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## Hold, Hold, My Heart

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HOLD, HOLD, MY HEART

by

Andrew Berthrong

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, UT

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## ABSTRACT

Hold, Hold, My Heart

by

Andrew Berthrong, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2010

Major Professor: Jennifer Sinor  
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This thesis consists of a traditional introduction followed by a first-person, fictional story told in seven chapters. The story begins with the protagonist in his apartment preparing to write, a brief account of his stalling, and then his beginning to write. Those chapters taking place in the vicinity of the apartment are in the present tense and those relating past adventures are written in third person, one chapter for each adventure: Africa, sailing, and Navajo Mountain. After each adventure, the narration returns to the apartment.

This piece is the embodiment of both the vigorous internal work in search of understanding and the story of that work, told as a fictional account. The structure, therefore, mimics the journey: the dialogue between his present, cloistered searching and his past, external searching. Therefore, the combination of his solitary internal life and his failed adventures point to an urge to be involved and the awareness of his separateness, of the great solitude of human existence, to be both connected and isolated.

(109 pages)

## PREFACE

## 1. THESIS TOPIC

I sit, determined: for a few minutes before bed, I will rock back and forth in the pine glider on loan from my sister and enjoy the peace of a blank mind.

Outside, night blackens the high small windows of my basement apartment, but, come to think of it, that description is not completely accurate since it is this lamp peeking over my shoulder that casts the inside of this small room—the pale bookcases and their contents guarding the doorway to the bedroom, those two plant studies hanging on the wall above the sofa, me swaying in the glider—against the glass, the darkness outside transforming the window panes into tiny screens upon which this little domestic scene is projected. And so, looking out the window at night, I see myself and this sitting room reflected in miniature upon the outside, a suspended version of myself looking faded and transparent.

Enough. Plenty of time for thinking of that later; it's an easily reproducible phenomenon. The metaphoric implications are quite rich, quite compelling, but for now, let's just sit. What could be easier? Besides, that reflection is only a version and a silent one. In here is where I actually sit, and Django Reinhardt picks out his long guitar lines from the stereo that sits on top of the bookcase. I browse the familiar titles. Recently I have not been reading like I want to, and these books whisper a small reproach.

I rise and retrieve a sweater from the bedroom and pull it on. The weather is turning. Now nights are chilly and I must remember to shut the windows in the kitchen before bed. I experience a small moment of indecision before sitting again—I am caught in the middle of two thoughts, my body suspended between my mind's simultaneous

commands to both sit and shut the windows in the kitchen. It is like a tiny seizure, my muscles momentarily unsure, halted, in that act of bending my knees to sit and extending my foot to stride. Awkward, yes, and a little amusing, this mental restlessness, but I sort it out.

I sit: a small victory. Now I can be still; think of nothing. I ought to be able to do this, to sit calmly without the need for progress, without having to work anything out, to contemplate.

To rest, like the kind I allow my body every night. Why not rest my mind, let it stretch out on the grass and sigh deeply? Of course, this here, this little pep talk is a kind of working out, but is it not to the point? Still, let's be quiet now. Django plays beautifully, and the rustiness of the old recording—the purr of it—soothes and lulls like crickets.

Hold on now. Silence.

Out of nowhere I get up, having suddenly remembered my teeth, how they need flossing. I clench my fists, pound them against the air and grimace. I sit again, annoyed and fascinated at the difficulty I am having in doing nothing. I can't seem to stop my mind. What exactly is it after? What will satisfy it?

I think of Hamlet and how he resisted satisfaction, how unstoppable his scheming was, how frantic his delay. How reluctant he was to complete his mission, to extinguish that great Reason the death of his father gave to his life. I bet he was petrified. Hovering around his uncle, jabbing at him vaguely, flirting with that self-sustaining revenge like how someone stranded hopelessly in the Sahara reveres the last sip of the canteen,

swirling it around, hearing it gurgle against the sides, smelling its freshness, rationing the inevitable self-annihilation that accompanies the swallowing of it.

Outside, the neighbor's car rolls up their driveway, the sweep of the headlights illuminating the rosemary in the planter box outside my window and then the railing that descends the concrete steps to my front door.

That was good, that thought about Hamlet. I like the symmetry of it, the circular jaunt it takes. I'd like to remember it. I ought to make note of it, of this struggle for and against stillness, of his struggle for and against peace, try to explain, reason, conclude.

I make to get up again, palms on the arm rests to lift myself, and I am caught again mid-action. I slump back into the chair, which sends it rocking, and cover my face with my hands. My gut is wrenched with frustration and I am almost weeping with annoyance (Be still! Be still! I must record this! I must!), but I rise, take an envelope from the table, sit again and write furiously.

What am I avoiding?

\*

I live simply. The walls of my apartment stand mostly bare, although above my borrowed couch hang two lithographs by M.G. Kemp, also on loan from my parents. Both are plant studies, one of silver lace and the other blue poppy.

I spend a lot of time below them on the couch reading or napping, and it is probably true that I don't notice them anymore. My father made the picture frames from alder.

The couch is upholstered in sturdy faded-blue cotton with a couple of matching throw pillows I prop behind my head when I nap. Since the apartment is in the basement of a house, the air is cool and I sleep long and well.

The upper house is divided into two units. One, where a Guatemalan named Moses lives, sits over my living room, kitchen and shower. The other is above my bedroom and has access to all three levels of the house: a part of the basement where I can hear them doing laundry, the main floor, and an upper floor where I presume they sleep. A mother and her two daughters occupy this mostly vertical space and although we've lived a wall and a ceiling apart for over a year, I can't imagine what their names might be. The mother works at the local Smith's Marketplace where I sometimes ride my bike to pick up an avocado or a box of licorice—you know, just to get out of the house—and we smile and nod to one another.

My car sits in the carport, ready. If necessary (what that necessity might be I can't exactly say, but why take the chance?), I'm prepared to leave in short order; I own a hatchback (one of a long line) which, when I lay the back seats down flat, I can sleep on two foam pads I cut to fit around the rear wheel wells. The pads are of a light custard color and are firm, so I sleep well after a night or two of calibration.

This summer I drilled six holes through the white roof of the Honda and bolted on a couple of fir studs to which I could lash a canoe or extra luggage; when the car is your bed it can no longer be your closet.

In the apartment, I am told the atmosphere is surprisingly cheery. I think it's the pale yellow paint on the walls and also how outside the ground slopes away from living room and bedroom windows, letting in considerable sunlight. My bedroom window faces

east, so on the weekends when I sleep late I can watch the beams and the shadows of the unmowed grass outside the window crawl down the west wall. By late afternoon, the sun pushes into the living room and shines for a time on the cream lampshade by the rocker in the corner.

I've lived in Logan for nearly two years, but I have few friends. I know people, sure, but they are either colleagues from the university or former co-workers from the bakery or they are my parents. I haven't had a visitor for months.

I cook for myself and spare no expense. A sizeable percentage of my income goes to ingredients, but I don't always use them in time and must throw some things away. Most recently it was a few stalks of leeks. In the store I thought for sure I'd use them, maybe in a soup, but I forgot about them and they rotted in the refrigerator for weeks.

But I cook myself three meals per day, almost every day. I sauté and sear and deglaze and reduce and even plate my food symmetrically. I pull out one of the chairs from the dining table and sit. I tend to say grace, sometimes aloud but mostly to myself. Sometimes I forget. And while I'm eating I either put on the radio, news mostly, or I prop a novel up and read.

I can pass an entire twenty-four hours in this little space, not once stepping outside, pattering around between the rooms, reading, making little notes to maybe write about later (I've been collecting these notes for years and have a file for them). But it is a struggle to sustain any effort for very long. It is as if for all my motion—playing the accordion, listening to music, cooking, reading, writing, flossing, vacuuming, napping, waking, sitting, rising only to sit again—I am really only orbiting my own unknown

Reason at the center. The speed of my circling is too fast to be pulled in by its gravity and too slow to be released off into space. By pretending activity, I am avoiding action.

Although these days I sit in my apartment, I used to adventure. When I was sixteen I went to Africa where I slept in open bungalows and tents out in the bush and where I was not so much hoping as willing to stumble upon this purposefulness. Our family accompanied a group of dental and medical specialists to Zimbabwe where we lived and worked for six weeks. The threadbare need of the people who were at once joyous and calculating, the desolate beauty of the country, the wildness, the political situation which has now recently exploded, the strangeness of helping strangers—all this almost completely escaped my notice at the time. I remember then, and feel it now, to have been disturbingly unaffected by the whole adventure. In fact, I concerned myself then with purely domestic affairs, with wooing a girl who lived not 20 miles from me back in California. That is what I did in Africa. And I think now of the waste, that perhaps in Africa might have given me my Reason by filling me up with the place and the people, that the newness would shock the answer up into my throat and I might speak it.

My father, so far as I can tell, never lacked trajectory. He, like his father, went straight to Annapolis out of high school. He graduated and dove down in subs following the Soviets through the North Sea. And perhaps the confrontation with danger hundreds of feet below, perhaps having enemies he could ping enlivened him so that now he is indefatigable. His Reason is work, continuous activity. Even his diversions require immense energies, marathons, cycling, Spanish immersion programs in South America. I envy the sense of purpose but not the constant motion. I long for stillness, for a calm self

awareness, not this spinning avoidance. Hoping to get the purpose without my father's busyness, I sought it on the ocean, where the men in my family have gone.

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Dad took my brother and me sailing on the bay once a month or so. I invented for myself considerable pressure to push myself out onto the water, like my father and my grandfather had done, and in 2002 I helped sail a friend's boat from San Francisco to San Diego. We spent three nights at sea, out of sight of land, sailing day and night, keeping solitary watches, and almost capsizing. It was a time to be brave, to calm the sea within by conquering the ocean without, to either prove I was firm or to become firm by acting it. But I was terrified. And perhaps it was because I had put myself there deliberately, hoping the ocean might change me like it did my forbearers but without putting me in harm's way; or that if it presented danger, I would be exhilarated by it, would feel more alive than ever, braver; that the fear would be surgically plucked from me. Instead, I couldn't wait to get off the boat.

A few years later, I received a teaching certificate and applied, really without much thought, to a tiny high school in a particularly remote section of the Navajo reservation. I applied elsewhere as well, but the Navajo school responded first, which, looking back, was no great surprise. The small staff interviewed me over the phone and insisted I come to visit before making a decision. I did. The school stood in the middle of a sagebrush and juniper desert in the shadow of Navajo Mountain, a hundred miles from any city, as if its having been plopped down from above was its likeliest means of existence. As I drove off, I felt very fearful. But a week later when I was offered the position, I accepted with a sort of what-the-hell kind of feeling.

The nine months I lived there—completely alone, no phone, no visitors, using my voice only during school hours and then, silence—I fought against the adventure of it. I ignored the vast landscape, fearing perhaps that to try myself against it might reveal certain troubling inadequacies. I stayed inside, listened to the radio and read epics: *War and Peace*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *Don Quixote*. What, if I am so anxious to be filled with purpose, was I afraid of? The elements of change (what are they?) were there in the desert but I avoided them, suppressed them, and with them myself. As Bellow wrote: “Everybody knows there is no fineness or accuracy in suppression; if you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining” (*Augie* 3).

For years I’ve been turning around and around inside, making no headway, as if I have not yet committed to this business of living. I pretend to live, perform what appears to be decisive action, but inside I have withdrawn and the action will not reach me.

Therefore, the combination of my solitary internal life and my failed adventures (this combination is what my thesis relates) point to an insatiable desire to be involved and the fearful awareness of my separateness—an acknowledgement of the great solitude of human existence, to be both connected and isolated.

## 2. STRUCTURE

This thesis is the embodiment of both the vigorous internal work in search of understanding and the story of that work, told as a fictional account. The structure, therefore, mimics the journey: the dialogue between my present, cloistered searching and my past, external searching.

My thesis begins with the protagonist in his apartment preparing to write, a brief account of his stalling, and then his beginning to write. The entire piece is written in the

first person. Those chapters taking place in the vicinity of the apartment are in the present tense and those relating past adventures are written in third person, one chapter for each adventure: Africa, sailing, and Navajo Mountain. After each adventure, the narration returns to the apartment.

I have landed upon this structure—a book within a book—for several reasons. First of all, it mimics my experience. I both connect and remain separate from life by composing my experiences into stories. That way, I can control them. But because of that control I also suppress them. The character lives internally and writes and remembers for the same reasons, and so as he records the stories of his past adventures, he also creates the story of his present internal struggles that the adventure chapters suggest. For example, in Africa, perhaps for reasons of youth, he shows little interest in anything African but commits himself to girl chasing. At sea, he is distinctly along for the ride, and when the opportunity for action presented itself, he balks. And at Navajo Mountain, he keeps the desert at bay by staying inside.

In the first person, present tense scenes in the apartment, the protagonist mimics this suppression of experience by seeming to inhabit his mind only and not the world around him, until, perhaps the final chapter, during which there is some sense of acceptance of how his awareness both connects and keeps him from life, of how the simple act of existence is enough of an act to justify itself.

And so the story jumps back and forth between internal and external action until the two converge with the character leaving his apartment at night for a walk. He stumbles upon a wild place within his little town and through it he is able to gain some momentary understanding and acceptance of his predicament.

### 3. LITERARY REVIEW

My thesis is influenced by both fiction and nonfiction texts, not to mention a bit of Shakespeare. Many of my ideas about form have come from two works of fiction. As for content, a couple of nonfiction books, a short story and a novel have informed me about adventurers—people acting decisively in the external world—what they seek and what they find; and to *Hamlet* I have looked for an example of compelling internal conflict, of a frenzied suppression of action.

#### *Form*

Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz* contains the main inspiration for the structure of my thesis. The focus of Fuentes' novel is always the same—Artemio Cruz—but the point of view constantly cycles: from the first person (told in present tense while Artemio lies on his death bed), to the second person (Artemio addresses himself seemingly outside of time), to third person (composed of various scenes from Artemio's past and told in that tense), back to the first person and so on. In the final chapter, the point of view cycles more frequently and often without warning until these three "parts" of Artemio die together in the final sentence.

The effect Fuentes achieves is that of a very complete portrait, but also a sense of three distinct lives: external (third person: what other people see), internal (first person: what only the narrator sees, his contemplations), and a kind of meta-internal (in which the narrator is aware of himself and responds to his own contemplations).

So, from Fuentes I will borrow the structure of moving from present to past tense, how he uses his character's past to explain his present and his present to explain his past. The present tense chapters are centrally located and spanning a relatively short period of

time (a few days), while the past tense sections (his adventures) will be in many different locations and cover periods from adolescence to recent adulthood. And all parts come together at the end.

Saul Bellow's *Herzog* plays a bit with that duality (internal vs. external) in a character by having Herzog constantly write letters, which he incidentally never sends. Not only does the point of view switch from first to third person and back again as we enter and leave the letters, but the first person letters allow the reader to more completely enter Herzog's mind. That is a similar effect I wish to achieve with my switching back and forth between present tense scenes and past tense scenes. So from *Herzog* I will borrow the structure of the narrator writing essentially to himself in order to make some sense out of his life. I will not do it, of course, in the form of letters, but as sections of a "novel" separated from the first person narration by chapter headings.

### *Content*

Christopher McCandless, in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, is insatiable. He abandons nearly all his possessions and relationships in search, apparently, of true experience. He bounds around the country and into Mexico and Canada, at first in an old Datsun, and when it breaks down he thumbs his way. He seeks out remote country, South Dakota, Arizona, and Mexico, never able to stay anywhere very long, always anxious, always unsatisfied. Finally he works his way up into Alaska where he believes he will find that ultimate feeling of living and where he eventually starves to death in the cab of an abandoned bus in the wilderness. It is difficult to know what exactly he found out there, but during the last months of his life he wrote, "I am reborn," and pointed to what he called "Deliberate Living" (68). And in his solitude he quoted Tolstoy: "The only

certain happiness in life is to live for others” (169). Unlike me, McCandless seems to find purpose through adventure.

For Joshua Slocum adventure *is* the purpose. His sailing classic, *Sailing Alone Around the World*, presents an interesting study of danger and solitude. After a long career in the merchant marine, he “tried to quit the sea” but having been “born in the breezes, what was there for an old sailor to do” (4) He spent the next two years at sea, sailing from Boston across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean only to be rebuffed by pirates. He recrosses the Atlantic in his 37-foot sloop, suffers gales and near shipwreck through Cape Horn, then to Australia and the Indian Ocean, down to the Cape of Good Hope and across the Atlantic (for the third time) before landing in Boston. Again, why voyage? What was he looking for? He seemed to need to be out on the water. Not many years after his circumnavigation, at the age of sixty, he sailed off again in the same boat to find the source of the Amazon, which was yet undiscovered. There were reports that the boat was in bad repair and that Slocum was careless and a bit wild. He was lost at sea.

I am interested in these stories because they do not ultimately help me. Particularly in Slocum’s case, they suggest that adventuring doesn’t necessarily create that kind of satisfying self-contentment I long for, but instead a restlessness akin to addiction, much like, in fact, my pattering around the apartment pretending to do real things.

On the other hand, the fictional adventure accounts suggest that adventure is, in fact, a solution to something. Hemingway’s story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” tells of a coward, on safari in Africa with his wife, who is made brave by a sudden recklessness, brought on by discovering his wife has just been unfaithful. He dies

in an apparent accident, but is momentarily content with having conquered his fear through “strange chance of hunting, a sudden precipitation into action without worrying beforehand, to bring this about” (26).

