

An aerial photograph of a forest with a large, intricate spiderweb overlaid on it. The spiderweb is made of fine, light-colored threads and is positioned diagonally across the right side of the image. The forest below is a mix of green and brown, with some paths or roads visible. The overall tone is somewhat somber and mysterious.

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Flight

‘George Nobel – disrespectful of architecture and of himself,’ George Nobel quoted. For a second he glanced at the woman next to him, ironically adding: ‘by our special editor, Charlotte Vermeer.’ He looked away, lost again in the music playing through his headphones.

He had noticed her in New York, as she had checked in. George had been waiting at the desk for connecting flights, somewhat further on. His second transfer. It hadn’t been a painless return to civilization. He was tired and after a delay of three hours in the last airport and an exhausting flight, he wanted nothing more than to board and survive the final legs of his enervating journey home. Charlotte Vermeer, he thought, the last person I want to talk to right now.

Conscience-stricken, he had ducked away behind an enormous palm tree; the airport was packed with these; he had seen enough of them for the time being. Then on the plane, he had discovered that she was sitting next to him. They had said hello but George had tried to avoid any real dialogue. However, Charlotte kept making remarks to which

he thought he had to respond. Eventually he had fallen asleep. When he woke a few hours later, he had taken up the gauntlet, confronting her with the quote: The headline of the review she had written eighteen years ago about his one and only exhibit.

‘It’s so long ago,’ she had demurred, ‘seriously, you can’t still be bothered with a phantom of, how long ago is it actually, seventeen, eighteen years?’

‘Eighteen, to be precise. And yes, it still bothers me, even more because I am supposed to have a conversation with you, as coincidence decided to seat us next to each other in this plane. Charlotte Vermeer, the super-censor, who knows all or at least knew all. Are you still so sure of yourself?’

Charlotte reflected, long enough to give George the impression that, whatever the answer, she really did think that she knew it all.

‘No, actually I don’t know it all that well.’ Her voice faltered, but then she continued more firmly: ‘What I do know is that it would be extremely pathetic for us to start an argument about some piece of text I wrote eighteen years ago. As if we don’t have other things to talk about. I would be very sad if you only remember me because of that article. But, I guess you’re right about the timing, eighteen years. I just had started to write articles for Art InSight.’

For a moment he wanted to let it go, but the indignation of past injustice was superior to the present pragmatic rationality. Injustice wasn’t relative, nor did it become relative over time.

‘Of all people, you should have known best.’ George said. ‘You knew me. You weren’t talking about a stranger. But then again, it’s always easier to hurt someone you know really well.’

‘I didn’t want to hurt you, but let’s not talk about that part, please.’

George, glad that he didn’t have to dive further into the unhappy

story of their brief relationship, turned his focus back to the article: 'Everybody else was enthusiastic about my show. All the architectural magazines I read thought well of it. Only a certain rising star couldn't resist libeling. Art InSight. The very name of it! Have you specialized in slinging mud since then? Hurting wholehearted sincere people?'

'Oh come on. I thought you were tough and could stand a few comments.' She smiled. 'If you want to know, I have started to work for an auction house, ArtSale. My main preoccupation now is sculpture.'

George didn't react at once and she used the silence to continue: 'Not so long ago I looked at a fascinating piece of art, a carved slate. I can show you pictures of it. I have them with me. It's really worthwhile.' Fumbling with his headphones, he ignored her invitation to talk about her activities.

'I can stand it perfectly well now, as I could then. I didn't deserve it though.'

'I wrote quite frankly what I thought about it,' she continued, giving up her attempt to change the topic. 'It's not my fault that the critics on the architectural scene copy one another. By the way, the headline wasn't mine, but some editor's. You didn't deserve that.'

It felt like a small victory. 'Would you write it again?' he asked.

A slight hesitation: 'Maybe.' She reconsidered. 'No, probably not. I still approve of my writing, but I have changed. Not such an idealistic dreamer anymore. Sadder and wiser.' She smiled again, a genuine and disarming smile. 'That predominant compulsive urgency has gone. I see my life differently now.'

George pushed some buttons next to the screen. Meaningless images passed by at short, regular intervals. He tried to hang the headphones on the small hook, but they fell to the floor. Trying to pick them up, he inadvertently looked right into her eyes. Quickly he turned away

to avoid the intimacy. He picked up the headphones and held them awkwardly in his hands, ready to put them on in case the conversation got too complicated.

‘It wasn’t just unfair, it was unnecessary. The exhibit was okay and that’s that.’ His voice grew fierce. ‘I worked myself to the bone to make it splendid. And you had to tear it down. It says a lot more about you than about me.’ He smiled. ‘At the time I briefly considered writing a reaction. As a matter of fact I did, late at night after a couple of drinks. I didn’t dip my pen in poison but in pure alcohol. It was very funny. I think I still have it somewhere.’

He tipped his head back on his shoulders and looked as if he could sense the words that he had penned that evening. He laughed a bit foolishly. ‘It was fun.’ Again he tasted them as if a long-held presumption had been confirmed, then he shook his head. ‘But it was too rude. I would have stooped to your level.’

‘If you can quote from my piece I am pretty sure you can recollect your own fancies and fabrications. Don’t protect me, I can take it.’

‘No. Perhaps you’re right and it is all in the past. But you hurt me badly with that article, especially because it came from a supposed friend. You disgraced yourself with it... But then again, maybe you were right and I didn’t do myself justice with the exhibit.’

This time he dared to look her straight into the eyes. She was older, of course, but she hadn’t changed that much. Time hadn’t done her any harm; on the contrary, she was more attractive, more expressive. She looked a bit pale but that could be fatigue. Her hair was tied up behind her head with a little purple ribbon; a few locks fell on her forehead, which made her less severe, more girlish. At first sight she was as arrogant and untouchable as she had been in the past, but a closer look showed that her soft blue grey eyes had developed an introverted

sincerity. George saw understanding and it reminded him of a fresco he had seen half a year earlier in Florence.

Suddenly he longed to pour his heart out to her and tell her all that had happened in the last months. She would empathize. After all, before the show and her review, they had been intimate companions. She had been safe with him. In a strange way, he knew that he would be safe with her now. No sooner had the sensation struck him than he dropped the idea; it wouldn't change anything, beyond providing perhaps a brief moment of solace. He looked away again.

'I don't want to remember it. I don't want to recollect anything. I don't even want a recollection to recollections.'

During chemistry class in high school, George had had to add potassium permanganate to water. A few purple drops had turned the clear water opaque. One trickle had affected thousands of others. Slowly the turbulences had spiraled their way down.

Despite himself, all of the memories dropped in again.

George

I

George Nobel stood at the edge of the crater that took up the center of the fenced area and he gazed over the immense chaos left in the earthquake's wake. His heart sank. Only a faint intimation of what had once been still lingered. Ruin was everywhere. He recalled images of German cities after the Allied bombardments, but the devastation seemed greater here. Armageddon. Sand and dust whirled across the plain; it hurt just to look. Everything was covered in a haze of soft, grayish-white powder and the sun was no more than an illusion of light, as if his eyes were closed. It made the image fainter, but no less painful.

The only buildings still erect and recognizable were the three large ones at the edge of the enclosure. The cornerstones of his plan, the

pillars of his design. The museum lived up to expectations. The school was worse off, but the church was in the most deplorable state, far worse than the photographs had led him to believe. From its ruins rose a structure, black and pockmarked, standing in stark contrast to light dust and the pulverized remains of walls and roads. The once mighty house of God was a total ruin. The entire roof was gone and both side walls were little more than outlines; long fissures and large holes ripped across their entire length.

Like a colossal spider the remaining ribbed vaults with their giant legs of perpendicular buttresses, tried to sustain the idea of a Gothic church. George spotted a lone gargoyle on top of a buttress examining the devastation sardonically, as if in the end, justice had been done. The façade, however, remained upright, with its soaring relief depicting the Last Judgment still above the main entrance. This was all the more grotesque because the facade was the one element that had now been freed from keeping up appearances, something it had probably managed perfectly well for many centuries. George wondered what the figure of Christ would think of the stone dust that the westerly wind kept feeding into his nostrils. The smell of ruin and decay. Not to mention the majestic position bestowed upon him, granting him the privileged view of the devastated city named in his honor. The doomed figures carved below him, still wrestled for salvation. Estimates put the number of people buried beneath the rubble at several dozen. They would not rise, that much was certain.

George's gaze wandered back over the ruins. He could not salvage this place. On the drawing table, the area had looked safe, symmetrical, structured, clearly demarcated. He only had to put a couple of lines down on paper and order replaced chaos: a road was built, a tower block shot up in seconds, the empty space filled with buildings, architecture.

And when he closed his eyes, he could see the sun and the trees with people beneath these trees people on a boulevard, talking, laughing, shopping. He saw traffic moving in orderly lanes; his lanes. And he saw himself, walking, hand-in-hand with Violetta. No lies. No false presumptions.

He saw none of that now. He could not connect his vision, his plans, to this reality. He realized he would have to tear down the church, his cornerstone, his transition from old to new. Without the church, the whole idea would be meaningless. He had to come up with something completely new. The other buildings along the perimeter, his other anchors, were of no use to him. Disillusioned he turned away from this scene of disaster. He shivered with cold. Even in Sicily, the sun had no strength at the end of a December afternoon. He shuffled into a narrow alley that would have struck him as a dreadful slum under normal circumstances, but which now seemed a bright, sunlit route back to the safety of his hotel. Tomorrow he would have to defend his plan before the local authorities, but he already knew it was no good. And he knew that he was guilty, because he had not bothered to come here four months ago.

II

A dim morning haze enveloped the city, making it hard to recognize any buildings. The mist was the thickest above the river; it seemed to be the source of the impenetrable shrouds through which people trudged in order to get to work on time, in the port, the shops or the many office buildings of Rotterdam. However, the rising sun promised to dissolve the mist. Gradually the skyline became visible. One of the first buildings that the bright sunlight liberated from the fog was a twenty five-story office block located near the highway that ringed the city. The area had no connection to the city at all but willingly took its name. The three topmost floors of this tower were the domain of the American architectural firm, Pearce, Cole & Meyerbeer.

The architects had chosen Rotterdam as the location for their European expansion because, in their view, Rotterdam bore the strongest resemblance to New York; the city gave them the impression

that it would welcome modern architecture. Furthermore, the board of directors had assumed that broad-minded Holland would grant them the liberty to be creative. This was an unfortunate miscalculation since nowhere were the innumerable rules so inflexible; these rules even prevented the company from having its own architects design their colossal office, in the location of choice -- the city center on the banks of the river. But the decision had been made. The firm found a substitute building and leased space. After a few years, the original three top floors were no longer sufficient. A legal firm occupied the floors right underneath, so the architects took over the empty third floor. Officially this new department was called section two, but generally the employees referred to it by its nickname, "down under".

There, in a corner office with view of the meadows, George had worked as a junior architect for eight years, his humdrum position, as he called it. The hope of becoming a successful architect had long faded away. Here he sold other peoples' ideas to anonymous managers of even more anonymous institutions. Here he convinced people to make the perfect choice by contracting with PC&M. This was the place where he defined projects others already had sketched; drew lines of already designed squares; evaluated types of stone, already chosen; calculated the elasticity of glass walls, already decided upon. Sometimes he introduced himself to the mirror: "I am an architect. Pleased to meet you, architect!" He knew it was a lie. But once this lie stood in front him, other ones appeared automatically, like massive stone warriors with cruel spears, lurking with their solid presence. Generally he could avoid them. But if he couldn't get past them, the spears pierced his head like burning needles.

Herbert Jansen, George's superior, had his desk on the same floor but he rarely put in an appearance down under. Then there was Chris

Meyer, George's colleague, abroad for a few years now, struggling to bring a major project in Texas to a successful conclusion. Having Chris on such an assignment was promising, George reassured himself, because Chris wasn't exactly any brighter or smarter than he was. And it was pleasant to have him gone, because George didn't like him. The rest of the space was filled with secretarial cubicles.

George had no trouble maintaining his position, and the title that came with it, because his abilities surpassed those of the many windbags and nitwits with which the company was blessed. And it didn't hurt his wallet. He had a lavish salary. He and Alice lived comfortably. There was a company car and a second car for Alice, as well as a huge residence in the suburbs of Rotterdam. They took three vacations a year: A city trip in February, a tour in Italy in the fall and around Christmas time, a beach vacation in the Caribbean. Life had become a material treat. For that, at least, Alice was grateful to him. George looked out the window, but today, even the meadows were not visible due to the low, depressing clouds.

The ring of the telephone startled him. Instinctively, he closed the computer program in front of him. His personal creations were nobody's concern. A long time ago, he had discovered he could switch between computer programs quite easily with a simple push of a button and having made sure that no one could look over his shoulder, he spent considerable hours of his boss's time inventing the wildest architectural plans. In this way, he satisfied his professional yearnings. He found it delightful to draw his own visions and plans throughout those silent hours.

At the other end of phone line, he heard, with interest, the vice-president of the Dutch holding, Carl Ozmerek, requesting him to come to his office immediately. As he went, George explored the reasons why

they might have sent for him, but couldn't come up with a plausible one. A bit anxiously, he took the elevator to the top floor. In the big conference room he saw two men and a woman. Ozmerek he had seen before, but the other two he had never met. Ozmerek introduced them as Theo Cole, the son of one of the partners of PC&M, just arrived from Italy, and Marian Vercada, the USA/Holland liaison.

'Since Herbert Jansen is on leave, we have invited you to sit in on this new project meeting,' Cole said. He was a young man still, much younger than George, but with an authority appropriate for his position. 'You are his first assistant and in his absence in charge of the division, yes? Please correct me if I'm wrong.'

George hadn't given the matter much thought. 'Yes, I'm in charge,' he said and continued: 'If Herbert is out, I take over. Herbert is a real stayer, though.' His jest went over well and his self-confidence grew.

'And, you are our Italian restoration specialist?' George's heart leapt. Perhaps this was the opportunity. He wasn't sure whether this was a question or a statement, but to be on the safe side he granted that this was correct. And it was. As a student of Art History, he had had a minor in restoration techniques and after graduation, he had attended an evening course in building-restoration for two years.

'Fine, that's settled then.' Theo Cole resettled himself more comfortably in his chair, the attitude of a man who didn't tolerate objections, who couldn't be surprised and who never had to be afraid: 'George, tell me, what is architecture to you?'

Astonished George paraphrased the question.

Theo Cole smiled as if he understood why George didn't grasp his meaning. George felt a certain affinity for the man. 'Do you mean what I think a building should look like, or my opinion on architecture of the Twentieth Century, or what particular ideas I have on what it

should be?’ The last remark perhaps was a too-obvious criticism, but no one reacted.

‘If you had space to build, what would be the first and most important issue you would take into consideration? Which principle should always guide you?’

This was safer ground. George often had played the game of question and answer for an imaginary job interview or the intake of a new project. In case he required it one day. But now it was imperative. The answers came automatically.

‘It has to be light and infinite. Always offering the possibility of going beyond. No closed spaces.’

‘Interesting. Please continue.’

‘Preserve openings, so people don’t get locked in the building. Architecture should be an invitation to freedom, to see beyond and live beyond.’

‘Wonderful!’ Theo Cole looked triumphantly at the others. Even if they had had any objections, they wouldn’t express them now. ‘You are the right man in the right place!’

Marian Vercada dimmed the lights and displayed some slides. Aerial views of a city in ruins appeared, a city that looked as if it had been bombed. George had no clue where this was leading.

