beside the damp black fire pit. There was something so sordid here, so secret and sad.

Sandro looked down at his own faraway hands and noticed that he was holding the girl's handbag with the newspaper rolled up inside of it, the newspaper containing the story about the Shi'a religious festival and the stampede. He reached his hand into the bag and felt the various items that come under his fingers: her pack of Gitane cigarettes, the little stubby pen she used, the plastic lighter, a woman's billfold, a cold rubbery pendant on a key chain. He felt overcome by an odd sensation of confusion. The purse confirmed the girl's existence, but he couldn't figure out – though it should have been obvious, a point of fact not speculation – where the girl was. Where she actually was. Physically. He strained all of his faculties to locate her in his mind. To place her on a blueprint. Was she there with him hiding in the woods? Or here in this handbag, in the mundane solidity of the objects in her purse? She seemed to be simultaneously in many places at once. In the woods, in the purse, dancing in the air with the golden leaves, resting in his arms beneath him on his mattress at home, that funny little smirk passing over her face.

"I don't mind," she had said.

His fingers stumbled onto the short spiral of the girl's notebook and he pulled it from the bag. He scanned the list of words she had written there, some crossed out as if she had already located them on the grocery store shelf and placed them in her basket – *GOD* and *HIGHER PURPOSE* and *HONOR* – and others she had yet to find – *LOVE* (sandwiched

between god and a higher purpose) and *ART* which perhaps she just hadn't had time to cross out, had been too angry to cross out. In retrospect, the whole exercise seemed absurd, completely frivolous, because of course most people don't choose what they die for. At the best, they only choose what to live for.

He turned the notebook over in his hands and saw what she had written on the other side: his name and hers connecting by a plus sign. It was so childish and dumb. So uncynical. So hopeful. So great, in fact. So great. She had fallen in love with him just as he feared she would.

FALLING

I experienced my first epileptic seizure shortly after my thirteenth birthday. I was toppled, as the doctors later informed me, by an attack of the *grand mal* variety – the medical term, borrowed from the French, for big and bad. Yet however big and bad it may have been, the incident resides in a strangely ambivalent place in my memory. I cannot report that I have a wholly negative view of the event. Though it would be entirely understandable, I do not, when recalling that initial episode, think: *Ah, now that was the moment when life took a turn for the worse*. Or even: *My god, how awful it was*. This ambivalence no doubt results from the curious fact that the circumstances preceding the first attack merged almost pleasurably with a persistent fantasy of mine.

Thus the falling

falling

falling of my first epileptic seizure landed between an odd set of parentheses: on one side the surrealistic sensation of a dream-come-true and on the other, the mental blankness that I later came to recognize as the inevitable calm following the storms of neurological activity that snapped my body down like a sapling.

The night it happened I was asleep in my bed on the second floor of our family house. Or more precisely, I had been asleep moments before it happened. In those years, my bed was positioned against the rear wall of our pale avocado green stucco house. My pillow lay directly below a wide and uncurtained window that gave on to the expanse of a redwood patio, and beyond the patio and the garden fence, a jagged rocky scree. The house itself was situated near the top of a very high hill, the highest elevation in the coastal city where I lived with my terribly thin and terribly distant mother, and with my handsome older brother. The hill – or the mountain as the neighborhood children had dubbed it – rose

nearly a thousand feet above sea level and provided a mysterious and ungoverned extension to the fenced-in backyards along our street. Adding to its already impressive stature was an enormous cement cross – just over a hundred feet tall – that had been erected several decades before on a barren patch of land at the top of the mountain. Up close, the cross was far from pristine: its surface was scarred and pitted and soiled with graffiti. It had even been fitted out with mountain-climbing pitons gouged into the cement every three feet or so, and extending, one after another, all the way to the top. But from a distance, the cross appeared so massive and its form so simple as it emerged from the eucalyptus trees blanketing the mountain, that any superficial flaws, let alone symbolic meaning, was eclipsed by the sheer geometrical force of its lines.

Under the sheets of my bed that night, I wore only a pair of white panties decorated – for some reason I recall this particular detail – with tiny orange filigreed flowers. I was not so scantily clad because the night was warm – nights were hardly ever warm in the city and summer had ended weeks before – but because that was my habit in those days. At about eight o'clock each evening, I used to put on my cotton nightgown, brush my teeth and hair, and go downstairs to kiss my mother goodnight. She tilted her dry papery cheek up toward my lips. Sometimes she even took the trouble to ask why on earth I was turning in so early.

But as no answer was expected, I didn't linger long. After the kiss, I turned on my heel and ran upstairs to my bedroom where I had a rendezvous of sorts. Shutting and locking the door behind me, I pulled the nightgown back up over my head and hung it on a hook in the closet. I switched off the overhead light and cleared all the books and photos and figurines from the low chest of drawers that stood against the wall opposite my bed. Then, with only the dim light cast by a reading lamp, I spent the next half hour striking poses in the mirror that hung above the chest of drawers. I turned myself this way and

that, pressing out one side of my body and then the other, exaggerating with innocent lasciviousness the still too shallow swell of my hips. I twisted my waist around to make it appear narrower, thrust one shoulder forward and threw my head back in a stiffly choreographed gesture of abandon. I leaned forward, squeezing my new breasts together between my upper arms, and stared intently at the soft fissure I had created there. I took a few steps backward, turned my back to the mirror and gave myself a come-hither look in the glass. I wrapped my arms around my torso so that looking back into the mirror it appeared that my body was held in a passionate embrace. I never used any accessories – scarves or such – in this strange and silent game. My changing body was the sole object of attention. Every night, my eyes sought out the infinitesimal alterations in the reflection – the deepening shadow behind the white cotton triangle, the faint widening of a pale pink areola – and reveled in each discovery.

When I was finished, I replaced the objects on my dresser, tiptoed to the door, quietly unlocked it – my mother forbade us to sleep behind bolted doors – climbed into my bed and switched off the reading lamp. As I closed my eyes and drifted toward sleep, all the slowly fading energies of my brain’s invisible circuitry focused on some vague notion of who might one day embrace me like that. I thought of no boy in particular. Just a boy. Any boy. A full moon shone through the window above my head, and falling asleep, I willed that imaginary boy to come to me, to climb into me through my wide and uncurtained window.

Several hours later – I’m not sure exactly how many – I was awakened by the sound of knocking on the glass pane. In my semiconscious state, the sharp raps at the window elicited an extraordinary, almost supernatural response in me. Because there was no particular boy in my life at that time. There was no particular face or arms to attach to the fervent embrace I had imagined before sleep. There was no one, literally no one – not in school or in the neighborhood or anywhere at all – who could possibly come and knock on my

second floor window in the middle of the night. In that instant, I had no doubt but that I, with all the force and desire of my growing body and mind, had conjured a nocturnal visitor.

Conjured a lover.

The rapping on the glass sounded again, more insistently now. I sat up in bed and shifted into a kneeling position before the window. I didn't bother to cover myself. Still naked on top, I peered out into the night where I detected the oval outline of a silvery face – a boy's face. It hovered there surrounded by a taut blackness. I unlatched the window and carefully pushed it outward with the palm of my hand.

“Go downstairs and open the door,” the face demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Anyone who has ever willed a thing to occur, who has ever caused something absolutely inconceivable to happen through the sheer strength of wanting it so, will probably recognize the flow of emotions that coursed through me when I heard that voice. It was as if I had been transported into a parallel universe of possibility, a universe that until that moment I hadn't known existed. The first thing I felt was the jolt of a sudden and frightened faith. I believed. I believed in something. I wasn't quite sure what, but it was something awesome and mysterious and powerful. Then came the awareness of my own control in this parallel universe. Because I had made this happen. I had made this boy appear, made him want me, made him order me to open the downstairs door and let him in. But last of all, I felt overwhelmed by the sensation of nostalgia as all of these emotions – the awe, the mystery, the anticipation – were suddenly rinsed away in a rain-washed sheen of remorse.

Not yet, I cried out in my mind, not yet!

I already regretted the passage of the part of my life that was about to pass. I regretted having summoned forth an object for my unfulfilled desires. At that moment, I no longer wanted it. I no longer wanted the boy at the window. I wanted only the desire.

“I said go downstairs and open the door,” the face repeated, fierce and impatient this time.

I hesitated before the repeated demand. As much as I feared the apparition at the window, its fierce insistence and all that it portended, I feared its disappearance even more. I thought that if I let it out of my sight, if I went downstairs to open the sliding door to the patio, it would surely vanish.

“Can't you just climb in here?” I said, my voice sounding strange and alien as it lurched out of its cottony slumber. I lowered my voice and made my own demand: “You,” I whispered to the face, “you climb in here. To me.”

With these words, the face transformed. Its mouth widened into a confused and funny grin. Something about the near perfect imperfection of that smile, about the way one front tooth slightly overlapped its neighbor, tugged at my groggy mind. I stared out into the darkness, wondering.

“What's the matter with you?” the voice asked, awkward now, half-laughing. “Did I wake you up or something?”

“Hey, Rick,” a whisper floated up high though the garden. I followed the new voice with my eyes and made out the shape of another boy who had shimmied up a small tree and was staring straight into my window. “Does your sister always sleep in the nude? I bet she likes to pose in the nude, too.” I covered my chest with my arms and peered into the silvery darkness, wondering how long the phantom boys had been there.

“Goddamn it, Ellie. Put something on and let me in. Jesus.” The voice of the face in the window had grown nervous and angry, embarrassed by the unmistakable mockery in the other boy's loud laughing whisper. “Henry and me need to get some rope from the basement.”

Ellie was my brother's nickname for me. He was the only one who called me that. My mother always called me Eleanor and preferred that others did the same. Rick – she also called him Richard, but his charm and good looks were compelling enough to make everyone else call him anything he wanted them to – was standing on the top rung of the garden ladder. He wore a black nylon stocking over his head that covered and flattened his long blond curls.

Suddenly, miserably, a realization intervened in my stumbling ascent toward consciousness. Every couple of years or so a group of boys from the neighborhood attempted to climb the cross on the mountain. They used a long length of rope and the pitons that their predecessors had hammered into the cement. Tonight was the night. They had picked it because of the full moon. Rick had actually told me about it earlier that day. The most daring boy in the group – and there had been no doubt when Rick had explained it to me that that was the role he intended to play – made the dangerous climb to the top of the cross first, using only the pitons as footholds, the heavy coil of rope slung over his shoulder. Summit accomplished, the leader then tied the affixed the rope to the last piton before letting the whole length of it down to the boys waiting below. The next boy in line then grabbed the rope and hoisted himself up the monument: piton after piton after piton, and then the next boy and the next boy, and so on and so forth until the whole battalion of boys found themselves high above the city, gazing out over their conquered domain. Legend had it that there was a tin coffee can waiting at the top of the cross, weighed down by a couple of heavy stones. Also inside the can were a small notepad, the stub of a pencil and a marijuana joint, all wrapped in a plastic bag. Each boy, so Rick had told me, would sign his name on the paper before they shared the joint and deposited a fresh one into the bag. Then, stoned and wild and free, each boy would grab the rope in his hands and rappel down the cross, legs opened and relaxed, feet bouncing out and away from the hard cement surface.

A squad car, called to the scene by some insomniac who happened to have glanced out the window at the right moment, often waited at the bottom with red lights flashing and siren emitting little beeps of applause. It was tradition to do the climb on a clear moonlit night so the silhouette of the boys' spectacular descent would be visible from all over the city. They didn't mind getting arrested or taking a short ride in the squad car. It was all part of the glory.

Fully awake then – or so I thought though the doctors would later tell me that the brain is at its most vulnerable and erratic during the hectic scramble from sleep to wakefulness – I nodded at the face in the window. At my brother's face. I carefully pulled the window shut and swung my bare feet down where they alit on the cold wood panels of the floor of my room. I padded past the chest of drawers and the mirror and across to the closet where my nightgown hung on a hook. I extended my right hand up to the hook. As I reached for my nightgown, I watched my hand moving upward, propelled by a silently articulated order from my brain. My hand fluttered sharply out and away from its task, fluttered strangely and beautifully like a bird trying to escape its cage. I gasped at the sight of that errant hand. I couldn't help but admire the oddness of its movements. The abbreviated jerk out and in, out and in, a baby bird testing the strength of its wings for the first time. I watched as if in a dream, entranced, and all the while I knew that I could stop the strange fluttering, control the little bird, take my nightgown down from the hook, and pull it over my head.

But I couldn't. I fell. I fell the whole great distance, down through the night air toward the planks of the floor. No rope, no pitons, no piece of paper where I could sign my name. Just me and my orange-flowered panties tumbling down silently through the darkness. I don't know if my body's unusual movements were captured in the mirror or not, and I don't remember hitting the floor.

When I returned from the hospital a little less than a week later, the second floor of the house had been covered in thick wall-to-wall carpet. All the tests suggested that I belonged in the neurological territory known as borderline abnormal and that, with a bit of luck, my condition could be controlled with medication. My mother, however, was taking no chances. At least not on the second floor of our pale avocado green house, perched high on the edge of the mountain. My mother put down the carpet and my doctors put me on a regime of phenobarbital: tiny white pills that for a long time afterwards made me see the most lovely silvery explosions every time I tossed a tennis ball up in the air or inadvertently looked into the sun. Tiny white pills that had a tiny crevice down the middle and liked to spin from my grasp and roll in rapid circles until they got wedged in the spaces between the bathroom tiles. Tiny, bitter white pills that I sometimes left on the bathroom floor imagining that the odd ant or spider might come and lick them, like a deer lapping at a salt bar in the forest. Then they too might see those lovely silvery explosions.

Despite my mother's conviction that such a thing could occur only in the intimacy of the upstairs bedchambers, I had a second attack within weeks of the first and it happened downstairs where wall-to-wall carpeting had not yet been laid. I was with Rick. We were at the breakfast table in the dining room on the first floor of our house. My mother was eating her breakfast upstairs in bed. Rick was telling me with a good deal of enthusiasm how Henry had kicked the ball to him in the last minute of yesterday's soccer match and how Rick, rushing forward, had fluidly connected with the ball, making the...

"Wait," I said to Rick. "Could you wait one second please?" I stared down at the sunny-side-up egg in the center of my blue-and-white china plate. My right hand, lightly grasping a fork, rested on the table beside the plate. While Rick was talking, I had noticed that my hand had begun to make little odd choppy motions. I was certain, as I

had been certain the first time, that I could force that hand to stop the movements, that I could guide the fork above the plate, slice through the bright yellow yolk, and let Rick finish the tale of his heroic goal. I was supremely confident that that simple act lay within my powers.