So with Macomber he was perhaps surprised into being brave and so, by accident, discovered he knew how to be brave. Like when the training wheels come off. And then, evidently, a lack of fear settles in, hardens the wishy-washiness inside, and you are equipped to live life fully.

Henderson’s trip to Africa in Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* draws similarly satisfying conclusions, though decidedly vague. The overactive Henderson went to Africa because he couldn’t quiet the voice inside him that said, “I want, I want, I want.” He cannot be still. He is large and immensely strong, owns a pig farm, inherited a fortune, terrorizes his family unintentionally, plays the violin to try to calm himself, and chops an enormous amount of firewood. Once, while chopping, a chunk of wood splintered off and struck him in the nose. As he felt it “[his] only thought was *truth*. Does truth come in blows” (23).

Henderson suffers great things in Africa, physical, but also emotional, and that is in fact why he goes. To receive truth by being struck. Adventure is supposed to fill that need, giving us bruises to be changed by.

These texts are therefore useful to me as foils to my character’s experience, showing not just that he might have adventured incorrectly, that he had somehow bungled it, but why he might have done so. But my character does not receive those benefits from adventure. He emerges from Africa, from sailing the Pacific and from the desert of

Navajo Mountain largely unchanged, so far as he can tell. Emerges, perhaps, with a different suspicions of what it means to act.

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## HOLD, HOLD, MY HEART

## CHAPTER 1

What is making me write this all down? Sitting here at the kitchen table burrowed in the basement, it feels very incriminating. I began this yesterday afternoon after returning from a walk to the University's student center to place an ad for an engagement ring I was finally ready to get rid of. When Lola had returned it to me nearly a year and a half before, I had taken it, long faced, back to the jeweler but they refused to accept it.

"We don't sell used merchandise," they had said. And so commerce performs its magical reduction. I did see their point but I nearly burst into tears as I tried to explain how little it had been used.

"Five days," I had said, "five days. What's five days to a diamond?" Those are the sorts of things I am capable of saying. I sometimes forget I address an actual human and speak to something else entirely. I walked out rubbing my forehead and looking crushed. I felt it too—very much so—but with me I couldn't let myself feel something without some outward sign.

But all that happened long enough ago that now I felt nothing of the sort, except curiosity about how much the ring might fetch. I wrote the ad with money in mind. "Diamond engagement ring: mint condition, never used." I was prepared to increase the tragedy by fudging those five days. The photo I provided I took in natural light and was stunning. I knew this because when I had it developed, the woman who trimmed the photo had said so. I offered to sell it to her but she just laughed.

"Oh, honey, I could never afford *that*."

So I walked up the hill to the university. An asphalt path traversed the big lawn and I trod it almost whistling. The sun shone and the rich autumn air swayed and rustled the trees. A dozen or so people milled about on the grass, alone and in groups. It was the first warm day in a few weeks and possibly the last until spring. That was the sort of possibility people responded to. And here I was too, out of my apartment and walking.

The last few weeks had not been good. Lola had called suddenly after so long and we had spoken cordially though she never said what it was she wanted. So I asked her to lunch, not because I particularly wanted to see her—I didn't, honestly—but because such a question might reveal her motives.

“When I'm ready to have lunch, we'll have lunch,” she said, instantly, I think, regretting how it sounded.

I thought to myself, *No you won't*. Still, the conversation concluded without great injury but neither did I have a clear understanding of it. Her motive, as a matter of fact, was not revealed, although I suspected she felt guilty and wanted assurance. Perhaps she received it somehow.

So I stayed holed up in my sparse but comfortable apartment, doing essentially nothing, feeling a sort of suppressive fire being laid over me. I was supposed to be writing a novel, but couldn't find a way to begin. I felt like a kid trying to mount a spinning merry-go-round. All preparation, leaning forward on my toes, setting and resetting my footing within the chunks of tanbark, always at the very point of leaping, breath held, swaying back and forth with the rotation, eyes wide and darting, trying to pick out my entrance, believing everything depended on timing. Devastating how the world doesn't stop for you to hop on. Still, it's very captivating, this preparing. It's

almost a sort of syndrome, the sort of thing Hamlet complained of. He who can say how he burns, burns little. That's Petrarch.

So, as you can see, I read too, old books mostly. I feel death highly recommends an author, an opinion that perhaps gets at the heart of my condition. But am I really in such bad shape? I do nothing, surely, but does that make me so different? No, it isn't that I am in bad shape but that I am in no shape at all.

So I write the damn thing, whatever it is, and keep to myself: I cook elaborate meals for one, play the guitar, the accordion, sneak into the church up the street to play the piano, shop for food, nap, order books on how to build guitars, shower twice a day, and respond to internet personal ads. That last one burns up quite a bit of time and causes me to do rash things.

Just last night I met one of the girls—Vanessa; in less than an hour she had written to me and we had spoken on the phone and agreed to meet that night for a late movie, both of us clearly desperate for something. My motivation was difficult to explain, since before I spoke to her I had just hung up with Brigham, a friend from New York whom I was considering flying out and visiting. He was an old friend and we had spoken at length, and I felt really very satisfied. But still, off I went. Vanessa lived south of Salt Lake, which is already a couple hours away from me, so we picked a halfway point. We spoke and my body began to tremble as if with cold, which is what it does when it believes me to be at the point of causing it trouble. I pulled on a sweater and departed. The sky had been raging all day, pouring and flashing, and now at night it thrashed my little sedan as I raced toward my rendezvous.

Actually, I disliked causing trouble—had a downright physical reaction against it—but then how to explain my actual behavior? I tried keeping to myself in hopes of avoiding complications. Anyway, that was partly the reason, or it was connected to the central disease. But as I was demonstrating, I could occasionally run off and do unaccountable things—in this case, embrace women I did not desire, as if simply a change of atmosphere would do me good. A kind of electroshock therapy. Which I suppose is why I responded to those personal ads and drove in the middle of the night to meet Vanessa. She met me in the empty parking lot of a movie theater. She is a brave girl, I thought.

I parked next to her and got out and waited. The theater was attached to a shopping center and all the shops being closed left the place utterly deserted. The rain had stopped but beneath the tall lamps around the lot the air swirled misty and pale. I looked into her car. She was in there alright, and she held up a hand to me, smiled and continued talking into her phone. I sized her up. I could see she was a small girl, pulled up close to the steering wheel, and when she had turned to me her features seemed to huddle on her face, scrunched and a tad unsymmetrical. I was undeterred.

In a moment she emerged and apologized.

“Sorry, I just wanted to make sure someone knew where I was, just in case.”

“Just in case?” This I didn’t like. I felt a trembling rise from my chest.

“Look at you! I’m kidding. Are you always so serious?” She laughed and we started walking toward the theater. She smelled strongly of nail polish. I offered my arm and she took it.

I knew how this would go and I didn't like it. And her joking didn't help the feeling of criminal activity the whole setting evoked. Soon, I would buy her a movie ticket and we, the only two in the theater, would sit in the back and kiss for much of the film.

Still, I did not fail to notice that the film was about the apocalypse, set in a future not so very distant from where I reclined and caressed this eager stranger. The Mayans had predicted it with their temples and astronomers, and so it occurred. I would have enjoyed being less occupied and able to pay it more attention. The actors, John Cusack in particular, scurried around with a tremendous, death-fueled purpose. Very thrilling.

A new flood threatened all humanity. Fortunately the government built a number of modern arks and a fair number of nameless people were saved. How one acquired a seat remained unclear throughout, but again I had my hands full with Vanessa. Still, I wanted to know. Why I thought this trashy movie had answers to offer I can't say. I was willing to see salvation anywhere, even in the thinnest Hollywood concoction. Mr. Cusack had been dropped into a burning, exploding crisis and he ran and leapt and fought and did and did and did, and to me it looked like a fabulous gift. I went so far as to imagine I would be excellent in just such a crisis, although this was without proper basis.

I was not, as it turned out, at all interested in Vanessa. I knew this from the beginning and knew also that this indifference was the main reason I had agreed the meeting and to the physical entanglements. She meant, as a personal attachment, absolutely nothing to me. But I told myself as I drove home—it was one o'clock in the morning—that as a person she was bursting with value, a theoretical asset. Such thinking was sound as an idea, but I remained unconvinced. I could treat people very coldly—like

bits of recyclable material I could use and then return to circulation, trusting in their basic soundness and in my inability to make a lasting impression. Even in self-deprecation I found a way to wiggle out of things.

I applied myself to these efforts while driving home, letting the music play loudly. By the time I laid down in bed, she was basically forgotten—caught briefly and then released.

The next day when the sky cleared and the air warmed I got out in it. I was eager to interpret the weather as a sign of redemption. The brightness cheered me a good deal and seemed to burn away the previous night and its troublesome events, as if in such a light dark secret things became incomprehensible.

So on my walk up to the university to sell the ring, the previous evening felt like days if not weeks ago. On a day like this, the autumn sun low and radiant, the air cool and rich, all seemed well enough. I had left the apartment and now climbed the hill. In my pockets, my hands felt the flex of my legs pushing against the slope. I admit the ad in my pocket caused me some vague anxiety, but I'd soon be done with it.

Besides, it was warm and there were people about, people with whom I wasn't in the least entangled but with whom I was happy to share the day. Up the path I strode, under huge chestnut trees and maples and past some gathered firs. The vast fading lawn stretched out before me and on it couples took photos and parents assembled piles of leaves for their children to squeal into. And I on this path bisecting their activities, but it was much more like I passed overhead on a cable. Close but uninvolved.

I passed several people on the path and we nodded to each other. Up ahead, tall Daniel Nyikos, a university colleague, emerged from the shade and approached.

“Hello, Andrew. Out for a walk? Your expression is very somber. How are you?”

This surprised me. I felt in good spirits. I rubbed the top of my head like I did when unsure of how to proceed. “Somber, eh? Interesting. I wonder what it was for.”

I was referring to my expression, but again, I had a tendency to say unintelligible things. But good, fair Dan smiled and we both moved on.

But what he said troubled me, particularly considering what I was off to do. This ring was my last link to Lola and I was eager to rid myself of it, happy about the money it would bring in. Then why the long face? Could it be I didn't know my own expressions? Indeed, it indicated a certain character if when at rest my face fell into a scowl. I could see the trouble such inattention could bring, the distress it might cause. Was it my failure to regulate my facial expressions the reason mother handled me with such care? Could it be that within my face there rumbles a perpetual snarl and that is why I am alone? Lola, is that why I am off to do what I am off to do?

When I returned to the apartment I felt agitated. I paced around the rooms, opened the refrigerator and stared, selected some music then immediately shut it off. The walk had not invigorated me. Instead I was unsettled. I had the urge to pack up some belongings and drive into the desert to camp. I pined briefly for Vanessa.

But now, here below ground, the evening is descending and I sit at the table. A legal pad with a few pages turned back lays in front of me. It contains the many false starts to the novel I am supposed to be writing. I begin to read.

The doctor delivered me on January 1, 1977 at Reading Regional Hospital, while in the corner of the delivery room a television, which had been brought in during the early stages of labor, broadcast the first half of the Rose Bowl. Although it had been a low-scoring first half, the

two Michigan touchdowns had punctuated, with cheers, some of Mother's more vicious contractions. Those scores were the moments the doctor most wanted to see, but during the first he had been explaining to the mother that I lay breach in her womb and needed to be turned.

"You see, Mrs. Stills, it appears there is a slight complication—" he had begun, when the crowd in Pasadena roared.

The doctor had almost spun around—his chin jabbed toward the television—but he had resisted. The other touchdown had happened during the moment of delivery so there was of course nothing he could do. When it was over he handed me to the nurse to be cleaned up. My mother fell back against the pillows, reaching out her arms for the boy. In a moment the nurse deposited me into her arms. I was quiet, and she looked down at me. Frank, her husband, stood by close and grinning.

"Look at him, Frank. Just look at him," she said again and again.

The delivery had been difficult, she thought, more so than when she had had the twins. I had been breach and the doctor was annoyed. But it had all turned out.

In the corner a few doctors had gathered in front of the small television that blinked against their white coats and cheered.

I come to the end of the page and stop. I am somewhat troubled by my having started the book with a birth, thinking it portentous. Birth can only lead to one thing, is my thought. But on I go:

I was a delightful infant. Some nights, while the twins slept, Mom and Dad had the habit of waking me and setting me on their bed where I would teeter and sway cheerfully. I did not cry. And when they were sufficiently entertained, they returned me to bed and I slept without complaint or hesitation.

Well into my second year, my parents moved us to California. One morning my hands reddened and swelled, and I developed a new irritability. Mom noticed. I wailed and would not sleep. She called the doctor. “Bring him in immediately,” he said.

Kawasaki’s Disease, a peculiar Japanese condition, had somehow found its way into me, and for a few days I was very much at risk.

“Honestly, Mr. and Mrs. Stills,” explained the doctor, “Kawasaki’s is a very poorly understood disease. Comes out of nowhere and attacks the main organ. Impossible to predict. Survivors often live in a weakened state as a result of the heart tissue being compromised. Early treatment is essential and so I believe your boy will be fine, seeing as you called during the very early stages, while it was just figuring out what it intended to do with him. Still in recruitment, so to speak.” He looked at the parents and smiled. “He’ll be fine, he’ll be fine.”

At first, I didn’t respond to the treatment. The frequent injections annoyed my mother. She was unaccustomed to hearing me cry, and would sometimes leave Frank in the room while the nurse administered the medicine. But she would not get far before my cries erupted and pulled her back where she would stroke my head and chastise herself for ever leaving my side. After two days, the medicine took, and in a week, I was home.

I stop reading. I pick up a pen and write, underneath, one more line:

When I was grown, I enjoyed hearing my parents tell this story, enjoyed hearing about my brush with death, about this exotic disease I had survived as if it proved something about my essential powers.

I rise and go into the kitchen. I feel a little weak. I slice some cheese and tear at some bread that sits staling on the counter. The act of writing I find tremendously uncomfortable. I am building, I can tell, towards some kind of revelation. This birth and

that illness act as avenues for later excusal. I sketch them into the background as exits I intend to use. That weakening of the heart can explain a great deal.

Still, these inward glances make me say things I can't believe I really mean, but it seems I am writing myself into a kind of taking of responsibility, like giving testimony or a confession. What am I confessing to? That remains to be seen. At the same time I mistrust the act. What a safe sort of responsibility it is, the creation of this essentially private record, particularly here in America, which is a country that deals with confessions very practically—that is, with near complete forgetfulness. We are not so much merciful as uninterested in the past, and confessions throw the past in our faces. So to us, they are basically spilled milk.

But I'm trying to explain why I feel the need to confess. That's how I see this writing. Maybe the urge for settlement is still very strong with us here in America, our Manifest Destiny extending beyond dirt territory and into the realm of expression. Here, we are encouraged to say things in order to be sure we are still free, since we have run out of new land. We are individuals so long as we can say we are. I admit I find that idea seductive. Perhaps I am susceptible to an exposé. I am an American, Pennsylvanian-born, taken from those blankets within that American cradle. But this tendency to confess everything is also annihilating, leaves you no place to be, is a kind of punishment. Perhaps I am trying to force my own hand somehow, as if enough revelations on the page might force me out and into life. But punishment is something I have almost no natural inclination for. Still, I write things down I would have rather have stayed hidden and this is puzzling. That is, I have a highly developed sense of forgiveness (again, forgetfulness is really what it is)—towards others, yes, with the proper motivation—but mostly towards

myself. For example, with Vanessa, I feel hardly any guilt at all, have almost forgotten about the whole affair. She might very well be suffering. But one reason I keep to myself is to avoid witnessing unpleasant consequences. I had behaved selfishly, certainly, but am I not after all a *self*? I look out at the world from behind two very specific eyes, possess a stomach into which food must be regularly dropped, step and push my peculiar nakedness into corduroys and cotton shirts, clip that dead whiteness from fingertips whose roundness closes off the exits to my spilling blood. I am here—contained; and everything else—there, outside, beyond. I start and stop within this pinkish, forked frame, and beyond me is otherness. Under such circumstances, isn't a certain level of egoism to be expected? Thus I handle moments of crisis.

So I eat standing up in the kitchen, while outside the day darkens and chills. Yes, here I am, inside this apartment and inside this skull and beneath this tarp of skin. I chew and swallow and shit (“What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more...”) and thus maintain the appearance of autonomy. I am in excellent health, can do what I please, but who knows what I please? Evidently that is up to me and I am stumped. So I write, although it might easily be seen as a life invented and therefore always removed. A composition disguised as an outpouring. But nor am I sure I really buy in to the idea of self-construction, into the idea that I have much say in my development. I consider it a matter of discovery and not of invention. In theory, yes, modern life with its vast empire of subdued territories—distance, time, disease, the beasts and the trees, our internal lives, mystery itself—all apparently conquered by our great speeds, our technological ever-presence, our clawing machinery, our brilliance in code cracking, our intolerance of complexity. Yes, this place I bump

around in certainly *seems* discovered and unlocked, but to me, none of it addresses the central question: why live? It is a question that begins anew with each birth and ends, I suppose, with each death. And the sort of information we gather between those two points is incommunicable between other beings or through generations. There is simply no way to get ahead. So I suppose starting as I have with birth made sense, if only chronologically speaking.

Outside, I hear Tom Hale, my neighbor call to his children in the yard to come inside. They holler back. I peer out over the ledge through the kitchen window and see his back door wide open and just his hand on the knob. He pulls it shut.