‘These are images of Castiglione del Cristo, a small town in Sicily, after it was hit by an earthquake. Perhaps you read about it. Seven on the Richter scale. Anyway, the center, an area of about one kilometer by six hundred meters, has been completely destroyed. We got the assignment to develop a rebuilding plan. I managed to convince the ministry in Rome myself, and it is willing to pour a substantial amount of money into the project. We have a fair amount time, but we can’t tarry. *Capisce?*’

George nodded, as new slides appeared. They showed, in detail, the few buildings that were still erect, albeit in ruins.

‘These three buildings are still standing, in one way or another: The church, the museum and the school. I don’t know whether we can save them. Doesn’t matter what I think. You go there. Record, analyze, examine, do whatever you need. Talk to people. Consider demolition, restoration, reconstruction, doesn’t matter to me, but come back with a plan.’ Again he looked at the others as if seeking affirmation that he had said everything necessary: ‘I’ll leave you now. Carl will discuss the further details with you.’ Marianne Vercada, who hadn’t said a word, accompanied him out the door. Just before Cole left the room he turned back: ‘Pevsner started his opus with the difference between a bicycle shed and a cathedral. A lot of architects don’t understand this difference. These ridiculous modernists deliberately try to squander their poor constructions as architecture. I don’t want a bicycle shed!’

Carl Ozmerek watched while George continued to study the pictures. Finally he said: ‘Fill Herbert in as soon as he gets back, but you are in charge. Any questions?’ George didn’t have any questions. He trembled with the desire to flee Carl’s office and to burst into an exuberant cheer. It was impossible to stay calm. This was exactly what he had been waiting for. No Herbert Jansen to interfere. His own assignment.

After work, in his haste to get home and to share the big news with Alice, he did not follow his usual indirect route, but, feeling invincible, drove along the main road itself. Surviving a thirty-minute traffic jam, he burst into the house to tell her about the meeting. Was it too much to ask that she would be proud of him? Even if she didn’t fully believe in him, at least she could support him.

She wasn't home yet. Suddenly George remembered – she had recently enrolled in a Thursday afternoon course with the paradoxical title, *The Psychology of Body Language*. After class, she usually hung out with some fellow course members to prattle and above all to drink.

George buried himself in the pictures that he had brought home from the office, lost track of time and forgot about Alice. 'We had such fun,' Alice chortled when she walked in at seven o'clock. With her was Harry Feltkamp, their backdoor neighbor, who also attended the course. In George's view, the younger man was a presumptuous bon vivant with the appearance of a sluggish pubescent. He did something in model railway layout, not as a hobby but as a profession, perhaps a sales manager, George thought.

Both were very worked up, with too-high spirits, and, in some way they seemed just too comfortable with each other.

'Hi George. How are you?' Harry tried to bring himself back down to earth a bit.

In spite of himself, George offered him a drink. To see her sparkling with this drip distressed him. Until now he had never had doubted her fidelity. Maybe now the possibility struck him because he suddenly had a reason to believe in the future again. Was he jealous? Alice was a pretty woman and despite her imperfections, he did not want to lose her. The flirting made her desirable. She was wearing a dress, he realized. Didn't she always wear jeans? He felt the urge to punch Feltkamp in the nose.

The three of them sat down on the recently acquired couch, that fitted so nicely in the modern interior. To say that they had found it together, implied that George had been dragged along to precious furniture stores just to that he could pull out his credit card when Alice had made her definitive choice, since, in the end, he was the man with

the money. But in fact, he had gone willingly, because he wanted to make her happy and he thought her happiness depended on a new couch.

‘I have great news,’ George announced. ‘Brace yourselves!’

‘Wait, hear us first.’ Alice laughed at Harry and pushed him forward. ‘Tell him, Harry.’ Harry, clearly uncomfortable, stammered, ‘Alice and I are going to collaborate on a book.’

For Alice the statement wasn’t overwhelming enough so, with a loud voice she proclaimed, ‘Harry is going to make the drawings for the children’s book I’m writing.’

‘Since when are you writing a children’s book?’ George asked without blinking an eye; he was trying hard to disguise his discomfort with the whole situation. Alice had never wanted to have children and now out of the blue she wanted to write children’s books.

‘But George, I’ve been working on it for months.’

George couldn’t prove she hadn’t; she could prove she had, he supposed, but she chose not to. He let it rest. He didn’t want to spoil the positive mood for his own big news. ‘Nice. So Harry can draw a bit?’

‘Yes, really. During the course, we realized Harry is a most talented artist. Aren’t you, Harry?’ George marveled at the ‘we.’ If Harry were so talented, he would probably have been aware of it already. Harry stared quite blankly into the distance as if the liquor had overcome him, then confirmed Alice’s question.

‘Such an imagination,’ Alice continued, ‘he sketches everything off-the-cuff. Unlike you architects with your straight lines.’ Harry giggled along with Alice. But before George could respond, Alice snuggled against her husband and whispered, for all to hear ‘Just kidding, George, I do appreciate your skills.’

‘He showed his drawings in class,’ she went on. ‘Really superb.’

‘Does he take them along to that class of yours? What sort of pictures are they? Meaningful fantasies of tormented souls in probing poses?’ George asked. In his growing annoyance and increasing suspicion, he couldn’t let go of his instinctive sarcasm.

After a slight hesitation, Harry responded hastily: ‘No, I went home to get them. Alice wanted to look at them right away. She never can wait, you know.’ He dropped that last remark with a wink, speaking in the way men are supposed to talk when among themselves. It was a tone that George detested.

Swiftly, Alice changed the subject. ‘Harry, you must read my short stories. I think you will simply adore them.’

‘But,’ Harry burst out, ‘didn’t you say that you have never actually published anything?’ He realized right away that he had made a serious faux pas.

Too loudly, Alice responded, ‘Of course not! That will happen after I’m dead. That’s the way it is with real talent.’ And in a softer voice she continued, ‘I have just not had the opportunity to write. My talent hasn’t had the chance to develop. But I have written really amazing, beautiful stuff. Haven’t I, George?’ She reached for her glass and made a toast to herself.

George wanted to object but kept his thoughts to himself. He wouldn’t denounce her openly, a fatal mistake in a relationship. She certainly had opportunities. George provided money and time. Alice didn’t have to do anything else but to sit down at her typewriter or take up a pencil. But Alice Winter hadn’t turned out to be a writer. She hadn’t managed much more than a single article in the employees’ magazine of the company for which she worked, part time, as assistant (a regional store in a chain of kitchen and home appliances; the shop

window displaying in huge characters that it could deliver the right bag for every vacuum cleaner at the lowest rate). Maybe she had been talented once, when she had seduced George with her letters, with their enchanting, stylistically charming content. George still kept them because they reminded him that she really could have accomplished something once. But back then she hadn't thought it worthwhile to pursue her writing. George thought that the time had come to disclose his own big news.

'But you couldn't possibly do that!' was Alice's reaction when he finished. 'You have no experience with that kind of project. What does Herbert say?'

'Herbert is on vacation,' was all George could say, restraining his resentment. Mentioning that name and the need for his superior's approval was the worst mistrust Alice could have shown.

George kept silent as Alice listed all the reasons why George surely would fail in this enterprise. With every sentence, her head bent forward like a pecking chicken.

'Most likely it will mean my salary will go up,' he tried in an attempt to derail her objections. 'You'll get promoted?' Alice brought her litany to halt. 'Possibly,' George hedged.

'Well, at least that would be something.'

Alice turned back to Harry, 'You will have to show me more of your work tomorrow.'

'I'm going up.' George rose and went to the stairs. Alice's sneers had triggered a mild headache. From the medicine cabinet he took a box of painkillers, but in his haste to open the little box, he ripped the packaging and cut himself on the sharp cardboard edge. A drop of blood appeared on his thumb. He looked for a band-aid in the cabinet, forgetting his headache in the process. Stung with disappointment at

Alice's reaction to his news, he plumped himself down on the bed.

For ten minutes he didn't move, then he rose and picked up the photos of Castiglione. They were unquestionable proof he had gotten the assignment. He saw the enormous devastation in the space between the church, the museum and the school. These buildings seemed to have been spared by Providence from the destructive violence of the earthquake, three authorities that had stood the test against the forces of nature, as if these centers of goodness, beauty and truth had absolute power.

He would show everyone. But first he had to arrange something else. He knew that he would have to go to see Coradetti, but, and George was determined about this, it would be the last time he did so. The new assignment had given him confidence even in this area. Before traveling to Sicily, he would confront Coradetti in Florence and once and for all, he would settle things. If necessary, George would threaten to go to the police. A pity he had to engage in a matter like this, especially now, but in his invincible mood, he was ready to deal with anything. Once he got to Sicily, he would do his research, analyze it and display his expertise. They would all notice him.

The meeting with Coradetti was easy to arrange. Thinking about the obligation had been more distressing than the actual conversation turned to be. After the brief exchange, George just stared into space for a moment and then dialed the number of the travel agency, reserving a one-way ticket to Florence. This was an exact replay of the call he had made so many years before, when he had left for his honeymoon a day early, by himself.

It would stop. The end was near and nobody would ever again think about it. Not even George himself. He sought consolation in the thought that this lie allowed Alice to live the life she had always

dreamed of.

Murmurs floated up from the living room. He thought he heard his name, followed by sharp laughter.

III

The bells of a church, somewhere on the southern slope of Florence, struck four. Slowly George rose from his bed, opened the wooden shutters and contemplated the view from the window of his hotel. Florence, basking in the hazy sun of a late August afternoon. The city seemed aflame and only the brown of the bell towers, the grey rectangular campanile and the cupolas of the Dome and the San Lorenzo interrupted the orange-red pattern of the roofs. This was the way Florence always looked. George appreciated this view, because it encompassed the entire city at a glance. He felt that he could comprehend her from this distance, because from here she was no more than an illustration for tourists, and he found the charade reassuring.

Florence knew she was beautiful and she cherished her looks, self-conscious and superior, allowing her visitors to admire and adore her. But it was hard for outsiders to get a grip on her; she wouldn't be

seized. Florence always kept her distance and the illusion of virginity. She never yielded the secret, the essence, of her allure. It didn't affect her that millions of people defiled her day after day. She opened herself to tourists and visitors, only to drive them out at her pleasure, like a prostitute who submissively allows others to amuse themselves without restraint, until she reaches her limit and expels them. However, soon enough, she would play the tempting virgin again. Florence forever positioned herself before the window shining, apparently unchanged, and as arrogant as ever.

Florence, the city that had become his enemy. He could not see her in any other way. Twenty years ago, he had been here to write his thesis on the architecture of the fifteenth century, in the cloister archives. That was when the lie had started. No, that was when he had begun to live the lie.

George has a dossier with building orders in front of him. He sits in a room with bookshelves on all sides, stuffed with age-old, uncategorized documents. With a permit from the abbot, who had long ago forsaken the world for a life of ordering and cataloguing records about which nobody ever cared, he sat here on the attic of this old cloister. No use, meaning yes.

His heart is pounding. Here's the key. For a full year has he searched for this document, hoping it existed, and now he is holding it. He stares at the yellowed sheet of paper in his trembling hands. He reads the words again and again. They confirm his theory. Finishing the thesis is no more than just rote now. The document lists the payments for every detail of the construction of his church. The proof is unmistakable.

He looks at the date, in the left corner. It's wrong. It's dated 1556. Damn. It's utterly wrong. It should have been one century earlier.

This folio shouldn't exist. No. It should exist but without date. Why couldn't he have found this document without a date? In a flash he snatches the original and puts it in his bag. Copies are easily made and a piece of text can be erased without effort. At that moment, the door opens and Coradetti, the archivist, plants himself in the doorway, a disdainful smile playing around his lips. George looks up, disturbed. Despite Coradetti's support over the last months, George has never trusted him. He is a man who thrives on the unhappiness of other people. The kind that waits for someone else's mistake. Something disastrous was imminent. The man examines George, his bag, the pile of papers on the table and then George's face again. He points at the pile.

'That *busta* is from the sixteenth century. All the documents in it are from that date. You need an earlier date for your research, I suppose. But I thought I saw you putting something away in your bag?'

George feels faint. He wants to sit down, but sways and grasps for the chair. But the chair sways as well. He is in conflict: he wants to lie down and simultaneously he must take action. Black specks appear before his eyes. The archivist scrutinizes George's face. What in the name of heaven is his business here? Smashing George's dream at the last moment? Two years of hard work and an ideal, lie in pieces before him, all reflected in the smirk of a shabby archivist wearing a lopsided tie and too small a suit. It would have been so easy...

George stammers. His Italian crumbles to incoherent gibberish. '*La mia tesi.*' My thesis. What has to become of my thesis? He implores the archivist. '*Cosa facciamo?*' But the archivist is a lenient man. He has a wife and children, for whom he has to care with a very low income. He can arrange something.

'*Lo bruciamo, forse?*' Coradetti suggests.

What is it worth to George to destroy the document, to burn it? But George hasn't any money. Maybe Coradetti has an idea? But the man wants more. George has to understand that he is asking a great deal: to change an official document, to copy it and then to destroy the original is a crime. The abbot would fire him on the spot, he could end up in jail, not be able to sustain his family. After his graduation George will probably have some money to help a poor man. Not much. A small donation to an honest family. That never would be misconceived. No, it would be just. George's head spins. This is becoming absurd. One moment he is writing a thesis and the next he is standing here in a cloister arranging a deal as if he is in a gangster film. One million lire as annual allowance. A trifle, more a token of thoughtfulness.

George's loathing disappears and a feeling of selfishness takes over. His integrity wavers. The words tumble out of his mouth without thought. To close the deal he signs a paper stating that he, George Nobel, will grant for a period of twenty five years one million lire cash to signore Coradetti for proven services in the frame of assistance to his thesis.

He puts the massive dossiers back on the bookshelves, leaves the room and rushes down the grand monumental stairs. Outside, the sun makes him dizzy. He feels himself a fraud, but a competent one; he knows he will get away with it. The copy shop is round the corner. He covers the date and the copy is made. Behind some bushes George puts his lighter to the original. His thesis is saved.

For twenty years he travelled to Italy every summer to pay his debt, but, unlike his expectations, the amount only grew every year. The third year, when he got his job at PC&M, he had proposed to pay the complete sum once and for all; indeed Coradetti had accepted. But the

next year he had shamelessly come asking for money again. Coradetti had phoned just as George and Alice were going out and George had hung up, pretending the man had dialed the wrong number. Alice had eyed him oddly, but he kept up his act and she let it rest. Every year the archivist called and every year he increased the amount. Alice had picked up the phone a few times and had become suspicious about this strange Italian connection. George made up ever more complicated constructions to keep his current, pristine world separate from the wicked world of his long-ago act.

One year ago, after another mysterious phone call from Italy, Alice had asked him frankly if there was something, anything he concealed from her. She begged him to explain. She would accept it. But he held his tongue. The only thing he said was a foolish ‘what could there be?’ and he feigned he was irritated at her lack of trust. Maybe he really was angry, but if so, it was with himself. He still couldn’t explain why he hadn’t taken the opportunity to come clean. Would he give up on himself if he told the truth now? Or would he feel utterly ridiculous confessing to Alice that he had been lying to her all these years. He had meant well after all.

In preparing his assignment for Italy, he had almost been exposed. The tickets for Florence had arrived at his office. Herbert Jansen had returned from his leave, had seen them and – probably out of spite because George had the assignment – couldn’t resist interfering. He called George at home to ask whether there had been a mistake, wondering why George hadn’t booked a flight to Catania. Alice answered the phone, explaining that George was not in.