It did not. The fork soared in a high wide arc across the room and fell onto the floor in a clattering shower of stainless steel. The fork looked like some object from outer space – a meteorite that bizarrely soared into our dining room, propelled by a mysterious force we could only guess at. Its slow-motion passage from hand to air to uncarpeted floor was so bold and impressive that it made my failure of control seem almost worthwhile.

In the seconds or moments that followed, I felt our family dog pressing down against my chest and heard it growling, growling. I wondered absently what the dog was doing there. My mother didn't allow him in the dining room during meals. She said it fostered bad habits in an animal. Some time later, after my mother had called the doctor and I was lying upstairs under my window, Rick came in to keep me company and finish his story. I interrupted him to ask what the dog had been doing in the dining room. Had Rick let him in? "No, that isn't how it happened," he told me, his handsome face cast in an uncharacteristic expression of discomfort. "The dog didn't come into the dining room at all," he explained. It had been Rick pressing down on my chest, holding me, so I wouldn't bump my head against the uncarpeted floor.

And it had been me growling.

Rick informed me of these facts and stared down at the new carpet for a while. Then he raised his gaze to mine and grinned with that nearly perfect smile of his. I smiled back at him, or I tried to, because I believed that at least that amount of muscular control was still expected of me.

Rick never finished his story about the previous day's match. For him, all the fun had gone out of the telling and, as for me, I knew the ending already. Rick's endings were always

the same. It was my endings that remained uncertain. I think in that moment I began to hate my brother a little bit. I resented his ability to always connect with the ball. Perhaps I even held him responsible for what had begun when he climbed the garden ladder and knocked on my window in the middle of the night. Perhaps the slight imperfection of my otherwise nearly perfect brain would have lain dormant for a while longer had it not been for that odd awakening. And yet, despite all that followed, it was precisely that awakening, that conversation at the window, the sensations I felt in that brief nocturnal interval which I regarded as the most startling and vivid moments in my life up until then. I had experienced faith in that instant. I had believed. I had believed in my ability to control my destiny. I had believed that I possessed the power to make things happen.

After that night, of course, I lost even the minimal power which most people take for granted: the ability to send orders to my limbs, to dictate their movements. To take a nightgown down from a hook. To slice through a bright yellow egg yolk. To pluck a tiny white pill out of a crevice between two tiles. Yet I was determined not to let it matter. After Rick had gone and I lay in my bed waiting for the doctor, I made the decision to regain some of the control I had lost, to seize some of the potency I felt at the window on that moonlit night.

The flailing of my limbs and the animal sound of my growl had revived a forgotten fantasy. And now there was a boy. One boy. One particular boy. There was Henry, Rick's friend. Since the night of the aborted climb up the cross, Henry had shown a distinct interest in me. When he'd come to the house to visit my brother after that night, he had studied me with a secretive gaze. I'd noticed how his cheeks flushed when I entered the room where he was, or when I spoke a few inconsequential words to him. A nervous smile hovered around the corner of his lips as he struggled to respond, to master the muscles that governed his expression. I didn't know whether his attraction had been awakened by the vision of my small new breasts as he stood at the foot of the ladder gazing up toward my window that night or by my new

disease, and I didn't much care. From then on, I willed him to come for me. I summoned him in my mind. *Come. Come to me. Speak to me. Want me.*

On a Wednesday afternoon several months after my first seizure, Henry responded to my silently articulated order. He came by the house on the hill at a time when he knew that neither Richard nor my mother would be at home. He stood outside on the patio and rapped on the transparent sliding door. I lowered the aluminum latch and glided the door open, leaving the echo of my palm on the glass. After a brief and unnecessary conversation as we sat side by side on the couch in the television room, he pushed his hot face in toward mine. He wanted to kiss me and I let him. We grappled for a while on the freshly carpeted floor of the television room.

The following Wednesday, I was reading a book when Henry rapped at the glass door again. Still holding the book, I lowered the aluminum latch and slid the door open.

"You," I whispered to him as he entered the television room. "You go upstairs. Go to my room and wait for me."

I instructed and he obeyed. He did not stray even slightly from the task I had given him. I followed up the stairs a few steps behind him. It was a dark and rainy day in late autumn and the view of the mountain from the window was rinsed in a nostalgic sheen. I lit the reading lamp next to my bed. I laid my book on the low chest of drawers on the wall opposite. I pulled my sweater up over my head and hung it on the hook in the closet. Then I lay down under my wide uncurtained window. I felt strangely divided in that instant, like a body gazing at its reflection in the mirror. My doctors told me that the peculiar sensation of the mind floating apart from the body, divided from it, was another kind of abnormal neurological episode. But I chose to ignore them. I chose to make this particular range of perception my own.

On that autumn afternoon with Henry, I resumed my solitary game of the summer before. As if from a high lookout point, I observed my body moving this way and that. I gazed at the still too narrow swell of my hips, at my head flung back in a stiffly choreographed gesture of abandon.

I watched my flailing limbs.

I made them flail.

I listened as a soft growl emerged from the back of my throat.

I made it emerge.

THE BOWERBIRD'S MATE
AND OTHER FAIRYTALES

I went on holiday with my husband's extended family last summer. Twenty-one of us stayed in three old farmhouses in the Tuscan hills above Siena. Each of the three vine-covered houses had a heavy wooden door opening on to a communal meadow that on its fourth and unhindered side dropped down a dry grassy hill to a grove of olive trees. One morning, I woke up early and stepped out into the dawn-filled meadow and saw a family of wild badgers routing gently in the pink-hued grass. Slowly, slowly, I lowered myself down onto a rickety chair that had been left beside the door the night before, but the slats made a deafening squall, and the badgers scattered.

When we first arrived, we found several long wooden tables standing helter-skelter in the meadow, and we put them all together, end to end, to form one very long table that would accommodate the whole family. It wobbled a bit at the meeting points, and after an unusual summer downpour, the legs on one side sunk into the soft damp soil causing the whole thing to list slightly and sauce to dribble from the low-lipped platters. But the improvised table served its purpose nevertheless. The teenagers in the group sat at one end among themselves, and the littler children who still needed the assistance or prodding of their parents sat in the middle, and the rest of us situated ourselves at the far end. My boy, Ingo, eleven already and enchanted by his nearest elders, found a place among the teenagers.

Dinners were convivial. One could even say romantic – the chirping of crickets on the warm summer nights, the heavy Tuscan wine passed up and down the table in clay pitchers, the sound of leaves rustling through the surrounding oak forests, the cypresses standing watch beside the narrow access road. We were a varied group – the German branch of my husband's family, the Italian branch, my husband, Klaus, Ingo and I, who represent the so-called

American branch, though Klaus had been brought up, like his brother, in Germany. These far-flung branches of the family met only rarely, but when we did, we got along well. On most evenings, we lit candles and sat in the meadow long into the night catching up on each other's lives, telling jokes, relating stories.

One evening after dinner, when the women were still running back and forth between the table in the meadow and the three kitchens, one of the teenagers, a tall blond girl named Tamara – who, though not strictly a family member, counted as one the German branch having been brought along as a companion for their fourteen-year-old daughter – told a story that we all found so charming, indeed so much like a real fairytale, that on subsequent evenings we asked her to repeat parts of it that we had missed, and teased her a bit, saying that the story couldn't possibly have happened.

The story took place in one of the protected national forests that lie to the north of Frankfurt, beyond the spa towns of Bad Homburg and Bad Nauheim. I myself have walked these forests many times for Klaus's brother owns a house near one of them, and during the first years of our marriage, we visited often. These northern forests do not much resemble the more mysterious and wild Black Forest to the south in which so many of Grimm's fairytales were set. The northern forests have a more cultivated appeal, which, nowadays anyway, I prefer in a natural setting. You are never far from a road, more often than not a paved road. Tall wooden hunters' lookouts rise like ladders here and there beside the forest paths and, though hunters no longer use them, they offer a comforting sign of man's presence. But perhaps most lovely are the expansive copses of birch trees, radiating out beyond the narrow walking paths, the trunks spaced at regular intervals, their delicate white chipped bark looking like something not quite natural, something that belongs more in a drawing room than in a primordial wood. I once took a long walk through one of those magnificent birch forests up to a watchtower. It was late autumn and I will never forget how the leaves whispered beneath

my feet as I walked on that vast yellow-gold carpet, how the magical white trunks circled around me like a kaleidoscope.

Tamara and her little sister used to play in just such a forest when they were little girls. Tamara was about eight years old, she said, and her sister two years younger, when one autumn day they ran up from the house where they still live to play near the cabin that the local union syndicate made available to their members for summer and winter holidays. The cabin had a wide wooden porch, a series of yards and meadows, with targets for archery, and goal posts for soccer, and a well-equipped playground, which was what Tamara and her sister liked about it. But on that day, they did not restrict their game to the playground. They went back and forth over a small wooden footbridge that traversed a narrow brook between the playground and the forest. They were pretending to be Hansel and Gretel, the syndicate cabin functioning as the home from which their evil stepmother wishes to banish them. The witch's house, imaginary, was located beneath the footbridge on the rocky banks of the creek, and the forest, of course, was simply the forest where the two children wandered to and fro, searching for the way home. The girls collected white stones from the creek bed and tossed them down on the gold and red leaves, pretending they were breadcrumbs.

Towards late afternoon, when the light under the canopy was just beginning to dim, the girls walked solemnly among the birch trees, heads down, scanning the ground, looking for the white stones they had distributed earlier. But instead of stones, they found something else, something quite surprising, something so shocking in fact that it jolted them right out of the fairytale world they momentarily occupied, into the real world, and then, once they realized what they were looking at, back into the world of fairytales again. For there at the base of a birch tree, lying amidst the red and gold foliage, was a baby: a tiny, pink-skinned, clean-faced baby. A perfectly normal little baby – the kind you might see in the maternity ward of a Frankfurt hospital cradled in its mother's arms. The baby was not crying at the

moment, but looking around with its milky newborn eyes. Its thin chapped little hands, starting to turn bluish around the fingernails, had managed to escape the blanket in which it had been left and were exploring the unfamiliar air.

Startled, the girls stepped back away from the baby. They stood bold upright, their knees locked straight. They didn't dare touch it. They held their breath for a second and then, without saying a single word to each other, they ran. They ran as fast as they could. They bounded through the birch trees, down the unpaved road, across the paved road, and through the front door of their house where they discovered their father in his cardigan sweater and slippers, sitting on the living room couch, reading *Die Zeit* as was his habit on Saturday afternoons. It had taken the girls about three minutes to get home. Their mother was paying a visit to an ailing neighbor. This information their father offered without being asked. As the girls gasped for breath, they told their father what they had found.

“...a baby...”

“...in the forest...”

“...not crying...”

“...but cold...”

The father looked at them for a moment, an expression of disbelief on his face. He was a jovial man, their father, and he liked to enjoy a hearty laugh. He enjoyed one now. He tousled his girls' blond heads. He hugged them round their waists. He praised their imagination and enterprise, their ability to keep themselves busy all afternoon playing make-believe. Stung, they pulled away from him, insisting that the story was true. But he just winked and smiled, and told them that if the story was true, they must run back into the forest right away and get the baby and bring it back to him. His laughter still echoed as they ran back out the front door, across the street, and up the path in the direction of the syndicate

cabin. This time they did not run so fast. It was uphill, and they were tired, and the light had fallen even lower than before. They had to be careful not to trip on a stone or a root.

When they got to the birch forest with all the white trunks spaced out so evenly under the canopy, and the golden carpet of leaves lying so evenly underfoot, they could not remember exactly under which tree, or how far from the little footbridge and the cabin, the baby had been. The girls separated, running from tree to tree, and soon both of them had begun to cry. They persisted like this for a long while in part because they were so certain that the baby had been there, and in part because they were so angry with their father who had refused to believe them, and now it seemed never would. It would become one of those legendary family tales, the day the girls came in from the forest saying they had found an abandoned baby. The two would have to privately nurse their own convictions about what had really happened that day in the face of the amusement and condescension of the adults. Their mother would pretend to believe them in order not to hurt their feelings, and that would insult them all the more. *The baby was there, it was there* – they would chant the mantra inside their heads as they tried to fall asleep after the story had been recounted at yet another family dinner. And when they themselves grew up, there would come a day when they would no longer be sure whether they had seen the baby or not. Perhaps they would end up disagreeing about it, Tamara saying that it hadn't happened after all, and her little sister insisting that it had. Perhaps it would drive a small wedge of mistrust between the girls as they grew.

Just when they were about to give up and go home because of the growing darkness and the cold, they heard the rising rhythm of convulsive cries coming from the syndicate cabin and, without a word, the two sisters ran in that direction. The baby lay screaming on the wide wooden porch under the eaves of the house. It was the same baby, still alone, but it had been reswaddled in its blankets and its hands were firmly trapped against its body. Someone had moved it. Someone had rewrapped the blanket around it. Now the girls found themselves

at a terrible impasse. If someone had moved the baby, that someone was probably its mother, and she might still be about. And yet, at the same time, they were desperate to show the baby to their father, to prove that they had told the truth, that they did not make up stories. While Tamara's sister gingerly picked up the baby and tried to quiet it, Tamara jiggled the cabin door and found it locked. She peered inside the windows, but it was dark inside and all battened down. She leaned over the railing of the porch and called out – hallo, hallo – into the fading light of the forest.

There was no reply.

“Let's go,” she said firmly, and the two girls took the route through the forest and along the unpaved path for the fourth time that day. This time it took them nearly half an hour to get home. They passed the crying baby from one set of arms to the other. They stopped now and then to awkwardly rearrange the blanket and let the baby suckle their fingers. They proceeded very slowly and cautiously, because by this time the forest lay in total darkness.

Like any good story, the listeners sitting around the table in the Tuscan meadow relished this one for a variety of different reasons. The children liked it for its archetypal mythic elements: the baby abandoned by its mother in an isolated natural setting, just as Moses had been abandoned in a basket made of bulrushes and left to float in the shallows of the Nile River. And like Moses, who been found by the wise and goodhearted daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh, so too had this little baby been found by the wise and goodhearted daughters of a contemporary pharaoh, a wealthy Frankfurt businessman. The adults around the table, however, looked at the story from a slightly different angle and therefore took a different sort of pleasure in it, a less heroic and uplifting sort of pleasure. Their imaginations lingered not in the forest but in the house, in the drawing room, on the humorous image of the father thumbing through his *Die Zeit*, his self-satisfied certainty that the world contains only

what he thinks it contains – nothing more, nothing less. It was good, self-deprecating fun for them to imagine his face when the girls burst through the door, squalling infant in arms.