Feeling as I do that I can get nowhere with that question in my current state—I will write first thing in the morning—I lie down in my bed fully dressed and sleep.

## CHAPTER 2

In the taxi taking us from the Bulawayo Railway station to the Holiday Inn, I wore a silk-lined, suede fedora. I felt ridiculous in the thing, but what of it? I had paid over a hundred dollars for it, twenty of which I had taken from Mom and twenty from Dad, both of whom sat up front next to the driver. I sat in back with my brother and sister.

Now that I was existing in one of Africa's minor but still active cities, this hat preoccupied me slightly. I knew that in Africa you wore hats. Grandpa had gone on a safari when I was a young child and had returned with pictures of lions and a domed pith helmet similar to those British soldiers wore in their imperial days but that since had become popular among tourists. The inside was ribbed with wide, sturdy grasses that pulled at my young sunshine hair. Still, in this hat, long before my trip to Africa, I had played in the pine trees below the house, played not safari but other games. From the tree house made from pieces of old decking with chipping paint like dried mud that Frank, my father, had hoisted into the branches and braced with new two-by-fours, me and my older brother Eli would play sailors, swaying in the rigging, the valley and Oakland hills rolling out before us, in winter greener than any ocean and in summer gold and shimmering like ripples reflecting in the sun. We had binoculars and a BB gun and would shoot pinecones and watch red-winged blackbirds perch and bob among the weeds and molest the hawks. And although Grandpa's hat rolled around on my head and pulled at my hair, it kept me cool and the sun from my eyes and also imparted something else to me.

But by the time our family prepared to go to Africa years later on a Rotary Humanitarian Mission—I in the middle of adolescence and Sophie and Eli just out of high school—the hat had been misplaced.

So a week before we left, I took BART into Walnut Creek to the Wilson Leather Co. all the way out at the big mall. The shop was clean and orderly with a well-dressed, attentive woman. All very professional. Everything in its place, hung on chrome hangers in circular racks or evenly spaced on shelves and hooks against the wall. The mannequins appeared to have just stepped out of the jungle, bald, blank-faced, and perfectly still. But the store smelled musky and alive and even wild, full of leather coats, shoes, purses, belts, gloves, bracelets. I even brushed past a rack of black leather pants on my way to the back where on a shelf perched the hats on shiny wire skulls.

The saleswoman retrieved a hat with silk lining—a brown suede fedora, artificially weathered, aged through some unique chemical process. I handled it for a minute or two before putting it on—felt its weight, inhaled its richness, enjoyed the strangeness of the word “haberdashery” printed on the inside of the lining, flexed the brim, turned it over in my hands. I’m sure the saleswoman saw my hesitation and moved off, shifting on her way some merchandise from one rack to another.

I confronted the mirror. I wore an overlarge tee shirt, gray with a yellow surfboard over the breast, although I did not surf—had never even tried. The water at the northern California beaches gave off a great richness but chilled me very quickly and tugged at my slender legs a little too eagerly, how it pulled the sand from beneath my feet. On the solid ground of the leather shop, I wore low-top Converse All-Stars. And at sixteen, I had not yet grown into my nose.

I put on the hat. It was, of course, perfect in its way. Just what I imagined Africa required, although I had to admit standing in front of the mirror in Wilson's Leather Co. in that California mall that the setting wasn't ideal. But that was just it. Africa was the sort of place in which this kind of hat *meant* something. I had read many books in which certain items endowed their owner with power, summoned from within the user their true and undiscovered nature. Excalibur, Tolkien's ring, Moses' staff, the winged boots of Hermes, Dumbo's feather, the magician's hat. This was fantasy, I knew, but wasn't it also essentially true? When I dressed up in my necktie for church did I not become more pious? When I tried on Eli's glasses did I not feel more scholastic? In pajamas did I not become sleepy?

That the hat did not at that precise moment make me feel adventurous and brave and purposeful was the fault of the environment. It required the proper space in order to stretch its legs. Were I to wear the hat to school or around my hilly suburb or to marching band practice, it would not be right. I would be denounced—by myself, loudest of all—as an imposter. But in Africa? It was where the hat belonged—and me too, so my thinking went, being underneath its brim.

I took the hat to the register and the woman smiled, asked if there was anything else, and installed the hat into its box. I didn't want the box, wanted it to appear as if I'd found it discarded in some field, as if it had somehow chosen me, as if it had rolled to me in a gust and I had sprung to life, but I said nothing.

"It's a beautiful hat," she said.

I looked at her and her calm face, trying to find in it some clue. But no, it was a retail face, without reproach or promise. I paid cash and she handed me the box.

“Good luck,” she said, although she couldn’t have had any idea what I was up to. It was probably what she said to everybody. Otherwise, what had she seen in me that showed her I needed luck?

But now, here I was, in Africa. The taxi pulled up to the hotel doors. Porters came out to collect the bags and we all got out of the car. After installing ourselves in our rooms, we showered and dressed and went down to meet Dr. Rawlings and his wife for supper. We all sat at a round table in the mostly empty bar. It was early but I think we all felt tired.

Dr. Rawlings and his wife however sputtered with energy. They introduced their Bulawayan friend Isaiah and spoke about the project.

“We’re having trouble getting the container through customs,” explained Dr. Rawlings. “They are holding it as a matter of principle, but the local club is aware and is doing what it can. This happens every time, some low-ranking official gets it in his mind to make trouble to show that he can take stands and what not, but it never amounts to anything. It is why we send the container over so long before we arrive. You’ll see. They are tired of me and will release it tomorrow, Thursday at the latest. You know Saul Bellow? Well, anyway, he wrote that in the highest government positions almost no human beings have been seen for decades, anywhere in the world, and of course that’s true except here it applies to every position. Even the trash collectors are crooks in embryo.”

I listened, although I hardly understood. Dad asked something and the adults began a discussion. I liked hearing them talk. I felt sleepy but was pleased to be there.

Here was a place where people did things. What would I do? If nothing else I was properly dressed.

“You are Andrew?” I turned and shook hands with the African. He was young, in his early twenties. His skin shone.

“Yes. Andrew. You are Isaiah.” Already I felt a change, speaking like an African.

“Yes. Are you tired from your journey? It is very far.”

“Very tired. But it is good to be here. I am hungry too.” I smiled and held my stomach for emphasis.

Isaiah frowned. “Here the food is not good. When we arrive in Binga, the food will be better. The farther from the city, the better the food.”

“My father will cook for us,” I said.

“He is not a doctor?”

I shook my head. “Not a doctor, but he will feed the doctors.” The food arrived—rice, some boiled beef, a salad. Isaiah taught karate and went to the local university. His father presided over the local Rotary club which is how Isaiah had joined the project as translator. When we had eaten, we said good night and went up to our rooms.

When I lay down in bed next to my brother Eli, I felt very tired. Still, a little past midnight I awoke. My nose felt chilled. There was no heater in the room.

I rose, agitated. I went into the bathroom, closed the door and drank some water from the tap. I put on a sweatshirt, picked up the key, slipped on my shoes and went out into the hall.

I discovered the stairs went all the way up to the roof. From there I surveyed the city. To me the air smelled basically normal, and west of the hotel came the city

humming like a generator. I walked the perimeter of the roof, peered down at the dark empty lawn, the pool and small palms. At one end of the hotel, a small shopping center stood silent. Beyond it—houses, I supposed. Over there, what looked like a dirt landing strip. It was hard to tell in the dim city glow. We had arrived from that direction. I walked over above the front of the hotel and tried to make out the train station but couldn't. I could see where the city ended, where the lights dropped off and in the darkness, Africa, began.

In the morning, we would go there, drive through the wilderness towards Binga. Binga lay not on the other side of the wilderness but existed as a part of it. There, perhaps, I would sit cross-legged in the dirt around a bonfire while black bodies danced and drummed up the dust. I would be taught to hunt with a spear, to lie still in the grasses and when to spring. To stand still at the buffalo's charge.

Below me, in the street, I heard voices. I looked over and saw Isaiah and another man who straddled a bicycle. Against his hip was strapped a machete. I didn't understand what they were saying, both of them speaking quickly and in Shona, the words sounding to me like bubbles and snapping twigs. But they were laughing and slapping each other on the shoulder. Eventually they embraced, holding each other's hands as they said goodbye, and the man rode off and Isaiah turned and went into the hotel. I felt sorry it was over, wished I had been down there with them to begin my education, part of what they were part of, whatever that was, feeling happy to be out at night in an African city. At the same time, everything was very strange. The way they gestured and moved their heads when they spoke. Their laughs. The machete. The sounds they produced. All

underneath an unfamiliar sky. To me it felt like a challenge, and I wondered what to do about it.

I sat down on the wide ledge of the roof and thought.

Africa. It was a place I never had been forced to think of, not my whole life. All sixteen years I never once thought of the place, and now here I was. Astounding, really. I knew of it—could call up its elephantine shape from the glossy faded maps pulled down in Ms. Meyer’s Geography class, could recall more than anything the loose flapping of Africa’s unfolding in front of the chalk board, Ms. Meyer on her toes, calves flexing beneath her stockings, and then the quick unrolling of Africa, those vinyl-coated sheets flopping open, like a flat tire galomping down the highway; and also that smell of airing plastic, Africa newly unscrolled and breathing, the great ear jutting out into the Atlantic and the enormous dangling snout and spotted with shades of brown and orange and yellow and red. The Nile streaking down like a tear.

But that was it. In that one moment in seventh grade I thought of Africa and then Africa would be rolled up again along with my thoughts of her. It was simply a place I never *had* to think about. Then one day in April of 1993 Africa itself jumped into Dad’s office in the person of Dr. Benjamin Rawlings, DDS, asking for directions to the Korean Buffet. They talked. Dad—Frank, as Dr. Rawlings called him—was captivated by combination of Rawling’s boundless energy, his enormous belly, his womanly voice, his commanding nose and dimpled cheeks, as well as by his six-foot lumbering frame, his brimming healthy face, his proclivity to giggle. Every summer the doctor led an expedition (he used the word “expedition;” such was the influence of Africa) to Zimbabwe to fix teeth, but just then he was hungry and could Frank please direct him to

the buffet? Dr. Rawlings left and Frank called Mom and talked her into it. Frank left work and tracked Rawlings down at the buffet and signed on to the expedition as cook, not being a medical man. Given my father's position—an aging sailor trapped in an office—what else could he have done?

And now that I'm here, I thought to myself, what am I going to do? Perhaps in Isaiah I could find the answer, he seemed to move freely between my world and this one. Attach myself to him and perhaps I will find something.

The door to the roof opened and I felt my body tense. From where I sat frozen to the ledge I could not see the door but I heard it sing quietly on its hinges, one long terrifying note. I slid off the ledge and slunk to the stairwell wall, breathing short and shallow. I crouched down and pressed myself against the cinderblock. It still felt warm from the day.

With a click the door shut. My heart labored against the fear. Feet shuffled along the gravel of the roof, stopping here, then there. Was I being tracked? The roof was too high to jump from, but maybe into the pool? No, I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering, it lay across the lawn. I would have to slip out the door and down two flights and then the hallway—

I heard my name called, unmistakably my name in this still chilly night. I immediately relaxed. Eli. It's Eli. I rose and crunched out into the light.

“You're up here too,” he said.

“Yes, I'm not tired.” I could hear my voice shake. “It's cold.”

“Yeah. Have you seen the pool?”

“I’ve seen it. There’s a piano down in the lobby and an old man asleep on the couch.”

So together we explored the hotel: down to the lobby to the piano and the snoring man, outside the back to the pool and then back up to the roof. But back up on the roof felt different, less African. We joked and ran at the ledge pretending to jump off and talked about bounding from treetop to treetop all the way to the pool across the lawn.

Up there on the roof I thought of how as boys we would climb our steep hill together after school. I thought of how once Eli and I, myself more of a child attempting boyhood than an actual boy (I was eight or nine maybe) climbed that hill towards home. The early afternoon air held still and hot above the pavement. Grass the color of light stretched wide between the houses and into some neglected pasture.

We were coming home from school. We wore backpacks with our initials stitched along the top that Granddad sent for Christmas all the way from Virginia: blue for Eli and red for me. I think they were from Land’s End.

It was at the steepest part, where we most hoped Mom would be just returning from the store to retrieve us into the cool family room where she’d give us bread and popsicles and where the blinds were drawn. But no mom came and so we drooped around the steepness. We kicked in the dry gutters, among pale grasses and gravel and parched mud, faded candy wrappers that made us yearn, a rusty bolt, a couple of broken bottles.

Eli—no older than twelve—picked up a bottle, glass frosted with the abrasion of gutter life, and, grinning, posed with it held high above his head.

“Andrew, watch,” he called, but I was already watching him.

He hurled the bottle against the curb and it was like the bursting of a bag of gold coins, so shimmering was the sound.

Eli walked off, traversing the steepness out of the hill, leaving me by the curb. I reached for a bottle. I moved slowly, unsure. I wouldn't throw it right, wouldn't be convinced it was good—this breaking—like Eli was. He wanted it for the act of shattering, to feel himself stand still and unblinking at the impact.

But I was afraid. Afraid of bringing sharpness forth from within the glassy smoothness. I lifted it with my pink, sticky hand, placing my finger wrong across the neck where there was a tiny invisible fissure that as I threw, holding on too long, cut me and I bled.

So I stood thinking next to my brother on the ledge of that African hotel, the toes of our shoes hanging over.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” said Eli.

“Me too,” I said.

“Shall we?” said Eli, grinning.

“Okay,” and we unloosed our pants and urinated off the roof and onto the lawn of the Bulawayo Holiday Inn.

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In the morning, we picked up the other doctors from hotels around the city. Donald Lentz, the oral surgeon, and his family were at the Selborne Hotel next to the railway station. I did not see Isaiah and at breakfast Dr. Rawlings said he would meet us in Binga, which was where I would say to Isaiah, “Teach me your ways. I am willing.”

But arriving at the Selborne, I saw her and felt instantly different about Africa. I felt the challenge of last night and the banging strangeness of the place fade into mere tapping, a buzz of novelty, a backdrop against which would play a more familiar story. How quickly I forgot about Isaiah.

She was a fine-looking girl—I took her in with a glance as Dad and I approached the steps of the hotel where she was waiting with her mother and father and their luggage—slender with big, jetlagged eyes. Later, her eyes turned quick and jovial, but just then they drooped with exhaustion. Her lips crimson, freshly coated.

The Lentzs stood behind their luggage under the burgundy hotel awning, her father small and handsome, silver hair neatly combed and with a face on which only his mouth smiled; her mother exuding hardly a presence, round and wary, already fading into the role of an American woman abroad, retreating into tourism, looking around blinkingly as if she had just lost her glasses; and Victoria smiling with her thin radiant lips at me and my approaching father.

I saw her instantly and knew Africa would be different, knew to what end my efforts would be applied. And as Dad engaged the Lentzs in conversation, I launched myself at her luggage as if in metaphor, as if to insinuate my intentions. At such moments of clarity, I needed above all a job to perform, a way to dispatch with the troublesome fact of possessing limbs, a something against which to heave.

Dad, who had been up since five exploring the city, chatted cheerily:

“Sleep well? I’m Frank. I’ll handle the bags. My other son, Eli, is in the truck.”

Frank inhaled deeply and looked around. “What a morning!”

“Yes, fine, fine. A pleasure. The train woke us early, nearly shook our windows shut. Ha! Tremendous chill. And Polly’s been spooked all morning. She saw a man with a machete riding a bicycle down the middle of the street last night and slept very poorly. He was perfectly harmless, a working man. I’m Donald Lentz. My wife, Polly. That’s Victoria.”

“Victoria. Like the falls. Nice meeting you,” Frank said.

“Yes, that’s right. Like the falls,” said Mr. Lentz.

I loaded the bags carefully, rearranging them many times, not wanting the job to be over. Just then I needed motion until we departed, after which the scenery would step in to relieve me. If I finished too soon I would be cut loose, set adrift, and would have to stand by while Dad chatted with the Lentz’s.

Eli came back and said there was trouble with the glow plugs of the diesel. We went forward and unlatched the hood and stared. *This is good*, I thought, *this is motion*. Of course I knew nothing about diesels.

Under the awning of the hotel with the Lentz’s, Dad had made a discovery:

“Montclair? How about that? My wife and I bought a little Cape Cod cottage on Aspinwall Drive after we were married. I was working for Bechtel at the time. The twins were born at Primary Children’s. And now we’re just over the hill. Incredible.”

It was incredible, I thought staring down into the engine of the truck. Come all the way to Africa, through San Francisco, JFK, London, Paris, south and south to Harare, places never dreamed of, thousands of miles, hour upon hour burning through the sky above the spinning globe—the trip was basically galactic—then the train to Bulawayo, only to end up where? Essentially right back where I started, encountering folks who

back home lived just minutes away. How by walking far enough out your front door you somehow end up at your backdoor.

For an instant this coincidence upset me, by this sudden intrusion of familiarity in a place I had vaguely hoped to be catalytic. I had purchased the hat, perhaps, for that reason: as a representation of my willingness to let Africa exert itself upon me. And then that vision I'd had on the roof about stomping into the bush and giving myself over. But, what business had I in the bush? After that moment of terror up there, huddled in the gravel while Eli pranced around calling my name? And now this trick Africa played with this appearance of home hemispheres away.