‘I expect him to be here in an hour. Can I leave him a message?’

‘No, actually yes. Tell Georgy that the wrong tickets were delivered. He should rush to the travel agency to sort it out since in two days he

has to be in Sicily.'

'Peculiar. I will tell him. Thanks.'

When George came home, Alice asked him warily why he had booked a flight to Florence.

'Florence?' His face turned pale, but he wouldn't give up, not yet, not until he was sure the game was over. 'What Florence?' He had become a master at this.

Alice briefed him about Jansen's phone call.

'Idiots, can't they ever do anything right.'

He took up the phone and called the travel agency. He sank lower than he ever would have imagined. In Alice's presence, he scolded the woman of the agency, the picture of innocence, because she was so stupid as to have sent the wrong tickets. He would come in himself to sort things out. He sounded very convincing and Alice believed him. The next day, after he had eaten humble pie, he convinced them the tickets to Florence were really the right ones. It had all been a big mistake. But George knew better.

Without any well-considered plan he got off the bus at Florence's central station. He was engulfed by the crowd and was pulled by the endless stream of tourists who moved, as under a spell, toward the Dome. Along the small sidewalks, busses and taxis honked their way through the chaos. At the facade of the Dome, George broke free of the mass of people and fled via the Ponte Vecchio to the southern bank of the Arno. Here at least there were fewer tourists. At a sidewalk cafe he settled himself into a chair and ordered a glass of wine. Coradetti would wait. And the assignment in Sicily had completely vanished from his thoughts.

He had ended up in an appealing square. About ten tables with

umbrellas stood on a platform in front of a row of small cafes. The side steps opposite them led to the front of a Renaissance palazzo. George ran his eyes over the tables and saw a woman reading a book. The late afternoon sun made her red hair flare. A long blue dress fell loosely around her, but George imagined a slender figure under the folds. Since her eyes weren't visible under her great blue hat, she became unfathomable. He could scarcely discern the fine features of her face. She reminded George of the nineteenth century noble British ladies who, according to the custom of the day, made annual trips to Italy. Every time she turned a page, she looked up and, like searchlights, her eyes smoothly scanned her surroundings. Her glance included George but without any indication that she had noticed him. Then she would sip from her glass – rose he thought – and again delve into her book. George wanted to catch its title. He got up and walked to the cafe in order to pass her table. But the moment he laid eyes on the cover, she moved her hand, covering the title and author with her fingers. As he walked into the cafe, the transition from light to dark made him dizzy. He closed his eyes and while he waited for the flashes on his retina to disappear, he heard a soft voice.

'Permesso?'

George looked up and saw her. He realized he was standing in the middle of the gangway.

'Scusi, signora.' He stammered, scooting aside.

'Signorina, per favore,' she said and continued into the cafe.

He hurried outside. Adjusting to the intense light again, he realized that her book was still on the table. He quickly checked to make sure that no one was watching him, then stealthily walked to her table and looked at the cover. *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, in an Italian translation. Satisfied, he returned to his own table. While the waiter

brought him a new glass of wine, he racked his brains wondering how to get in touch with her. Had he given an awkward or clumsy impression? In search of lost time; why hadn't he read Proust? During a long ago beach holiday, he had started to read it – he clearly remembered the lounge chair in which he had sat, the blue-striped white cushions – but after forty pages he had given up, not because he didn't like it but because he couldn't find the time for it. Alice believed that she deserved more attention and, when, just for a moment, he had dived into the world of Marcel and was drifting on the waves of the endless word-flow, she had called out to him from the sea to come and dive into the delightful water with her.

The woman returned to her table. She looked around, picked up the book, had another look around, checked that her hat was straight and walked away. George stood up and wanted to follow her, but he realized he hadn't yet paid the bill. The waiter stood in the doorway watching him. George stopped at the corner of the street; with one step he would have passed from the waiter's sight. He looked down the street and saw the woman in front of a shop window. She glanced in George's direction. His eyes went back to the waiter who was knitting his brow. Again he gazed along the street. She was gone. Briefly he was tempted to follow her down the street, but reluctantly he turned back to the waiter.

The bed in the hotel was too soft. With George's every move the mattress bounced in all directions. A sheet hung over it, but quickly it came loose, and George felt its folds all over his body. It was unbearably hot in the room. Despite the open window, there was no relief, no puff of air.

He was tired. After he had paid the bill, George had returned to his

hotel. He had taken a shower, but within moments, the heat had made him as sweaty and sticky as before. Spent, he lay down on the bed. The wine must have gone to his head. He could usually handle a few glasses without a problem, but now it felt like he had partied all night. The alcohol made him idle and restless at the same time.

His thoughts bounced back and forth between Alice and the other woman. But if he could think about someone else, did that herald the end? He could reconcile himself to the split. It wouldn't break his heart. He had always stayed faithful, but he wasn't so sure about Alice. Who could tell? Maybe a woman was only interesting for a few years. Probably men as well. From the outset, people were clear and sparkling, like ice cubes in a glass of fresh mineral water. But the water would lose its fizzing vigor and the ice would melt.

The thought of an affair with a mysterious woman increased his restlessness. He recognized the same sensation that he had felt as a child, when his friend, Peter, had told him an evocative story. George was fifteen and so prudish that he thought it unheard-of that a woman would show her pregnancy, implying she had done "it". Peter had told him about staying with his older brother in the big city. How he had gone to the bathroom and had seen a woman lying in the bathtub completely naked. How the woman had gotten up, unconcerned, and had left the bathroom in all her glory. George was deeply impressed, even though the story was second hand. He hadn't even seen the woman, but the image haunted his abdomen. An encounter with an unknown woman had always been one of his most tantalizing fantasies. It had given him fuel to keep his passionate desires glowing for nights.

Coradetti suddenly crossed his mind. He had to pay *Signore* Enrico Coradetti a visit. This is why he had come to Florence in the first place. He rolled over again and could feel the sweat running slowly down his

neck to his back. He got up and decided to go out.

He got dressed, looked into the mirror to straighten his tie and examined his reflection. Just forty-five, enough hair left to keep a comb on the dressing table. Not too bloated. To underline this, he tapped both his cheeks. Too-trendy spectacles. Alice's choice. Maybe a classical style would be more becoming. The thought of leaving for Sicily tomorrow to start his assignment invigorated him.

Once outside, however, he yielded entirely to the fantasy that he would meet the woman again. If the twilight had set in, he would have indulged this dream, undisturbed, in his hotel room, but in the full light of day, reality forced him to wander around agitated and excited. He wanted to find her and at the same time to be untraceable. To be gone. Not to feel guilty. He wandered aimlessly through the alleys of the southern bank of the Arno. From the moment he had lost her this afternoon, he had known that he would meet her again. He had to see her.

Meanwhile he crossed the Arno, finding himself near the Santa Croce. Without thinking, he walked in to a very respectable grand hotel. It was like committing the perfect crime. Self-conscious but not guilty. When he was six and had gone to school without his mother for the first time, he had played truant. He had walked two blocks and had then hidden in an alley, waiting, tense. At first he had been tough, aware of the great mischief, but definitely not afraid. He was up to the world. After a while it just had become boring. How could disobedience be so dull? Gladly he would have gone to school now but the urge to stay away obsessed him completely and there was no way back, except by expiation and punishment. Ultimately his sinful conscience had won and after three hours, he had returned home crying. He had confessed everything to his mother, who had given

him a stern rebuke. But nobody could punish him here in Florence. There would be no need for atonement.

The silence in the lobby was overwhelming after the roar of the traffic. The lights were dim and the air was cool. It was an oasis of tranquility. He walked up to the counter and paid for a room. The lobby was elaborately furnished in Jugendstil. Between the extravagant ornaments enormous mirrors aggrandized the space. Monumental columns, around which huge palms reached to the ceiling, supported the hall. It was impressive without making the visitor feel small. Next to a fan humming softly, George sank in an immense armchair with massive cushions. He closed his eyes and imagined that he was on a faraway island with pristine beaches and waving palm trees; somewhere where no one would ever find him. No responsibilities. A soft breeze washed over him. A tender caress and then a loving voice whispered *permesso*.

He looked up to find a waiter to bring him coffee and saw the woman with the hat. He froze. This couldn't be coincidence. He immediately ducked away. He adjusted his position so that she could not possibly see him, but so that he had a good view of her. She was tucked away in a sofa reading again. Her hat lay beside her and her red hair glowed in the light of the big flamboyant chandeliers at the ceiling.

There was no sign she had seen him. What opening would he use? He couldn't let this opportunity go by without trying something. A light, a drink, do I know you, were out of the question. Too obvious and the woman wasn't likely to fall for something that trite. It had to be good. Literature. But how on earth did you start a conversation about a book? He was ashamed that he hadn't read it. How had he made the first contact with Alice? He was sure he had reached out first. Probably a light, he supposed. He banished Alice from his thoughts

and decided to walk past the woman. Maybe she would show some sign of recognition. He got up and tried to walk self assuredly to the counter to order a drink. She didn't look up. At the bar he turned around. There was no one to serve him so he could gaze around at ease. Nothing unusual. He took out his cigarettes and discovered he had left his lighter in the hotel room. At that moment she looked up. George saw that she had seen him. She mimed as if she were smoking.

He walked up to her and raised his brow. He resembled a cartoon figure, he thought. She took a light golden lighter out of her purse. Bending over her to let the fire go into his cigarette he smelled her perfume and if he had any reservations, they disappeared completely.

'Didn't I see you this afternoon at Santo Spirito?' He spoke Italian and she confirmed in the same language.

'Brunelleschi is a great architect, don't you think?' he started once more.

'Sure, ground-breaking.'

'The San Lorenzo gives an even better impression of his innovative value.' He heard himself babbling and was dismayed at this typical Herbert Jansen statement.

He continued as if he had to give an explanation. 'I am an architect, you know; I'm professionally in Florence. I am not bothering you, I hope?'

As if she realized that she couldn't ignore him anymore, she slowly put her book open on the table. She sat up and examined him closely.

'No, you don't bother me at all,' she said with a smile. George worried that it might be a sarcastic smile. 'And I have never been in the San Lorenzo.'

His self-confidence grew. 'Can I offer you something to drink? After the wine this afternoon I could use a good espresso.' He had used

all of his clichés now.

‘A cappuccino please. And a glass of water. Won’t you sit down?’

‘With pleasure.’ George wanted to sit down gracefully, but the lowness of the sofa made him clumsy. A cushion fell on the ground. She picked it up and kindly tossed it to him.

‘Are you here alone?’

‘Yes, I have to take care of some business for the architectural firm I work for. Then I will travel to Sicily.’

‘Also for work?’

‘Yeah, I have an assignment to build a building.’

‘What else should one build?’ she laughed, and because there was no irony, George joined in her laughter.

‘Indeed, what else could one build? A relationship?’ She ignored the word play. ‘I don’t know,’ he stuttered insecurely. He tried to find a waiter to take the weight from the moment. One had turned up behind the counter so George ordered the drinks.

‘You are professionally in Florence, miss...?’

‘Call me Violetta.’

‘My name is George. Actually you should wear a different color.’

Again she ignored his jest.

‘No, I’m not here professionally.’

He hoped that she would reveal why she was here, but since she didn’t continue, he found another topic.

‘Maybe we could visit the San Lorenzo together? Then you would have a free guide.’

‘Maybe I have to leave tomorrow.’

He considered asking her where she had to go but he let it rest. If everything turned out alright he’d find the answer anyhow. New topic.

‘Is this hotel comfortable? I’ve just checked in and haven’t even seen my room.’

‘Very comfortable.’

Okay, she stayed at the hotel; he had established that. He couldn’t come up with anything else to say, but now Violetta kept the conversation going.

‘George, tell me, do you always hang out on terraces to watch women and follow them afterwards to their hotels?’

He knew he was blushing, but he couldn’t be more embarrassed than this. It was all or nothing.

‘Did it show?’

Violetta nodded commiserating.

‘I was fascinated,’ he continued, ‘I’d better confess honestly.’

‘Really?’ That smile again. She looked at him in a slight angle and George was sure he never had beheld such a woman.

‘Fascinated is a poor description. Mesmerized, enchanted.’

‘And what did you envision then? Chasing her to her hotel and making a pass at her.’

‘No, honestly, neither one nor the other. To tell the truth, it is sheer coincidence that we are meeting here. And however appealing the idea, I am not making a pass at you... At least, there’s more to it than that.’ He wasn’t lying. ‘I wanted to get to know you.’

‘And, so far, is it okay or not?’

‘It’s okay.’ And if that could be taken wrongly: ‘Even better. But I still want to get to know you. What about supper? We could have it here in the hotel or go out?’

‘I’d rather stay here. Shall we say, eight thirty in the restaurant of the hotel? You make the reservation, please?’ Without waiting for an answer, she picked up her book and stood. As she left the lounge,

she turned once more and waved briefly. When George made the reservation, he asked for a table with a view of the resplendent church of the San Miniato al Monte.

Violetta showed up a half hour late, leaving George worried and anxious. But when she sat down with a smile, his concern vanished. She had dressed for dinner and now was wearing a simple short black dress with black stockings. Her long red locks flowed round her face.

He couldn't remember much of their lively conversation afterwards. Time had stopped and the entire evening intoxicated him. The soft light, the wine, the food, but especially her warm voice and her blue eyes -- they captivated and enticed him. He could drown in them and know he would be happy. They talked freely about literature - George admitted frankly that he hadn't read Proust, about Florence, about beauty, about life with all its opportunities. George didn't mention Alice nor did Violetta imply anything about her relationships. They touched on the view and the San Miniato al Monte. It seemed to both of them that the lofty church was watching the city as both guard and master. Nothing escaped its attention, but at the same time it offered a sense of safety. A sphinx with a consoling eye. Having the church as his guardian that night increased George's confidence.

The moment the coffee was served reality returned. George wondered how the evening would evolve. He wasn't necessarily pondering a possible nocturnal rendezvous, but he did want to be with her. Her presence and her voice, nothing else. Obviously Violetta read his mind: 'What about a last drink? One for the road?'

The apprehension disappeared instantly. 'Fine with me; you say where, and I will follow.'

'I really don't feel like going out. Let's make ourselves comfortable in the lobby.'

It didn't matter to George, as long as the evening continued.

They took the elevator to the ground floor. In the narrow space, Violetta pressed herself softly but firmly against him and laughed when he gently touched her arm.

'Here we are,' George said superfluously when the door of the elevator opened. As they headed for the lobby, dance music wafted from one of the hotel's large halls.

'A party, I would guess. We could go in. After all it is Friday night,' suggested George.

'I want some coffee first. Come sit beside me.' She had dropped into one of the large armchairs and she tapped the empty spot next to her. George joined her. She reached for his hand.

'You know, George, I think we are spiritual people. We couldn't go without brightness.'

'If someone makes me shine it is you.'

'But I mean more than that. Take today for instance; after all of this, we couldn't separate just by saying "well, good night, I'll see you tomorrow." We seek meaning that will last forever. It is essential to us. We can't do differently.'

The waiter brought over coffee with sambuca and the break allowed George to ponder her words carefully. Was this a blatant invitation into her bed? Or was it just an abstract statement, an observation on their psyche? No matter how he tried, he could only interpret it as an invitation.

'I'd like to dance,' he said when they had finished their coffee, 'let's go over to that party. The worst they can do is throw us out.'