As for me, I found something else to rouse my interest. Of course, I was as delighted as anyone that the baby was saved, and as amused that the jovial and complacent father would be taken down a peg. But my interest as a listener settled on another target. My gaze alit not on the heroic girls as they carried the baby down the hill, nor on the pharaoh waiting in his castle, but instead it sought out the baby's mother as she hid in the forest. It accompanied her as she moved like a ghost between the trunks of the white birch trees, as she rushed forward in a surge of regret after the little girls ran off the first time – *why did they go? why did they not take her?* How carefully she tucked the baby's bluish hands back into the blanket again. How tenderly she transferred the bundle to a place under the eaves of the syndicate cabin where the baby would be more likely to survive the night. And what relief she felt when the girls returned and she heard Tamara's sweet *hallo, hallo* floating out from the porch and through the trees to her hiding place.

Yes, the story held a blessing for me. For I couldn't help but notice that the others around the table did not dwell, as listeners to such stories often do, on the mother's sin against nature, on her deformed instinct. Their attention remained safely elsewhere – on more positive elements in the story – and this felt like a sort of absolution to me, because I too abandoned a baby once a long time ago and at the time it seemed to me like the most natural thing in the world. That story, like all fairytales, is a story that can only be told in the third person. As if we need to reassure ourselves: she was the one who did it, not I.

“Hey, there,” the man called out from behind the wheel of his long blue sedan. The car was cruising slowly down the pockmarked road that ran alongside the bird sanctuary in the quiet settlement. “You dropped something.”

The girl, who looked to be around thirteen years old, didn't return the man's gaze, but instead looked back at the crumpled paper lying on the damp pavement behind her. "Yeah, I know," she answered. "I dropped it on purpose."

The engine purred beside her. Both the man and the car were an unusual sight in the town. There had once been a working factory, but it had closed almost a decade before, and now there remained only a grid of ramshackle houses, many empty and unsold, an elementary and middle school – if you wanted high school you had to go to the next town over – and once a week a mobile library van that come through lending story books and encyclopedias and such. And the town had the old bird sanctuary as well, which, though no longer actively managed, the birds kept returning to simply out of habit. But there were few fancy cars on the streets. Those were a real rarity.

"It's against the law to litter," the man remarked.

"You going to report me?" The girl looked straight ahead and kept walking at the same brisk pace.

"Maybe I will." He prodded the car gently forward to keep up with her. "What's your name?"

"Parker," she lied, and walked a bit faster.

"Parker," he repeated the name slowly. "That's a funny name for a girl."

At this she stopped abruptly, turned, and looked directly into the man's eyes. The expression on her pale young face – a face that seemed an even paler shade of white for being surrounded by a cloud of wispy almost blue-black hair – showed such a startling mixture of defiance and loneliness that the man drew back in momentary surprise.

"Well." She jutted her sharp little chin out towards him. "I guess it suits me then. Because I'm a funny girl." She veered off the sidewalk and strode into the bird sanctuary, heading toward a house on the other side of the green.

And, in fact, Parker – we'll call her Parker for that's what she called herself – was a funny girl: funny sad, funny strange. Unlike Tamara, she did not have a jovial father waiting at home for her. Her father, an epidemiologist, had left his wife and baby girl to travel the world saving other people, leaving his own to save themselves. Parker had seen him only once that she could recall, and he never wrote. As for Parker's mother, she had an untreated degenerative eye condition and lived more and more in her own shadowy world. Had the girl brought her math test home, rather than throwing it onto the damp pavement, her mother wouldn't have been able to read it anyway. Parker had few friends, or no friends at all, and for as long as she could remember she had only really enjoyed herself in the bird sanctuary that abutted her house. She liked the birds – their jerky inhuman movements, their sharp flat eyes, their mobility – the talent to be digging for a worm in the grass one moment and to be gone the next.

A wall of ivy stood a good distance behind her bedroom window, and in the early spring of each year of her childhood and adolescence, a plain dark-feathered bird arrived to build a nest within its leafy recesses. The bird announced its arrival each year with a solitary birdsong, and the girl, lying in her bed, would wait for the low piping tones that signaled the end of winter. When she heard them she knew it was time to walk out through the long grass and the trees and examine the bird's progress. Over the years she had learned that even when the nest was situated low enough to do so, she must not inspect it too closely, must not push away the curtain of leaves and peer inside, or the bird, fickle creature that she was, might abandon her unborn offspring. That happened in one of the early years, and the nest containing five speckled, nearly weightless eggs still sat like a *memento mori* on a shelf in the girl's room.

For many years, Parker believed that it was one and the same bird that returned each spring, but over time that became increasingly unlikely as the life span of the common

thrushes that nested in the sanctuary rarely exceeded five or six years. She also assumed, reasonably enough, that the birds nesting in the ivy were females, but even that was not a certainty. The most seemingly ordinary of birds have a great variety of mating and nesting habits. Each individual species and genus follows a complex and unwritten set of rules that might seem incomprehensible and sometimes even cruel to outsiders. In some, the male and female work together as partners to build a nest and raise their brood. In some, the females can't be bothered with a nest and just make a long deep scrape in the ground. In others, the male chooses the nesting site, and the female chooses the male on the basis of his real estate holdings. The tiny male bowerbird, for example, creates such a magnificent and ornate structure that it often includes an avenue of twigs for him to swagger down, a balcony upon which to display his collected treasures for the young female's perusal: a snail's shell, for example, or a beetle's wing, or a tiny silver spoon scavenged from a picnic. But these show nests, Parker read in an ornithology book checked out from the library van, are not intended for the rearing of young. Once a female is lured, she builds a modest nest of her own in which to raise a family, and the male bowerbird retreats to his solitary palace.

Once Parker had seen two birds coupling as she walked through the green after school. She hadn't known how they did it before, hadn't really ever thought about it. If she had thought about it, she might have imagined something more pristine – more like fish perhaps – the female laying her eggs alone and the male swooping down from the skies afterwards to fertilize them. Instead, the two birds engaged in a martial sort of courtship ritual, marching around each other, stretching their heads up and down on muscular necks, thrusting their beaks forward with sharp stabbing motions. Low choked noises emerged from their throats. She caught a glimpse of a stubby gray bird tongue. At one seemingly arbitrary juncture in their dance, the female suddenly stopped strutting and cowered down low against the ground, fanning her feathers, and crooning. On this signal, the male flew up about five or six feet and

then dove down toward the female, landing on her back, and thrusting rapidly into her. It lasted a couple of seconds, and then the two birds were in the air again, each flying off in a different direction.

“Hey, Parker.” The blue sedan pulled up alongside her about a week after it had the first time. A cool spring drizzle hung in the afternoon air. It was early April already. The thrushes were nesting. “Want a ride?”

This time she studied the car awhile before answering. She stepped down onto the slick asphalt road. She made a slow circle around the car, taking in its fine silvery hubcaps, its metallic surface preened to a high dark shine. She studied the man too, glancing at him surreptitiously as she moved around the car. He looked to be about her mother’s age, though much better acclimated to this world. His hair was graying at the temples and his blue eyes, unlike her mother’s clouded ones, shone clear and bright and predatory.

“I walk home though the sanctuary,” she said at last, and stepped back up onto the sidewalk. She gazed toward her house in the distance, at the clothesline flickering in the damp spring air. For an instant, the girl seemed poised between two competing possibilities of existence, two competing paths into her future. The man watched her as this odd expression passed over her childish features. His pupils slid rapidly back and forth over her face as if he were reading a deeply engaging book. And then all of a sudden, she turned away, depriving him of the riveting text of her face. She walked away from the car, not looking back, not offering the man the satisfaction of the parting glance that she already instinctively knew he craved.

As April days passed and May came, and the air grew warmer and drier, Parker felt increasingly unsettled. No matter how late she went to bed, the shrill pandemonium of birdsong woke her each morning at first light. In past years, the din of the sanctuary birds had comforted her, made her feel less alone. But this year the birds’ clamor seemed to migrate

right into her chest cavity. As she lay in bed listening to their warbling and whistling and trilling, she sensed the mute thrumming of their wings, and it seemed to her as if the animal madness existed not outside her window but had entered her bedroom, had entered her body. She felt as if she would surely explode from all those birds flapping against the bars of her ribcage.

“Hello, Parker.” He was watching her with his sharp flat eyes through a gap in the books on the long single shelf that ran down the center of the library van. “I didn’t know you were a book worm.”

“I’m not,” she lied, shifting her head behind a solid section of books to escape his gaze.

“Have you read this one?” he asked, coming nimbly around the shelf, but still keeping his distance as he held out a slim volume at arm’s length. The librarian looked at him suspiciously and then lowered her eyes. Parker moved a few paces down the van away from both him and the librarian who sat in the driver’s seat at the front of the van. The man placed the book on an empty space in the shelf, and then went back to the other side, his gray-templed head bobbing slightly as he leaned forward and pretended to read the spines. She took a single step forward and glanced down at the offered book. It was a manual on the care and feeding of nestlings. The man walked down the steps of the van and went out into the spring afternoon. She went after him.

“Are you following me?” she demanded.

The day before, walking home through the sanctuary, she had stumbled upon a tiny featherless fledgling lying on the ground a couple of yards from the ivy wall. It must have fallen out of the nest and, not yet able to fly, couldn’t get back up. Seeing the naked limp thing lying helpless on the ground, she had been overcome with a mixture of pity and excitement. She had gasped out loud, and now she wondered if the man had heard her gasp.

She wondered if he had been watching her as she knelt down beside the tiny creature and placed the tip of her forefinger onto its cold breast, felt its pea-sized heart palpitating beneath the fragile ribcage. It wasn't dead. Not yet anyway. She picked it up with one hand and transferred it to the palm of the other. She held it there for a moment, looking down at its little body, wondering if she could actually rear it, feed it with an eyedropper, teach it to fly. Or should she put it back in its nest? She glanced at the ivy wall, but the nest was too high to reach without a ladder. In the end, she laid the nestling back on the ground where she found it. Now she realized that the man must have witnessed the whole scene.

“Could be.” He looked up sharply and his feral eyes met hers. This time the expression in them was dead serious. The steely blue contained an unmistakable challenge.

Caged wings fluttered in her chest.

“Anything wrong with that?” He raised his eyebrows in amused inquiry, the darkness departing from his gaze as quickly as it had come. “I’m staying up at the Himmelson house, you know. I’ve inherited it.”

The Himmelson house was one in a cluster of large hunting lodges – vacation homes really – that lay some five miles out of town near a lake.

“I just moved in and I’m a bit at loose ends.” His teeth shone between his damp lips when he spoke. “Rather like you, I imagine. Too much time on my hands. Why don’t you come one day and look the place over? I’ve renovated it. Top to bottom. It has an excellent library now, if I do say so myself, a billiards room, a brand new television set, all state-of-the-art.”

He spread his smooth wide hands before her.

“State-of-the-art,” she mouthed silently to herself and looking openly into his face for the first time. She could only guess what the words meant. “Maybe another day,” she conceded, before turning and walking away.

The courtship and mating habits of human beings are surely as varied and strange, and sometimes as cruel, as those of birds, and from this point forward it didn't take long for this pair's tentative dance of approach and avoidance to reach its culmination, for young Parker to give her pursuer the signal he was waiting for. Two days later, after school, she got into his car, and he drove her to the large refurbished Himmelson house. Not long afterwards, she was moving from room to room of the house, sliding drawers open and shut on their silent hinges, rolling electric dimmers up and down in their plastic casings, turning the wands for the vertical blinds, peering into shiny cabinets. The man followed along behind her, not speaking for the most part, darting in close now and again to show her how something worked. Each time he offered such guidance, one of his large handsome hands – each nail filed down to a perfect white crescent – would brush against a forearm, a thigh, her neck. And finally worn down by the softness of his assault, she flopped onto the leather couch, and he was upon her.

The act itself was concluded quickly. If a sympathetic school friend – of which she had none at the time – had asked her, with the singular intensity that women use when discussing their singular loss of innocence, if she had enjoyed it, she would not have known what to say. Words like pleasure, enjoyment, fulfillment all seemed beside the point. What she had done on that spring afternoon with the man who lived in the Himmelson house remained impervious to such words. What she had done was nothing more and nothing less than an imperative: the dropping of a heavy black curtain over the caged flurry in her chest. Circumstances that even six months ago would have been utterly foreign to her – her tee-shirt and bra shoved up under her chin, for example, or the man's pink tongue passing over her nipple, or the feel of that strange club pushing blindly against her, or even the strangled sound of the man's voice repeating her make-believe name – *Parker, Parker, oh, oh, Parker* – now struck her as part of the necessary and natural order of things. She didn't enjoy it really.

Though she didn't not. There was just a sense of *this is it, this is it*, as if she knew all along that this was what must happen.

She left the Himmelson house less than an hour after she had arrived. He dropped her at the spot where he had first approached her. Rushing home across the sanctuary, she broke into a giddy skip, and as she skipped, she whispered rhythmically under her breath. *I love you, I love you, I love you* – though she had no name to attach the words to, and their sound and meaning were almost as strange to her as the riotous language of the birds in the branches above her head.

One dawn early the following year, Parker walked out into the sanctuary, through the trees and long grass, and lay beneath the ivy wall. A heavy rain had fallen though the night and ground was cold and sodden. Parker lay in a cool damp hollow on a blanket she had brought and watched the sky grow lighter and the clouds slowly begin to part, revealing here and there a strip of pale morning sky. She felt the pains passing through her body, but because she had no one to describe them to, nobody's hand to squeeze, she and the pain melded into a closed universe. She didn't complain. She didn't cry out. She just closed her eyes and the periodical sensations flooded her abdomen, her whole conscious self, and then retreated again. Occasionally she would moan softly, but so softly that not even the thrushes could hear her. In the end, the baby came quickly: in two short bursts. Parker knew instinctively when to push. She reached her fingers into the ground beneath her and clutched wildly at the wet grass. Soon a baby girl lay squirming and struggling between her legs.