Perhaps this was better. I saw very quickly the many problems it solved, this girl, this home sprouted up through the clay, and again that sensation of safety I had when I first saw her washed over me. A feeling that, no, not even here in Africa would much be required of me, that here I can inhabit all my previous, well-fitting skins while appearing to move about in African clothes (so I described my hat to myself), constructing dentures for Africans under African skies, shaking African hands, sleeping in African beds and eating African foods (so I supposed). I was a visitor—no, I was more than a visitor—I was allowing Africa to visit me.

Eli tightened the plugs and slammed the hood.

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The next two days we spent at Hwange Wildlife Preserve, sleeping on cots in stucco huts with thatched roofs and dining at the whitewashed, green roofed resort that abutted the preserve. Out the back of the dining room's screen doors, tough green grass extended to a wooden fence and ditch to keep out the animals. Elephants roamed close

by. Sophie and Victoria walked around the grounds arm-in-arm. The men leaned on the fence. The wives lounged under umbrellas, sipping drinks and talking. I watched Victoria and the elephants. It was good to have something to distract me, something to mask my interest in her. Thus I used Africa.

That night we dined at the resort on white table cloths with silver and crystal. The waiters came and went silently. Music drummed from hidden speakers. Dr. Rawlings and his wife and the other parents sat together and Victoria, Eli, Sophie and I shared our own table. We ate appetizers of crocodile tail. Spoke of the recent past and music.

“In Bulawayo our hotel was freezing. Was yours? It’s winter here, can you believe I didn’t realize? I laid awake staring at the most enormous spider and suddenly it came to me. Winter! No one had mentioned it, and of course I didn’t think about it. What a dork. You never think about that stuff,” Victoria said. She sipped her water, and I watched her lips take the rim, hold it and release it. She placed it on the table. I saw the lipstick her lips left on the glass.

“I haven’t slept a wink in two days—” She coughed, smiled and continued. “Oh, but I love it here.”

“Eli and I couldn’t sleep either and we went up on the roof and peed off of it.”

“Gross, Andrew. Thanks,” said Sophie, looking severe and pleased.

“That’s hilarious,” said Victoria. “How’d you get on the roof?”

“Easy. The stairs go right up. We worried the door would lock behind us but it didn’t and so we were alright. We both woke up in the middle of the night because you know it’s like the middle of the afternoon back home and we just walked around the

hotel. Went on every floor, just looking around. In the lobby there was a piano but we didn't play it, obviously. Then we saw the stairs to the roof and went up. It was easy."

She looked at me and I thought I saw the tiredness leave her eyes. I reached over and took her glass because mine was empty. "May I?" I said.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Thanks. So the view was great up there. Buildings and stuff. Trees. Wires going everywhere."

"Did you see the Southern Cross?"

"What's that?"

"It's like the North Star, but for the southern hemisphere."

"Oh, really? Never heard of it." I ran my fingers back through my hair. "It's kind of like you and winter."

She laughed. "Yeah, kind of like that."

"So we stayed up there for a bit, just looking around and then we both had to go and so we went off the roof. It was six or seven stories down, I think. Peed all over the grass. At night it sounded like TV static turn way up."

"Andrew, stop. That's gross. She doesn't want to hear it," said Sophie, still enjoying herself. Eli and Victoria were laughing too.

I was not good at telling stories, but this one had worked out. I was pleased because now I knew that what I thought would happen would happen.

"Anyway, I guess it was just what I needed because then we went back to our room and I fell right to sleep. I remember thinking, 'Hello Africa. Welcome to Andrew.' Sort of a weird thing to think but I had just peed off a roof of a hotel in Africa.

‘Zimbabwe’. I guess I should say ‘Zimbabwe’ since Africa’s not a country.” That part about welcoming Africa was a lie but I had become excited and felt the lie suited me.

We finished eating and drove to our huts out on the Preserve beyond the fences. Victoria fell asleep in the van, and when we arrived she hobbled out and crossed the dirt beneath giant spreading trees and the southern moon and entered her family’s hut without saying goodnight to me, and I went to bed feeling foolish, wondering how I had blundered. Still, I slept well even though—or perhaps because—all night long the hyenas cried out in the bush.

But the next day, when we all toured the park and while everyone admired the giraffes and the wildebeests, I saw from her that all was well. She went up in a silver-wood observation tower and waved down to me, motioned for me to come up. I did, and we leaned out towards the watering hole where giraffes bent to drink and impala grazed warily.

“Is that an Indiana Jones hat?” Victoria asked.

My face caved. The hat was clearly reminiscent of Indiana Jones, which was an association when I bought the hat I had wanted to inspire, but now I resisted the comparison. I scowled and removed the hat as if to scrutinize it, seeing it as if for the first time, as if I hadn’t, in fact, been aware I’d been wearing it, as if it were so integral to me that the novelty of considering that me and the hat might be separate entities confused me. That’s not, by the way, a very easy face to make and I’m not sure I succeeded. I very much wanted my wearing of the outdated, conspicuous fedora to go unnoticed—or at least unmentioned, that was essential part—wanted to suggest we were cut from the same

cloth, so to speak, that neither predated the other, that it sat upon my head as necessary as my head upon my neck—like a lion’s mane: a physical manifestation of my nature.

I toyed briefly with ignoring the question entirely, shrugging my shoulders as if I hadn’t quite understood. But this was Victoria. I had to answer.

“There *is* a resemblance, isn’t there?” turning the hat over in my hands and frowning good naturedly at the joke, for it had been a joke, surely. But I shared the joke, not with Victoria—no, not with her, but with the fictional Dr. Jones himself—the two of us amused by this impossible—yet here it was, here was the hat itself, actual physical evidence—by this impossible similarity, like a little jest between colleagues.

But Victoria, who back in the States attended a Christian college, carried on:

“Can I try it?”

I handed it over, gladly.

“How do I look? I like wearing hats.” She pouted and did a little pose.

“You look great.” And in fact she did. It became her. At twenty-one her face had decided what it would be—thin lipped and serene and well toned—whereas mine was as yet unsettled, my features, though fine on their own, had not yet learned to work together as a complete, harmonious face. It was nothing more than youth.

She smiled at me and placed the hat again on my head, and her face assumed the look of one arranging flowers. “Ha! You look like new wine in old bottles.”

I laughed but after that I did not again wear the fedora. My father noted this and I gave it to him and he wore it occasionally to keep the sun from his eyes which seemed a perfectly reasonable use for it.

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The two weeks at Binga passed quickly. When we arrived, the dirt yard in front of the one level hospital (which reminded me of my high school with its outdoor concrete walkways and blue painted railings, although the resemblance ended there) chattered and swayed with people. Dr. Fears, the head physician at Binga Hospital, said they had been arriving everyday for weeks.

I worked hard. I excelled at performing jobs that were given me. I unloaded supplies and organized them. Dr. Rawlings taught me and Eli to make dentures from the moulds he took, and we worked at it daily until sundown. Victoria assisted her father in another wing of the hospital. I saw her occasionally during the day, mainly at the lunches my father spent his mornings preparing. I knew she worried about my age and sometimes treated me coolly. But back at Binga Rest Camp, a little motel overlooking Lake Kariba where we spent our evenings, she was more open. After supper while the adults talked with the proprietors and the staff, my siblings and I and Victoria would take the dirt trail down the hill to the pool built to capture the water from a nearby hot spring. There in the pool we would form teams and get on each other's shoulders and push each other over or dive into the water, and now and then she would accidentally fall into my arms.

All day while grinding and boiling dentures I would think about that pool and her skin and how dark her hair looked wet and how she laughed at the things I said even when it hadn't been funny. I often became very anxious at the hospital seeing the long queue of patients, the stack of moulds to be processed and fitted. How at times I wanted all of it to vanish, for Africa to disappear and leave us in that pool.

And then one night after we had swum, I showered and sat on the lawn in a canvas recliner. Beyond, Lake Kariba spilled over the horizon like ink, like a giant

vacancy, a hole in the night. A breeze blew in from the lake smelling faintly of mud and rotting plants and bringing with it the calls of strange birds.

She came out to me and I stood and we looked at the night together. She showed me the Southern Cross, and in return I kissed her abruptly. Our teeth collided and we laughed, embarrassed but pleased.

Two days later, Victoria left with her parents to see the falls. She left me the telephone number to her hotel. That night, instead of going to the pool after supper I went to my room. Isaiah was there, bare-chested, teaching Eli karate.

“Andrew, come, let us do pushups. Yes, come, take off your shirt. Do not be shy. You must see what you are doing. Pushups are the best thing you can do. Good for everything: chest, arms, stomach, back. Ha! You are very skinny, but that is good because it means you can be quick. Okay. Eli, join us.”

The three of us arranged ourselves on the hard dirt floor.

“No, no, no, Andrew. On your fists, pushups must be done on your fists. To strengthen your grip and make your fist strong. After that, we do them on the fingertips. Very good for the hands. You play the piano, yes? This will be very good for you.”

The next morning, Isaiah waited for me on the grass outside my room. Together we walked to the dining room for breakfast. In my pocket was Victoria’s telephone number.

“Andrew, here when we are friends, it is customary to walk with our hands together, like this.” He took my hand in his like he had with his friend outside the hotel in Bulawayo. “See? Friends.” He smiled with great warmth and trust, and I felt rise within me fear and regret and longing. And though I walked with Isaiah hand in hand to the

dining room, I knew I wouldn't again. I knew that this invitation I would refuse and that I longed only for Victoria and that I would regret that refusal and that longing.

## CHAPTER 3

Every other day I wake up early to teach the couple of classes I earn my living by. I agreed to teach the early classes because I believe waking early to be a virtue. Before taking this teaching, job I had been a baker for perhaps that same reason. To rise before the irreproachable sun. Those small victories impart enormous good feeling and I need all I can get. I don't think my father ever sleeps past seven. But with him, it is genuine. He treats sleep and food as physical necessities, as obstacles to activity, but then again he had been in the Navy. We grew up taking Navy showers, adopting his method, and I still take them enjoying the chilly anticipation as I rub my body with soap before returning to the steaming water.

So today, I wake up to a dark, late autumn morning, the windows black mirrors. I leap up, click on all the lights and squint my way to the bathroom.

Before I set out, I bundle against the cold with a goose down coat and a light fleece jacket. The morning is underexposed and still. I stride towards campus, past a church and dim houses. My coat rustles like an oak, my shoes are silent.

In the air, the smell of burning wood. Someone, somewhere stokes a fire. I believe I detect a hint of lacquer in the air, as if the owner fuels the stove with scraps of flooring or a length of finished banister, or perhaps a busted up dining room chair.

Or perhaps—I give my imagination slack—they are all still asleep and their living room is ablaze. Alone, I allow myself a glance around. Only dark windows. But still, I imagine that one—that one there with the white door and the tiny aspen grove punching

up through the snow in the front yard—imagine flames crawling up the curtains drawn across the big window, burning them back and streaking the glass with soot. And then the screams. Me running across the street (how lucky I was at hand) bursting with courage and goodwill; me bounding up the porch to the door, where I pause to remove my down coat, which, because it's a fire, I won't need in there. I reach again for the door but, feeling the heat radiating from the window and the brass doorknob, remember that my fleece jacket is made mostly from recycled plastic and would certainly melt against my skin and wouldn't that make matters much worse? So I move to take it off but then consider my bare arms and those scorching flames (the fire has now spread to the bedrooms), and so I stand on the porch undecided, hesitant about how best to proceed, bare armed or not—stand on the porch while inside the whole family burns.

I grimace and continue to pad along the sidewalk. I consider such imaginings as evidence of some deficiency of mine. If lust is adultery then how is this not murder?  
*How all occasions to inform against me.*

Occasionally, I would housesit for my parents who live not ten miles from me. My duties included caring for their insatiable calico cat. Prone to gluttony, the cat cried desperately and feelingly for food, as if starved. Granted she had been a stray and so had not been properly brought up. When I got tired of it, I locked her in the basement. When the cat disappeared so did her suffering. That's how I am. I can imagine the acutest pain—burn entire families, but toward actual suffering I can be cold hearted. I hang on to such everyday examples as indictments of my character. Since I do basically nothing, I depend on these moments in order to see myself. I prefer small mirrors to grand full-bodied reflections.

After classes, which pass by like a performance (I knew, somehow, what to do with a crowd), I meet with a few students and then return home to write. I descend the stairs to the basement and swing in with an incriminating sort of relief. I fix myself a sandwich then lay down for a nap. I sleep for a couple of hours. When I wake, I consider buying that ticket to New York I occasionally think about, but don't. I decide to cook myself dinner and drive to Macey's for ingredients.

Inside, while I looking at canned goods, I feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn to see the shocked face of a stranger.

"Hey—oh, sorry. I thought you were someone else. I thought you worked here," he says.

I remain calm. Of course I don't know this fellow in his wispy beard and thick-rimmed glasses. I tell him it is alright. He persists.

"But, whoa, that was strange. I thought you were my buddy Aaron and that was why I touched you. He must have the same shirt. Wasn't that weird? You're not upset?"

"I'm not upset." I smile and remove my hand from my pockets. "See? Unharmd." Again, I have a tendency to muddle simple matters, to speak symbolically.

He is terribly relieved. He works in the place and had mistaken me for a friend and now is terribly relieved I'm not. He continues down the aisle, pushing along some boxes. He looks back around at me while he speaks, shaken and fleeing, as if he expects me to yell for the police.

"Wow, thanks for understanding. I don't know what's the matter with me. Thanks for taking it so well."

Had I? I'm not exactly sure what I am taking. That this stranger—the touch had been familiar, tender—mistook me for a friend I actually find very reassuring. Of course my back had been turned and he can't see my naturally somber face.

I try to comfort him as he retreats. “Don't worry about it. Happens all the time,” and I act like the whole thing is forgotten and become fascinated with the cans of tomatoes.

“Excellent. Ha ha! Very funny!” He turns the corner and disappears.

As I leave the store, I spot my assailant arranging a crate of oranges for display. His back is to me. Something stirs inside me as I stand unseen by rows of stacked celery. I feel as though here, now, an action waits to be performed, as if I am being recruited for something. I see, perhaps, an opportunity for artistic symmetry, to complete what the clerk started by the canned tomatoes. See how I interpret things? What an ego. Not only physically separate but even my own actions lie outside of me and I hurl them on to the page as a proxy. I live completely in my head; I unpack, like a whore, my heart with words but nothing more. Words, words, words. Where does all this come from? Full of inner noise, outwardly I am mute, my particular strain of disabilities making my abilities, such as they are, essentially null and void. So perhaps it all ends up as nothing, but as I pass I place my hand on his shoulder and say, “See you later, buddy,” and grin probably very wildly, overdoing it.

“Oh ha ha. Yes, good one. Very good,” he says as I stride out. Walking across the parking lot, my legs feel weak and my heart trembles. I flee towards the car, wanting to fling myself in, to pull the door closed behind. What a thing to feel, I think as I wait for a long black car to pass, this sudden weakness from that brief contact, as if I have

contracted something, as if my idleness feels threatened, as if I have forced my body to behave in ways my heart can't support. The average human can only stand so much unity.

But the long black hearse does not pass. I look over its roof, beyond to my car. Someone calls my name. A woman leans out the hearse, which is splattered with graying mud. My hands are full of groceries in paper bags.

"Josie," I say. We had gone to Mexico together several years ago—she and her husband and I had chaperoned the humanitarian work of a dozen teenage girls.

"You're driving hearse," I say. I am somehow out of breath.

She nods. "What are you up to?" she says.

I hold up the groceries. "Seeing to the necessities." I cannot say a normal thing.

"Did you know Matt and I got divorced?"

I do. He lives down the street from my apartment and supplies me with fresh eggs and sprigs of tarragon. Of course I know what she is getting at—my father knows them and has also made such a suggestion, but I want nothing to do with it. She has children and I feel unfit for real duties. My funds are limited, both monetarily and spiritually. My reserves are depleted and I have adjusted my activities accordingly. I am best left alone and only slightly used. I am like a couple of bad knees that, while perfectly good for getting around, can't take any sort of load.

Perhaps Lola had sensed this. At the time I believed I had Lola figured out. Lola—at that breathless age of twenty—had used words a reasonable man would have understood. Instead, I believed them. That is, I was pretty certain she loved me. She said so very willingly, which perhaps should have tipped me off. But the fact of the matter

was she hadn't any idea whether she did or not. I took it upon myself to be her interpreter. So I spoke, she listened and I inferred her agreement. On her behalf, I explained away her reluctance (I am wonderful with other people's emotions), and she nodded, which, admittedly, was her error. Nodded over and over to my fantastic psychology, and like a madman I took her at *my* word.

As I drive home with my groceries rustling in the back seat, I review the events:

We had been picnicking at her mother's plot in the graveyard when I proposed.

The sun was setting seductively and Lola's face shone. Shadows lengthened and increased the bulk and significance of everything—the maples, headstones, our glances, love itself. I got on one knee and recited a Neruda poem in the original language which she did not understand. Produced a diamond. To me she seemed very happy to accept, but in such heart-blinding moments much goes unnoticed. I have as witnesses only the dead.

For a couple of days, she and that flawless stone got along swimmingly. But then certain cracks began to appear. Her doctor examined her and she returned depressed. I took her sailing on the reservoir and she cheered a little, as if by being out on the water certain earth-tied consequences couldn't reach her, but sooner or later we had to return to land.

We visited with my parents. Their excitement ran in all directions and I believe Lola became upset. (But no—how quickly I can create a diversion—it was me she couldn't live with, not my family tree.) The four of us sat at the kitchen table playing hearts and her hands were trembling. I got her out of there. In the park down the road we sat on a picnic table and she apologized and dropped the jewel into my hand while some neighborhood kids played tag and squealed.