He knew he was going to cheat on Alice. He tried to get the thought out of his head, but didn't succeed. Then the justification struck him: Alice surely had cheated on him a long time ago. Maybe not for real,

but surely in her thoughts. Her relationship with Feltkamp couldn't be that innocent. He dropped his disquiet in soft pillows of confirmation until they concerned him no longer.

They danced close to each other in the dim light. Afterwards, they went to her room. George undressed and stretched out on the bed. Violetta came from the bathroom, divine and overwhelming. She nestled herself against his back and he caressed her. Instead of talking he looked at her. He stared in her eyes and he saw everything he wanted to see and what he never had seen before. He could fill her eyes with himself and then find himself in them. At first it was a rational projection, but during the passion the image dissolved and he could no longer discern George Nobel as an individual. It was as if he were drowning. She returned his gaze, intense and deeply touched. A well, heavy and dark blue, sprang from the unfathomable deep, at first unknown and awesome; its water, welling up to the surface, became a clear bluish green. It subsided in tranquility until it held no secrets, and its depths could not evoke fear. And at the climax they beheld each other and they didn't exist anymore.

A loud bang startled George awake. Disoriented, he glanced up at the ceiling. At first he thought he was alone as he had been in his interrupted dream. He looked around. No one. The sound of streaming water: the shower. He sank back on his pillow. She was here. It was real.

Soon they were sitting on the bed, having coffee. George wasn't dressed but he had wrapped the sheets around him. Violetta wore a turquoise shift. She sat beside him in lotus pose, her bare arms folded around him. In this position they had talked for hours between bouts of lovemaking. George had been honest and had confessed that he was

married, though his marriage didn't mean much anymore. It was perhaps not completely honest, but after this night probably true. Violetta had mainly listened and George hadn't managed to learn much about her. He didn't know where she came from or what she did professionally. Since she didn't raise these matters herself, he let them rest, supposing that she would clarify these trivial questions later. More importantly, she had shared her feelings and thoughts about how magnificent it was to meet someone who could really listen and understand.

'Chatterbox,' she had said several times, 'you're the biggest chatterbox I know.' But she said it with a soft and tender voice that it encouraged George to keep on talking, about his work, his project, his plans - made up on the spot - to emigrate to Italy, about lies, love, Alice, disappointments. He had gotten up twice but both times Violetta had begged him to stay.

'George, please, it is so cold when you are not with me.'

He had returned to the bed and had taken her arm: 'I will never leave you. I will stay, Violetta. We are so fantastic. It would be a disgrace if we were not together.'

They had finally fallen asleep round six, intertwined, dissolved. George dreamed that they had bought a villa in Tuscany, planning to rebuild it. He had set his drawing table up on the porch.

'George, tell me, how important was this night to you?'

She cuddled in his arms and looked into his eyes. The question had an unusually ominous tone to it. He tried to answer loosely: 'Why, what do you mean, how important?'

'I have to know. I need to know who and what you are.'

He sought her eyes again and perceived himself within them, so answered honestly: 'It was probably the most important one in my life.'

‘How will you remember all this?’

‘Wait a second. I’m not saying farewell. I want to spend the entire day with you. And tomorrow and the day after.’ And forever, he added in his thoughts.

‘I’m not saying goodbye. I just have to leave now.’ George panicked. ‘But don’t worry,’ she continued, ‘I will be back this afternoon.’ Her smile warmed him.

‘Where do you have to go to?’

‘Doesn’t matter, just some things I have to take care of. But still you haven’t answered me.’

George put on a vapid face. ‘Which question?’

‘What kind of a man you are.’

‘Quite normal, I would say. Average, why?’

‘Are you the type that is going to hate, who gets infuriated? Or are you a nice guy that understands, accepts, treasures?’

Her question triggered the recollection of pain, which made him feel anxious again. He didn’t want to hear again he was nice. Nice. He wanted more than that. He had been there. Twenty four and in love. The girl had fled from her parents’ house, hoping George could provide her with protection and affection. Nothing had happened that night. But then was not now. The events of the previous night reassured him.

‘I don’t understand,’ he tried to sound naive.

‘If I were to leave. If we weren’t to be together any more. How shall I put it?’ And softly she added, looking down, ‘It’s so sad that people can become full of hatred when they learn that it is over.’

‘I don’t know. I know I am not sad, at least not at the moment.’ And with further emphasis as if to convince himself, ‘And it isn’t over.’ He wanted to disregard the whole conversation. ‘I am very cheerful.’

Resolutely he persisted: 'When will we see each other?'

'I will be here at five, all right?' She hesitated one moment. 'Sorry about what I've said. I've disconcerted you with my questions and caught you off guard. Don't worry.'

'What shall I do in the meantime? I can wait here for you.'

'Go for a walk. Enjoy the city.'

'Well, I could go to the cloister of the San Marco. Have a peek at the frescoes again.'

'Yes, do so.' She got up and draped her stole round her shoulders. 'I really have to go now. I will be back at five. Goodbye, love.' She gave him a kiss and left. George remained motionless for half an hour.

What he indisputably had to do was to pay Coradetti a visit. Expel him for once and for all from his life. Not by paying the man but by making it clear it was over. Coradetti could jump in the lake with his threats. George felt liberated. He didn't have to hide anything from Alice anymore, least of all his fraudulent thesis and his submissive journeys to Italy to pay off his debts. One little mistake of the past wouldn't hurt him anymore. He got dressed and decided to visit Coradetti at once.

Because he wasn't sure of the way from the hotel to Coradetti's home, he decided to get back to the city center and, from there, follow the familiar route. The sun was shining and life seemed a feast. Florence, which had always invoked so much tension in him, had become a cheerful Italian town; honking cars, for once stopping as he carelessly crossed the streets; women, giving him a friendly eye as he looked at them; cafes, diffusing high-spirited Italian melodies, mixed with the sounds of radios and televisions coming from every house and apartment; the cacophony delighted his ear. From the cathedral he found his way and, undaunted, he walked into the narrow streets

that led to Coradetti's house. The sky was no more than a small gap between the towering medieval buildings. Every step drew him further in the dark. How gladly would he have backed away and escaped to the hotel on that joyful piazza in the sun.

'*Signore Nobel, come sta?*' Coradetti asked him, opening the door with a friendly smile. He wore a new suit but it still didn't fit him. Bought with my money, George suspected.

'Fine,' George answered. He rejected the invitation to step inside. No need to; it could be settled in a minute.

'Listen carefully. This is the last time I'll be here. I'm done with the payments. You can do whatever you like, but it's over. Your blackmail has lost its power.'

'Blackmail?' The man looked indignant, but at the same time, there was fear in his eyes. 'Blackmail is for police inspectors, or for the movies or television. Not for us, scholars and historians. Don't have the police involved. That would be offensive.' He looked skittish around. Frantically, he took George by his shoulder and he tried to lead him indoors. 'Nobody needs to spot us here, on the street,' he whispered.

'Don't you touch me! And I won't come in.' George thrust him away, more fiercely than he intended and by accident he brushed Coradetti's face. The man took off his glasses and passed his hand across his eyes. '*Aiuto*,' he whined, 'you have become completely insane. We will call the police! Are you going to beat up a poor man? Where will it stop? We are not barbarians.'

George worried that this would get out of hand: 'We are not going to call anyone. The one thing I'm telling you, is that it has stopped. No more payments. No more phone calls. Nothing.'

The man regained his spirits somewhat. 'Maybe we can arrange the whole thing in a final settlement, let's say a final two million lire. You

are rid of me, and vice versa.'

Coradetti had somehow managed to suggest that George was the nuisance, but George felt that he had the upper hand. The unintentional contact had created the right effect.

'I never ever want to see or hear from you again. Get it?' The man would give in. One more convincing bluff would do it. 'If I ever hear from you again, I'll be back.' Feeling quite ridiculous, he added: 'And not alone!' Without further delay he walked away triumphantly. He knew that he had gotten rid of the man and he couldn't understand why he hadn't done this before. He had let too many people hold power over him. Now he was unassailable. Violetta had created this state of mind. He couldn't wait to revolt against another former tyrant. Alice would be his next victory; she would not control him either. He had eliminated every possibility of returning to the marriage when he had walked into that hotel. And he was proud that for once in his life he had shown the courage to pursue his own happiness.

He would fly home and make it clear to Alice that he didn't see any future for them, no, first he would confess that he had been in Florence. No. Not confess, just tell. He would not shout; that would immediately make her defensive. Quietly, he would tell his story, without any restraint. Not arrogant, but unwavering. And she would have to recognize that George had no other choice. Violetta was on a different level. Alice and George were history. The fact that he wouldn't go to Sicily struck him as completely irrelevant. Work was secondary.

He wanted to leave this neighborhood now as fast as he could. He got away via a side alley, heading south, with the hunch he would hit the Arno again. The alley seemed at first to be a dead end, but then he spotted a small passage. Quickly he passed under a few large arches

and he found himself back in the sunlight. To the left he saw the high trees in front of the hotel where he had spent the previous night. Barely three hundred yards from Coradetti's house. But the two worlds had nothing in common. Even had he known beforehand, he would have preferred the longer route with its gradual transition to the sudden separation.

He decided to visit the cloister of the San Marco. He and Alice had never been there, so the location would not be tainted with memories. He observed the sunlit walls of the cloister. In this setting, he could relax. The light fell on the old walls and all details were visible without rendering the view harsh. The sun burned his face and caused spots when he closed his eyes. His thoughts wandered. Violetta appeared, as she had the previous day and then again as she had been lying in bed. Her questions of this morning had frightened him more than he wanted to admit. She had spoken loosely at the end and she had assured him he shouldn't be worried, but now, with the strain of the meeting with Coradetti gone, they gnawed. Reluctantly, he had to face the option she wouldn't be there. Would he be made the fool? A guy who couldn't constrain his lusts on a business trip, or maybe a man who had finally found his true love but had immediately lost her? Both ideas were ridiculous. Or maybe he wasn't a fool at all but pitiable? Because it hadn't been that way. Because he had been right to chose this woman and to betray Alice with her.

He opened his eyes and saw an olive tree. All of the shades from green to silver twinkled in his eyes. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed a poster hanging at the entrance to the cloister. In the background it had a fresco by Piero della Francesca. A woman knelt next to the frightened figure of Christ in a dancing pose, receding, afraid of being touched. But what struck him wasn't the figures themselves. It was

their setting, in a garden with lush trees and a fence behind them. Not just a fence. Exactly the same fence that he and Alice had chosen for their garden in a bedroom suburb with uniform houses and uniform gardens, separated by fences, apparently famous for ages already. With pointy tops so no one would climb over them.

Now that he had seen the light in Violetta's eyes, Alice was no more than an insipid cloud wasting its rains above the sea and only capable of obscuring the sun as it shone on other people. Maybe she wasn't that innocent? Or was he deceiving himself as an excuse for his own infidelity? He pictured Harry Feltkamp. He pictured Alice walking along the garden fence to the gate at the end of the lawn, with nervous steps, dancing away like the figure in the painting. Furtively, she looks over her shoulder to be sure nobody is watching her. She stops for a moment at the roses, huge white ones, George's pride, and collects a few to take with her. She looks stealthily around again, opens the gate softly, then she treads through the alley to the opening in the hedge ten yard further. She walks to Harry's house. No wait, first she does something else: she removes the pin from her hair and shakes her head to free her blond locks so that they fall loosely around her face. She inspects her clothes and, with a short cough, she opens the small gate, without knocking, and inconspicuously walks along the gravel path to Harry Feltkamp's kitchen door. She slips in quickly. This is how it would happen.

He opened his eyes again and he no longer saw Florence. How could this be, how could he be preoccupied with the greyness and banality of his old life, here in this place in the sun? He tried to blot out the images of his house, his garden with the fence, his wife and his neighbor. Slowly but steadily, the olive tree, the light and the warmth of the present returned. Violetta had been joking, he was sure. She would

be there tonight. And Alice? Too bad for Alice. He couldn't make her happy, so she had better get involved with someone who could, the backdoor neighbor if she couldn't find anything better. George would never again have to see the fence from his past. Violetta was his future. She had challenged him this morning. Let him know she wasn't a toy to play with. No cheap affair. She really wanted something. She would be there.

The sun was already casting longer shadows in the court. Confidence restored, George left the cloister, returning to the hotel where his new life would continue. No regrets. If happiness were there to take, it should be taken. And George would.

Excited he made his way down the *corso*. It had become busy. All the shops had reopened. He looked at his watch, confirming that he was late. Only ten minutes to get to the hotel. He hurried through the thickening crowds.

Sweaty, he rushed into the lobby of the hotel. A couple of minutes to go. No problem. Time enough to catch his breath. Violetta would think him silly the way he stood there. From behind the plants he watched the counter. She hadn't come yet. Should he go and freshen up? He decided just to sit, and without thinking, he took the same couch as he had the previous day, only twenty four hours before, but an afternoon from another life.

No sooner had he sat down than the receptionist approached him.

'George Nobel?' he asked softly.

George was surprised. 'Yes. What?'

'I have a letter for you. The lady in question said a forty-year old man wearing glasses would arrive here at five. Pardon me, the description was hers not mine.'

George paid no attention to the man, and grabbed the letter. The

envelope was the hotel's stationery. In small but strong capitals spelled out: To the attention of Mr. George Nobel. It had to be from Violetta. No one else knew he was here. He tore open the envelope. Inside was a small slip of paper, a page from a notebook.

George, dear George,

I have to leave. It can't be changed. Please don't ask me why. It is what it is. This morning I asked you what kind of man you are. Please don't be a vindictive man. Don't spoil last night by hating me, or even by being angry with me. Of course, you are entitled to be angry. You have all the right in the world to curse this life, fate, this town, everything, save me. George, I say farewell. You won't see me again. Be the man that I think you are. That unique wonderful man, that loves.

Violetta

He read and reread the letter several times. His mouth fell open, but no sound came out. Finally, a silent scream. 'Why, damn it, why?' He got up, his face distorted to hold back the tears. He turned around, looked at the counter and in his head the voice yelled again: 'Why? What happened?' Back at the desk, he addressed the receptionist.

'Did she say something? Anything?'

The man shook his head and walked away. George wanted to follow him, but realized that there would be no point. He headed for the exit, leaving the hotel for the city that remained untouched. The city that had become his enemy again. Florence, basking in a late hazy sun.

For hours he roamed, hoping he would find her. And although he knew it was absurd, he didn't think it was desperate. Yesterday she had

arrived in his life out of the blue. Exhausted, he finally sat down on a bench at the Santissima Annunziata to get some rest. It had become dark and the cool wind chilled him to the bone. He fled into the shelter of the forecourt. Above the marble rectangles of the frieze he noticed a fresco. His view was immediately pulled into the antique bay window that it depicted, reached by the painted steps that led into the fresco and that created its depth. On the stairs a group of people formed a circle. But the middle of that circle was empty. There was just a large gap. This redirected one's gaze from the center to the side; a woman was seated on the steps, just outside the circle. She seemed to have distanced herself from the group, leaving the story for a moment, and taking this opportunity to look at the beholder and to make a statement.

George kept staring at her. No, the woman kept staring at him. He couldn't describe what captivated him. The melancholy face, the imploring look, praying for redemption. Helpless, but then again so compelling, so strong. A pleading sadness of unfulfilled longing. Suddenly he knew who she was. It wasn't Violetta, and certainly not Alice. He knew. This morning he had thought about her.