Those few female birds who forego nests altogether – just making a scrape in the ground – do so because the cryptic coloration of their eggs and their hatchlings blends so well into the soil that it foils predators. But this was not the case here. For the newborn baby girl that landed below the blanket directly on the ground shone out a slick vulnerable pink on the winter grass. Parker slipped a hand into the pocket of her bathrobe where she had put a pair of

nail scissors a few days before. Pushing herself up onto her haunches, she leaned in toward the infant and, half looking away, she clipped the umbilical cord. It took some doing, and afterwards she lay back on the ground again and dozed until the baby's cries roused her. She struggled to her feet, gathered her nightgown and bathrobe around her, and tested the strength of her legs. The baby lay screaming in the grass, and for the first time that morning, Parker didn't know what to do. She took one step away from the hollow where the baby was lying and the thought of the little nestling she had found the previous spring shot through her mind. She had returned to the mobile library and checked out the book the man had offered her, the book about the care of nestlings. A newborn nestling can tolerate short periods of hypothermia, the author reported, and even when it appears to be dead, just being held within a pair of warm human hands can often revive it.

Parker kneeled down beside the screaming infant, placed a hesitant finger on its cool skin, but then she pulled her hand away and quickly covered the baby with the soiled blanket. She stood up again and took a few steps away from the wall. She knew she should tell someone, but it had been so long since she had told anybody anything important. She took another step away and stood as still as a statue for a moment or two. She could feel her heart slamming against her ribcage. She had to get away. She wanted to be back in her room. She thought of the five little eggs in the nest on the shelf in her room, and marveled briefly at the very idea of eggs. What perfect object they are, how ingenious. The ideal vessel for life, the ideal vessel for death, equally suitably as womb or coffin. And in either case: no smell, no carnage, no sin. The girl tipped her head back and stared up at a small clearing in the sky, at one small expanse of weightless blue rimmed by the dark edge of a rain cloud. She made a sudden sharp intake of air, spread her arms, and was gone.

The tale of Parker's abandoned baby has a rather peculiar, even mystifying, epilog. For after Parker left the baby girl beneath the ivy wall, she never heard anything more about

her. No whispered rumors circulated through the small town. No article of outrage appeared in the local newspaper about a dead infant found in the sanctuary. She received no summons to come to the office of the school nurse and discuss the weight she had gained over the last few months. Nothing. And when a month or so later, Parker walked out to examine the thrush's progress on her nest in the ivy wall, she found no sign either of the baby or the blanket with which she had covered her. Over time, Parker wondered if it had really happened. As she grew older, she became convinced that it had all been the product of her imagination, the fantasy of a lonely and unhappy girl as she came of sexual age.

Two subsequent events went against this interpretation.

The first occurred several years later when Parker went on a hike with some school friends that took them past the cluster of vacation homes located some five miles out of town near the lake. Looking across the large well-tended garden that encircled the Himmelson estate, Parker saw the man under a wide window, methodically clipping the rose bushes, and tossing the dead blossom heads into a basket. Though a good distance separated them, the man looked straight at her, and a cold and implacable recognition glinted in his eyes. And then, many many years after that, after her mother had died, after the house at the edge of the sanctuary had been sold, when her life in the town seemed like ancient half-forgotten history, Parker married and became pregnant. During the first physical examination, the doctor asked her a surprising question. In the medical history form, Parker had not filled in the boxes regarding previous pregnancies and births. She always left those boxes empty. But this doctor hadn't bothered to look at the form and simply asked after the examination – casually, as a matter of course – how old her first child was and if there had been anything noteworthy about the pregnancy and birth.

Parker lay back on the examination table and looked upward, remembering how she had looked up from the wet sodden earth at the high ivy wall and caught a glimpse of pale

rinsed sky beyond it. She couldn't say, anymore than a thrush could comment on the hatching of her eggs, whether the birth had been noteworthy or not.

On one particularly sweltering afternoon toward the end of our Tuscan holiday, I walked up from the farmhouses toward the swimming pool that was located in a broad clearing on higher ground, on the far side of a shallow grassy crest. I had just woken from a nap. I had been sleeping remarkably well on this trip and felt a sense of calm and contentment that I had rarely known before. It was as if the demons that occasionally troubled me – that made me wake up in the night and strike my head repeatedly against the headboard in a fit of self-loathing, or push Ingo violently away from me amidst claims of unworthiness – had departed for good.

It made no sense. One incident took place more than twenty years ago, the other less than seven. One baby had been found in a forest near Frankfurt, Germany, and the other left in a deserted bird sanctuary in a defunct American factory town. But the two stories had merged in my mind, and I felt certain that the baby girl that Tamara and her sister carried triumphantly into her father that cold autumn night was the same baby that had been left in the sanctuary years before. By the time Tamara and her sister got home that night, their mother had returned from the neighbor's and the arrival of the tiny screaming infant was met with a flurry of activity that lasted into the night. Bottles were dug out of storage and sterilized in boiling water. Tamara's father went on a run to the night pharmacy to buy formula. Police and social services were notified.

During the intervals between answering the questions of the police officer who had been assigned to the case, the two sisters took turns feeding the baby, rocking her, letting her squeeze their forefingers with her warm little hands. When the baby finally fell asleep (the police had agreed that she could spend that first night at the house until social service

representatives arrived in the morning), the sisters pranced around the sleeping infant, begging their mother and father to adopt her. *Can we have her? Can we? Please?* And to their great hope and excitement, their mother actually seemed to be considering it. But this story, after all, was not make-believe, but real, and bureaucratic hurdles being what they are in the modern German state, the baby was taken away by social services the next day, methodical efforts were embarked on to locate the biological parents either for criminal prosecution or eventual custody hearings, and it was many months before the baby even came up for adoption. By that time, Tamara and her family had returned to their ordinary routine and only occasionally did the baby abandoned in the birch forest cross their minds.

When I made it over the grassy crest, I paused to catch my breath and looked around the clearing for Ingo. The surface of the pool shone as white as a mirage. Ingo must have gone exploring in the forest with the other children. They had left their bright beach towels behind, scattered here and there, bold flashes of color on the dry Tuscan savannah. Only Tamara remained, lying on a plastic lounge chair in the shade of a huge chestnut tree, applying sun cream to her long tan limbs.

“Hey,” I said, and sat down on another lounge chair beside her. I hadn’t spoken much with her since the beginning of the holiday, little more than polite greetings and perfunctory chatter when we occasionally stood side by side at one of the stone sinks, washing up after dinner.

“Hey.” She turned toward me, squinting against the sun. I noticed she had a tiny aquamarine stud piercing her perfect brown belly button. I envied her self-confidence. She was poised at the most fragile and exquisite juncture in her existence, passing over the chasm between childhood and womanhood, and she just seemed to be calmly enjoying it. Though even through her cool self-possession, I could sense now and again the secret flurry contained within her growing young body. It’s just such a feeling to be that age.

“I was wondering,” I asked. “Did you ever find out what happened to that baby? Whether it was placed in a nice home or not? With a nice family?”

“What?” The girl looked at me with something like scorn. She wore that dismissive expression that teenagers often put on when they are slightly confused or taken aback by something. I didn’t really blame her. She had told the story more than a week ago and had probably forgotten all about it.

“Did your family ever follow up on what happened to that baby? The baby you and your sister found in the woods?”

Once she realized what I was talking about, she replied with an unadorned no and a small contemptuous shake of her blond head as if to say – *why would you want to know?* At the same moment, a scuffle and riot of leaves and wings exploded from the chestnut tree above our heads. A handful of medium-sized birds with grayish brown plumage shot out of the branches and flapped their way up through the turgid summer air.

“Look,” I pointed up toward the birds. “A covey of partridges.”

But the girl was already gone. I heard a splash and caught a glimpse of her shell-pink feet as they disappeared under the surface of the water.

HERE THERE ALONE TOGETHER

I stagger up the stairs to my apartment. It's a lot of steps – a five-story walk up – and I'm drunk, very drunk. It's twelve-fifteen, night not noon. Either way, too early to be this drunk, but not too late perhaps for a phone call. I bump into the railing and squat briefly on the third floor landing to conquer my spins. I've been out with some guys but it was no use. Because it's not just any him I want. It's the faraway him. The him who lives on the other side of the earth. The him who got swallowed up by some other damn continent. The him from a country I never even heard of. At the top of the stairwell, I fumble with my handbag, trying to locate my keys. There's not much to the handbag – just a strip of black leather and a feathery clasp – but it seems to have swallowed my keys as voraciously as that continent swallowed my man. Finally, I hook the keys on the nail of my index finger – I'd like to hook him that way – and unlock the door. It swings open and I stand there for a second, blinking away the moisture from my eyes and staring at the red blinking zero on the answering machine.

No messages.

No one called.

The door closes behind me. My purse and keys fall to the floor below. It's a cold hard surface. I release my feet from their prison of high-heeled shoes and slide, nylon and silk, down the wall to join my keys and purse below. On the journey, I reach out and grab the telephone from its cradle. I hold the mean plastic in my hand. I clutch it to my chest. It's cordless like me. Untethered. Disconnected. Crawling toward the mattress on the floor of my bedroom, I assess the situation. It's twelve-fifteen here, still early. The guys I was out with were sorry to see me go.

But over there it's six-fifteen in the morning. The sun, the one thing we still share, is coming up over there, the day is starting, and if I get no answer – if I get that red blinking

zero, that ringing signal echoing into the emptiness of some faraway, never-seen apartment – then I'm finished. It's over. One drunken phone call translates into instant hangover, a night of jealous sleep, a lonely cottonmouth morning.

I am panting from exertion, from disappointment, from the terrible crush of desire. My head is spinning, but through its circulations, some quiet and calculating part of my brain knows that now is the most dangerous time to call. I don't have auto-dial. Or I do. But I don't know how to use it. It doesn't matter. I know his number. I've memorized every dip, twist, and sigh on the key pad, every numeral, every robotic beep that carries my voice through that huge mysterious space that separates my mattress from his, my mattress from whatever happy surface his body is resting on there.

Over there.

On the other side of the world.

I press the buttons in the darkness: 011 to cross the ocean, 38 to enter his continent, 61 to unlock the door, 22-42-67 – six digits not seven – to reach out my hand out and touch him, rouse him, drag him up out of his forgetful sleep.

Or maybe not.

Ten rings. No answer.

Eleven rings. Still no answer.

Twelve rings. The receiver is lifted. But nothing.

It's me, I whisper, my voice sculpted by booze, by shame, by need.

A pause.

Hello you, he whispers back through the ether.

And then we're off.

We speak with words. Plain ordinary words. But words that are so gorgeous to my ears, so gorgeous to my foolish inebriated body.

Words that seem merely foolish on the page.

What are you wearing?

Take it off.

What are you thinking about?

Do it.

What are you touching?

Touch it more.

Where I tell you.

Lower.

Deeper.

Are you doing it now?

Do it harder.

Do it faster.

The words fling themselves like ribbons of lava into the empty space. They rush blind, disembodied through a maze of fiber optic cable. They bounce off satellites dishes. Random. Wild. Elated. They collide with each other and race back through the slippery darkness toward agitated ears, whispering mouths, frantic fingers. And when it's all over, the whole telecommunications system – the whole universe it seems – runs amok for a second, jump its bounds. Time skips a beat. The planets falter in their orbital routine. The stars flicker. The hemispheres are washed in a haze of weird light. When's it over, I open my eyes and glance across the mattress. The cold mean plastic on the pillow glances back at me.

Are you there? comes the voice.

Yeah, I'm here, I answer.

In a way, it's not that different from the real thing.

Here. There. Alone. Together.

Nearly a year later, I travel halfway across the world to the other end of the line. It turns out he doesn't have a cordless phone. Which, when you think about it, really makes phone sex that much more absurd. He's tethered. Connected by a short cord affixed to the wall of a narrow economy kitchen above a gray linoleum floor. The happy place where his body once rested.

I step into his apartment and take in this set-up.

I take him in too.

You must have really loved me, I say.

I did, he says,

I do.

THE APPLE AND PARADISE TOO

“Don't your kidneys feel cold?” Polona asked, eyeing my swollen half-exposed midriff with disapproval.

We were just stepping out of the house on our way to lunch on an early day in spring. I swung a light suede jacket around the magnificent bulging torso I'd been waiting all winter to expose and sailed down College Avenue, my stretched-to-the-max belly button pointing true north like a compass. I was just about a month shy of my due date – thirty-three days to be precise – and I had attained, as far as I was concerned, the perfect melon-like proportions.

“I haven't the least idea whether my kidneys are cold,” I replied with a tone I'd like to think of as insouciant. Such a pretty-sounding word it is, insouciant, certainly prettier than reckless. A current of soft warm air glanced playfully off the curved hull of my stomach, an architectural miracle that made Frank Gehry's rotund creations look pompous and strained, the product of male hubris. My belly, in contrast, was undiluted essence of female. “In fact,” I continued, “I don't think I have ever even been aware of possessing kidneys. I wouldn't even be able to say with any certainty where my kidneys are located.”

“Here,” Polona said, placing a warm hand on one side of my lower back.

“And here,” she turned me toward her, and placed another warm hand on the other side.

“Hmmm,” I murmured. “Well, they don't feel cold right now.”

Polona carefully deposited a forkful of radicchio and white beans into her mouth.

“Did I ever tell you,” I asked, poaching a clove of roasted garlic from her plate and popping it into my mouth, “that my sister's bladder fell out after giving birth to her second child?”

Polona chewed slowly and deliberately, looking steadily across the table at me with her light brown eyes. Two warm walnuts in a field of freckled cream. Without removing her gaze from mine, she defended the last clove of garlic on her plate with a rapid parry of her fork. I like that about Polona. She knows how to protect what's hers, and she does it with a charming and effortless ferocity. We were eating at Chez Panisse, our favorite restaurant. We feared it might be our last chance for a civilized meal before the baby was born, and we hadn't the foggiest notion what kind of meals we'd be eating afterwards.

"Plouf!" I added for emphasis.

She swallowed and wiped her lips with her linen napkin.

"Fell right out of her. Just like that," I pushed my chair back and shifted my enormous belly upward for dramatic impact. "It's called prelapse. It can happen to anyone."

"Plouf?" Polona asked.

"Yup. That's right. Though her bladder was still connected, of course," I added by way of reassurance. "By some kind of tube, or urethra, or whatever. I mean she didn't lose it for good or anything, like you might lose a purse left behind on the bench of a Greyhound bus station." And here my mind drifted off for a while, as it does often enough in these later days of pregnancy. I imagined a woman standing at the lost-and-found counter, scanning the shelves for the missing item, filling out a form that carefully describes the contours of her misplaced organ.