For months I pestered her, but I eventually gave up and withdrew. I took to staying in and writing sentences on scraps of paper, writing in the margins of bills and on the backs of envelopes. Grocery lists would become essays.

I made a terrible fool of myself, weeping and conceding and seducing, every time of course being rebuffed. But the worst of it was that I *understood*. I could see very clearly her position: her youth, my influence that was just then dawning on her, my tremendous need, my careerlessness, etc.—I understood all of it, and saw myself as a very poor choice for her. I should have been angry, but I couldn't manage it.

Still I was in tremendous pain. The chest-ripping sort when all is doom and I would throw myself against the side of the bed as if clinging to a cliff and hang on and wail. Fall to the floor and beat the carpet and plead for relief. Relief which, of course, was within my grasp. In the kitchen—just there—I had an excellent chef's knife.

I remembered the story I heard in my college classics class of how Perseus, the vanquished King of Macedonia, had petitioned the conquering Roman consul, Paulus Aemilius, not to display him in his defeat to the Romans and to his own people, to spare him that indignity. The consul planned on marching poor Perseus through the streets. Paulus Aemilius is said to have replied, "The favor he asks of me is in his own power; he can procure it for himself." Which Perseus did. He starved himself to death.

My appetite too vanished. I moped and nibbled on dry toast and sipped ginger ale. I abandoned myself to the romance of suffering, to my wretched existence, my love-pain, all of which I sustained by my own hand even in my deepest despair, by my own, as the Romans might charge, "excessive love of life."

It occurs to me that although it is true I could forgive myself the daily infractions—the Vanessas and what not—but against the sin of existence I feel great remorse. However until my grief exceeds my capacities, I am safe. As far as actual death is concerned, I cannot raise a hand.

It is not just the ultimate decisiveness of it that I object to. From my occasional rashness I have gained an understanding that you cannot live by it, that rash acts do not lead to steady motion, which is what I feel I need. And since I see suicide as a sort of culminating activity instead of an escape (though I could see its usefulness in that area), I have not lived the sort of life suicide would be the proper culmination for. So I reason.

Also there is mother to think of.

Years ago I lived in San Diego and once I called my mother just to talk. I seldom called home but instead tolerated their phone calls. That night, however, the open bedroom window let in the cool breeze and I became caught in a moment of nostalgia and so I called and asked her to sing that song about the moon. I think I had just been dumped by a girl, but I can't remember. I sat at my desk beside the open window.

“I remember it starts ‘Mister Moon’ and isn't there something about chasing?” I said.

“You want me to sing it now?”

“Do you remember it?”

“Yes. I sang it to you when you were very young, six or seven. You know, we were in love, you and I, when you were young.”

I didn't know what to say to such declarations. I heard the reproach but in reality it was probably all invitation. And I knew what she was talking about. Of course I loved

her still but back then I needed her. “You know I love you,” I said, knowing how it would please her.

“I know, but then it was different. Your hair was very blond and you would sleep in the car and wake needy.”

Boy did I remember that. Like a flash it came, the hum of the engine, my cheek resting on her thigh, her hand combing my hair back from my forehead, my small body stretched out on the seat, tangled in the belt, Dad up front driving. And outside, what? Darkness and trees and peaked roofs and the eyes of street lamps and the whoosh of passing cars.

“Yes,” I said. “I remember the long driveway with the juniper bushes on one side and the old pines on the other side, and I could see the gray-splotched moon that made the needles and branches and trunks black. You sang very softly. You didn’t whisper but sang in a full voice, soft but also clear.”

I paused for a moment, thinking, and went on:

“The moon looked through the pines like your voice sounded, soft and clear. I remember it was driving home from something and turning down the long driveway to the garage. I don’t remember there being anybody else, but of course dad was driving. The moon followed us and I could look at the same spot in the window and watch the trees move in front of it, and the song would say the moon was chasing, but I don’t remember how it said it. You sang, ‘Mister Moon, Moon, bright and shining moon, won’t you please shine down on me?’ and then that other part I can’t remember. You sang it again and again until the car stopped in front of the garage door. I thought I’d forgotten.”

“I think of you always.” She said it as if the words were irrepensible. I was all repression.

“I know you do, mom,” I said, and I thought she was going to press the matter. But instead we were both silent for a moment, but long enough for everything to settle. I felt pleased because I could see no tragedy to prepare for and nothing to apologize for. From my open window I heard the distant sound of a car coming to a sudden and screeching stop.

“Well, good night mom.”

“Good night.”

Being the son of a mother like that left me few choices. How integrated our opinions of ourselves are with our opinions of others. Mother was the kind of person who couldn't bear the thought of being attached to a mortally troubled son (that's how she'd see it). It was the sort of act she could never understand and not because she hadn't suffered plenty. Nor was she weak-minded, or vain, or deluded, but she demanded a certain courtesy from others. I have probably never given her all she wanted in that regard, but I wasn't about to go out of my way to show her what a thoughtless son she had by killing myself.

## CHAPTER 4

I was below in the galley with a knife, preparing what I believed to be a sailor's lunch: sliced baguette, smoked gouda, summer sausage, cured salmon, apple slices, bottles of ginger ale. I was here by a kind of luck. Days before I had been picking my way down the coast in an old Honda two-door, between things I guess you could say, driving down from Seattle where Mom's father lives, when Calder (I had known his sister in college, then him) called.

"I just bought a boat," he said.

He explained how the boat was in San Francisco and that in a couple days—the final days of January—he and Jeffrey, whom I'd never heard of and still didn't really know though we've met and just now I was preparing his lunch, would be sailing it down to San Diego where he had already paid for a slip.

"Sign me up as cook." It seemed like the thing to say.

The night I arrived in San Francisco, we worked on the engine. I approach engines only theoretically and so that night had busied myself with stowing food, occasionally handing Calder and Jeffrey wrenches. They changed the oil, replaced of the fuel filter. During the course of that night's work, fuel spilled into the bilge and by morning we reeked of it, of that particular diesel smell, primary how certain colors were primary—a mixture of sea and stale earth. And throughout our morning preparations, it hung in our lungs and made my stomach unsure.

From the diesel-filled boat, we shopped for food and picked up spare parts.

Around ten, we sat for breakfast by the window in a diner on Powell Street, from where we could see the Bay Bridge dipping into Treasure Island as if scooping up a fish before leaping off again across the water. I listened to Jeffrey speak about Point Concepción, about how the coast cut sharply east there, how just by heading south we'd be working our way out to sea where the winds blew steady. This seemed serious.

“How far out?”

“Oh,” he said, drawing it out, not looking at me who sat across from both of them, “A ways,” and then began speaking about mechanical matters, rubber hose, valves, pistons, gaskets.

He leaned with his back against the window, talking towards Calder, and rested his arm on the table. In his hand dangled a stocking cap. Jeffrey wore his dark hair long, which, with his small-framed glasses, made him look like a photographer. He was a photographer, as a matter of fact, and made a good living at it. Years earlier he had been nominated for the Pulitzer.

As he spoke, the waitress stepped forward to refill his coffee and he fell silent, watching the cup gurgle full. The girl poured holding her breath to be less of a presence, retreated, and as Jeffrey continued:

“I think we have a fuel leak. No big deal, except for the smell.”

At this I turned to Calder who had just spoken and then to Jeffrey to show that I, too, felt the stench of the engine, but said nothing. Calder was looking past both of us, out the window to the busy street and the thinning morning traffic.

He was an unlikely athlete. Not yet thirty, his blond hair grew without conviction, timid from above his freckled, Scandinavian brow. Something of a boy wonder, he had climbed El Capitan several times, sleeping in a nylon nest a thousand feet up the granite face, and while still in high school obtained various reputable sponsors. At thirteen he would climb the water tower near his home so he could smoke cigarettes privately. A year later he quit.

“They tasted good, but got old,” he once told me.

We each paid our checks and returned to the boat. By noon, we had cast off.

And so now, a few hours later, the closeness of the cabin insisted its fumes on me as I arranged the bread, meat, cheese and fruit on the cutting board and climbed on deck.

I felt sick, but it was good to be out of the cabin. To breathe out deeply and take in as a replacement the brothy ocean air.

The tide took us out fast. Jeffrey said ten knots, a fast jog. Off the port side, the mainsail stretched full, the color of velum, and up forward we had the jib set big and parabolic. Jeffrey was snapping pictures with a disposable camera, of Alcatraz, the foggy city skyline. Calder sat at the helm, steering us west and toward the open jaw of the bay with its spanning Golden Gate. I leaned against the cabin, amidships in my parka and life vest.

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I knew these waters, had grown up just beyond the hills surrounding the bay, in a rolling suburb with narrow winding streets I had to climb to get home from school. Victoria used to live nearby, but we no longer spoke. After Africa things had simply evaporated. I never thought of her anymore.

Although he had been in the Navy—had attended Annapolis like his father—Dad had never owned a sailboat but had found it more economical to borrow. And marinas thrived with neglected boats.

A couple of times a month, Dad, my older brother Eli, and I would drive out to Alameda to sleep aboard a family friend's thirty-five foot sloop. It had a pull-out kitchen table, a barbeque, and a stainless steel cage at the tip of the bow Dad called the pulpit where a boy could sit in the sun out over the water and watch the prow saw through the waves.

We'd motor out past the stony breakwater, streaked white by the gulls, and point into the wind. Dad would hoist the main. Eli would raise the jib. (I was too small.) He'd grasp the line up high as if with a sword he were about to finish off an enemy, and, squatting to the deck as he pulled, he'd plunge his hands down. He'd do this again and again until he'd run the sail all the way up where it would flap like Mom shaking out a hundred bed sheets.

While they worked I'd hold the big shiny wheel steady, keeping us headed into the wind. I'd stretch my neck back and with big eyes look up to the top of the mast where a finned vane would tell me where the wind came from.

But soon Dad would come back to the helm and relieve me and he'd sail us around the rest of the day, while Eli and I plotted attacks against enemy ships and invented sea monsters from which to narrowly escape.

When I got sleepy, even in the middle of the afternoon while we were still underway, I could go below and nap in the high-sided bunks without fear of rolling out.

Once, I awoke to the sound of utensils tossed around in the galley drawer. I sat up. The boat pitched deep and out the port lights I saw no sky, only dark water. I climbed topside where I found Dad and Eli.

The hull of a tanker bore down on us, black and streaked with rust, threatening to crush us. Dad stood at the wheel, eyes steady, alert and calm, and spun the wheel. He'd been a submariner, aboard the most advanced nuclear sub in the ocean; had crossed the Atlantic to monitor Russian traffic in the North Sea.

The boom swung across the deck as we pulled alongside the tanker. The sails snapped like a great community spanking. Dad fought the lines for a moment—difficult among the ship's steep bow wake it kept slamming us with—but then restored the relative peace. We were now quite safe, paralleling the beast, but still I didn't like the waves being so high above my head, even though we would rise up on top of them every time.

Eli stood on deck watching the ship pass by close and tall, blotting out half the sky. He grasped the cables and threw his head back, appeared to me gleeful, trying to see the top of it. I was terrified. Had I been Eli and possessed a baseball I could have thudded it against the tanker's massive hull and caught the ricochet. Instead, I clung to the rigging as the ship floated by smooth and unperturbed, while we rocked and tossed in its wake.

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Once out of the bay, we changed the sails and pointed due south. No one talked much. Jeffrey sat forward by the bow and I took the helm while Calder went below to attend to some mechanical matters. The wind fanned us from the north, and the seas laid about calmly. By sundown, the sky cleared. In that brief dusk, the coast, which had been

lingering on the edge of the horizon, finally dropped away and we became the only feature.

The boat, a Bristol Channel Cutter designed after the British pilot boats that used to guide ships across the English Channel in heavy seas, was a stout vessel—a blunt prow, wide in the hips, plump as a ripe wheat berry. She had no railing, but low bulwarks instead. Off the bow extends the wooden sprit to which the forward sail attached, like a line hooking the long bill of a marlin. We each took turns walking out there to the tip of the bow sprit, where we would stand, grasping the cable running up to the mast, and stare and stare at the water and the sky.

That night, the outlines of dolphins appeared in our bow wake, shimmering phosphorescent in the black water.

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Above the solitary, puttering boat, the slit of the moon diffused its light into the thin clouds as if from beneath a closed door. I wrapped myself tighter in the blanket against the late January air. The autopilot groaned like a snoring robot. Calder and Jeffrey were asleep below deck in their bunks, lulled by the drone of the engine. I sat on the floor of the cockpit out of the wind. Occasionally, I stood and scanned the horizon for the running lights of ships or just to stretch my legs or adjust my life vest. It was a slick number—self-inflating, low-profile, with a beacon on the shoulder and a dangling orange flashlight with a compass on the back. I put it on whenever I came on deck, clipping an eight-foot tether onto a line that ran fore and aft.

Granddad once told me that during the War, while patrolling near St. Thomas, he had refused to wear his life jacket, defying his gin-soaked captain. He told me how as a

young submarine officer he had stood at ease in the tiny captain's quarters. The captain had offered him a seat but as there was no place to sit he had refused.

"No, sir," he had said. "Thank you," without looking at the man lounging on his berth, swirling his cocktail. Around his neck the captain wore a dingy life vest.

"Well, then. What is it?"

"You are requested on the bridge, sir." He caught his hands behind his back and could smell the diesel oil on his clothes.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, sir." The young man, my grandfather, glanced down at the captain and then up again to where the map hung on the wall. It was of the Caribbean.

"Well?"

"Just thought you might want to make an appearance, sir."

The captain took a sip and placed the glass on the desk spread with papers fuzzy with close, official type. The liquid wrinkled with the vibrations sent from the engine room. He examined his executive officer standing in his rumpled, stinking khakis. He frowned.

"Where's your life jacket?"

The officer tightened his lips then relaxed them—did this twice before he answered. I had seen Granddad do this many times before.

"In my bunk."

"Orders are," the captain leaned forward and put his hands on his knees, "to wear them at all times when we're under way." He reclined again, the bed creaking, and

gathered his glass in his hand just to hold it, resting his arm on the green painted plywood desk.

The young man looked at the captain now, turned slightly toward him so that he might see him perfectly. His rubber soles flexed a little against the floor full of the hum of the engines.

“Yes sir. I believe that’s true.” He swallowed, prepared to say more, something he had evidently prepared. “I don’t want to wear a life jacket. Doing so exhibits an exceptional degree of fear.” The captain bristled. “Conveys a level of pessimism I’m not prepared to convey. To the crew, that is.”

“Pessimism!” The captain slapped his knee and almost rose, but remembering his glass which he all of sudden needed desperately and worrying too that he might stagger, he straightened and remained seated. “Pessimism? This is war time, Lieutenant.” He drank. “War time.”

The officer, my grandfather—twenty-six at the time, asked the captain to put the order in writing. The captain refused, and the two had “quite a falling out over the matter.”

Not that Granddad wanted particularly to be adrift without a life jacket. But still, I thought of him standing in those small quarters, young and defiant, and I wanted to see him rush into that void in the leadership and fill it, and to do it in a particularly cinematic way. He perhaps believed the uncertainty of drowning to be preferable to the certainty of doubt. But it was possible, too, that wearing the life jackets published a fear that ought to have remained private. That a crew’s usefulness depended on each sailor being afraid and hiding it, believing, in fact, that all his fellows were brave but him.

I thought, just for a minute, about falling overboard out here in the middle of the Pacific, perhaps having forgotten to attach my tether, those two asleep below, my calls useless against the chattering engine. How the boat would just drift away.

My panic—somehow I knew this—would be boundless. Such a crushing, silent blow. One splash. With what profound suffering I would await my drowning, the sort of waiting during which I wouldn't know what to do with my hands but would know how essential such knowledge would be to me just then, bobbing in that particularly indifferent vacancy. And in this case Granddad would be right about the life jacket, but not for the reasons he might have supposed. That, if it was dark and my rescuers were slumbering, it was better to fall overboard in my natural state so as to at least have something to do while I waited.

I tugged at my tether to return my mind to the boat, to the regular, deep swells of the following seas. To the sound of the engine muffled by the crest of each overtaking wave and then cackling as it passed, the stern rising and falling in tempo to the sound.

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According to the charts, we passed Point Concepción around dinner time (tomato soup, bread, cheese) the following evening, cutting southeast towards San Diego which still lay buried two hundred miles beyond the horizon, another two-day sail. Winds were favorable in the dusky peace of sundown pushing us from dead astern, the sky birdless.

Calder stayed topside, while I went below with the remains of dinner. I pumped salt water into the sink with my foot, worked up a good lather, rinsed, and left dishes to dry in the sink. Jeffrey, who had been rustling about in the forward compartment where we keep the extra sails, excused past me with a big folded bundle spilling out of his arms.

I stowed the food wherever I could, anxious to be on deck, a tinge of nausea rising in my stomach which, in a moment, would be scraped away by the clean marine air like a hand removing crumbs from a table.

On deck, Jeffrey had rigged up the spinnaker. Huge with wind, it slapped out in front, big and cheerful and striped with red and blue and yellow like a full belly draped with a Cambridge necktie.

All our sail was up: mainsail stretched out wide to port, jib to starboard, spinnaker flying off the bow. Our resemblance to a lustful bird, fluttering his wings as he strutted, puffing forward his billowing chest as he waddled about posing, must have been striking.