The whole night he kept looking for Violetta. Around midnight he went back to the hotel for the last time. He hung around for a while in the lobby and for a moment he flirted with the idea of drowning his thoughts in a frenzy of alcohol, that temporary memory eraser, but after one whisky, the idea appalled him. It tasted too much of defeat. Realizing that the last place he wanted to spend the night was there where they had been together, at two o'clock he returned to his first hotel.

The night was terrible. A mosquito prevented him from sleeping; he realized that he should get up, put on the light and smash the bug. But he remained in bed, shaking his head in an attempt to ward it off.

The buzzing stopped for a while and he dozed off uneasily, half waking again, floating in a vague grief but landing eventually with a fearful shock on the inevitable misery. Thinking logically about what had happened caused him perhaps even more torment than the delusions of his imagination. In the morning, he would take action. He would call the *Capo di Lavori signore* Bosoni in Castiglione del Cristo and tell him he couldn't attend the meeting, they would have to reschedule. Maybe they could send him all of the materials with which he would work, especially photographs.

More importantly, he had to buy a ticket. A second ticket from Rotterdam to Florence, a one-way ticket. Florence would be his destination for once and for all. First he would go to Holland and tell Alice everything. Then he would collect his stuff and depart for good. To Florence. The rest of his life he would search Violetta. That was indisputable. There were no other options.

IV

‘Do you have the opera tickets?’ Alice’s high voice cut through the house. As if they would not hear enough high notes tonight.

George pulled himself together, ‘Yes, they’re in my wallet. You can take them.’

‘No, better you keep them.’

Another useless conversation, he decided, listening to the gurgling water as it flowed down the drain. He looked at the empty tub where Alice had been lying. Renovating the bathroom had taken a year. They had gone together to a quarry to select the marble, going over hundreds of color samples. At first George had taken charge of the enterprise, but after hosts of curses and months of Alice’s scorn, he had to admit that being an architect didn’t mean he could renovate, and he had called an interior designer. In the end it had come out more or less all right. A lot of tiles were askew and a few taps were wrongly connected, but

the bathroom as a whole was an improvement. Their marriage hadn't changed much, though. A modulation to a higher key, like in a pop song: a moment of promising anticipation, but a few bars later the trick turns out to be a repetition of the same melody.

Alice used to bath after him. She fancied undressing provocatively while he was lying under the suds. He only was allowed to look when she had put on a playful, see-through nightgown. With one toe she would test the temperature of the water. Hastily, she would withdraw, only to repeat her act, as George called it. When she finally had one leg in the water, she would hold up the other one for at least half a minute, scrutinizing the soap bubbles attentively. She would hold the gown above her knees with both hands, in a pose that reminded George of a Greek goddess bathing with her Naiades. George used to watch in suspense, well aware that she was performing this ceremony because she delighted in it and not for fear of the hot water. It aroused him every time.

And then it happened.

'Did you remember to turn on the dishwasher?'

The damper of the untimely remark broke the spell. Instead of an enchanting nymph, it was Alice's mundane self that slid into the water. She could enthrall him and she did, sometimes, but just as George had completely surrendered to the illusion, she would drop the distractions. 'George, did you hang out the laundry?' or 'Tomorrow I have to go to class at nine.' One time, in a moment of stormy passion, George, still wearing his shirt, had asked, 'shall I take it off?' She had answered: 'No, it's rather funny.'

He had always looked for her, but she had always closed her eyes to him, literally. He had seen ecstasy in her face; it had always been good, but he never had seen her with fully open eyes at the moment of their

greatest intimacy. And everything he hadn't found with Alice, he had found with Violetta.

He had hoped to be proud of her, of Alice Winter the writer. Dreamed that she would win a renowned literary prize and at the presentation he would step forward from the background and congratulate the winner, after everybody had tried to court this lovely lady of course, in vain. When it was time, he would say: 'Alice, let's go', leaving all the others devastated. Was it a sign of maturity that he had stopped dreaming of himself as the hero who audaciously rescues the fair maiden locked up in the castle's tower; or was it just too sad for words that even in his dreams he had no greater ambition than to dwell on the idea of being the hero in his wife's shadow? But his dream about Alice never had come true.

He hadn't said anything after his return from Florence two months earlier. Not to anybody. At work he had lied that everything had gone extremely well and to Alice he said nothing at all. His bravery had vanished completely during his flight back. On his way home from the airport he had shredded his new flight ticket – back to Florence, to Violetta – and he had thrown the snippets out of the window of his taxi. Scattered in countless pieces, his flight details had come to rest in the dark on the wet asphalt.

Yet he was still looking for the right moment to tell her the truth. Maybe Violetta wasn't a possibility anymore, but Alice had clearly become an impossibility. But it shouldn't be cheap, or too simple. It felt like he was already divorced. He was alone when she was there, conscious of their separation on the most practical level. On the bookshelves he saw her books and his books, where there once had been their books. He didn't even see their names, only the ownership: Alice's. But she still didn't suspect anything.

‘Shall I put on my grey jacket or the new black one?’ George shouted to the mirror. He heard Alice moving around in the living room. He repeated his question, louder. The noise downstairs continued. Where was it written that he had to answer, but not she?

‘Fine, I’ll will wear this stupid brown thing,’ he said angrily, picking up a too-small jacket from his student days. He knew Alice hated it.

When he entered the living room, George saw the contempt in her eyes at his clothing choice, but all she said was: ‘Please hurry, I don’t want to be late. Last time we barely arrived in the nick of time.’

‘That idiot shouldn’t write five hour-long operas. A decent working person doesn’t even have time to eat his supper. What is it tonight? Again that endless German nagging about those Niederringen?’

Alice paid no attention to George’s weak attempt to be a cultural nitwit. ‘Yes, part four. *Götterdämmerung*.’ She handed him the booklet that she held and laughed, but not with amusement. ‘Prepare yourself. This time it takes even longer than five hours.’

‘Ah yes.’ He browsed the booklet. ‘We will all perish in grand style, isn’t it?’ He remembered how this music had once captivated him and he loathed playing the cynic now. It felt as if Alice were forcing him to deny himself the things that were precious to him.

‘Just come now.’ Alice said in the doorway, automatically putting her arm around him.

Castling about for an escape, for years, death had seemed to be the only alternative. Death as relief. Anything else was only prolonging the present. They looked for their seats and he suddenly realized that there was another option. One he had never dared to face. Presumably he had to hit rock bottom before he could see this way out. Tonight he would touch the bottom.

‘Here are our seats,’ he said, tarrying between the chairs on the

second balcony and looking back at Alice.

‘Even worse than last time,’ he murmured, referring to the seats.

‘Maybe we can look for better ones during the intermission. Look out for empty seats when the opera begins.’

‘You know I hate that.’ George sat down and reconciled himself with the idea that if he wanted to see anything on the stage, he would have to look down at an angle.

A reasonable perspective could only originate when all the former ideas were dead; the way his church, struck by the earthquake, would have to be taken down to its fundamentals to let new walls, new arches and new windows come into being; windows to let the light shine through. It didn’t make sense to put new layers on top of the decay. They would conceal the misery, but eventually the rottenness would emerge again. The layers would grow into crusts, hard and mean, and the iniquity underneath wouldn’t disappear. For so long he had done exactly that, putting layer on top of layer in his attempt to cover up his mistakes.

A huge fortissimo from the orchestra interrupted his thoughts.

Maybe the idea of letting the whole world perish in a cataclysm of fire and water wasn’t such a bad one after all. On the final day the world could get a new appearance, making room for something new, something better. Didn’t the future announce itself while the past was deteriorating? A tree with dead branches could flourish again only when it was pruned. Until then, the sick boughs would absorb all the light, sucking up all the energy and water, keeping the resources to themselves. Wasn’t that precisely why people died: to make room to their children? Viewed in this light, all of the dying in the world made some sense; it allowed progress. Coming to himself, George scoffed at this perception because under no condition could he ever accept this as

a logical world-view.

He tried to remember when his life had taken the wrong turn. Had it been the first lie or the repetition of that lie to Alice? Was the repetition of a lie worse because the opportunity to come clean remained unused, or was it less bad because it only stemmed from the first and was therefore less essential?

He had made up so many lies over the years. Lies only he knew about. Was he unique in this? Probably not. Every human being had to bear his own lies, a lifelong burden. He thought, if each person harbored a hundred lies that were never revealed, then there had to be billions of hidden lies in Europe alone. Not to mention the rest of the unknowns, not lies, but secrets, thousands per person. Billions and billions of facts, thoughts and feelings that no one knew about. Lies and secrets, suspected or unsuspected, but whose presence must define every encounter. Everything was coated with untruth. What had Violetta kept secret? What hadn't she told, what thoughts and feelings had she really had that night? Did she know from the start that she would leave the next day without saying a word? Did this possible deceit immediately stain the beauty of the encounter, or did its beauty only exist for George himself?

Maybe it had gone wrong when he had walked into Violetta's hotel? Was it just the fact that he had slept with her? Or had there been no distinctive moment? He didn't know. Was he seeking connections and symbolism where there was nothing but a sequence of facts, without causality?

During the intermission they got up in silence and headed for the lobby. It was packed. The force of the crowd pushed George along, and without resistance he went with the flow. He turned around a couple of times to see whether Alice was following him, but she was sandwiched

between some people and couldn't move. He considered trying to wait for her, but realizing that she was indifferent to the separation, he didn't summon the energy to fight the crowd. The distance got greater. He recollected the night with Violetta and a feeling of shame emerged.

After twenty minutes when the bell rang, they hadn't spoken more than three sentences to each other. They had spent the entire intermission just gazing about, holding their glasses. Was it hatred or indifference that he felt for Alice? Indifference, he thought, and he despised himself for it. Alice had once told him a dream in which they were sitting at a table together, no more than just expressionless companions, and they had been sure: this will never happen to us. There will never be a time in which being together would have no meaning.

Once they had spent a two-week vacation in a mobile home on a deserted camping site somewhere in Tuscany. The inconvenience, the heat, the thorny grass and the sharp stones on the way to the bathroom stalls three hundred feet away, the lack of shade while the sun was burning from eight in the morning until seven in the evening, the lack of running water and other primary facilities --it all had been so horrible that they decided never to return. However, there had been magnificent moments like drinking grappa from plastic cups by candlelight. The pervasive smell of thyme had been more powerful than even the chirping of the crickets, because when he later reminisced about that vacation, it was the scent that always came immediately to his mind. Holding hands, they had talked for hours. How unique they were. That for them this special bond would always exist. For a long time, those nights had been, for George, the definition of paradise.

As an adolescent, fantasizing about his ideal woman, George had

always pictured her within existing friendships and social contacts. Imaging himself with her, he always saw his friends surrounding them. Never were he and his dreamt loved one alone. She would only add to his life and enhance existing situations. He never pictured her living life on her own.

The conductor had again found his place before the orchestra.

The first girl he had been in love with turned out to be unreachable. She thought he was nice, but that was it. He had learned to live with this rejection and began to think that women were only food for dreams. But when he had fallen in love with Alice, he had come to believe that he didn't need anyone other than her. Thoughts of other people being around were annoying. For George, it was enough to be together; nobody had to show up to fill the stage. There would be no supporting characters in his life with Alice.

Sitting beside her as the music swelled, he couldn't grasp that feeling anymore; he knew it had been there once, but now it was lost forever. They were too far away from each other. This was the table of Alice's dream. He knew that, with this sudden new reality, the walk home would be a trial. But he couldn't imagine any scenario for their interactions during the time between the safety of the performance and the very end of the day. Instead of trying, he only wanted to think about Violetta?

'Alice, I don't feel well. I feel ill. Maybe it would be better if I went home.' He hesitated for a second, understanding that this wasn't enough; too weak. 'It has a bad ending anyhow. Opera always ends badly, but this opera ends extraordinarily badly. And besides, I really dislike the tenor. Such a show-off. It seems they select tenors for that trait.'

'But I think it's beautiful.' Alice responded.

‘Well, it’s a long-winded way to point out that everything’s a big mess.’

‘I agree, it takes a while, but the music is dazzling. And it’s not all bad. I still see hope.’

‘You don’t get it then. Even our big hero, the one who is supposed to be so righteous, eventually devolves into an immoral puppet of coincidences, intrigues and lies. He would be better off lying down beside Brünnhilde at the ending of the previous opera, never to get up again. You know, that Wotan is the only one who sees what’s right, despite having only one eye. Mark my words, he is no better than the rest, but at least he has some perspective. And do you know what he does? Nothing. He’s not striving for anything any longer. He just sits in his fortress waiting for the end, no honor left for him. Literally he ceases to play any role. Everything that started well or had the intention of goodness in it has been corrupted, overcome by reality. I think this is the most pessimistic piece one can imagine. In other operas you have at least the good guy against the bad guy and although the bad guy kills the good guy, the good guy remains good. Here everything is misery.’

‘But the end has hope in it. That last melody, the one you love. Stay, please, you’ll see it all ends well.’

George didn’t respond. His elucidation had upset him too much. He knew that he was talking about more than the twilight of the gods. He had to tell Alice everything. Be clean with it for once and for all and then wait to see what happened afterwards. He had to find the courage.

‘But George, if you really want to go home, I’ll walk with you. It’ll give me the opportunity to spoil you and tuck you in.’ She meant it, but at the same time she was lying.

He hesitated again, making a last attempt to postpone his confession: 'You know, you stay here. You are so fond of it. And I think you really like that Siegfried-fellow.'

The answer was too slick: 'But George, the only man I'm interested in is you. You look very distracted. What is the matter?' She took him by the hand and he plodded next to her. Together they left the opera. As they neared their home, his pace slowed, and Alice took that as a sign of his illness. She grabbed him tightly, and patronizingly ordered him to take it easy. He looked at her as she walked beside him and she gave him her arm. His wedding day came to mind, but his memory deceived him. He was sure it had been cloudy then, but in his mind the day had been sunny and everyone had been happy. Had he deceived everyone or was everyone wrong?

At home Alice immediately went to their bedroom.

'Here, your old pajamas. Nice to have them on between the sheets.'

Delay wasn't an option anymore. It got more deadly every second. Didn't she suspect it was all a charade? That he wasn't ill at all and only wanted to be alone? No, he wanted to be with anyone except her. Think of Violetta!

'Alice, I have to tell you something.'

'It can wait till tomorrow.'

'No, it can't. It can't wait a second any longer. It will become unbearable.'

The die was cast.

'You remember, when I went recently to Sicily,' he looked at her almost imploring her to understand what happened; not to make him go through this ordeal. But nothing in Alice showed that she understood which way the conversation would turn. Maybe she really didn't know

or maybe she just wanted George to struggle with his confession: ‘Yes, I remember. When you had the wrong tickets. To Florence, wasn’t it? Kind of stupid that whole business.’

‘Very stupid, indeed. But it wasn’t a mistake by the travel agency.’

‘What do you want to tell me?’ Her voice became a bit worried now.

‘I ordered the tickets for Florence myself. I wanted to go to Florence.’

‘But what in heaven’s name did you have to do there. Visit one of your sweethearts?’ The cynical contempt in her voice reassured George that he was doing the right thing.

‘No, I don’t have sweethearts. Look at me. Don Giovanni in person. Don’t make me laugh.’

‘Sorry, I was only joking. I know you don’t do these things.’

For a moment George felt like telling about Violetta as a proof for his amorous qualities. But he withstood the temptation. Confessing to two lies on one evening would be too much. First Alice had to know about his years-long swindle of Coradetti. That ought to do. Moreover Violetta shouldn’t play a role in this. He didn’t want to taint her with this squabbling. His confession tonight would be enough to make Alice rush out of the house to go stay with her mother. Concentrate, George! Purpose of tonight: not to be with Alice.