Two courses later, the waiter placed one pannacotta with berries in front of Polona and one in front of me. Polona looked at the dish a bit sadly and then up at me, her eyes gleaming with what looked like tears. "But you love pannacotta," I protested.

Polona held her spoon above the creamy white pudding, and then slowly, almost mournfully, ruptured the membrane of its taut pearly surface. Juice from the berries pooled darkly around the breach.

“I dreamt I was taking care of the baby last night,” she said.

“You did?” I leaned forward eagerly. “Was it a boy or a girl?”

Gender is a point of great, almost theological, interest to us. We don’t yet know what sex our baby is. We have one more ultrasound scheduled before the end, but we have already decided not to ask even at the final one. For some reason, we prefer ignorance in this matter. To our friends we claim we want the traditional element of surprise: the nurse calling out “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!”, the infant’s first gurgling cry, the sea of beaming faces all around. But this explanation doesn’t ring entirely true since so little else about our situation is particularly traditional, still less lacking in technological intervention. Indeed without technological intervention, my condition would have been impossible or at least would have had to have been engineered with a good deal more physical contact with the male of the species. But Polona and I are determined not to dwell on that, or indeed on the fact that our ignorance of the baby’s sex is as artificial as the insemination that produced it. We suppress our awareness that every single receptionist, nurse, technician and doctor who opens our file, possesses the knowledge that we so assiduously avoided. We realize there is an element of absurdity to it, as if everyone in the world knows the answer to an important, astounding, life-changing riddle – like whether god exists or not – and we perversely insist that they not tell us.

Or perhaps our avoidance has to do with something more run-of-the-mill. Perhaps we are simply terrified of the possibility of a boy in our all-female family unit. In those early days, a baby seemed alien enough.

“I don’t know whether it was a boy or a girl,” Polona answered. A slight sadness had entered her voice, and a pall seemed to fall over our little table. “That wasn’t part of the dream.” She paused, gazing down transfixed at her almost untouched dessert.

“I’ll finish it,” I offered quietly.

“The baby was little, tiny, less than a month old, and you needed to go out somewhere for a couple of hours. You told me to feed the baby if it got hungry. I sat on the couch with it wrapped in a blanket on my lap. I felt very weird and all alone, as if I weren’t really myself any longer. Our apartment had become this huge, cavernous, echoing place. I just sat there without moving, and the baby slept the whole time. I heard little smacking and sighing noises coming from inside the blanket, so I knew it was alive.”

“And then?” I took a spoonful of her pannacotta, and trying to lighten the atmosphere, made a little smack and sigh of my own. But Polona was in no mood. Her walnut eyes had grown sadder and darker.

“After a while, I opened the blanket to see if the baby was hungry,” she said, “but there was just a dried apple in there. An old, shriveled-up, dried apple in a blanket.”

The day after the lunch at Chez Panisse, Polona left me. She packed her bags and left me and my beautiful melon-shaped belly that rose like a great round sun every morning in our shared bed. She left the dark wood paneling of our bedroom. She left the little sexless god growing inside of me: the product of one tiny ovum (mine) and one tiny sperm (a stranger’s who had deposited a part of himself in a test tube at a sperm bank and oddly had never come back to retrieve it).

She said the baby wasn’t hers. Could never be hers. No tube or anything else connected its body to hers, its life to hers. That’s why she couldn’t feed it, couldn’t take care

of it. That's why she dreamt it was an apple: not even the same life form as her, let alone the same species. How could they possibly be part of the same family?

Polona is the child of a pair of Russian immigrants. Actually, Polona is herself a Russian immigrant but she conceals her origins well. She has assimilated, as the expression goes, and almost never alludes to her early childhood or displays her foreign roots, though they are there, I know, and she is loyal to them in her way. Polona and her parents and younger brother came to California in the late nineteen-eighties, riding that great surge of humanity that gushed out of the then eastern bloc in those years. She was ten when they settled into a little flat in the Richmond district of San Francisco and she quickly learned the ropes in the new country, growing into what appeared to me, when I met her at college a little over ten years later, an ordinary, wholesome, rosy-cheeked, brown-haired American girl.

Polona's parents, older and fully formed when they came, didn't adapt quite as effortlessly. They missed home, or more accurately, they missed the feeling of being at home, of catching passing remarks on the street, of directing casual disgust at an incompetent government the sins of which they could at least understand. The longer they were away from home, the more they built it up in their memory as a sort of paradise, and slowly but surely they began to interpret exile as the fall, as the expulsion. Over the years, they managed to suppress all recollection of how poor they were, how hopeless, how lousy things must have been to propel two such sedentary people halfway across the world. Now that they no longer work, they spend their days on quests to find foods and various objects that remind them of their lost Eden – doilies for on top of the television set, mesh inner curtains that strike me as useless and drab, but that Polona's mother insists keeps the dust off the windows and that pervasive Californian damp out. The couple seems almost to be deliberately fulfilling a stereotype, playing the role of foreigners in a strange and hostile world. Polona, for example,

speaks English with no accent at all, while her mother, Marta, nurses her thick Slavic drawl, cultivates it as a reminder of her history. She peppers her speech with old-world proverbs: the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, better a clod of dirt at home than a gold mine in a foreign land, you only know the worth of water when the well runs dry, every paradise has a serpent.

As for Polona's father, Boris, he hardly speaks at all any more. In any language.

Boris and Marta don't care too much for me. They have accepted me until now, though warily. They hold me responsible for Polona's having become a lover of women rather than of men, and they are convinced that things would have turned out differently had they stayed in Vladivostok. But they accept me because they don't want to lose Polona as they did her younger brother who succumbed to a new world fate that was at once more predictable and more tragic: falling in with the Russian drug mafia and dying in questionable circumstances, of what looked – to them anyway – like a forced overdose of heroin. Perhaps that was the only reason Polona's parents accepted her transformation with such stoic resignation. If the son had been alive, they might have cast her out. But as it was, they treated their daughter's unorthodox domestic arrangement as just another of the many new customs to learn in America, one of the more bizarre side effects of this thing called freedom.

“Where's your better half?” The question came from Rav, the proprietor of the green grocer on the ground floor of our apartment building.

“She left,” I answered, laying a bag of apples and a head of butter lettuce on the counter. “She said the baby wasn't hers,” I stated baldly, unable to summon the energy to lie and aching in every fiber for sympathy. But it was not to be.

“She's right. It isn't her baby. It's yours ...” Rav said with a triumphant smile that revealed two shining rows of crooked white teeth. Rav himself has a brood of five children ranging in age from toddler to adolescence, a gaggle of coffee-skinned silken-haired beauties.

I have often admired one or another of them diligently watering the greens or stacking the peaches into a fuzzy pink pyramid. Indeed exposure to Rav's beautiful offspring may have been responsible for planting inside of me a nagging desire for my own.

"...and the others fellow's." Rav completed his thought as he rang up the produce, making the self-serving point that he had been cheerfully making ever since my condition began to show. That you can't just subtract the man from the equation. "One plus one equals three, or in my case, seven," he liked to remind me with a lascivious grin. My mind flashed miserably on the photograph in the file, on the face of the other fellow as Rav called him. Pale, slightly freckled face with a long, narrow nose that bent to right a bit at the very end. It was an unbelievably young face – hard to imagine how it ever even occurred to its owner to part with his sperm for a price, to make the rather awesome decision to spawn his own distant, never-to-be-known brood. It was a face that was both utterly strange to me because it belonged to a man I had never met and would never know, and horribly hauntingly familiar because I could never completely repress the knowledge that this stranger was a husband of sorts, my phantom mate.

Polona had shied away from that part of the process – the selection of the donor. She said it seemed uncomfortably close to shopping: flipping through a mail order catalog, gazing at glossy photographs, reading the bland descriptions of goods on sale. Or worse still, it reminded her of looking at mug shots, at picture after picture of stalker, king pin, rapist. Looking through binders of mug shots was an activity with which Polona was unhappily familiar, having been recruited by the police to identify some of her brother's cohorts after he had been found blue-skinned and blue-lipped on the cold tile floor of a restroom at a roadside diner just beyond the city limits, a hypodermic syringe still dangling precariously from his vein.

So I picked the donor myself. I selected someone who would contribute, I hoped, some of Polona's physical characteristics to the mix: willowy height, pale freckled skin, light brown eyes, Russian – or at any rate Slavic – ancestry. And now I couldn't help but wonder that if she had helped pick the donor, might she not feel a greater sense of possession now, a sort of buyer's obligation perhaps. If she had selected the face, if the photograph of the man now resided in her mind and not in mine, might she not feel more of a connection running from her to the baby.

“She'll be back.” A dark little boy, one of Rav's, sidled up to me and laid a small brown hand on my belly. It looked like a starfish clinging to a smooth underwater rock. People often touch my stomach now, and I don't mind. In fact, I rather like it. And this child, Rav's youngest son, is anyway so lovely he almost looks like a kind of deity. I willed him to be speaking the truth, to have some prophetic knowledge of the future.

“They are all kinds of families,” conceded Rav with a shake of his head and a click of his tongue. He reached behind him and grabbed a green-orange mango. “For the baby,” he smiled, dropping it into my bag. “Vitamins from a foreign land.”

“Hello, Boris,” I shouted into the telephone receiver, hoping that volume would drown out our natural distrust of each other. “Can I speak to Polona please?”

He handed over the phone.

“Polona?”

“No, it's Marta. Polona's not here right now.”

I figured that was probably a lie.

“How are you feeling, dear? Are you well? Are you keeping warm? Are you still able to sleep at night?” This was typical of Marta, and of Polona, too, for that matter: this overwhelming concentration on the physical world at the expense of the psychic one, this

ceaseless vigilance against the threats of a malevolent natural environment: cold, hunger, illness. A chill to the kidneys on a warm spring day was only the tip of the iceberg. Cross drafts were potentially lethal, even during the summer. An excessively cold beverage could cause nausea, or laryngitis, or both. Once shortly after Polona had moved into my Berkeley apartment, I stood barefoot on the tile floor in the morning, waiting for the coffee to brew and thumbing through the morning paper. All of a sudden, Polona rushed into the kitchen with the urgency of someone who had detected an odorless but deadly gas leak. Clutching a pair of woolen socks in her hand – I owned no slippers, a fact that had never ceased to mystify her – she told me how the cold from the tiles would travel up through the soles of my feet, wend its way up my legs, and finally into the cavity of my body where the icy claw would seize at my internal organs, causing a urinary tract infection at the least. I turned my eyes away from the newspaper and smiled at her. For despite the cold kitchen floor, despite news of violent windstorms in northern Europe, a calamitous earthquake in Iran, a mudslide on Bainbridge Island that washed an entire family away as they slept – the world seemed utterly benign to me at that moment, full of nothing but goodness and love.

“I’m sleeping well enough,” I answered Marta, “and when I can’t sleep, I read. But I miss Polona terribly. I feel sad. Very sad. That can’t be good for the baby.”

I plucked the mournful Slavic strings, hoping to play on other superstitions that Marta had communicated to me around the kitchen table in her small flat: that too much reading while pregnant would cause me to lose my eyesight, that it wasn’t good to feel sad because the baby’s disposition would be affected, that it wasn’t good to cry because my milk would curdle.

“You must sleep,” she chided me. “When you sleep, you leave your cares in your shoes. Rest, get plenty to eat, and your baby will be just fine.”

My baby.

“Alright,” I gave up. “Remind Polona that we have an ultrasound appointment tomorrow at four o’clock in the afternoon. Same place as before. Just tell her that, Marta. Please. Tell her.”

If crying curdles the milk then curdled it would be, for I had wept an avalanche of tears during the long months of pregnancy. I had been overcome with the most absurd excesses of emotion from the first moment I felt the fragile butterfly wings of movement inside of me to an evening not long ago when I lay in the bathtub and contemplated a great whale of an elbow (or a rump or a knee) trawling across the internal sea of my body. I wept, driving to work on my last day, when I spotted a small, bedraggled group of animal rights protestors marching in the rain around the science hall chanting “shame on you!” to the scientists within. It wasn’t my sympathy for the protestors’ cause that made me cry, still less for the creatures they sought to protect. No doubt it was something as pedestrian as hormones, but at the time I felt completely bowled over by the touching faith of those young people who had risen at dawn, taken up their flimsy placards, and headed out into the rain. And for what? I marveled. For what altruistic notion? For what naïve belief that they could change the shape of the future? Make it somehow better? Somehow free it of sin? The hope – and the sweet futility – of the gesture struck me as so enormous, so awesome, that I had to pull the car over and lay my head down against the steering wheel until I was calm enough to drive on.

And I had wept at a Russian Easter party only a few weeks before Polona left. A ridiculous sentimentality had risen in my throat as I watched an old couple on the dance floor – he dressed in a threadbare suit dating from decades before the end of the Cold War, she in a shiny turquoise dress, a smear of pink lipstick across her lips, silver patent leather shoes on her swollen feet. Accompanied by the tinkling notes of an electric piano, they made their shuffling way across the hall, arm in withered arm, eye to bleary eye.

“Look at those two,” I said to Polona. “Just look at them. Could that be us in fifty years?”

It hardly seemed possible.

Polona leaned in close to me – she could be so brave, so fierce in her affection that she sometimes seemed capable of almost any crazy thing – and she kissed me full on the mouth in front of the whole hall filled with hatchet-faced members of the Russian émigré community. Even our old couple paused in the middle of their doddering two-step to stare. Then she pulled back and, using her two strong thumbs, wiped the tears from my cheeks.

“I’ll wear the patent leather shoes,” I promised in a quavering whisper, in the same kind of whisper I had used when I offered my womb to be the carrier of our first child. After all, we had had two to choose from, but Polona had claimed she wasn’t ready, that it was all too strange for her, that she had never dreamed she could have her passion and an ordinary life too.

“And the lipstick and that ridiculous dress?”

She drove a hard bargain.

“It’s a deal,” I whispered, and then I laughed and cried, and then laughed some more. And now she was gone, and I was left standing in the middle of an empty dance hall, facing the enormity of my gesture, the sweet futility of my faith in the future.

I walked into the waiting area at the university obstetrics clinic at 3:55. No Polona. When my name was called at 4:05, I asked the woman scheduled for 4:15 if she wanted to switch with me. She did and when she emerged with her husband at 4:25 – both beaming confidently as heterosexual parents, firmly connected to their offspring, tend to do – there was still no Polona.