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One fall evening at dusk, near the end of the War, Granddad patrolled above Japan's northern island in the submarine Searaven, a lookout called down to the control room that a small hawk had landed on the periscope shears. Word soon reached the young executive officer, who became very excited and ran to the engine room for a thick leather glove. As he went up to the bridge, it's quite possible he thought of his youth back in Washington, D.C., back when the capitol still teemed wild, back before any of this warfare with its sinking of ships.

He might have thought of his brother Morgan who had nurtured an interest in falcons, and how often he had accompanied him in search of them among the white oaks and maples and hickories near the rugged banks of the Potomac. Morgan would shimmy up trunks and rappel off cliffs, and Granddad would stay on the ground—not that he didn't like the animals, but his policy against heights was strict. Which was perhaps why he took to the treeless sea, burrowed beneath it, in fact.

He knew that when he emerged onto the sub's bridge he would see the outline of the Paramashir peninsula of eastern Siberia running forty miles to the east like a black rip in the sky. He immediately looked for the bird. He found it where he had been told, among the black metal of the periscope superstructure, exhausted and famished. In the calming darkness, he captured it easily and went below.

The bird was small—a male for sure from his battleship-gray wings and rusty head and back, his chest spotted as if with oil. He immediately saw it was not a hawk but a kestrel—or sparrow hawk—a member of the falcon family, and he informed his crew. Morgan had kept several in their yard back home, and now here was one in a submarine in the middle of the ocean. Granddad manufactured a hood out of an old glove and a pair of jesses to keep the kestrel on his perch and force fed him bits of raw meat until he ate on his own.

During moments of quiet, Granddad would remove the hood and with an engineer's glove used to wrestle hot diesel engines and take the little falcon into the ward room and sit with him. I imagine it felt very good to him to watch the wild bird's bearing, to see the decisive jerk of his head, to feel the pressure of the flexing of his talons through the leather glove, to sense the disturbance in the air as he unfolded and folded his wings; movements, which, even in such an unlikely place as a submarine were never unsure. To sit and be examined by the obsidian animal gaze of that predator, neither affectionate nor malicious, incapable of irony or self-doubt, unacquainted with shame, unconcerned with being brave and, if frightened, then frightened only to its own advantage—to become more fierce.

A certain peace, too, shone from the kestrel. This he probably noticed most of all and remembered—that freedom from compulsion, from a duty which has compelled him to sink boatloads of people. Still, it was difficult to be a good, honorable man. To a kestrel, it was enough to be a kestrel. In a few months he will get command of his own submarine, the Cero. He will receive orders that no survivors were to be left in the water, that they either come aboard on their own or they must be shot. And so after he has sunk a ship he must then sink her men. And, as captain, he will do it himself. He never says this, mentions only that no one but the captain should have that “terrible duty.” How it was that the necessity gave to him what it was that he should be.

And so it wouldn't surprise me if he might have felt some kinship with the bird, both of them living by what was needful.

Ten days after he took on the kestrel, Granddad's patrol surfaced and released the bird, who climbed until he was nearly out of sight, then headed toward land.

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Darkness, eleven o'clock. The moon was nearly new. By this time last night, we had stowed the foresails and lowered and lashed the mainsail to the boom and let the engine rumble on until morning. Tonight, however, the spinnaker, whose colors had blackened in the night, still loomed like an enormous Moorish arch. We all sat in the cockpit, linked together by the same forward running lifeline. I clutched the helm.

The wind had picked up a bit, and the suggestion of dropping some sail, although no one had spoken about it, floated in the air.

“Breeze's freshening.”

“Yes.”

“That’s a lot of sail.”

“Indeed it is.”

And so on.

I said nothing, left the matter to Jeffrey and Calder. That spinnaker was very big, looked to be bearing down on us like the outline of an approaching steam engine. But I didn’t know the dangers of too much sail. Besides, I approached physical courage like Bellow’s Einhorn approached his genius, whether willing or unwilling, *nolens volens*: I wasn’t going to come out and declare I was a coward when there was still a chance I might not be.

We rolled among the swells as if on the hips of a hula dancer. Since we were flying with the wind, we passed through moments, surfing down the slope of a wave, when our speed matched that of the wind and it was as though the air held still.

So when the gust came, silent, wrinkling the black water in our wake, I felt it first on the back of my neck, then brushing my cheek as it swooped in like the tip of an owl’s wing. Then it poured over the stern and climbed the mast and the rigging and jumped on the sails with a fantastic sudden weight.

As if some great invisible creature were clawing aboard, we heeled over hard to port, the churning water overrunning the rail, the deck pitching up and up, all of us leaning away and grasping at the tipping boat like mice on a steep steel roof, a din of clattering and thumping pots and boxes and tools clambered up from the cabin. The mainsail dipped into the water, the jib pole snapped, and, between the borders of my welling panic, my heart, weak perhaps since childhood, sickened with fear, wanting above all things to be away from here, to never have come on this futile boat out to this

useless ocean, which I suddenly knew could do nothing for me—not this way. What did I want from it anyway? I was aware only of wanting to spiral up into the air and fly back to a family room somewhere; or better yet, to wake from this in a firm bed. I let go of the tiller just as Jeffrey released the lines and in a moment the sails relaxed, the boat sighed back into the water.

We hauled in the spinnaker heavy with seawater and lower the jib, leaving the mainsail set, which satisfied us for now. I went below to straighten up. I heard Calder say, “That could have been bad.”

Later, I lay in my berth for a while—an hour maybe—and then fell asleep only after the engine sputtered on and hushed the sound of the wind blowing across the water.

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The breeze lilted us along the rolling ocean, and the life jackets were stowed away in the lazaret. We lazed around on the sunny deck barefoot, reading, snacking, rotating at the helm, sitting out on the bowsprit looking down as if on the end of a high tree branch.

We motored past Catalina Island early this morning, and now the early afternoon breeze urged fresh and steady into the southeast. The swells, still following, eased by us long and low like the breathing of a napping dog.

All our sails were up except the spinnaker, and today, in this benign air, I wanted it up too. However, Calder said it wouldn’t do us much good in this particular wind, that it would be a hindrance.

I went below with strange relief, and sliced myself some cheese. I knew, of course, that I didn’t want to fly the spinnaker, that I was quite happy to float along risklessly. That, in fact, there was no other sort of adventure, that if I were to drown out

here it would be nothing more than a pleasure-boat accident, a splash of foolhardiness.

Character was not fooled by such crude mirror work.

With what great difficulty I performed anything new. It was a predicament, this following. Stumbling along behind the cooling trail of others. How to flourish bouncing around in such a smooth and solid existence? By conjuring enemies out of thin air, by flying spinnakers. Hoping that by wading safely out into the sea—not too far—I might emerge as salty as my forbearers. But only the trivial was passed along.

We glided into San Diego Bay a little before sundown, a good time for anything. In this burnishing light, the water ran before us like a sheet of copper patina. Because of how the peninsula juts south, protecting the mouth of the bay from the regular ocean swell and the occasional stiff northerly, it was like skating on a lake. To starboard, an Air Force base roared now and then. Off to port, a submarine yard nestled into the steep banks of the peninsula, the marble-spotted liquid green of a military cemetery shining on the hill above.

## CHAPTER 5

On Wednesday evenings I go to Rachel's little apartment of white painted cinderblock for dinner and a film. Tonight we are supposed to see *Dracula* and last week it had been *Le Gout des Autres*. The food is generally fine, although I prefer to cook for myself. Also I had forgotten about this dinner and now begrudge the groceries I had to wade through that store clerk and Josie to get.

It is true that I like things a certain way, appreciate a winning presentation, and sometimes, because she and her boyfriend Will must battle good-naturedly but constantly with her five-year old boy, the risotto becomes starchy or the salad overdressed. What is the matter with me? I don't understand why I have to notice such things. It is as if by living alone so long—not just spatially but inside my head—I have lost certain social capacities like gratitude. (Every Christmas time I resolve to compose notes for every gift I receive, but I never ever do.) Of course I don't say anything, which is normal, but I am aware of a certain amount of disdain in the way I lift my fork and pull the food in with my teeth, like how one lifts a dirty sock with one's fingers. But I hope that the quickness with which I eat won't be mistaken for relish. How unfit I am for going out among people!

But I am tiring of so much self-examination. It is like a membrane I crawl inside in order to maintain some separation from things. How even after having lashed myself to a boat in the middle of the Pacific with Granddad's ghost I can't tear through. The most ready explanation is that I envelop myself for protection, but I don't like to think I am so easily explained, or, really, such a coward. But there still might be something to the idea

that I hold the world and people and my own life at arm's length in order to get a better view of it. Seeing replaces motion. Being in that peculiar way farsighted, it makes a certain sense that I participate so little. Seeing great distances is wonderfully exhilarating but living happens at close quarters.

Another girl, Summer, also attends our Wednesday night gatherings. She has a divorce pending and tonight arrives late, bursting through the doorway, red-faced and weeping. She walks past us who are stirring around in the kitchen. She looks at us without the slightest shame for her uncovered, disastrous face, moves with her hands at her side down the hall and into the back room. Rachel follows. Will tends the risotto and I rub my hands together and circle in the kitchen.

Soon we both go back. Rachel fills us in while Summer droops on the bed.

Evidently her husband has stolen money she needs from their account. That the account is joint makes things tricky.

“We talk,” Summer says, “and I think we agree, and then he does something like this, saying something about the mortgage. As if I didn't know about the mortgage! But it's him who's living there. I told him, ‘I have my own place now. Can't you understand?’ And he just looks at me blankly and tells me to ‘Calm down,’ to ‘just calm down.’ He doesn't *get* it.”

This of course is true. I don't know the guy but how could he possibly get it? And Summer is an absolute junkie for understanding—she genuinely wants to understand others in exchange for understanding for herself. She swings herself around in order to crack people open like pods and expose their insides and to be cracked herself, wants her insides to be ferociously sought after. Yearns to inhabit another's skin like clothing, to

insert her hand into the space of his hand as if into a glove and wiggle her fingers. That there might be no space between things. To be swallowed up in the will of another for her would be bliss, so long as he is annihilated also. Such is the deal.

She possesses almost no ego. I think the fact of her body troubles her deeply. That she exists in a particular place with definite boundaries I think exacts an enormous limitation on her. She wants everything but is also willing to give it. There is no question about that.

When she first left her husband some months ago, I had tried to explain this to her, how futile such a search is, how it isn't the correct quest, how even our own unlimited access to ourselves, the hard wiring of our spinal column to our brains and our arteries to our hearts, how even our own inhabitation of our bodies has left us bewildered about our very own selves. So how can we hope to understand another being? That was my point. Our tools for doing so are of the crudest sort: handshakes and glances, our inscrutable faces, our kiss and our bedroom intercourses, our words words words.

“You may as well give Kierkegaard to a box elder bug,” I think I said.

I had been aware of offering her very little hope (this all I said to her in my apartment, she lounging on the couch while I rocked in the glider), and she was right to ignore me. But now, here, with all of us gathered in Rachel's back room involved in the business of consoling, it is difficult to look on as she weeps and curses and rages and heaves her breast up into this her state of constant crisis.

She and her husband had married very young—both nineteen—but had grown up and apart, and so on. Nothing too remarkable. And to herself she might admit the commonness of her predicament, that this sort of thing happens all the time, that there is

nothing to do, etc. Yes, she is capable of that comprehension but can't for a moment believe it. She lives as if right up against the impenetrable surface of the world, smears herself against the glass like an insect, and laments the driving speed of its cold, indifferent smoothness.

I, on the other hand, live in a more theoretical space. To me things do not occur as much as I perceive them occurring. Never in my grief over Lola did I ever forget that I was in fact *grieving*, performing some common act of existence, able always to be both thrashing about on the carpet beating the ground, and evaluating the performance. *Thinking too precisely on th' event*, is my trouble, which Hamlet equates with oblivion. I never completely lose control. I spin about the world in the capacity of a satellite, neither falling to the earth nor being released into space.

So with Summer crashed and smoldering on Rachel's bed while I stand against the wall considering and evaluating and thinking thinking thinking, I see very clearly the thousands of dead words between us. I also know how unlikely it is that I'll do anything about it. The dead, like the blind, don't go around much.

Will asks her if she is considering hiring a lawyer. She gasps and sobs. The notion that there might not be harmony devastates her. And the thing is she is right. Could we all somehow override our own physical presence, our patriotic dedication to the home body, overthrow the flesh and become joint like they had tried to do with that bank account, we'll see that not only are we in Oppenheimer's words "all sons of bitches" but also glorious, careening, terrified, little children, and then we might very well achieve her harmony.

But the point is whereas I am closed off she is wide open and ready to give and receive all, both poison and plenty. That the world will not accept it is hard to blame her for.

I think my way out of existence, believe too strongly in my separateness, possess too great an ego, cannot pull myself, like Narcissus, away from the pool. I bind myself in a nutshell and think myself a king of infinite space, or I would have *were it not that I have bad dreams*.

And what are these dreams? Not dreams exactly, but premonitions. Suspicions that this rich solitary inner life I believe myself to be living is counterfeit. Perhaps that's what the store clerk signified. These dreams, mine and Hamlet's, threaten this infinite space I fancy myself to be so fond of, which is why my legs had become so weak after that altercation at the grocery store and why now I make preparations to leave. I mean Rachel's apartment but perhaps I will also go to New York for a few days.

These dreams are best illustrated by my need to confess like I have been doing in my notepads at home, to unveil some past and fading longing for adventure, danger, courage, life. I dream of Africa and of the sea and like Hamlet am haunted by my fathers. And all this shines into my head from that weeping, broken, red-faced, crumbling, dying, living creature trembling on Rachel's bed. I get out of there.

With my friends I have a reputation for leaving early, for being the first one to say good night, and so with my head blaring at me I leave. The night holds still and very cold, the sky or at least that black tarp thrown over us we call the sky flickers clear as if fluttering in a breeze.

How can they not see my falsehood? I am praised up and down, and my silence and idleness—even this exiting—is mistaken for wisdom and steadiness. “You always know when to leave,” they tell me, and it is true I feel greatly relieved to be out in the night trudging through the snow to my car. But to them, I am restrained and therefore contained restrainable material. They think I am caught up in higher ideals, reasonable, fair, not reckless, to be counted on. All basically untrue. I am as flawed as they are but just unwilling to show it. When will they discover that I am only interested in being liked, in proving to myself I am likeable and that therefore nothing is in fact the matter? Of course this meant that I consider success to be the accumulation of good opinions, but how is it then that towards these people I often feel completely indifferent, or distant, perhaps. And that business with Vanessa. I will do anything to be thought well of, but will give nothing truly. I keep my shallow waters still so that they might be mistaken for great depths.

I pull out into the roadway as if for the last time. As if I might continue in this direction forever. I am full of doom. I think for the first time in months about Vanessa. Why had I gone to her? What had I hoped for? After my talk with Brigham I should have been content, but no, off I went drumming up trouble. What had I hoped for? It wasn't sex, for I was strict about that.

Was it hope? That is my default explanation, believing that humans act out of a kind of hopefulness, but is this true? I am looking for salvation from something, I want fate to take me into her hands and carry me off, I don't much care where. I certainly feel I need dealing with and that I'm not up to the task. That night I went to Vanessa the sky had dropped streams of rain and slickened the roads and that could have gotten me, but

instead I achieved a brief human entanglement which didn't amount to anything. Still, the next day, I had pined after this woman for whom I feel nothing. What am I after? So this going out into the night, and probably Africa and sailing and everything else, is my spurring fate on, saying, "Here I am. See what I am willing to do? Make me bleed and I will live, finally."

How because of all this maybe I don't care *where* I am. Perhaps location doesn't matter to me so long as I am not physically uncomfortable. Being uninvolved as I am with life, it could be lived (or not lived) anywhere. There is almost no place where doing nothing is impossible—I held sufficient evidence of this in my recent memory. But what about war? Of Granddad? Could he have done nothing?

When I get home I book a round trip ticket to New York for the next day. I received several hundred dollars from the government as a tax refund and I'm not about to save it. If they don't want my money, I'm sure the airlines do. And in Manhattan I have friends.

The next day I fly into JFK, following a two-day blizzard. However when I arrive late-morning, the day sparkles like a thousand suns. You can hardly look at it, everything covered as if with chrome and bursting with light, and the recently scrubbed air feels cold and raw and sharp. Of course the streets are a disaster, full of the now melting snow, the gutters completely choked. To gain the sidewalk one has no choice but to slop through the slush. But New York being a city mostly approached on foot, we all slop through together.

From the airport I take a train into the city. The doors open and I enter. There is seat for one, bolted to the floor off on its own, and so I take it, aware, of course of the

significance. Aware aware aware. We lurch forward then hum along. Outside a flock of seagulls flies alongside. Beyond stretch roof upon roof of skinny crowded houses, peaked roofs and pencil chimneys all snow-white and windswept and stretching towards that impossible, jeweled sky. Soon we pass above the more skeletal streets of Queens, full of wires and brick and steel and concrete. Here we stop and take on some more passengers. One of them is a young man, black and handsome with cheeks scored with pink scars, who stands and grasps the bar and puts his bag between his feet.

He begins to preach to us. He's been brought up amidst trouble. Drugs and prostitutes and whatnot. Has he assaulted a man? About that he is unclear. The point is that here he stands, emerged. He speaks earnestly, passionate and youthful, saying, "I axst the Lord God and the Lord God heard me. He called and I said, 'Here I am, Lord, here I am.'" Etcetera.

I see very soon that he isn't here for anything but to preach, and I feel I could use some preaching. Not the words exactly, but the act of it. To be exhorted, coaxed and called to reckoning. For my eyes to be looked into and to be told secret things after which everything would be different. But he never looks at me.