‘I never went to Sicily. I went to Florence to arrange some things.’ He waited whether this had any impact. But Alice was stubbornly silent. She stared at him with an open mouth, as if to encourage him to continue.

George continued: ‘I made a mistake once, long ago. I have been fixing that mistake for years.’

He had expected it to be difficult, but the words came without effort

now. He felt as if he were talking about someone who had forgotten to pay for an item in the supermarket.

‘But what, for heaven’s sake, did you do wrong?’

‘I lied. For years I lied to you. Even when we went on our honeymoon.’ He looked straight into her eyes now. He could do it. It was so easy. ‘I committed a fraud when I was writing my thesis and someone helped me to do it. In return, I had to pay him every year.’

He didn’t feel any shame, any embarrassment, any humiliation. Nothing. Not even relief. It all was nothing, because it wasn’t about anything anymore.

‘You mean all your trips to Italy, and the times we were together and you had to visit Florence for businesses. Was that why you left for the honeymoon one day early?’

‘Yes.’

‘And how much did you have to pay that person?’

‘One million lire, each time.’

Alice burst out laughing, a fake laugh. ‘I always knew there was something fishy. Those calls. I once thought you had a girlfriend there. Or who knew, a child. I didn’t dare to ask, but what you are telling me now is preposterous. Hilarious. No, you are ridiculous. And that’s what you are worried about?’ When her laughter had died down, she continued: ‘George, I don’t believe anything you have said. You are talking nonsense. What is really going on?’

‘This is the truth. I kept it secret from you. And now I’m telling you. And you are laughing.’ George felt his rage growing. She was putting aside as ridiculous something that had dominated his life for so many years.

‘Yes, but it’s all so silly. George, if this is what you want to confess to, I pardon you. Do you still feel ill? I will tuck you in. But don’t dream

up any more exciting blackmail tragedies, you hear.’ All sincerity had left her voice.

He had completely miscalculated her reaction. What he had told her wasn’t enough. Maybe Alice didn’t love him much, just enough not to throw away her comfortable life based on some lies. She wouldn’t endanger her cozy existence. And she would use his admission against him. He knew this for sure. Despite his honesty, he had reached the opposite of what he intended. Not only was she still there with all her irritating habits, but now he had given her another reason to look down upon him. He had struck lower than rock bottom. He went to the guest room and slammed the door, above all angry with himself.

The next day, Alice left early. As soon as he heard the door close, he got up, picked up the telephone and browsed the yellow pages. He found what he was looking for.

‘*Break Point*, lawyers and mediators.’

‘My name’s Nobel. You do civil cases? Divorces?’

‘Certainly. *Break Point* is the designated partner for matters of matrimonial disputes, divorces. We have a range of specialists...’

‘Can I make an appointment?’

He set a time for the next week and hung up. From the small writing desk he took a piece of paper and wrote down the name and the number of *Break Point*. That was all. He left it in sight on the desk and went upstairs. Quickly he collected the few things he wanted to take with him: some clothes, toiletries and the documents of his Castiglione project. Next he booked a night in a good but not too expensive hotel downtown. For the last time, he looked around. Then he went to the front door and, without looking back, walked out and left it all behind him.

The end of the street was closed for repairs, so to leave, he had to

drive back through the neighborhood. As he slowly passed along the street behind their house, he saw a red car, exactly the same brand and type as Alice's. He already was too far to distinguish the license plate. Should he turn back to be sure? But he was sure, more sure than He had ever been, that Alice was at Feltkamp's. And Alice had lied as much as he had. Or, she hadn't told the truth. What was the difference? He wished that he had known a year earlier. Then, he would have gotten angry, now he was just empty. A vague sense of tremendous sadness pervaded his spirit. Did it have to end in this perfidious and sneaky way?

V

George didn't know where to start. Not that there was much to start with. But, he thought, at least he could unpack some boxes. Put some clothes in the closet. He looked at the boxes he had brought from the attic of his old house. He hadn't wanted to take that old rubbish along, but even less did he want to leave it with Alice. Stuff he hadn't seen for ten years. A journey to the past. He kneeled on the floor and opened a box at random. In it he found a pile of papers, a little box with pictures, some study notes. Letters to Alice, from when they had first started seeing each other. He started reading but could only get through one. This was utterly the wrong moment for such memories. The happiness sprang from the pages. How could he destroy this? But he didn't want to keep them, sitting in a box in the attic until the day he died. Now that they had shown up, he hadn't the heart to burn them. It was much easier with official documents from an archive.

His eyes fell on a few photographs. A picture of his graduation, twenty-odd years ago, with his father proudly standing next to him. Another picture, taken around the same time. Probably because he wanted to drive away the thoughts about Alice, he looked more closely. He was sitting with Charlotte Vermeer in his dorm. The picture had been taken before the devastating night that had ended everything between them. In the photograph, they both looked so happy. He wondered whether she had overcome her bitterness towards men, whether she now was happily married. Strange to look into the past realizing there would be no future.

Reluctantly, he put the picture aside. A set of snapshots of George's family vacation in Italy when he was six, drew his attention. He was lying on the beach behind his sand castle, his head high, his eyes squeezed shut against the sun; it could easily be mistaken for a haughty look. Tom and Nicole, his siblings, were lying somewhat further, behind the castle they had made. George had insisted on building his own. He smiled inadvertently at the memory of this headstrong child.

He picked up the boxes and put them in the little storage room beside the kitchen. It was unlikely that he would go in there before the next move.

November had set in. George had lived in this apartment on the eleventh floor for more than a month and though he didn't feel at home, he was glad he was here. It came completely furnished, which had allowed him to settle in immediately. The large windows showed him Rotterdam from every direction, and George had to admit the views of the surrounding bridges were impressive.

Did he miss Alice? He didn't think so. She just wasn't there; maybe that was a kind of missing. But if their marriage had been good, shouldn't he Miss her, with a capital M? This simple syllogism allowed him to

deduce that their marriage had not been good and that therefore he needn't have any regrets. The world was very clear if you looked upon it rationally. But now when he sat alone at the table in the evening, it was different from all the other times he had sat alone at the table because Alice had gone out.

He had tried to get some structure into his life by shopping for groceries on schedule and eating at regular hours. If he didn't want to lose control he would need order. So that first night he had sat promptly at the neatly set table, with napkins and candlelight, alone. No instant food, but an extensive meal, which he himself had prepared; he had cut and cooked the vegetables and had fried the meat himself. The candle he had omitted the next night, because he thought it was too pathetic and more, because the candle had dripped some wax on the glass table. It had taken him an hour to remove the dirty globules. He didn't want to attack them with a knife, lest it scratch the table. He tried to wipe them away with a towel, staining the surface even more. At a loss, he finally went to work with a knife, cursing when he realized that he had not only made a terrible mess, but had also damaged the table. He bought a tablecloth and left it on.

He knew he had to do something, anything, but hadn't gotten further than a couple of visits to the local cafe. It was small, not more than a bar and a few tables. The second time he went there, the bartender welcomed him as a regular customer. The same people always occupied the same stools at the bar, and George wondered what inspired these people to gulp pints of beer and look for each other's company, here in this dreary place, day after day. It annoyed him they were already familiar with him. It seemed to him that the moment he walked in, all customers inspected him and called him to give account for his presence. He returned their looks and felt out of place.

He took his coffee to a table, took the spoon and stirred it until it dawned on him that he hadn't yet put any sugar in it. He focused on trying to invent a reality in which he could feel normal; he seemed to think about nothing else these days. Normally he was quite good at justifying his own weaknesses. About four years earlier, Alice had insisted that he quit smoking. She had nagged him for months until he had agreed. Of course he had started again within two days. He had made another attempt. And another, five times in all. Each time, Alice called him a pushover. Finally, during the sixth attempt, he had lit his cigarette with full devotion and had decided, for once and for all, never to stop again. As he told Alice, he had his strong and his weak sides and he didn't want to give any more clout to the weak sides. He told himself that this was a Nobel insight and a strong argument; it was a sign of strength to acknowledge one's own weaknesses.

He wanted to construct a clear rationale to settle the internal conflict about whether he had acted rightly by leaving Alice. But it must be an argument that left Violetta untouched, so she would stay good. Eventually, he found the solution to his dilemma. Oddly enough, it was Alice who provided the key. He convinced himself that his early feelings for Alice had been similar to those that Violetta inspired. But those sentiments had gotten lost; Alice had become boring. She had grown tired of George and he had become disappointed in her. In this way, Alice was to blame; George was not guilty and Violetta was a woman with visionary gifts. She had been right to vanish before their future turned out the same way -- perhaps it was so for everyone. Violetta had shielded him by leaving. However, the insecurity kept gnawing. He could not quite shake the idea that Violetta was just a vulgar swindler and that he had -- understandably, but still -- just cheated on Alice.

Having broken the monotony of the days a few times by visiting the cafe, he got tired of it. It was better to hang around languidly at home. His new apartment with the anonymous furniture had the advantage of being completely free of recollections. Here, guilt and parting haunted him less. Nevertheless he paced the living room restlessly. He would look out one window, then stride across the room to another one, as if seeking an external impulse to action. But the view from the windows was always the same. It was one of those autumns with barely cloud in the sky and he could imagine that he would continue to see it in every season: the promise of a morning in the spring, the warmth of a late summer evening or the serenity of a cold winter afternoon. Behind glass they would all look alike. George was relieved that he was here, elevated above the turmoil, beyond time, not tied to any place.

But he couldn't fool himself entirely. November had already begun but he wasn't in Castiglione del Cristo and time was running out on his project. The only thing he had done so far was to make some general sketches, bearing no relationship to the existing situation. For years he had played with the same designs: various curves in space struggling with gravity and finding their counterpoint in a freestanding soaring needle. Now for the first time he had a way of actualizing them. But it was all too abstract. The pictures from Castiglione offered too little. He hadn't gone to Sicily, although he had occasionally called Herbert to report that everything was going well, telling him that he needed time at home to elaborate on his plans. He stopped by the office once in a while, but asked Herbert not to disturb him during his creative drifts. George found this phrase repulsive but knew that the expression would win Herbert over. As indeed it had.

'Georgy, good old boy, you go working with your creative drifts.'
George knew that the patrons from Sicily hadn't done anything

alarming, because Herbert would have surely have mentioned it. But at the moment, George's main occupation was staring out of the window. He knew that he had to come up with something before the end of the year. Perhaps a new visit to Sicily. George corrected himself: a visit to Sicily. He had thought about the lie of his presence in Castiglione so many times that the deceit had inadvertently replaced the truth.

Two thoughts strove for the upper hand. The first described complete failure, exposing George Nobel as fraudulent architect. In the second fantasy, he was revered: the acknowledgement of George Nobel as genius, the architect who made the impossible possible. Neither was true of course, but he could evoke either without problem. Not that they helped him. He would simply have to get down to business and make the best of it. Forget about Violetta and Alice. Go to Sicily, as soon as possible. He had to pick up the gauntlet. To begin with, he had to call the supervisor of the activities in Castiglione. He needed documentation. Detailed photographs, old building plans, former contracts, municipal development plans, names of construction firms and subcontractors, the state of the clearing of the area. With these he could begin. And if then the creative drifts still wouldn't come, well then, he couldn't help it anymore.

He made a resolution. If during the next ten minutes the sky stayed cloudless, he would make the call that very morning. If someone later should start writing the book *George Nobel, the Man and his Architecture*, he could give an enigmatic answer to the question of how the Castiglione project had transpired, that no cloud had appeared at the sky.

Again he looked out of the window. The stream of traffic went on endlessly. Dusk was falling and cars had turned on their lights. In long lines they moved from one traffic light to the next. It pleased him to

see this. He was glad there was life down there, and even more glad he that he didn't have to mingle in it.

Monday morning found him sitting at his desk. He had convinced himself to make the call, but he kept staring at the telephone in front of him. After half an hour he woke from his musings: the thing rang, as if it were tired of waiting. His older sister Nicole was on the line.

'And how is our single man doing?' came the light-hearted question.

'Have you already spoken to Alice?'

'Yes, she called me.' Nicole reported that Alice had mainly called to complain and had shared little information. But Nicole was concerned about George. She invited him to come visit her for a few days. She had a week of vacation coming up and he must be lonely. At first George declined the offer -- he had lots of work to do and he had to go to Italy to discuss his project -- but eventually he had agreed, relieved. It would be much easier to get started from Nicole's place.

George had always preferred Nicole. Although their paths had parted, they were on the same wavelength. At crucial times in his life she had been there for him: as a student when he wanted to cry over a lost love; as husband when he didn't know how to respond to Alice; now, when George was completely at a loss.

Nicole lived with her son in an exquisite villa by the river. Her life at first sight seemed to be blessed and George thought she deserved it. Immediately after high school, she had started to study law, putting all else aside. On Friday afternoons she had taken the train to her parents' home to do her laundry, heading back to university before the break of day on Mondays to be on time for class. No parties, no alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, sex, or anything that might make her life pleasant. "My

time will come,” she had answered people who wondered about her. And from her point of view, the time had come. After five years she had graduated summa cum laude and had immediately been hired by a law firm. She had defended the greatest criminals, rapists, drug-dealers and murderers. She hadn’t turned up her nose at any riff-raff. Then she had left it all to start a company on her own. Saving money, making plans, meeting the right people. She had opened a bailiff’s office, and the money had started to pour in.

Six and a half years ago, she had decided she would take a son. That was the way with Nicole. Not, I want a child, but I will take a son. She didn’t want to have a man around, so she had registered at an adoption agency and, despite being a single mother, with her legal connections, she was given a boy, white, likely to be intelligent and originating from a well-to-do, but unknown family. Thim had become her son. To the outside world, he was her only soft spot. Thim meant everything to her.

On the agreed day, George packed his bags. Inspired, he had been working like a madman. Not having made the call for more material, he had designed his plans on the basis of those first pictures. He was still lacking detailed information about the current state of Castiglione but he reckoned he would be capable of filling the gaps on the fly. George was proud of what he had done. He had transformed his initial sketches into detailed building plans, with concrete, executable project descriptions. These were buildings, clear as glass, which could exist. Aesthetics and functionality! At his drawing table, George had renewed the area of devastation. The church should be restored. The museum could easily stay as it was and the school would need only minor repair work. With these three elements as fixed components, his

plan took shape. No tangle of alleys with small stone brick houses, no dark and gloomy labyrinth as a cradle of misery. Rather there would be three broad, tree-lined avenues, studded with arcades and porticoes, which would house shops and cafes. Here people would feel at home, safe and confident. They would stroll in the late summer sun, casting long shadows on the light stones of the pavement, or drink an espresso in one of the many bars. In the winter, huddled against each other, they would walk from one shop to another, in the radiance of the colored lights, carrying gifts, happy with the presents that would make their loved ones happy. He had laughed because even with so much sentimentality he didn't get tears in his eyes.

The avenues would lead to the central plaza, where a completely new architectural structure would arise, the central entrance to the three original buildings. In the space between the avenues, spheres would reach up, elongated; curved spheres in space, high-flying, finishing in three minimal points, not quite touching each other, the meeting point scarcely visible to the eye. Not stone, brick or marble, but glass, completely transparent, almost invisible, supported by the underlying steel construction. It would be more a sculpture than a building and it would organically unify the three separate structures.