At the insistence of the technician, I went into the examining room at 4:30 and lay down. My belly, now bifurcated by a cartographer's line running from naval to pelvic mound, floated serenely above the table. I love this belly of mine. But I love Polona too.

"Do you want to hear the heartbeat?" the technician asked.

"Sure," I answered. She flipped a switch on a fetal monitor, and began to roll the sensor around my midsection, hunting for the errant heart. "The head's down now, getting into position," she said, looking up toward the ceiling as she blindly searched. "There it is," she stopped, and we both listened for a moment to the sound of the little snare drum trapped in an underwater chamber, banging away, oblivious to everything but its own persistent rhythm. "Sounds good," she smiled down at me. Squeezing a dollop of cold gel onto my stomach, she turned her attention to the screen to my right. "Let's have a look," she said, taking another instrument into her hand and sliding it along the greasy orb of my lower abdomen. "You know the..?"

"No! I don't!" I cut her off, my voice clanging a bit hysterically around the sterile setting.

"Okay, don't worry, I won't tell..." she said soothingly, and resumed her vigil before the shifting submarine shapes on the screen. Though the baby was much bigger now than at the first ultrasound, I still couldn't make out very much: just that tiny heart pumping away, the generous sweep of the skull, the supple necklace of the spine.

"Can you actually see...?" I asked, feeling a burgeoning need for knowledge, for some kind of certitude. Without Polona by my side, I wasn't sure I could afford the luxury of ignorance any longer. Now that I was on my own, it might be a good thing to know the meaning and outline of the life I carried inside of me, to know the physical nature of this little god that most definitely did exist. It seemed, in any case, the height of folly to have the answer right before my eyes and deliberately turn away.

“Sure,” she said. “Are you sure you want to know?”

I nodded mutely.

“You can see it really clearly in this position. See right here,” she pointed to an area on the murky gray screen, “they look like two little walnuts.”

Polona’s eyes wherever I look. Polona’s eyes gazing steadily back at me.

“Hello, Boris,” I shouted into the telephone receiver. “Can I speak to Polona please?” He handed over the phone. “Marta?”

“No, it’s Polona.”

“Oh my god. Polona. Hello. Hi,” I laughed suddenly, helplessly.

“Why are you laughing?”

“You didn’t come yesterday.”

“I was looking up prelapse in the dictionary,” she said. Polona still retains the foreigner’s love of the English dictionary.

“That’s not much of an excuse. What did it say?”

“Well,” she paused, and I could almost hear her gathering her thoughts, plucking them out of her mind, and putting them together for me. “You got it wrong. As usual. There was nothing about organs falling out of the body. That’s called prolapse. For prelapse, the dictionary offers a more theological definition. It’s not the fall itself, but the time before the fall. As in a prelapsarian time, a time of joyous and carefree innocence.”

The time before the serpent entered paradise. The time before Eve plucked the apple. The time before I decided to make a withdrawal from the sperm bank. I couldn’t help but think of another pregnancy anecdote my sister had told me. That when she all but lost her sex drive during the nearly half year after her first baby was born, she had wondered briefly what she would have chosen had she known a choice had to be made: the passion of physical love

or the passion of procreation, the hungry lips of a lover or those of a baby. You can't have your cake and it too, that was Marta's favorite new-world adage. But not mine, not mine. I want it all. I want the apple and paradise too.

"We can have that again, Polona."

"I don't know," she sighed.

"Then a different kind of time, a better time maybe. I didn't get it wrong, Polona. I'm sure of it. There's the family you're stuck with and the family you choose."

"Being a family means being stuck. That's the only kind of family there is. Or should be. Otherwise things go wrong. You need to be connected, really connected. Or people get lost – left behind – forgotten at Greyhound bus stations." Remorse for her dead brother lurked somewhere in that last statement. But I pushed away the shade and kept up the fight for the living.

"Polona: I need you. This baby needs you."

Silence.

"Polona: my kidneys feel cold without you." I was pulling out all the stops now, rooting for her, rooting for us, throwing out every argument I could think of: from high-minded philosophizing about the meaning of family to the cheapest pandering for sympathy.

"Polona: listen to me. You know that sperm donor?" I remembered the day of the insemination. Polona had been there, too, sitting beside me at the head of the bed. The doctor had winked at both of us from above his mask, and reminded us – rather like Rav would later remind me in the hothouse atmosphere of his little green grocery shop – that the male of the species still held some of the cards. It was the sperm donor – the man not the woman – who determined the gender of the baby. The proverbial bull in the china shop. Polona and I had nothing to say about it. "Well, he pulled a fast one on us," I said breathlessly.

“What do you mean, a fast one?” A note of concern had entered her voice: the embryonic stirring of connection, of protection.

“Male hubris,” I said, reeling her in. “You know, the patriarch’s revenge: the dread Y-chromosome.”

“What are you talking about?” Her voice was exasperated, but I could tell she was caught. I could sense, even with the distance that still lay between us, the ferocity rising in her gut. I could almost hear the enamel sparks flying from her teeth.

Sitting alone on the matrimonial bed in our wood-paneled apartment, I settled back comfortably against the pillows and shifted my great belly upward for dramatic impact. “It’s a boy, Polona!” I yelled into the phone. “It’s another little boy! Tell that cranky old dad of yours that he’s going to have a grandson!”

And though I understand only a smattering of Russian, I had no trouble understanding the words that came after the attention-getting “Boris! Boris!” And I willed his response, the first gurgling chuckle of someone who hadn’t said much for a very long time, a rising anticipation – a glimpse of a possible future – in someone who hadn’t felt much of a future for a very long time. I imagined the congratulatory glasses of vodka clashing together, smelled the clear medicinal vapor sloshing through our brain passages.

And I knew I had her back. I knew I had them all.

WHAT GOES UP

“Wow,” Milo said. And then a little softer, “wow.”

He slowly shook his large, well-shaped, hairless head, rolling it back and forth against the pillow where it had fallen a few seconds before. He released a long sigh of contentment. Then he guffawed loudly, hooted really, the noise a rapturous soccer fan might make at the sight of a long awaited goal rippling into the net. The raucous sound burst into the early morning stillness of the bedroom and faded away.

“What got into you?” he wondered aloud.

His wife, Grace, lifted a languorous hand and wiped a bead of sweat from just below her right eye with the tip of her finger. Or perhaps it was a tear. The sexual act engaged in after such a long time and with such a mad, fresh rigor had brought both of those salty fluids rushing up to all her pores and ducts. They hadn't managed anything close to this kind of abandon in a long while. Her hand fell heavily back to her side. She looked down and surveyed her full middle-aged body flowing down between the sheets like a swollen river that has overflowed its banks and is pouring through a network of canyons and gorges. The morning sun pressed stridently against the window, penetrating the tiny holes in the blinds and casting a pattern of bright points all the way down her supine frame. I look beautiful, she thought to herself with surprise. Fuckable even. She smiled slyly as the word slid into her mind. Fucked, she corrected, and the word slid out again. She rolled the curved hull of her body up on to one hip, rested her head in the crook of a bent arm, and looked her husband straight in the eye.

“Are you sure you want to know?”

The last time they had made love had been on July 12, 2000 – almost four years ago. Or – Grace corrected herself – that was the last time they had done it right, with any real passion or exuberance, though there had certainly been many half-hearted attempts in between. But sex, these days anyway, is an activity that demands successful execution, that exists for better or worse under the tyranny of dizzyingly high expectations. MTV expectations. Tantric expectations. The expectations cast forward by a hedonistic youth. Whatever. But one thing is certain: it's got to be good, very good, because if it's not, it only makes you more aware of looming mortality, more aware of that disintegrating sack of your body, more aware of your own slight ridiculousness. And when it is good, then the physical obligingly – and paradoxically – disappears. The self evaporates. You close your eyes and all of a sudden you are nothing more than a white-hot core of pleasure zipping round a darkened universe. Nice. When you can swing it.

So July 12, 2000 it was. She remembered the date because it had been the afternoon of their third child's baptism. That baby – now a pleasant child named Oliver – had been born in the last gasp of the old millennium and was sincerely meant to have been their last. He was a boy and that was key, the first and much desired son after two daughters. But he had also been colicky infant, crying virtually without rest for the first six months of his life. Grace spent the nights of that half-year walking up and down the living room with the wailing baby resting now on her arm, now on her shoulder, watching foreign language movies on mute, relying solely on the English subtitles as the rhythmic sobs occupied all available airwaves for miles around. Over the months, she had acquired a fairly systematic knowledge of post-war Italian cinema and the French new wave. When sex figured in these movies, it looked like some alien activity engaged in by beautiful extraterrestrials, hardly something she'd consider trying herself, and certainly not a process that could have any connection to the soggy squalling creature that was drooling down her back. In the end, she came to prefer martial arts movies –

the leaps and kicks and violent tumbles providing the most suitable visual counterpoint to Oliver's howling and to her own mood of subdued aggression. She had a plan aimed at dissipating that growing well of hostility and frustration inside her, and that was to tackle the long row of sappy Bollywood musicals at the neighborhood video store. But in the end it hadn't been necessary, because, on the day of Oliver's baptism, indeed at the very moment the priest anointed his forehead, he stopped crying as suddenly as if a car alarm had been turned off.

"You see," her mother enthused to Grace after the ceremony, pleased to be able to dangle this small proof of god's existence before her daughter's eyes. "Before today everything was chaos to him; now there's order."

Grace imagined how the last six months might have been perceived by the unbaptised infant: in the beginning, a sort of abstract madness à la Jackson Pollock, resolving, just as the holy water hit his brow, into the serene hierarchy of classical perspective. The harrowing six-month passage from Grace to grace. Poor thing, she thought, we should have had him baptized months ago.

But aloud, she responded to her mother's proselytizing as she always did: with a demand for just a little more proof. "Well," Grace said dryly, "if this really is such a well-ordered universe, mother, why don't you and daddy take the blessed child off our hands for a couple of hours after lunch? In fact, why don't you take all three of them, so Milo and I can get a little rest."

Feeling beneficent, her mother had done just that, and Grace and Milo – alone in their empty and strangely silent house, a little bit drunk from the wine consumed at lunch, a little bit desperate for each other after the long months in the desert of colic – wound up in bed where in a slippery convocation of sweat and saliva and other body fluids, including the sweet runny milk leaking from Grace's overused breasts, they managed to conceive a fourth child.

Grace later complained that she couldn't have known she was ovulating since she was still lactating, but looking back at the whole sequence of events, she worried that perhaps her mother was right after all: perhaps there really was some perverse Christian god out there, relentlessly peopling his dominions, delivering peace of mind to his believers, settling scores with the skeptical.

“Yeah, I would like to know what got into you.”

Milo, now on his side of the bed, propped himself up on his elbow and locked eyes with Grace. “I really would. It's been a long time since you've rolled around and hollered like that. I liked it. I'm not saying I didn't. But I'm surprised. It wasn't part of the deal.”

Their marriage, like most successful marriages, was comprised of a series of deals and negotiations, approaches and retreats, concessions and compromises. A little more than three years ago, after the birth of that fourth unplanned post-baptismal child (they named him Milo Junior having run out of names by then), Grace had begun to disdain the marital bed. She hardly knew why. Something just clicked off inside her. What with two prepubescent girls always at each other's throats and two little male tyrants so close in age as to be almost twins, she was understandably weary at night. But worse than that, she'd become self-conscious. She felt as if she were being watched – sometimes by an intimidating host of tattooed, belly-button-pierced starlets that her girls already adulated, but just as often by her mother's punitive god who, looking down from his perch, pointed a vengeful finger at her womb and ordered her to multiply – that's what it's for, he admonished, that's all it's for. So she asked Milo to leave her alone for a while. To lay off.

And he agreed, because, he said, he loved her. But not before having won several hard-fought concessions. A) That she would approach him whenever she felt even the most minor stirrings of desire (which, spelled out, meant that she was not allowed to relieve them

herself). B) That he would not fool around but in return would have conjugal rights to Grace: i) whenever he felt he couldn't stand it anymore, or: ii) once a month, whichever was less. C) If on those occasions, Grace intended to lie unresponsive beneath him, she would have to wear her reading glasses (which he associated with a much-fantasized-about high-school librarian from his youth) and (here he overplayed his hand a bit) a red thong.

Grace had read somewhere that a couple that had sex less than eleven times a year was considered to have a sexless marriage. Eleven was an odd number – one less than the months of the year as if married couples needed an abstinent December in order to gather their strength and wits for the following year. But, however weary she was, she didn't want to have an officially sexless marriage, so she agreed to a minimum of eleven times a year and to the reading glasses. But not the thong.

“Well, now I have another deal for you,” Grace said energetically, jostling up to a seated position. “A new deal.”

“No,” Milo said emphatically. “No deal. I first want to know what got into you.”

“Okay,” Grace conceded, though reluctantly. She didn't like to see her agenda upset. She gathered up a handful of white sheet and wrapped it around her naked body. “What got into me first, deal later.”

“And don't do that,” Milo insisted, moving back over to her side of the bed. “Don't do that yet.” He pulled the sheet down and away from her torso, letting it pool around her ample hips. Sitting upright in the circular pattern of fabric, she felt for a moment like a goddess at a mountain source, her breasts plummeting away from her like a waterfall, but she dismissed the image from her mind. She had to tackle the business at hand and she realized that she might as well tell the story naked, since she would in any case be exposing her lowest self.

“Alright.” Grace paused again, this time looking into her husband's face to gauge his readiness. His sudden inquisitiveness had taken her off guard. She was more used to him

dozing after sex. “You know that party I went to last night. The party that Hill invited me to, for that UN agency I consulted with last year, that does legal work in Central and Eastern Europe?”

“Yeah?” He leaned in to nuzzle her neck and whispered wetly: “Get to the point.”

“Well, a bunch of Eastern Europeans guys were there. Balkan types, bearded, heavy smokers, lots of hard liquor, no ice. Guy guys. You know the profile.”

“Yeah,” he murmured, moving his lips down in the direction of her collarbones, setting a southerly course.

But Grace wasn't paying attention to him any longer. She stared blindly forward, remembering. “Well, there was this one guy: a little older than you, a lot more hair – on his face and his head. Attractively tragic demeanor. Apparently he was some kind of dissident at one time, rallied the troops to resist the communist authorities, even spent some time in jail. A famous man in his country, charismatic. He was at the party last night too. He was a little drunk, but not too drunk, just drunk enough.”