Just then the train descends below ground and I can hear the steel and earth rush by. I look around at the other passengers as the young preacher swings along from handhold to handhold as the train lurches and heaves, moves off to another car, but their serious city faces are all set towards some unknown urban purpose—towards their offices and elevators and appointments and making reservations and washing dishes and suing and selling and buying of stock, and of course towards eating and sleeping and loving and dying, for that is all done here too. But here, with what volume it is all done! Lives

stacked upon lives, pressed into subway cars close as a suckling litter, each living within its infinite nutshell, breathing on and smelling each other, hurtling underground through tunnels, burrowing through the earth beneath the living and perhaps the dead too. They of course think nothing of it, but I can hardly contain myself, overdressed as I am in my darting eyes and grinning.

But I'm tired from the trip. I yawn and a woman with a broken nose across from me yawns too. I try to catch her eye but she ignores me and I respect her for it. A principled woman. Not impressed by contrivances. She gets off at the next stop, and so I sit and make faces at myself in the black smeared windows. Grin and pucker and scowl and try, ultimately, to look normal. *What a strange thing it is, I think, to be something.*

But I can never completely remove from my expression all traces of performance, that I am always, always being watched, most of all by me. And I feel the distrust of seeing someone pose perfectly for a picture. Adopt those vacant eyes, that cheerless smile—every single time. Have they no decency? No private life? And yet I consider concealment to be a tremendous virtue.

I get out at Penn Station and haul my bags through wide, arch-roofed corridors, tiled white. I come to a great open underground plaza fed by dozens of these tunnels and stocked with newsstands and bums and cops and musicians and turnstiles. Film posters and underwear ads hang on the walls as if in some grand communal living room.

I move to a wall near one of the several exits to the station. I must choose one of them but I don't know how. Past me streams of people come and go. A few drops of icy water fall on my forehead and run down my nose. This for some reason delights me. I move to one side. The ceiling panels hang down rusty and warped and leaking from the

storm. Even in this huge expanse, it still feels filthy and close, comfortable, even inviting—a place where humans can dwell. It is the instant kinship of spilling your guts out. All this is common enough, I suppose, but for me it holds great significance. To me it feels very new. I dry my forehead by rubbing the dampness into my hair. I choose an exit and enter the stream of people.

The mass all push towards that brilliant light and I push with them, packing ourselves in close as we begin to ascend the stairs. Me, amidst that throng of strangers, climbing, bumping, rubbing, grunting, breathing—all of them grasping at the handrail, polished and shining, made so by their collective and continuous grasping, thousands, millions of them pulling themselves up from below—and I among them reaching tenderly for the rail as if I expect to receive an electric shock from all that I imagine to be stored within it. When I do reach it, the metal is simply warm from the friction of their accumulated contact, but I am still very pleased.

And then I emerge right in the sunny middle of the city, *as if* (this is my thought at the time) *from the grave*. Emerge blinking and dazed with everyone suddenly dissipated, going about their business as if I am nobody.

But in a few days, it becomes like any place. I tour the city with my friend, Brigham, eat in restaurants, and visit the MOMA. I am impressed by the number of women wearing fur coats, and when outside the Met a fleet of school busses stops and open, almost in unison, their accordion doors, I am surprised to learn that there are children in New York. Of course it stands to reason, but it doesn't seem really the place for them, somehow. Such a towering, adult place. But that's the sort of state I am in—serious thoughts in the most serious of cities—and I refuse to make allowances for

another kind of existence, although I don't think I am the only one to stand in amazement. Because here they are, spilled out onto the Manhattan sidewalk, their teachers running around their borders yelling, "Single file, single file!" Surprising the ease with which those squealing, bolting, laughing, sulking, bouncing, teasing, shoving, wide-eyed little people, who without proper thoughts or what you might call rich inner lives somehow conquer the city. Here playing along the curb and splashing in the gutters is Summer's dream of harmony.

But it is the kind of information you don't know exactly what to do with. In the end I fly home content, but unsaved. What did Nabokov say? "A change of environment is the traditional fallacy upon which doomed loves, and lungs, rely." It is difficult to lose the hope of rescue we hold for a trip. That it never succeeds doesn't appear to be reason enough.

## CHAPTER 6

The sophomores gave me constant trouble: sluffing, cursing, dozing, insulting and disliking generally. Only a random police search, during which a slinking German Sheppard sniffed a bag of marijuana from among carefully alphabetized young adult fiction, produced in the boys some display of proper behavior. Standing in the hallway against the lockers with immaculate posture, they became silent, and if they smiled it was only because they were frightened. Sharp teeth and pistols produce their affect.

I felt mostly calm. Sophie had married a police officer, and during one autumn afternoon under his supervision I had fired many rounds from a pistol—police issue—at a steel torso squatted amidst huge mounds of dirt just outside Logan, Utah. An outdoor police range, casings everywhere. I squeezed off several dozen rounds at the poor, rusty fellow but he had more fear from erosion than from me. Which experience filled me with a certain fearlessness towards sidearms that I hope did not go unnoticed as we all stood out in the hallway, the officer waving the Ziploc bag and barking reproaches while the dog, watchful, lay quietly in the corner. The boys stood at attention but I leaned back against the lockers. These were still just kids.

But without those reinforcements, the boys cursed and loafed and ditched and slept and dedicated themselves to scholastic inactivity. As this was my first teaching job, I couldn't find recourse.

“Why are you wearing a girl’s shirt?” Scottie Nez heckled during a grammar exercise. I looked around at myself, stunned, and dropped my hand which had been at the point of filling the board with linguistic wonders.

My shirt’s color scheme did, in fact, include a deep pink. An old polo from a thrift shop, its solid magenta collar matched the design on the back: an island scene, a palm tree, a reclining canvas chair, a beach ball. A similar, more restrained motif adorned the front pocket. I turned and faced the class. Perfect quiet, every student’s eyes fixed upon me, their faces shining delight, their anticipation breathless. The picture of eagerness. A teacher could not hope for a more receptive audience, I thought grimly, fidgeting in my now inexplicable shirt that may have well been a bra and panties.

“I beg your pardon?” I said rather too sharply, having acquired during that first semester a knack for making things worse. My cheeks flushed with blood. For which teenagers can have a hearty appetite. Scottie laughed with the others at my childishness, at my sudden anger, at the nothing I seemed able to do. I did what high school teachers are told never to do: I took personal attacks, well, personally.

I had the good sense not to flee home during lunch and change, but I never wore that shirt to school again. I somehow felt the rightness of Scottie’s inquiry. Why indeed wear that shirt out here among the sagebrush and the Navajos, surrounded by hundreds of miles of copper desert? The question elicits no ready response, perhaps because the question itself resembles so much nonsense, perhaps because the question doesn’t involve the shirt at all. Illuminated by that dim light, my fumbling in class explains itself at least partly, ignoring, that is, the political cost.

I had bought that shirt in Page, Arizona one weekend. Doing so took time: twenty minutes of rough pavement, one hour of dirt, forty minutes of state highway through the desert to Page, where I browsed in the second hand clothing shop. Then I shopped for food and drove back, brown bags rustling through the curves, back past the coal-fired generating station and its three smoking barrels aimed at the sky, the mountain hazy in the distance; turning left at the Crossroads Trading Post; north past the lone fuel pumps advertising the highest priced and only fuel within one hundred miles; passing dilapidated pick-up trucks—Fords and Chevys driven by impossibly old women with faces like leather upholstery; myself passed later by their son or grandson in a brand new Dodge, bellowing by, hauling water in those igloo tanks that nearly fill the bed. But I usually catch up in the dirt. I fly over it, willing to pay the toll the washboard takes on shocks and struts and springs. The mountain looms, a red light blinking from the summit.

The dirt road ends and I'm on to pavement again. I pass the post office and the chapter house. Eight miles to the cottonwood tree. Left. Left again. And home. I park and carry in my sleekly packaged groceries under the mountain's watchful gaze.

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After college, I had accepted this teaching job on a whim. I applied widely, freshly cropped from the university, but it was Navajo Mountain High School, founded 1996 on ancient Indian lands, that was most eager for my untested abilities, such as they were. They offered a several thousand dollar bonus for a year of my life. I should have known.

But they were up front. Lewis Singer, the principal, insisted I visit before I accepted. I drove the nine hours south from Salt Lake City, but really I travelled back,

back, back in time. Each town marking past decades, Price, Green River, Moab, Blanding; then centuries, Mexican Hat, Kayenta, Kaybato; and then finally leaving time altogether, entering the world of red dirt and rock, the mountain and ageless juniper, scarred with slot canyons and deep washes. At the cottonwood tree, I turned left, as instructed. I passed the clinic, whitewashed adobe trimmed with a blue the color of the June sky. A couple of horses plodded by—right down the middle of the road, homebound. I watched them pass, beaming at this picture, idling in my car with my arm out the window. To me they paid no attention. Strangely, I took this as invitational, as if the beasts recognized my belonging here. I was full of invention. Over the dirt I grumbled the car up to the school.

It was brand new, crowned with satellite dishes and antennas and possessing all conveniences, auditoriums and digital projectors and laptop computers. The place hummed. By the entrance, a plaque read “Founded: 1996.” Ten years old. What’s ten years to the desert? Mr. Singer and I spoke in the library. I didn’t listen much. I had no questions. He showed me the classrooms and where I might live, just down from the school. Two hundred yards, if that.

The whole scene rang my imagination like a bell. Perhaps I felt the invitation of Africa again pursuing me. But now I was grown, the wobbling of youth presumably gone. Now, perhaps, I could enter the wild and be born again. Live amongst the natives. Whittle away the trappings of modern life to expose the pulsing living core. It was in there, somewhere. All it needed was to be shocked to the surface, dislodged from the muck by a hard enough quake and to the surface it would rise. In the 1980s, a tremor in

the Aegean brought an ancient trireme bobbing up and many great mysteries were revealed.

Here, in the desert, hundreds of miles from all previousness, I would straddle and commune with horses, build fires from stone and wood and sweat, run stripped down and moonlit through the brush, launch an arrow a hundred yards into the heart of a stag (I did not know at the time that this was not stag country, but contained bunny rabbits and sheep and burros). That and, I suppose, I would teach high school English. After this visit, I said so to Mom.

“What’s it like?” she said.

She didn’t know a thing about the place and here I was—after a day—an expert. But, even before I went, I was an expert. My imagination created a livable place for me there—horses, achery, wilderness—and I had let it overtake reality and replace it. With me, a little information was all I needed to release the dogs.

In a few days, Mr. Singer called and wondered if I might be able to give him an answer. I was in my girlfriend’s kitchen at the time. She was napping upstairs. I had just slid some onions into a pan to sauté. They hissed and steamed. I told him, “Yes,” the same way one might throw a bottle against a curb. Just to see.

In August when I arrived in Navajo Mountain, Wilson, the facilities manager and volleyball coach, let my girlfriend and me in through the door of the house I would be renting and showed me how to use the swamp cooler. He smiled but said little. He left a key and departed. And instantly I saw what I had done. I crumpled onto the newly carpeted floor, leaned against the white textured walls of my \$280-per-month double-wide, and wept for myself and my lonesome predicament as my girlfriend looked on. She

would not be joining me, had her own studies to pursue. I repeated that scene, for authenticity's sake, when she drove off four days later.

Leaving Navajo Mountain was like picking up a scent; approaching like losing it, the bold multilane highway fading to two lanes, then to one, then finally into dirt, like a felt pen drying as it draws. That remoteness meant visitors came rarely and never unexpectedly, but in early September my parents arrived for a weekend. We ate some good food and stuffed ourselves with the fresh peaches they brought from Brigham City. Next day, we climbed some rocky peaks. Looking over the area satisfied me to some degree, the land painted as if to demonstrate the range of possibility. And, so late in the summer, the days were temperate and bright but could turn stormy in an hour. Out, finally, scrambling up boulders and kicking through the dirt, the spiny sagebrush scoring my legs with fine, white scratches, I thought my solace would flow from the land, that the amount I explored this country would be the amount I received comfort and peace here. But after my parents left I rarely left the house to traipse about the rocks and washes.

When I left for school in the morning, the rising sun would stretch out a carpet of orange across the sandy expanse as if to meet me, spotlighting the mountain looming big and watchful, and I tried desperately to ignore it. The feeling of bobbing about in the empty sea returned.

So I became an easily duplicable event. That event would wake up at six-thirty, shower, dress, and eat some cold cereal without much gusto (my appetite still slumbering). Then school would pass by me—I couldn't seem to grab hold of it—each hour beginning before I was ready for it and ending before I got my bearings. I would tell myself that here I was, attempting something, teetering on the edge of civilization,

enjoying the newness, having second thoughts, becoming distressed, becoming undistressed, shoeing sheep, herding teens, speaking at length, listening to the ensuing silence, exhorting, encouraging, reprimanding, and, occasionally, teaching. Performing a series of tasks in themselves decent and good, but which didn't seem to add to anything. As if doing them *here* nullified their net affect, like drawing on the surface of a lake.

Simple, honest land filled the space below the horizon in all directions. The red tinted earth, worn purple in places and in others almost white, engaged in the business of displaying features . Buttes, mesas, spires, canyons, peaks, and, of course, the mountain, which rose out of the earth on the back of igneous magma some twenty-four million years ago, which is the only thing I ever read about the place, steep-sided with a gently curving top. And populating the earth were not humans beings or buildings, but sagebrush, juniper, pinion pine. After school, the kids vanished into the land, and I would drive to the post office, seeing no one except maybe an old woman sitting outside on a plank bench. Then I would drive home where I would stay, listening to the radio or books on tape, "just to hear a voice of some kind."

Winter completed my isolation, justified it. I closed off the other rooms in the house and lived between the kitchen and the bedroom. Even still, the house's central heating system gained little against poor insulation. At dusk the mountain cut the sun off early, the desert chilling quickly. The easiest way to warm up became taking showers, and freshly cleaned and steaming I would lean against the front door frame to see domes of light bloom up in the blue air above where residents were flipping on switches, giving away their positions on the sloping expanse that stretches from my front steps uninterrupted to the horizon and beyond. With the pockets of electric light rose smoke,

which seasoned the otherwise odorless air. Juniper and pinion pine burn beautifully, fast and hot.

In the evening, the lights would vanish, swallowed in little gulps across the land as the people inside retired. And the complete darkness before the moon rises knocked against the glow escaping my open door and against my folded-armed figure with a daring I had not felt from night before. As if the air were dyed black and could stain you. Driving in it, headlight beams broke off short in deference.

One evening when outside the wind wailed against my flimsy little house and snow accumulated on the porch, the power went out. This happened frequently in both good and bad weather. Powering the desert was no simple matter.

I lit the few candles I had and, for the first time in years, drew a bath. Perhaps out here I felt weighted down by space and students and silence and my inescapable self and so I wanted to float a bit.

I stripped naked, set a candle by the sink and eased myself into the bathwater. My legs hung in the water and my arms bobbed at the surface, and I relinquished support to the liquid. Outside the wind tore over the desert. I remembered how before Granddad died he had lost his eyesight and began listening to books on tape about the universe. I closed my eyes and lay my head back against the side of the tub. Perhaps he prepared for the dark solitude of the grave with the dark solitude of space, that suspended night. And here I was, suspended also in the darkness. It felt wonderfully relaxing. I could feel my muscles nodding off, stretching out and dozing.

After a while, waterlogged and wilting, I decided to go to bed. I flipped the catch with my foot and lay there while the water drained. The drain gulped, then fell silent. At

first I thought it might be clogged, but then my heels brushed bottom. The water ran through that little hole at the bottom of the tub, leaving first my knees exposed, two knobby islands, and then everything else—me, that ruddy and soggy lump sprawled on the porcelain. And I felt it coming, all that weight returning, irresistibly slowly, marching back over my body as if on the feet of tiny hydrophobic soldiers. As the water fell I was forced to re-inhabit my body and feel again the great centripetal weight of living. A great corporal loneliness descended. I became unsure I could get up, did not particularly want to haul around this body anymore. I looked at myself as if at a stranger, laid out in the tub the way the water had left me, limp and limbed, sopping like a stillborn colt.

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My last Friday afternoon, deep into May, I hiked up to the base of the mountain. The weather was very fine. A high cloudless sky, no wind. I camped on a little rise, from where I could see the steep ridge I would take in the morning. No other way up, so far as I could see. The mountain squatted like a table against which, on one side, someone had laid a cane. That ridge I planned to take. If there were any trails, I did not know them.

I ate bread and sipped broth heated over a juniper fire. That soupy darkness abounded. I slept without a covering overhead, the sky being clear and heavy with stars. I felt frightened of something. An unreasonable fear. Maybe that out here I would never be found. Or of wild animals that might eat me in my sleep. (Again, the desert teemed with bunny rabbits and burros.) Or it was the same fear that kept me inside all year, that fear of falling overboard. Being alone, and amid such boundless space, was too demonstrative. Again, biologically speaking, I was all grown up, oversaw the education of children. It

therefore had been right to come out here alone with nothing to grab on to—so that when I slipped, I might fall, finally, into what might be glorious life.

The end of the school year had arrived with sighing relief. Relief, I'm quite certain, not at a job well done but at the simple mathematics of time. In a few days I would pack up and leave, probably never come back. And that sense of having done something without knowing exactly what or why unsettled me greatly. I paid little attention to what I did in case I might be forced to acknowledge certain unpleasant truths. Truths, perhaps, I had felt so profoundly in the tub.