Within the spheres, a new space would emanate, star-shaped, with a monument in the middle commemorating the victims, consoling, vulnerable and intimate, but also challenging; a thin pillar, hundred feet high, slightly oblique, almost transparent, made of reflective, clear travertine. It would be an accusing finger, held up to the sky, while soaring away from the earth that had shaken. Thus not only would Castiglione have its revenge, but George would as well. He would shake off all of his frustrations in one tremendous expression of aesthetics and no one could attack him anymore. The beauty would survive and

nobody would mention truth or righteousness any more. This was the privilege of the gifted artist. None of his motives or actions, or even his benevolent intrigues would matter anymore. This mighty revelation of stone and glass would correct everything. No one could observe it unaffected. Not even Alice; it would negate all her jeers. Violetta would regret her departure - he deluded himself with the idea that it meant nothing to him anymore. The entire staff of PC&M would bow before him. His mother, Tom and Nicole. They would all have to admit that George had been right to go his own way. Only his father would understand him.

A childish delight had taken possession of him when he had printed the sketches, neatly notated, pasted all of the parts in the right spots and tucked the whole into the firm's logo-covered folder. Then he had started to work on the model; with cardboard, toilet paper rolls, matchsticks and cellophane. In a toy store he had bought model-railway-trees and he planted them on his avenues in the model. It was exactly like those he had made as a student, maybe amateurish and a bit ramshackle. But it met his objective, and put shape to his plans.

Once it was complete, he ceased to worry about the plans themselves. And he could not bring himself to think about how they would be valued in Sicily and whether they were appropriate. From every angle he had taken pictures and had included them in the official maps. He made photocopies, sending one set to PC&M and a second to *Professore Salvatore Bosoni, capo di Restauro Generale* in Castiglione.

For a moment he was unsure whether he should take them with him to Nicole's house. Useless, he thought, putting them on the cabinet in the hall. But, just before he left he grabbed the sketches and designs and packed them. He was proud of his work and carrying such valuable objects was exciting. The model he left at home. When he got to his

car, it wouldn't start. After several fruitless attempts, he picked up his suitcase and took a taxi to the station.

One hour later Nicole and Tim warmly welcomed George into their home. As the three of them sat at the table, six-year old Tim enthusiastically bombarded George with questions, while Nicole watched them, bemused. After Tim had gone to bed, they drank coffee at her new designer table. George reached for the fancy sugar-bowl but couldn't figure out how to open it.

'How is dad?' He recognized as odd the fact that he never asked after his mother. His father always was the focus. His mother belonged to his father, not other way round. It went with his father's character. He retained this autonomy, while his mother was secondary. She might come up later in the conversation.

'Not very well,' Nicole replied slowly. 'The last time I was back I thought things were going badly. He is coughing constantly and he is getting absent and forgetful.'

'He always was. Once I thought it was his way of not getting too involved with his surroundings.'

'It has gotten worse. It's starting to look like dementia. He barely ever gets out of his chair.' She laughed. 'He reminds me of a geostationary satellite.'

'A what?'

Nicole expounded on how she had come to this remarkable perception. It seemed to her to be a fine name for essentially a very lamentable object, forever caught in the delicate balance between gravity and its own acceleration. It was too fast to fall back to earth, burning up leaving behind a last overwhelming - albeit very brief - track of light; something people would notice: "did you see that

satellite yesterday? Wasn't it beautiful?" And then again, it was too slow to escape and thus turn its back to this earthly existence, setting out on a journey never to be seen again. People would ask: "where did that satellite go?" and, not knowing, would answer mysteriously: "departed, destiny unknown, on a grand journey." But it was neither of these. The satellite was, for once and for all, geostationary, with the result that, deplorably, it had to continue moving in order not to leave its place but would forever stay where it was.

'Do you ever use such metaphors in court? You are completely misplaced in that bailiffs branch of yours.'

Nicole shrugged her shoulders. She knew George had his doubts about her profession.

'Maybe he should start painting again,' George suggested. He tried to picture his father in front of the easel, but he was sure his father wouldn't agree. He regretted that his father did nothing but at the same time he agreed with the choice. Hadn't George himself actually agreed with Wotan? The deity was the one who had renounced the collapsing world. It was the only acceptable decision. But his father was a sympathetic Wotan: he remained on stage because others wanted him to. Otherwise, he would have sneaked out silently, leaving through the backdoor. But he was called upon as a husband and as a father and he didn't want to place himself above that duty. He did what he had to do, but no more than that. It didn't call for admiration, rather pity at the opportunities lost. He had given up painting, the only passion into which he – although an amateur – had put enormous energy.

In his fifties, he had taken it up as therapy. He suffered from an ulcer and the doctor had advised him to engage in something more than just the misery of his job. At the community center he had learned to use oil paint. Under their system, anyone who could count, could paint,

matching numbers on the predesigned canvas with their corresponding colors. Later, he disliked being reminded of this infantile beginning, because he had followed that with several serious classes. He had started to use larger canvasses, painting landscapes from his own imagination. Always landscapes. Still with a classical composition, with foreground, middle and background, a tree as repoussoir, sometimes a desolate house at the left, then again at the right, a path or a river winding into the distance. Threatening clouds in the background. He had a good instinct for it. Without actually noticing that he was painting like Poussin, Hobbema, Ruysdael and romantics like Caspar David Friedrich, in five years the entire History of Art past on his canvasses. And then suddenly he didn't know how to continue. George once poked his head into the spare room that his father used as a studio. His father was rubbing away a layer of paint with his hands. When he noticed George, he put down the tube and picked up a paint-brush.

'I have to say, I have no idea what I'm doing,' he declared straightforwardly. 'I have no idea how to carry on. I don't want to leave figuration, and at the same time I know it is a dead-end.' He waved vaguely at the canvas before him on which hardly any nuances could be distinguished. 'It is just a thick paste of paint. Everything mixed in massive layers on top of each other.'

'It's called impasto-technique,' George supplied the term.

'Don't mock me.' But he said it with a smile: 'I do know the word, you know.'

'It still can develop into something nice,' George tried pleasantly. 'From the struggle with matter the most beautiful art can emerge.' He gave his father a jovial slap on the back.

'What! It's a mess. Rubbish. And you know, George, you are to blame. You gave me that book.'

George knew what he meant. He had given his father – completely in good faith – a book on nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting as a birthday present. He had hoped to inspire him, but it had exactly the opposite effect. From the moment his father had observed the paintings of Turner, he had been caught by the clash of light and darkness, and especially by the merging of figuration and abstraction in one and the same image. This left him with only one goal: to go on from the point where Turner had stopped.

‘I fall short on technique and vision and creativity. I have to admit I don’t have the talent to do this,’ he said solemnly.

‘Lack of creativity isn’t the issue. I’ve seen a lot of masterpieces in the past years, from Arcadian landscapes to extensive abstraction and from classic pieces to symbolic impressionism.’

For a moment his father looked at him, as if insulted, but immediately they both began to laugh. ‘You should have become a tour guide instead of an architect. Symbolic impressionism, bite me!’ he sneered, then continued more seriously: ‘Monet I can handle but that stinker of a Turner has ruined it all. That’s what I meant when I said your book was the kiss of death. For months I have worked myself to the bone, first white surfaces with on top of it layers of blue, yellow and black paint. Then the reverse, making everything black to start with and then trying to impose clear levels and shining tints.’

Again George couldn’t help laughing: ‘Adrian Michelangelo Nobel’s struggle with matter. Quite different than sweating in city hall.’ And his father had replied with a sincere smile. ‘You know what you are doing when you draw a building on paper. Not me, I don’t have any real technique. That’s why I don’t know how to obtain specific effects. And if by chance I find them, I am afraid to proceed with the painting, because I know I can’t repeat what I’m doing.’

He put down his brush and cleaned his hands with turpentine. 'Come, let's have a drink.' They left, and from that moment, the studio became a spare room once more. Adrian Nobel never touched a brush again. The ambition had turned his passion into a hell for him. He couldn't win the battle and had forfeited by giving up his dream. Since then, he had sat in his comfortable armchair in the living room, observing the view from his window: a landscape with a tree in the foreground and a winding path vanishing in the distance under heavy clouds.

'I don't know, he isn't up to anything anymore, it seems, but jolly me doesn't jump out of bed every morning either.'

Nicole went to the kitchen to make fresh coffee. When she came back, George casually took up another subject: 'I didn't make that remark gratuitously, just now. You are way too good to be a bailiff. Why stay on this job?'

'It's good money.'

'Good?'

'*Pecunia non olet*. Someone has to do it. I do it well. And if I didn't do it, someone else would. So out of pity for my victims I keep at it.'

'Did you force people out of their houses today?'

'It is so cheap to pretend that they are pathetic people. They are the ones who incurred the debts, not me. By the way, if you'd like to know, I am a very humane bailiff. I never deliver the writs just before the holiday season, with a message they have to pay ten times their loan within three days. That is something that most of my colleagues really love to do. Standard procedure: Friday afternoon at four o'clock ring the doorbell of those losers to be sure that their weekend will go down the drain.'

‘I couldn’t do it.’

‘I know, George. Maybe neither can I, but I just do it. I get up each morning telling myself I have to do it. Maybe you have to be unrelenting with yourself. Actually, I think you have begun to do that. I mean, breaking up with Alice.’

‘Maybe. I just stagger along.’

She studied George for a while. ‘Any regrets that you and Alice didn’t have children?’ And immediately she added as afterthought: ‘However, now it is convenient.’

‘No, you know, Alice didn’t want to. And I didn’t bother that much.’

‘It enriches your life, I can tell you that.’ Nicole used every opportunity to justify her choice. ‘You don’t know what it is to have a child. If you think it’s the ultimate bourgeois choice then you are utterly mistaken.’

George gave an honest reply: ‘You know I don’t think that way.’

To avoid a painful silence Nicole continued: ‘It would be wonderful if you could spend more time with Tim. It would be great for him to have a father figure.’

George wanted to tell her she could provide a father figure herself, but he didn’t want to continue the discussion with her. He was tired. After the weighty news about his father, he now wanted to wrap up the conversation with simple matters. Trivial items like who will do the groceries tomorrow or who will take Tim to school. Practical prattle.

‘How is he doing at school?’

‘Very well. He is number one in his class. Can you imagine? He wants to be an architect. Like you.’

George laughed sincerely. He never had shared his own doubts

about his job with anyone, and certainly not with Alice, his father, or Nicole. Everyone presumed that George was an accomplished architect. When they spoke about his buildings, for which – as he phrased it to himself – he had sharpened the points of the pencils, he covered by describing proudly how all the difficulties had been overcome or how they had implemented cutting edge technologies in their latest designs. He wondered if this was the right moment to confess that he viewed himself mainly as a phony. Architect. What's in a name?

While Nicole poured a glass of wine, George wished for one person in the world to whom he could speak honestly: 'Really? It should be an appealing profession.'

Nicole gave him a look: 'Why? Is something wrong?'

'No, but it isn't easy. For instance, I am working now on a huge project in Sicily, after the earthquake.' Nicole nodded to show she had heard about it. 'And I have some ideas but it's very hard.'

'But you will succeed in the end?'

'Sure, in the end. But it isn't easy.' He realized he had said the same thing three times. I will call Sicily tomorrow, he said to himself. I will do it. Nobel, you will do it. Aloud he said to Nicole: 'Thanks, you really helped me.'

Nicole shrugged her shoulders, confused: 'You're welcome.'

'Have you heard anything about Tom and Yvonne lately?' In spite of his exhaustion, George couldn't keep himself from asking.

'They are doing okay. He has an exhibit in the city. I don't know what Yvonne is up to lately; I am not that interested. Buying make-up, I gather.' It was no secret that Nicole and her sister-in-law didn't get along very well.

'Have you seen it? The show, I mean?' George asked.

'No, you know how I value his art.'

‘You could do it out of courtesy.’

‘No, I am beyond that. I do things because I think I should do them, not because I have to.’

‘Don’t get upset. I wouldn’t like to go there either.’

‘Our autonomous artist!’

‘What?’

‘That’s what he calls himself nowadays. TOM - in capitals - autonomous artist. It’s on his card. He has discarded Nobel. Too high-flown. He will only reconsider the name when a prize is named after him,. At the moment, it reminds him too much of dad. He would never produce sloppy kitsch the way he did, he says.’

‘Dad will be pleased to hear that.’

‘Well, he considers Tom’s work trash anyhow. Pee on a pitchfork, he used to say.’

George laughed: ‘I know.’

About a year ago George had told Tom what he thought of his art and had expounded on his perception of art in the second half of the twentieth century in general. He had described it as a period of anti-art and, unfortunately, he had suggested that his brother was a part of that. The artists should recognize this and quit. One statement by Dubuffet was fine, but they need not repeat it for seventy years. Unfortunately, they hadn’t quit. As artists, they all remained old-fashioned romantic idealists, thinking they were all geniuses illustrating their own individual expression. In George’s view, their output and products were worthless.

Tom had picked up this idea of George’s and had ingeniously combined it with another conversation in which he and George had discussed Hegel. A few months after that George had read an article in which Tom Nobel had presented himself as the epitome of the end of

modern art, heralding a new era. He called himself the one and only artist of a generation who, after the Art and the Anti-art, had reached the status of Syn-art. It was all too unsavory for words.

Tom had meanwhile renounced form as well as content; at least that was how George understood it. The last time they had spoken, Tom had exerted himself to convince George, using his failed study in mathematics: ‘The discussion of form and content claims that they must be one and the same. I have risen beyond that discourse. Form and content are both empty containers. It’s simple math: $Ax + Bx = C$. In my work this means form and content times Essence equals the Constant Object. A and B are the parameters, form and content, that only get value from the variable x: the Essence. When there’s no essence, there is neither form nor content. I add the essence. I fill in form and content from essence. That’s the key. That is art. Whether the object gets a certain content or form is of secondary importance. But as you probably will understand with your mathematical perception, in a given object and with my essence, form and content are reciprocally independent of each other. But essence comes first. That is the force that evokes awe in people, moves them, lets them shiver, cry, laugh. My audience understands that.’

With all the sympathy in the world and despite all his art-historical knowledge, George couldn’t make heads or tails of this. But he had to admit his brother’s art was a booming trend, well received by the holy hotshots of the art magazines, galleries and museums, as well as by the snobs desperately looking for something new to arouse the envy of their equally elitist neighbors.

Nicole continued: ‘You must be familiar with his creed, his new vision on art? He has daubed that equation on a canvas of twelve by eight feet and hung it pontifically at the entrance of his exhibit, as

if it were Einstein's famous one. He is even writing a book: *TOM, mathematically de-formed de-objectivism*. He is becoming a guru.'

'I don't want to hear anymore. His is such a pathetic, small world. I'm tired and if you don't mind, I would like to get some sleep.' George emptied his glass and got up.

His bedroom was cold. A white fluorescent lamp spread cool light on the frugal furniture. The bedspread and the sheets were folded over and on the night table waited an ashtray, an alarm clock and a small light. On the bed affectionately lay a washcloth and a towel. Nicole clearly wanted him to feel at home. It made the room even sadder, sitting in an urban development with the same houses one after another in depressing cheerlessness while the architect had tried to excuse his crime by planning little beds of flowers and a few timid trees between all that misery.

George walked to the sink in the corner of the room. Tired from the depressing conversation, he put his head under the tap and he felt the cold water running through his hair. He touched his skull behind his cheek, and tried to imagine how he would look without flesh, hair and all the rest of the superficiality, without form or content, only his own skull, naked. How would he look when he were dead?