Milo pulled away from Grace's throat and looked at her. A whiff of tension – suspicion even – mingled with the faint sex smell in the small room. “Where was he from?” Milo asked, sitting up fully, and wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

“I'm not sure. I think his country had collapsed, or disintegrated or something, that he didn't really have a country anymore. I didn't actually talk that much to him. Hill told me afterwards that he was working with one of the legal teams, drafting a constitution.”

“A constitution for a country that doesn't exist.”

“Something like that.” She shrugged her bare shoulders. Milo had moved rather deliberately back to his side of the bed and settled in against his own pillow and Grace leaned back against hers. It almost seemed as if some invisible figure had inserted itself between

them. The conversation paused briefly as the two pricked up their ears at the sound of water running in the hallway bathroom. The flush of a toilet followed.

“Oliver?” Milo asked.

“No, Tess,” Grace responded, referring to their thirteen-year-old daughter. Grace glanced at the clock. It was just past eight. “She has riding this morning.”

“So what about this guy?” Milo resumed, frowning.

“We danced all night. All of us danced, that is. They were playing some old Yugoslav rock songs from the seventies and things ended up getting pretty wild. It was a pretty unusual scene for a bunch of diplomats. But anyhow this guy and I kept winding up together on the dance floor. He would slowly circle around me –” and now it was she who broke the barrier running down the middle of the bed, sidling her pale flesh up against her husband’s, attempting to banish the specter that had come between them, “– and stamp his feet in this macho kind of way. Like a booted Cossack or something. Once I did a little spin in front of him and he ran his index finger up the nape of my neck.” She spoke softly now, the words tumbling rapidly over one another as if the excitement of the previous evening were coming after her again. “At the end of the night, he pressed me up against the curtains in Hill’s living room. And he... he kissed me. He pushed his tongue all the way to the back of my mouth. I was flabbergasted. Floored. Nothing like that has happened to me for years.”

Milo stared at her, speechless, a look of shock on his face. Grace stared back at him defiantly. “Well, it’s not the same for men as it is for women. When men have babies, young girls come rushing up to them in the supermarket, cooing and gushing, pretended to fawn over the baby but really fawning over the man. Fathers with children are at the centerpiece of glamorous ad campaigns for Rolex watches, American Express credit cards. And what do women get? Detergent, pampers, sanitary napkins. It’s not the same for women, you know. No one has desired me like that in years.”

“I desire you,” Milo protested. “I’ve never stopped desiring you.”

“Oh, that’s different.” Grace waved a dismissive hand in the air. Milo slumped against his pillow. She knew she was being cavalier, but she was still in the thrall of the strange man’s desire, and besides, she was only saying what was true. “I’m so familiar to you, Milo, like a country that’s been explored, conquered, occupied, developed. You know every nook and cranny of me, every valley, every hilltop. But he doesn’t, you see.” She sat up tall now, resting the two half-moons of her bottom on her heels and gesticulating. “He’s never seen me laid up with the flu. He’s never seen me give birth. He can’t remember me when I was young and slender. He doesn’t love me, Milo, he doesn’t love me. That’s the whole point. There’s none of that history, none of that sentiment. And he wanted me all the same. He was mad with desire. I had to push him away.”

“A man without a country seduced by the glimpse of an undiscovered land mass,” Milo said nastily. “Well, I hope you pushed him away.”

“Land mass,” she laughed, low and sultry. No amount of wounded male pride, or even legitimate jealousy, could burst her bubble. “I was thinking more along the lines of a small tropical island chain.” She wriggled up against him. The toilet flushed a second time and a moan escaped Grace’s lips. “Oh, Milo,” she whispered, “don’t be mad.”

“Lucy?” Milo asked, referring to Tess’s younger sister.

“No, Oliver,” Grace murmured, climbing up onto her husband and straddling him with the full girth of her body. “And I did push him away. It’s you I want.”

She felt as if she hadn’t eaten for years, and now she was suddenly, wildly famished. Like the first months of poor little colicky Oliver’s life, the longer arc of hers had followed a path from chaos to order. In her youth, she had slept with almost every man she could get her hands on, performing acts of such lust and perversion that even after all these years she sometimes shuddered when a particularly raw or pornographic vision from those distant days

intruded on her memory. In her mid-twenties, she found Milo, her perfect man, settled down, and over the course of a decade, gave birth to four perfect children – Tess, Lucy, Oliver and Milo Junior. Then she decided to give the bottom half of her body a rest. And rest she did, entering during these last years, a deep state of immobility and calm, a sort of mid-life hibernation. If life after forty was like an airplane plummeting to earth, she reckoned there were many ways to go down. One could howl in terror, pulling at one's hair, searching desperately for any way – liposuction, botox injections, viagra – to keep the thing up in the air just a little while longer. Or one could repair to the postage-stamp bathroom and quietly do away with oneself. Or one could put one's chair back into the full reclining position, order a glass of wine and enjoy the in-flight entertainment program as gravity worked its relentless magic.

Grace had decided that she belonged to the latter camp – no more fight, no more struggle, no more bedroom acrobatics. She had convinced herself that this was not only sensible, but even natural in terms of biological function. It was an entirely logical progression: from the frenzied search for the proper mate to the judicious emission of eggs to be fertilized by that mate, from the gestation and birth of offspring to their care and feeding for a limited number of years. What possible biological purpose could sex serve after that? As if to punctuate this pragmatic line of reasoning, the toilet flushed a third time. Milo opened his mouth to make another vain guess at the identity of the flusher. Grace silenced him by lowering her head and placing her lips on his. Sex might not be a biological necessity anymore, but all of a sudden it seemed like a necessity all the same.

“Well,” Milo said, his bald head hitting the pillow with a satisfied thud for the second time that morning. “Who am I to complain if some Balkan fellow kisses my wife at a party? Whatever it takes to have a morning like this again. Whatever it takes.”

“Really?” Grace pounced on her husband’s careless phrase. She rose from the bed and swung a robe around her shoulders. “So you wouldn’t mind then, if – well, how should I put it? – if I kept myself in this sort of condition?”

“What sort of condition do you mean?” His voice was wary again.

“It’s the new deal I was talking about before. Eleven times a year may not be enough anymore,” she said silkily. “I want to negotiate an increase.”

“*You* want to negotiate an increase?” Milo shook his head in disbelief. “What exactly do you want now?” The same hint of suspicion that had invaded the room when Grace first mentioned the man at the party hung between them once again.

“Well, if you wouldn’t object, I would go around, you know, collecting ...”

“Collecting what?”

“Collecting,” she paused, “collecting desire. Here and there, where I find it, where it finds me.”

“It’s not enough that I desire you?”

“All I need is a little objective confirmation, Milo, like a doctor’s second opinion. It’s not that big of a deal really.” Grace stared into the mirror, smoothed her hair back and continued casually. “I wouldn’t sleep with anybody but you, if that’s what you’re worried about. And I wouldn’t imagine having sex with them when I was having sex with you.”

“Them?”

“My desirers,” she clarified, carefully enunciating the *r*’s. She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head back to the precise angle that most effectively concealed the shadows and lines of middle age. And then she turned to him with a look of pleading in her eyes. “Oh, don’t you see, Milo? It was just so intoxicating, it was just so ...” Unable to find the adequate word to describe this particular intoxication, she let the sentence float off. “It wasn’t him specifically. He didn’t matter who it was. It could have been anybody.”

Milo gave her a long, wry look. “And what do I get in return?”

“You get me,” Grace responded, with a triumphant smile. She spread her arms out before him, as if to better reveal the value of the prize. “Like I used to be. Like it was before all of that.” She gave a disparaging nod toward the distant bathroom and its ever-flushing toilet.

“What do I get to collect?”

She looked sharply toward the bed where Milo still lay, and the curve of her spine went from self-admiring swoon to high alert. “You just get me,” she repeated with a note of warning in her voice. “Just me,” she repeated, as if to seal the deal. “I’m too jealous. I couldn’t stand it if you even thought about other women.”

Now that she had laid all her cards on the table, such as they were, all the fear and tension and sensual heat drained from her body. From then on, their negotiations took on the character of ordinary domestic banter, as if they were discussing who would go to the grocery store on Saturday, who would pick Oliver up from soccer, who would drill Lucy on her multiplication tables. The sound of the children arguing over the last piece of cinnamon toast drifted up from the kitchen. Grace cajoled her husband: “Besides, you don’t need anyone but me, do you? Not when I’m like I was today. You’re okay. Solid. Balanced. It’s only me who needs a bit of encouragement.”

And after a while, a lopsided deal was struck.

Three days later, Grace stepped down into the dark hull of a tailor shop on the eastern edge of the city. As she moved from the bright spring sunlight into the dim space, a strong odor struck her in the face: a combination of sewing machine oil, stale sweat, and the faded perfume that lingers on women’s discarded garments. She stretched her hand out to the clothing rack directly to the right to regain her equilibrium. A little troll of a man glanced up at her from

behind a black sewing machine. Grace noticed immediately the single black hair that sprung out from the bridge of his nose. An unfortunate location for a hair, stranded there in the no-man's land between eyebrow and moustache. Well, whatever his shortcomings, Hill had recommended this tailor, saying he was by far the best and cheapest in the city.

“Can I help you?” The man looked up. Despite his size and his ugliness, he radiated self-assurance. He was on his home turf and somehow managed to convey to Grace that she was not.

“I'd like to have a couple of skirts shortened.” She lifted the plastic bag she held in her left hand, and at the same time leaned forward self-consciously and touched her thigh as if to explain. It was part of her new campaign of youthful clothes, bikini waxes, facials. Maybe she'd even graduate to thongs eventually. The man rose from his chair and maneuvered past her in the small space. As his body brushed by hers, any doubts she might have had about the source of the sourest ingredients in the shop's aroma were put to rest. With a sweeping, almost violent gesture, the tailor pulled aside a dingy curtain and ushered Grace into a small dressing room, not a dressing room really, but just a tiny alcove separated from the workspace. A chair stood in the corner.

“Change in here.” Grace was struck again by the man's cocksure manner, by the easy way he ordered her about. Another flick of the curtain and she was alone, or at least hidden from his view.

She lowered herself into the chair, kicked off her shoes and absently reached a hand around her back to unzip her skirt. In the few days since that morning in bed with Milo, she had been dwelling obsessively on the dual nature – or rather the double-layeredness – of people, all people, the simultaneous and competing existence of their outer and inner selves. Both parts were right there at all times, the inner part visible though the outer as if through a prism of broken light, a prism of speculation or desire, sometimes even disgust. No matter

how much people tried to hide it, the existence of that chaotic physical self – the shitting, fucking, pissing self – could never plausibly be denied, not by priests in their vestments or ingénues in theirs.

There had been certain points in Grace's life – the last few years for example, as her plane seemed to be steadily losing altitude – that she had completely forgotten about that inner part. Though there been many other times – when she was first discovering sex as a young woman or later when she was producing baby after baby – when she couldn't get it out of her mind. After she had her first baby, for example, she used to lie on the beach on summer days, surveying the horizon through her sunglasses, eying the passing sets of feminine hips swathed in bright lycra. She gauged the age of an infant perched at the waist of one such wading mother and make the following calculation: approximately four months ago, this woman – this very ordinary, very public woman – had been lying on a gurney with her legs spread wide, panting and writhing, crying out to any god who happened to be around and might be willing to assist her in pushing a relatively large object out through a relatively small cavity in her body. And nine months before that, she had been lying somewhere else, legs spread, panting and writhing, crying out to an altogether different god. It seemed utterly inconceivable to Grace that this fresh, young woman with her straight teeth, her fine athletic husband, her one-piece bathing suit with smart little straps criss-crossing her pretty shoulder blades could have ever been in either of those positions.

But there it was. She had been. And in both.

In the last few days, Grace could think about nothing but the first half of the equation – the sex half. It was as she walked through a city each day that had been slid under some sort of magical X-ray machine. She watched all of the thousands of rear ends, the endlessly varied shapes and sizes – some swaddled in tight skirts, some hidden in baggy low-slung denim, others in well-tailored slacks – and saw them as if unclothed. Hurrying, wiggling, jiggling,

sashaying, slouching, swaying down the city streets. She studied cleavages. She peered at the exposed abdomens of teenagers. She looked into the faces that owned those body parts, or thought they did. She wondered when, where, and how often they'd had sex in the last twenty-four hours. They might well be heading for a rendezvous right now, or from one, or, who knows, from one to another. Maybe a trace of the most recent encounter still lingered somewhere on their bodies, could still be detected if one came close enough to sniff through their clothing.

The young bodies intrigued her the least – there was nothing surprising about their allure. Thinking about them in a sexual position was like fantasizing about a racehorse galloping round a track or the tail of a blue whale striking the waves. Beautiful, but predictable. She preferred to contemplate the odd specimens: the grotesque and obese ones, the vain old women with red-painted nails and withered lips smeared with color, the fat male crotches below the belt obscured by the even larger bulge of the belly protruding above. These were the heroic ones, the ones who had to transcend terrific hurdles in their quest for pleasure – hairy moles, rolls of blubber, impotence, shortness of breath.

Her mind wandered for a moment to the ugly tailor sitting just beyond the curtain. She could hear him breathing, hear the faint rhythmic rattle in his throat. And she could smell him, that pungent unwashed smell. She marveled at his existence in this little shop, spending his days fingering the outer shells of countless women. Did he ever fantasize, she wondered, about their absent bodies? As if in response to her musing, the tailor's voice materialized, penetrating the barrier of the curtain and addressed her absent body.

“Lady, are you having some kind of a problem back there?”

“No, no, no,” Grace called back flustered. She had no idea how long she's been sitting in the little alcove. She jumped up and hopped awkwardly into a deep blue calf-length skirt

that she pulled out of the plastic bag. Then she flicked the curtain open and obediently stepped before the mirror.

“How short do you want it?” He knelt beside her, his head at the level of her waist, pins in his mouth, a piece of tailor’s chalk in his hand.

“Here.” She pointed to a spot above her knee.

In order to hold the skirt up, the tailor slid his four fingers up between the azure fabric and Grace’s stockinged leg. Only his thumb could be seen on the outside of the skirt. “Here?” he asked. Grace looked into his face uncertainly. “Don’t look at me,” he admonished. “Look in the mirror.”

She looked in the mirror.

“A little higher,” she murmured, and his hand slid up a little higher.