So lying on the red earth among stout junipers and the early risen moon, I told myself that perhaps out here the lack of banks and dollar stores and parking meters and pavement, of doctor's offices and restaurants and houses upon houses in which live people I'll never need to know, never even see but know are there; as if the lack of the ambient noise of modern American life, the sound of cars accelerating, a neighbor's radio, the unaccountable hum of thousands of people living their separate, dirtless lives all together; as if the lack of all these manifestations of civilization equaled an inability for me to perform significant action. They scaffolded me, I now reasoned, into life. Earlier it had been to stand alone. And now, to be supported. Such thoughts directed me towards sleep. I could get away with just about anything.

In the morning I walked up the mountain. The ridge rose steeply, but I followed a faint trail and plenty of wild burro dung and sheep droppings, some of it fresh. The sheep droppings smelled like mutton, strangely. These sheep would occasionally infiltrate my yard and would clip the sparse grass short. They nibbled the sagebrush only when hard up. They weren't supposed to be in my yard or on the school grounds, which I paid good

money to share. But they tip-toed across the cattle guard, clumsy, eyes wide, straight-legged, clickitty-clack. Some would slip and their legs would fall through and they would stand on the ground beneath the steel slats, bleating wildly.

The climb was tough going. The trail dead-ended and I bushwhacked, scrambling up boulders and over strange fallen alpine trees. The vegetation altered radically as I ascended. Often covered in cloud and mist the top of the mountain, where the slope eased and leveled, seemed to receive more moisture than the surrounding area. Up here spring grasses covered the ground from which an occasional limber pine rose. Also, a low purple flower I did not know.

The flies were active in the still air and kept me moving. I didn't have a particular destination but wandered in that expansive meadow, looking vaguely for a place to camp. I am susceptible to groves and found one where the needles were thick and fragrant and some young trunks huddled in close.

Then I heard it crashing through the brush, a fantastic din of snapping branches. I whirled, of course, and through the trees, a wild horse seemed to be caught in the undergrowth. An appaloosa. Sophie had ridden one when we were kids. Colored like granite. The horse and I looked at each other, or so it seemed to me, and I could hear the air rushing in and out of her black nostrils.

But she was not caught. She leapt out of the brush and clambered up a little grassy slope with precision. Deliberate, ready always to bolt and watching me with her frenzied eye—for sure I watched her with mine. She stopped halfway up the slope and stood very still, occupying the space with immense vigor like a coiled spring. Then, in an instant, she relaxed (what had she sensed about me?) and trotted off.

I set up my gear and lay down. It was barely noon. I dozed. When I woke, it was to the sound of another animal: the bleating of a lost or wounded sheep echoed from a crevice far below me among the trunks of charred limber pine from the previous summer's fire. I heard its cry all day long as I prepared my lunch and swatted at flies, heard that hauntingly hopeless sound, if sheep have hope to lose. I, of course, could do nothing for it.

## CHAPTER 7

I sit, determined: for a few minutes before bed, I will rock back and forth in the pine glider on loan from Sophie and enjoy the peace of a blank mind. My New York bag sits unopened in the middle of the floor.

Outside, night blackens the high small windows of my basement apartment against which this lamp peeking over my shoulder casts the inside of this small room—the pale bookcases and their contents guarding the doorway to the bedroom, those two plant studies hanging on the wall above the sofa, me swaying in the glider—the darkness outside transforming the window panes into tiny screens upon which this little domestic scene is projected. And so, looking out the window at night, I see myself and this sitting room reflected in miniature upon the outside, a suspended version of myself looking faded and transparent.

Enough. Plenty of time for thinking of that later; it's an easily reproducible phenomenon. The metaphoric implications are quite rich, quite compelling, but for now, let's just sit. What could be easier? Besides, that reflection is only a version and a silent one. In here is where I actually sit, and Django Reinhardt picks out his long guitar lines from the stereo that sits on top of the bookcase. I browse the familiar titles. Recently I have not been reading like I want to, and these books whisper a small reproach.

I rise and retrieve a sweater from the bedroom and pull it on. The weather is turning, but it is not quite winter. But nights become chilly and I must remember to shut the windows in the kitchen before bed. I experience a small moment of indecision before

sitting again—I am caught in the middle of two thoughts, my body suspended between my mind’s simultaneous commands to both sit and shut the windows in the kitchen. It is like a tiny seizure, my muscles momentarily unsure, halted, in that act of bending my knees to sit and extending my foot to stride. Awkward, yes, and amusing, this mental restlessness, but I sort it out.

I sit: a small victory. Now I can be still; think of nothing. I ought to be able to do this, to sit calmly without the need for progress, without having to work anything out, to contemplate.

To rest, like the kind I allow my body every night. Why not rest my mind, let it stretch out on the grass and sigh deeply? Of course, this here, this little pep talk is a kind of working out, but is it not to the point? Still, let’s be quiet now. Django plays beautifully, and the rustiness of the old recording—the purr of it—soothes and lulls like crickets.

Hold on now. Silence.

Out of nowhere I get up, having suddenly remembered my teeth, how they need flossing.

I clench my fists, pound them against the air and grimace. I sit again, annoyed and fascinated at the difficulty I am having at remaining still. I can’t seem to stop my mind. What exactly is it after? What will satisfy it?

I think of Hamlet and how he resisted satisfaction, how unstoppable his scheming was, how frantic his delay. How reluctant he was to complete his mission, to extinguish that great Reason the death of his father gave to his life. I bet he was petrified. Hovering around his uncle, jabbing at him vaguely, flirting with that self-sustaining revenge like

how someone stranded hopelessly in the Sahara reveres the last sip of the canteen, swirling it around, hearing it gurgle against the sides, smelling its freshness, rationing the inevitable self-annihilation that accompanies the swallowing of it.

Outside, Tom's car rolls up his driveway, the sweep of the headlights illuminating the rosemary in the planter box outside my window and then the railing that descends the concrete steps to my front door.

That was good, that thought about Hamlet. I like the symmetry of it, the circular jaunt it takes. I'd like to remember it. I ought to make note of it, of this struggle for and against stillness, of his struggle for and against peace, try to explain, reason, conclude.

I make to get up again, palms on the arm rests to lift myself, and I am caught again mid-action. I slump back into the chair, which sends it rocking, and cover my face with my hands. My gut is wrenched with frustration and I am almost weeping with annoyance (Be still! Be still! I must record this! I must!), but I rise, take an envelope from the table, sit again and write furiously.

The phone begins to ring and I silence it. I can't talk to people now. I'm not busy but I just have nothing to say.

The other day during a lunch I was having with my father I mentioned a French film I had seen at Rachel's a month back and Dad asked me what the message was.

"What was the moral?" I think he said. I looked at him over our sandwiches and saw he meant for me to answer, to have a response loaded. Otherwise, why did I mention it?

Such questions terrify me. I am expected to know things like that, perhaps because I putter around a university, or perhaps because that's really the sort of thing people are supposed to know. Anyway, I greatly resist that kind of knowledge, even

though as we can see my mind was full of nonsense. Still, I do not want to know pat things. But it is also true that I am careful not to know too much about anything—if I can't grasp it quickly or in passing, I don't have the energy for application. Oh, I have energies, plenty of them. They are just the wrong kind, or maybe I believe them to finite, irreplenishable, and so am saving them for something, for some grand act, some ultimate Reason.

But maybe I am wrong. Maybe films and books and views and trips and states of being and lives ought to be summed up, compressed into portable sizes. The idea being that if portable, then useful. Perhaps this is our great modern technological achievement, this shrinking. Our pockets overflow with such stuff—encyclopedias and symphonies and histories and decades of schedules and the people who belong to us—all crammed into tiny glowing whirring boxes and palmed lovingly. Soon we will be consuming feasts by a pill capsule.

The fact that knowledge too is undergoing a similar reduction should not shock me. I am an American, Pennsylvanian born, after all. And we the people are a code-cracking bunch and can't stand complexity, which suggests to us deadweight and subtlety and meddling. Complication arouses our suspicion and therefore we resist subtlety as a way of life. The brevity of the Constitution suggests this.

So I suppose it isn't that I have nothing to say, but that I can't bring myself to say it. I don't answer many phone calls for that reason. So in the lamplight of my apartment I move to the sofa and let my mind run in these conclusive directions. I am addicted to the illusion of progress. Such, perhaps, is the reason for this recording of events. To stride

forth or flounder behind these pages as if behind a shield, and they might as well be armored plates. Who can pierce them?

And where am I? On the page, I'm nowhere to be found. What perverted art this is, populated by strangers, versions only. Erected and peopled and planted and paved and filled with oceans and spread with deserts and continents, all to hold me up. Concealment sold as revelation. But me? A stranger in a strange land.

I see movement across the dark carpet and I turn my head but there is nothing. There are spiders here in the basement and together we live in peace. Lola had been terrified of them and had me reseal all the windows and baseboards with caulk. Once while in the bathroom one of the creatures descended into the bowl of the sink. She yelled for me and I came.

"Spiders do not recognize you as prey," I told her, which was something I had read somewhere. I am deadly with the slightest information. "Go ahead, take some tissue and scoop him up. Nothing to it."

She refused and I pushed and pushed and pushed and she ended up in tears, really very frightened, slumping onto the seat of the toilet shaking and sobbing. I didn't know a thing. Not. A. Thing.

I lean back against the sofa cushions, remembering. Again, the phone rings. I get up finally and see that, of all people, it is Lola. Of all moments. I stare at the flashing number, really very astonished. Before I know what is happening I'm answering. I do not, in fact, wish to speak to her, especially after the last time which though it had been pleasant enough had left me befuddled for days and had moved me to sell the ring. But I have just been thinking of Hamlet and the spider in the bathroom, so I answer.

Of course it is always strange to hear the voices of these people we make mythical. Like the dead rising. Silence, silence, silence and then—“Hello,” as if nothing could be more common. Which is true, of course.

We talk for a few minutes about our families, a baby has been born to one of her sisters, and my aunt has moved, all of sudden—after decades in California she has moved to Utah, just like that. With the sea level rising could Auntie really afford to stay? And so on.

“Excuse me,” I say after a few minutes of that, “what exactly can I do for you, Lola? You called in November after over a year and now this.”

She hums slightly into the phone, apparently thinking it over.

“I wanted to call, so I called.” She never knows why she does things—this is familiar to me—which was where I came in. I provided explanations for her. It is my *forte*. But she has more to say. “Would you like to go to lunch?” she says.

Now this does surprise me. I remind her of our last conversation, ask her if she remembers what she had said.

“Yes,” she said, “I remember. I shouldn’t have put it that way.”

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, open them, stand up, sit back down—perform a system check, so to speak. All is well. I feel calm. My heart beats normally for a Kawasaki survivor. Outside, I hear a car drive past, see the headlights flash against the low window panes. I forget, for a moment, whom I am speaking with. Long ago she had nearly caused me to pick up the knife and plunge it into my now strange and vigorous heart. But, if you stay the knife, then perhaps you have to embrace the rest. I experience a

rare moment of mental pause, like the instant before a grand event or at the apex of the path of some launched object, that state of quiet before hurling back down to earth.

But nothing happens. I hurl nowhere, although I begin to feel a little angry. *Finally*, I think. I think of telling her that I have posted the ring for sale (would I say *her* ring?) and that if she wants it, she'll have to obtain it by normal methods, just like everybody else.

"Why lunch? Why now?" I say instead.

She begins humming again and it soon becomes clear she doesn't have any idea why lunch, why now, so I do what I had always done with her: I provide an explanation.

"No, Lola, I'm not going to have lunch with you," I say. I tell her that she is practicing at sophistication, at maturity. Her desire is not to have lunch with me but to show that she is capable of lunch with anyone, even me. Perhaps she has just seen a film in which old lovers reconcile and has become nostalgic. More likely she is simply lonely.

What she really wants, however, is to be assured I am recovered, that she did not deal me the fatal blow. She wants me to do like I did for the store clerk, to display myself as unharmed. Talking to her I can tell this is the final moment of disentanglement. She wants lunch so she can shake me finally loose. Lunch, perhaps, is the ring she's at long last ready to get rid of.

Although, I am not terribly kind, I am touched and forget for a moment that I am talking to her and simply spew forth.

"What a great wake of mess the bunch of us running around here makes," I say. "It is as if we, with our rough hewn stone limbs, lift tiny crystal glasses brimming with love and forgiveness and glory, to the lips of our fellows and curse them and ourselves

when it all shatters and spills.” I doubt it makes any sense to her, awkwardly put as it is. What I mean, of course, is our movements are too big and square for the mystery of our hearts to bear.

We hang up. I sit on the edge of my bed for a minute, perhaps two. I stand, put on my fleece jacket—the one made from recycled plastics, open the door and step out in to the night.

I bound up the steps as if towards a summit. On the last step, miscalculating or because of the darkness, I twist my ankle and yelp. I hop on my good foot and hold my ankle, breathing fast and heavy. The sharpness of the pain subsides and I limp down the driveway to the sidewalk.

Halfway down the hill, almost to the drainage, I shuffle past a dirt driveway with a black painted gate. It branches off the road, following the little gully, and disappears into the heavy brush of the hill; it is the only driveway in this section of road because of how the terrain eases here and has enabled construction. I can’t remember ever having seen anyone enter or leave the place, but of course I don’t often come this way. A mailbox is lashed with wire to a curved length of black pipe sticking out of ground where tiny purple flowers grow.

I stop and cross over to it and walking up to the gate I feel beneath my feet not dirt but crumbling asphalt. I lean against the gate. My ankle throbs like a lighthouse. Here near the road, the driveway hangs in blackness, but farther along, before it curves off into the trees, it lies in the moonlight open and glowing.

The gate is unlocked; from a hook on a post dangles a loop of chain to which several padlocks have been attached like charms, but they secure nothing. Anyway, it is

only a gate; there is no fence. I stare up the driveway in the silence of this cold cricketless night.

The sky gapes clear, but here close to the street the trees shade me from the light of the half moon and it is very dark. Farther on, however, the moon illuminates a pale ancient scene. To me, though, it looks brand new, unused, clean like a page from a children's coloring book before the children have gotten to it. All paper gray with black lines. There, through the trees are the silhouette of high grasses running down the middle and over there is a white stump and, off to the side squats a low moon-bleached stone wall. Beyond, the little road curves off into darkness.

A car drives by in the street, and I turn and squint at it. It passes noisily, the tires against the pavement like rushing water then fading up the street into a hush, then to a whisper, then—gone.

I squeeze past the gate and begin walking up the path. Almost immediately I am very far away. Nothing ahead but that white stump and that stone wall and the black trees. The trees and the steepness of the hill conceal the nearness of houses and yards and streets. My apartment is buried less than two blocks from here, back up the street, past the community center and down. Here in the shadow with those relics before me, I can't feel my bed's closeness. Hobbling forward, my ankle very painful, I feel a pocket of warm air stir against my face. I sniff it. Grass and earth and rotting wood.

A fear builds in me: of being alone in the dark in the woods. I have not felt it since childhood when while camping with Mom and Dad and Eli and Sophie in Big Sur, I would wake up to pee and stand in the needles and hear something, nothing, anything; and the fountain of my urine would dry and I would stand and listen, holding my breath,

eyes wide and blind in the darkness, feeling that uncomplicated animal fear, my whole body alert, my little fists clenched.

I should return home. My ankle needs icing. What an ankle I have that carries me through Africa and upon the ocean and up the desert mountains only to buckle against the top step of my apartment. My body, still basically young, as if it sensed that it would not be properly used, begins now to abandon me. It is a witness to too many failed enterprises. Fine, I will put it on ice.

But I creep forward. My feet crunch in the dirt. I move slowly but towards something, I can't say what, stepping into the moonlit clearing and past the stone wall. The road continues on into the trees. Who knows how far. No sign of any buildings, no lights anywhere. The tops of the autumn trees meet the sky with jagged precision. On I walk.

The road enters a tunnel of overhanging branches. They scrape my cheek and I extend my hands out in front and grab and snap off twigs blindly. In this state, I am helpless. What easy prey I would be up here in this silent, empty place so close to home.

The road turns up the hill. I plod forward like a mummy, arms in front, sightless, crippled and mostly dead. But how strongly my hearts beats in my chest, with what wonderful frenzy. Spurred by this ridiculous terror, I hurl myself through the darkness, resigned to my death should I meet it here, stumbling and flailing towards the top.

It doesn't take long. One moment I'm struggling through the trees and then, with a crash, I emerge onto the top of the rise, where it levels and a paddock full of milling horses confronts me. Just like that. Horses. It feels like I'm being given another go. Such

is the effect of surprise. They snort and whinny. One plods over and offers its snout to be stroked. I oblige, and satisfied, the beast turns away.

I turn also. I look out and down to the street from where I'd come. There, behind Tom's house, my apartment sits empty. I live there, somehow. There amongst those pages and pages, I live. Both on and among. What marvelous defenses. There, I have scrawled myself into existence. But have I not also scrawled (and crawled) myself out the door and up that lonely path, up here to this vantage? Yes, up here too.

I lean back against the gate of the paddock and hear the chain clang like a distant ship bell. I feel suddenly exhausted. All this treading water must stop. Do I return and burn the pages? It would be very decisive—a grand act—but no, they might be useful. Anyway, I wouldn't know how. They have brought me here, in any case. I had, after all, spared myself those months ago after Lola, I ought to spare the record of it. And I'm not sure I have anything more to say but for a moment stand alone and quiet.