“A little more.” She studied her dimpled knees, wondering if Milo would appreciate the new look, imagining the hand of the tailor climbing higher still.

“There,” she said. And he marked the new hemline with chalk, and slid a pin through the fabric. They repeated the process with the three skirts that remained in the plastic bag behind the curtain, and by the time Grace stepped back into the spring sunshine, into the city’s impersonal roar, she was dizzy with desire.

As if in response to the heightened atmosphere in the house, the conversation, even of the children, seemed to hover insistently around questions of indulgence and abstinence, sin and virtue, deeds and the regrets that followed. In the fog of her arousal, Grace was neglecting her freelance government agency work and spending the spring afternoons idling with the children in the garden, waiting for Milo to come home from work, for the family to get through the ritual of dinner and homework and tooth brushing, so they she and Milo could

climb into bed. Grace and the children kept getting tangled up in their sweet afternoon explorations and it was only Milo who was able to unravel her in the evening.

On Thursday afternoon, Grace was sitting in the garden with Tess and the boys. Though the weather had taken a premature turn toward summer, the Japanese cherry that stood at the center of the back garden was still in bloom. It was getting toward four o'clock when eleven-year old Lucy burst in the gate, announcing that she intended to join Best Friends. "Wonderful," Grace responded dreamily, staring up toward the sky through the irregular latticework of cherry blossoms.

"Mother," Tess objected. "Do you even know what Best Friends is?"

Grace shifted her gaze away from the blossoming branches of the cherry tree and focused on her two blossoming daughters. "I just thought she meant best friends as in, you know, best friends."

"Hardly." Tess rolled her eyes. Then she crossed her arms over her breasts and explained the facts to her mother. "It's an abstinence club, mother. They're all over the place now. She'll have to sign a contract. She'll have to take a virginity pledge. The works." Lately Tess had taken to sprinkling her pronouncements with phrases like 'the works' and 'go figure.'

"That's not true," Lucy practically screamed at her older sister. "There is no official pledge."

"Well, whatever." Tess turned away from her and looked down at her fingers. She had already scratched away most of the dark purple fingernail polish. The she directed her gaze at her mother again. "It's a bunch of stupid little girls who put on stupid little performances and swear to be virgins until they marry. I mean, my god, how absurd. How totally absurd." Absurd was another one of Tess's new favorite expressions. "They asked me to join, but I wouldn't even give them the satisfaction of saying I was a virgin."

“Well, are you?” Lucy sneered at her sister.

Oliver, the elder of the two boys, stood in a small clearing behind the cherry tree. He gripped a wooden sword firmly in one hand and a painted shield in the other. “What’s a virgin?” he asked. The boy had actually stopped fighting in order to ask the question, but Lucy and Grace, still staring at Tess expectantly, ignored him.

“Is it the same as a legend?” he persisted. When he didn’t get an immediate answer, he resumed the duel, thrusting his sword into the chest of his little brother, who not too sure of his feet, fell promptly to the ground.

“No, honey.” Grace answered, still looking at Tess, waiting for an answer. “It’s someone who’s never had sex before.” That made the matter seem straightforward enough, though she knew it to be anything but. “Like you, and Milo Junior, and Lucy, and Tess. Maybe.”

“Mother,” Tess rebuked her.

“But *can* a virgin be a legend?” Oliver, emerged from behind the tree, and slumped against his mother’s knee, letting the sword drop to the ground. Little Milo remained motionless on the ground behind, clutching his gut and moaning.

“I guess so.” Grace looked down at the boy and regarded him for a long moment before answering. “Mary, the mother of Jesus – whom I am sure your grandmother has told you all about – was legendary for her virginity.”

Grace was not particularly fond of the Virgin Mother, and indeed, she was one of the main reasons that Grace had turned away from the church that played such an important role in her own mother’s life. Grace had had her children baptized for sentimental reasons. She enjoyed the family ritual, the fleeting sense of community. She had once viewed religion pragmatically as being something like marriage: a series of reciprocal deals and arrangements. You get baptized: the chaos in your head goes away. You live righteously and keep the

shitting, fucking, peeing self under control: you get eternal life. You stay a virgin until you marry: you get – well, she wouldn't know what you get for that. The main difference between marriage and religion was that instead of love serving as the emotional backdrop to it all, faith did. And if the faith goes – just like when the love goes from a marriage – all the rules and rituals can't hold the thing together. It's like having a constitution for a country that doesn't exist.

Grace had had no particular objection to Jesus, per se, the combination of divinity and humanity seeming an apt metaphor for some sort of human nobility and striving, but she ended up choking on the idea of the Virgin Mary. The woman was stingy even in her humanity – in her willingness to suffer pain but not pleasure. And besides, Grace objected to her on purely logistical grounds: on the grounds that what goes up must come down, what comes out of the female body must have gone in, somehow. To pretend otherwise seemed, well, it seemed absurd.

“But usually not, Oliver. Usually virginity is just a temporary phase,” she concluded. “Although believe me girls, there's nothing wrong with eleven-year-old virgins. Or thirteen-years-old virgins for that matter.”

She had to admit to herself, though, that she did feel a pang of guilt for her own late-life virginity and the lengths she was now going to reverse it. Grace wondered about means and ends. Was it permissible to sin in the service of virtue? Was it permissible to spend her spring mornings, whatever the current deal with Milo was, wandering the streets gazing at bodies, getting aroused by the kiss of men without countries, or, odder still, by that unpleasant little tailor? Was she courting disaster? Did the other shoe really have to fall?

“Was King Arthur a virgin?” Oliver's high-pitched voice interrupted the string of questions with his own equally pressing one. Little Milo scrambled to his feet and waited for an answer.

“Oh, for god sake!” Tess flounced angrily toward the house. “This conversation is absurd!”

“I don’t think so, honey.” Grace watched Tess as she slid open the glass door and walked through the kitchen in the direction of her room. Lucy soon followed. “Wasn’t he married to Lady Guinivere? They were in love, weren’t they? They were very happy together until Guinivere set her sights on Lancelot.”

“But he was a legend,” Oliver told his little brother reassuringly, reaching a hand out to steady the smaller boy. “A hero. All that girly stuff doesn’t matter.”

“Right,” said Grace aloud. But she worried that all the girly stuff really did matter, that it mattered more than the heroics, more than the legendary search. That, in the end, it mattered more than anything else.

Later that night, after she and Milo made love, Milo senior went down to the garden to smoke a cigarette and Milo junior toddled into the room and took his place. He climbed into bed next to Grace. He pressed his small warm feet against her sticky belly and they both drifted off to sleep. Grace’s last thought before the oblivion of night closed over them both was how wonderful those soft little feet felt against her stomach, what a perfect fit, what a safe fit, that little body against hers. She never should have let herself stray back into the chaos.

Two weeks later, Grace sauntered up the stairs toward the bedroom. It was Friday night, just after eleven. The children were all asleep in their rooms. She’d been out with Hill and two other friends. She was wearing an azure blue skirt and a sleeveless creamy shirt. The skirt was short and fresh, hemmed several inches above her knees, and despite her maternal proportions, Grace felt younger and more girlish and happier than she had in years. Milo was sitting on the bed in their room, talking to someone on his cell phone.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he said. He leaned over and fiddled absently with his shoelaces.

“No, no,” he reassured the person on the other end of the line. “I’ll be there. It’s not a problem. I can be there.” There was a pause as he listened to the tinny voice that Grace could hear floating up from the instrument. A strange little half-smile flickered over Milo’s face, an expression Grace seemed to remember from years ago.

“Oh, don’t listen to him. You look great in that dress.”

Milo looked up and saw Grace standing in the doorway looking back at him.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “Grace just got home from her girls night out.” He hung up and cupped the phone in his hand, looking up at his wife.

“Who was that?” Grace asked.

“Kelly, Robert’s secretary,” Milo answered. “I think you’ve met her once or twice. Pretty girl. Tall as a giraffe.”

“You slept with her.” Grace stated the fact. She simply knew it.

“What are you talking about?” Milo asked, dumbstruck. He wasn’t looking at Grace anymore, but down at his left hand scrunched up on the bed next to his thigh.

“You slept with her.” Grace repeated.

“That’s ridiculous.” Milo shifted his gaze to his right hand that still held the tiny phone.

“It was how you said that thing about the dress,” Grace said, “and then how you smiled.” She could hear her heart inside her chest, spreading the knowledge of his betrayal through the rest of her body, into every limb, into every fiber of memory. She would never be able to block it out again. It was in her blood stream, in her fingernails. “I just know by the way you said it. It sounded – I don’t know – intimate.” She ripped the last word from her throat and it hung bloody in the air between them. “And you got a look on your face. I know that look.”

Her body slid down to the floor, pushing the door shut as she went. If life after forty was like an airplane plummeting to the earth, her fuselage had just broken into a million pieces. She felt the excruciating pain of a freezing cold, oxygen-free atmosphere. Her lungs were collapsing.

“Grace.” Milo got up from the bed.

“No,” she whispered fiercely. “Don’t.”

He sat down again.

“After all those years of waiting for me to come to life again, of letting me get over the shock of that fourth baby, of letting me get over the shock of all them. You had every reason to do it before. But not now. Not now.”

“I know.” He looked depleted. He put his hand up to his stubbly head and rubbed it gently. It was in need of a shave. He was the kind of man to whom baldness lent a certain unexpected dash of youth. Grace shaved him every single Sunday morning – very slowly, very carefully – never leaving the scratches and nicks that marred his skin when he did it himself. “I know it doesn’t make any sense, Grace. And I know I said it was okay, this new deal of yours. But there was a certain balance before. A certain reciprocity. The last few weeks were great, Grace, really great. But something went off kilter.”

A long silence followed his words, during which a raw image intruded on her feelings of betrayal, amplified them and transformed them into something else, something more like guilt. It was the image of the tailor pushing her roughly and awkwardly against the chair in the curtained alcove when she had returned a week ago to pick up the finished skirts. He had pushed his hand higher up, all the way up, as she had wanted him to, as she had imagined he would. Grace had let him do it. No, she had made him do it. She had guided his hand. Afterwards she had the distinct feeling that he preferred the empty shells to the real body,

preferred his existence among the empty clothes. That was his arrangement with the world. His constitution. His faith.

“Don’t follow me downstairs,” she said to Milo. She got up slowly and opened the door and went out. “Just let me be alone for a while.”

All night she sat by the window in the kitchen and looked out at the cherry tree illuminated by the nearly full moon. It was in its last gasp of glory. White petals lay all around it, carpeting the dark earth. One rather large low branch had been broken, probably by the boys, and hung down, nearly sweeping the ground with its crimped blossoms. Toward morning, she heard someone enter the kitchen. She thought it was Milo – she had halfway been expecting him all night – but it turned out to be a child. Little Milo. Milo Junior. He had come down looking for her and when he found her, he climbed drowsily into her lap.

“I love you,” he said with a bleary voice.

Grace looked down into the face of the boy. He was well named. He resembled his father more than the others, and resembled her not at all. He had Milo’s large handsome head, the broad sweep of his intelligent brow. He wasn’t usually much of a talker though, letting Oliver speak for him. This was definitely the very first time he’d used that phrase. Grace, still in the throes of the long night spent alone, of Milo’s betrayal – and of her own – felt her throat constrict. She wasn’t sure whether she would laugh or cry. The words sounded vaguely ridiculous in the little boy’s mouth. He said them in the same way Lucy had started to say ‘actually’ or the way Tess said ‘absurd.’ It was a kind of imitation, a mock sophistication, a reaching for adult emotions. Grace remembered the admonition of her mother’s priest when she had stopped attending church. She bluntly announced to him that she had lost her faith – full stop – but the priest told her not to worry. He told her to just keep praying, to just keep saying the words, and the faith would follow. Now she wondered why some words seemed so

earth shattering when spoken for the first time, or when spoken by a child, but seemed routine and emptied of meaning after repetition – the I-love-you-I-love-you-too of the married couple. It really should be the other way around. Beginnings are easy. Full of wonder. Beginnings take no effort at all.

She gripped the boy's shoulders and peered hard into his face. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded of him. She wasn't going to let him get off so easy. But little Milo was too sleepy to take offense. He just settled in as close as he could to her, and murmured: "What do you mean by what do you mean?"

She pushed him away from her again, shook him a bit, and stared into his face. "I mean what are you saying to me when you say that? Why do you use those words? Why do you use that word?"

"I don't know, Mommy." The soft little child nestled insistently against her, carving a refuge for himself in her warm body. "I say it to you because you say it to me." And Grace, to her distress, could think of no better answer, no better definition of love.

The silvery light in the garden slowly altered to the first milky rays of dawn. As Grace finally drifted off to sleep, the young boy in her arms grew more wakeful. He looked out the window and marveled at the mysteries of the quiet morning. He wondered at why his mother had sat all night at the kitchen window. He wondered at the magnificence of King Arthur and Lancelot and the other knights, at their wonderfully heroic deeds. He took in the beauty of the cherry tree in the early morning light, one fallen branch sweeping the ground, and the beauty of his mother in her midnight blue skirt.

Vita

Erica Johnson Debeljak was born and raised in San Francisco, California. In 1980, she moved to New York City where she studied French Literature at Columbia University and then went on to get an MBA from New York University. She worked as a banker for five years before moving to the capital of the newly independent Slovenia to marry. She settled in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, studied the language and launched a career in her new home as a translator from Slovenian into English and as a popular essayist and columnist.

Ms. Debeljak has published two books in Slovenia. In 1999, she published a book of creative non-fiction called “Tujka v hiši domačinov” (Foreigner in the House of Natives), and, in 2004, an exploration into the life of the Slovenian poet, Srečko Kosovel, called “Pesnik in jaz” (The Poet and I). Ms. Debeljak’s translation of the selected work of Dane Zajc (“Barren Harvest”) came out in 2004 with White Pine Press. She contributes regularly to Slovenian literary journals, newspapers, popular magazines and other publications. Her fiction and non-fiction work has been published in American and British literary reviews such as *The Literary Review*, *Common Knowledge*, *Wasafiri*, *The Third Coast* and is upcoming in *Prairie Schooner* and *Nimrod*. Her essay “The World’s Skin” was named among the notable essays of 2004 in the *Best American Essay* anthology edited by Robert Atwan and Louis Menand. Her work has also appeared in Sweden, Italy, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Macedonia, Croatia, Finland and Hungary. The author lives in Ljubljana with her husband and three children.