He lied down and smelled the aroma of fresh laundry. Grateful that he was here, he turned out the light and looked through the skylight above him. He heard an airplane and he raised himself a bit to see it, but the window deceived him. It didn't offer a broad perspective on the sky but rather was just a narrow hole to the outside world.

He remembered that as a child he used to lie on the couch, rocking to and fro, dreaming away while his father played the piano. When his mother would rebuke George, urging him to action, his father had always taken George's side. 'You have to give him some room. It will

turn out all right. He's not absent, he has plans.' It was said facetiously, but with a promising undertone. His father would then stop playing and take little George for his nap. 'Our George has something on the ball. He will surprise us all.'

His last thought before he fell asleep was how he would guide his father and Tim through Castiglione and how he would draw the boy's attention to the specific elements in the new construction.

The next morning George walked with his nephew through the neighborhood. Nicole had gone off shopping and Tim had wanted to go to the playground. Tim was cheerful and he talked nineteen to the dozen.

'Uncle George, shall we race to see who gets to that pile of stones first? The winner gets ice cream!'

It was too late for George to object. His nephew was racing already. George doubled his pace; he even wanted to run, but with his heavy black raincoat, his tight tie and his Italian shoes with extremely slippery soles, he couldn't do better than a brisk walk. He felt like an old man.

'You lost,' the boy shouted. 'You owe me an ice cream. Shall we have it right now?'

The sun had disappeared behind the clouds and the air felt chilly. At the same time a bleak wind came up. Wasn't one penalty enough? Did misery always have to come in multiples?

Fifteen minutes later they entered the local ice cream shop.

'What would you like?'

'Seven scoops. All flavors.'

George decided to forget all of his grown-up restraint and completely go along with his nephew's impulsive rashness. What did it matter if people thought him ridiculous? He ordered two bowls with all seven

flavors. They sat down at a table by the window.

‘Why is it actually Thim with an H?’

‘I don’t know, but mama likes Thim with an H better than just Tim without. She says it is really Thimo.’

‘But then, why not Thimo in full?’

‘Because I think Thim is much nicer.’

‘But I can’t hear the difference between the two of them. Do you?’

‘Yes, Thim is much nicer.’

‘Of course. It’s absolutely crystal clear to me now.’

For some time Thim was absorbed in his seven scoops. Then he looked up at George seriously, as if considering something.

‘Uncle George, would you buy me a dog? Secretly? Mama doesn’t have to know. I can keep him in my secret garden house.’

‘A dog? In your secret garden house? Do you have a secret garden house?’

‘I’m going to build it.’

‘Of course. I should have known. And you want to keep a dog there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just tell me what kind of dog. Large, small, long-haired or one with those sad eyes?’

‘No, a Beagle. Like Snoopy,’ came the ardent answer.

‘Snoopy’s cute,’ George had to admit.

‘Will you buy me one, please?’

‘Relax. Why secretly? Why can’t mama know about it?’

‘She says a Beagle has dig-claws and he will ruin the grass.’ The boy stated it with sincere indignation.

George laughed. He cracked up. Thim was looking sort of dazed, as if he had done something improper. The other customers in the

shop looked up, disturbed. Every time George tried to get a grip on himself, it started again. It had been a long time since he had laughed this way. This was spontaneous laughter, not the benign kind necessary in reaction to one of Herbert Jansen's jokes or one of Alice's faux pas. No, this was a joy that hadn't touched him for a long time. When he calmed down, he asked: 'Dig-claws?'

'Yes. Those paws with bony tough stumps, which dogs use to dig. But a Beagle is very sweet and if I tell him he shouldn't do that, he won't. I'm sure!'

'As far as I am concerned, you can have your dog. I will give it to you personally. And it will always remind me of our time together this morning. But I think that we do have to discuss it with your mother first.'

Back at Nicole's he called the office. Herbert Jansen answered the phone.

'Hi Georgy. Still in Sicily? Not done in by the mafia, yet?'

George pretended to laugh: 'No, I'm in Holland at the moment. Did you get my plans? Maybe we could review them tomorrow or the day after?'

Herbert insisted that he come to the office right away. George took Nicole's car but had to stop at home to pick up his model. In the car he prepared himself for the conversation.

Herbert, nicknamed Bigmouth at the office. Cheating on his colleagues, using everything to climb the ladder in the company with the sole goal of money, money evermore. Wary on anyone else's success, he always had to put George down. 'Georgy, I'm sure, if you only had the opportunity to show your real architectural self, then the world would be amazed', he would say, while, as George's superior, he kept

every assignment to himself. It was impossible to win. And if George ever presented an idea for a project himself, Herbert would come up with much bigger plans for a far greater project, probably made up, because if George asked Herbert about it a few months later, it would turn out that – according to Herbert – it had been temporarily set aside. George recognized this tendency of Herbert’s; George always had, even as a child. Before the Nobel family had moved to a new house outside the city, George had shown his friends the plans, proudly pointing out his own room. One hanger-on, Ronny, had rained on his parade, stating his parents were moving too and that he would get a room with his own bath and his own front door; moreover, it would have a secret corridor, hidden behind the closet. George couldn’t compete with that and had held his tongue, suppressing his anger. He had always realized that he shouldn’t blame the boy, indeed he should envy him; didn’t Ronny just possess a greater imagination? Wasn’t George pathetic because he was so attached to reality and because he was jealous of a fiction? Later, when he was older, he had concluded that it hadn’t been a lack of imagination, nor even jealousy on his part, but rather a righteous form of vexation. Ronny had been the one who was jealous; he hadn’t been able to leave George in peace to enjoy his moment. But the Ronny’s never vanished. The men who boasted about their nicer houses, better jobs and faster cars, invented or otherwise, had never left George’s world.

On the table in the conference room of PC&M stood the model. Herbert was looking at the drawings and sketches in front of him.

‘Impressive, George, very impressive.’ It seemed to George he was sincere and showed honest respect. But knowing Herbert, the criticism eventually would come or at least some remark in which Herbert took credit. For the time being though, Herbert limited the conversation

to technical questions about choice of materials, supporting structures and proportions. George began to hope it would turn out better than he had expected and that he would set out for Sicily with Herbert's blessing. For once maybe his superior would back him up.

'Our technical department has roughly analyzed the plans and according to them it is feasible.'

An audible sigh escaped George's mouth. Herbert looked up wondering: 'Did you think that they would reject it?'

'Not really, but one never knows.'

'As far as I understand, the technical realization shouldn't be a problem.'

George hoped he would leave it at that, but Herbert quickly dashed his optimism.

'I can imagine though that it might encounter some resistance from the local authorities.'

'I wouldn't know. Maybe it's a bit ambitious, but as I see it, this is nothing more than carrying out the assignment as it has been expressed in the terms and agreements.'

'Did you meet with them?'

'Not about the plan as you see it now. I have sent it to them. But we had long talks about the presuppositions and the initial principles.'

'That was in August, wasn't it?'

'Yes. And then I got going, as you know. Creative drifts.'

Herbert nodded, pondering: 'You haven't been back there?' George shook his head.

'Well, the result is not bad at all.' He repeated how impressive he thought it was. He let his eyes run over the model, on which a few matchsticks had already come loose.

'Why didn't you turn to a professional model-building office? I really

think this is way below our level. Very primitive.' He looked scornful. 'You didn't have in mind to take this with you to Castiglione?'

'Maybe better not to?'

'No, leave it here. I will have a professional model made, based on this. The Sicilians can always come here to look at it.' He laughed. 'Would be ridiculous to get on the plane with this thing.' He got up, took the model and demonstrated how George would keep upright, swaying and faltering, balancing the thing in the aisle of the airplane. Again he laughed loud. 'No, leave it here. I'll make something out of it.' He carried the model to a table in the corner. One of the pieces of cellophane, representing a curved sphere, came loose and flapped to the ground. 'Oh, the roof has been blown away,' Herbert said with a mocking voice. He left it lying on the ground. George picked it up and tried to reattach it in the right position, but he didn't succeed. In any case, Herbert Jansen hadn't finished yet. He bent over and looked at the model. 'From this side it slightly resembles a woman's breasts, those two forms, don't you think. Here, have a look yourself.'

George also bent over and observed his creation from the same height.

'I don't see it.'

'Probably Freudian then. God forbid that later they will call them Nobel's Boobs!' He burst into laughter, then sat and he continued in a more serious note: 'Did you examine the restoration of the church really well? On the spot, I mean? It seems to me that restoration is crucial to your plans. From what I recollect from the photographs, the church was fit for demolition.' Turning the moment into a joke he added, 'but if I may say so, the Church has been fit for demolition for ages!' George laughed along with Herbert's thundering roars.

'It is an important element. I don't think it will cause any problems.'

The church can be restored. I've checked it.'

'If you say so. You are the expert.'

Herbert was browsing through the designs again. Now and then he picked one up and held it up to the light. Without looking at George he asked: 'What kind of people are you dealing with there. Are they at all cooperative?'

'Sure. A guy called Bosoni is in charge there and in fact he has given me *carte blanche*. Like you.'

'Hmm.'

'What hmm?'

'I have pulled off many of these projects, but I have never experienced one where they let me muddle on without opposition. There are always groups trying to frustrate one's plans. It would surprise me if things work out well there. Especially there. Sicily isn't renowned for its facile disposition. Bureaucratic, closed, not to mention the criminality that seems to have penetrated every level of society.' He waited a second, folded his hands, pressed his fingertips together and continued in a stately manner: 'I don't want us to get our fingers burned. This is a prestigious assignment. It is important to PC&M. Perhaps we should put someone extra on the job. After all, it is your first time.' Again he paused for dramatic effect. George wanted to point out that Cole himself had directly given him assignment and that therefore he did not actually have to account to Herbert regarding it, but he held his tongue. As if Herbert had come to a conclusion, he said, less pompously: 'If you say it will not cause any problems, we will hope for the best.' He delved again into the plans, browsing through the designs.

'I notice you have carefully studied the shape that I used for the new hospital in Canada. You have incorporated it perfectly. Splendid.'

He got up to indicate that the meeting was over. George collected

his stuff and they shook hands.

‘George, don’t be fooled by those spaghetti crunchers. Don’t get into discussions with those people there and don’t let them push you around. It is Sicily after all. Don Corleone and his gang. Watch out. Don’t mess up.’ Less haughtily he asked: ‘When do you go there exactly?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘Keep me posted.’

George left the building. One obstacle down, one left to go. But having pulled it off with Herbert, he was convinced he could manage the Sicilians as well.

It was rainy and cold, a genuine November evening. Tonight George would take the train back to his apartment. As a farewell gesture he visited, as if inspecting, the doghouse Thim had provisionally knocked together. He and Nicole trailed the boy through the garden.

‘I talked with your mother about the dog. She approves,’ George said. ‘And the lodging for the dog I approve herewith myself.’

Speechless with joy, Thim looked at his uncle and his mother. He didn’t know which he should thank more.

‘You would be such a good father,’ Nicole whispered.

‘Who knows what the future will bring.’ George answered with a cliché.

She offered to drive him to the station, but George declined. From the moment he had decided to leave, he couldn’t wait to be alone. His self-confidence had returned and he wanted to get going immediately. He said a short goodbye at the door and, looking over his shoulder and waving at his sister and the boy, he paced briskly toward the station.

For a mile the road led past an endless row of houses. At the far end of the wet mirroring asphalt he saw the faint neon glow of the train station. If he looked right or left, above the shimmering puddles

full of leaves, between the trees planted at regular intervals, through the blurred light of the street lamps, over the uniform lawns with borders of earthy dark flowerbeds and dreary conifers, he could see the enormous glass surfaces of windows without curtains; in the living rooms, scarcely lit with shaded lamps, filled with mottled oak furniture, he saw proper uniform people in proper uniform couches, as if cloning had been practiced here for years. Every room offered the same image, the picture on the television screen. All of the screens reflected the same channel, the vanishing point for all of the people on the couches in front of it. Because George saw the images at intervals, they resembled an old silent movie, roughly edited and jumpy. He quickened his pace, as if by doing so he could force the reel of the film to turn faster. He decided to direct his attention to his own vanishing point in the far distance, the station.

As he reached it, the bleak wind cut him to the quick. He wrapped his coat more securely around himself. Blown leaves chased each other. Small heaps formed larger heaps, until gusts of wind scattered them again. A dented beer can joined this involuntare ballet, dancing a *pas de deux* with its invisible partner. At the stone steps in front of the station it turned a few more pirouettes, lay motionless for a moment and then started again on its random journey to the centre of the square. George suppressed his urge to kick it away.

In the train, he was glad to find a free seat facing the right direction; he hated to ride backwards. This was a stroke of luck from which to muster courage. He felt ready for the confrontation, the inevitable trip to Sicily. With his head against the seatback he fell asleep peacefully, not noticing that at the next station the train's orientation changed. Unaware, George continued his travels, now facing backwards.

VI

A few days later, he arrived in Catania. To the northwest, Etna's snow-covered peak seemed to shine in the late sunlight. The volcano was ominous but far away, a sleeping giant, not to be angered. He remembered the image from his previous visit, when he had arrived here alone on his honeymoon. Reflexively, he checked to see whether Alice was there. Last time, she had been waiting for him in the Arrivals Hall. They had just been married and life seemed a dream. He had gotten the job at PC&M's and the first thing he had done was to ask for two weeks off, but since it was a honeymoon, the company hadn't had any problems with it. On the contrary, his new colleagues had advised him to make a virtue of necessity and above all to keep looking, despite his love-sick eyes, at architecture. They had given him a list of "one hundred buildings to view on your honeymoon." "Maybe you can

invent something ingenious to build there,' Herbert Jansen had said ironically. That was the first time George had suspected his contempt.

He had departed one day before Alice. She had asked him a thousand times not to do it, but George had insisted that he had to thank some people in Florence who had helped him immensely with his thesis, which wasn't entirely a lie.

'But we can do that together. Please, let's go together. Don't you want me around there?' she had begged him.

'Of course I want us to do everything together. Only, what I have to do isn't fun at all. I have to drop off some things and I have to say some last words of thanks to all the people who have helped me. It will be awful. Even I think it's dreadful, so I don't want you to be involved. Besides, we have already booked our hotel in Catania. And it would be a pity to start our honeymoon with all these stupid business affairs. Just let me go a bit earlier and we will meet in Sicily. Nothing wrong with that. It all would be way too tiring to visit Florence together first.'

When he walked through the Arrivals Hall, he recognized the spot where she had been standing, twenty years earlier. The honeymoon had turned out to be perfect, with one exception: Alice had continuously brought up his inexplicable behavior at its start. Every evening there had been arguments, which had given the trip a sinister, even gloomy, edge.

'Let go, you are free now,' he rebuked himself. Through his sweaty t-shirt he felt the warmth of his body. He decided to stop at his hotel first to refresh himself. Castiglione could wait until tomorrow. His first meeting would be on Monday morning, giving him three days to boost his self-confidence even more. Tomorrow he would rent a car; that would give him independence. He installed himself in his hotel room and after a cold shower he decided to have a drink in the

downstairs bar.

This turned out to be a restaurant playing soft jazz. In the middle of the shadowy hall a family was seated at a long table, richly laid. The *pater familias* was sitting in a wheelchair at the head of the table. His spouse sat opposite him. Between them along both sides were the children and grandchildren. A happy group, closed to strangers. Some of them glanced up as George settled himself at the bar and ordered a drink.

Once again, he was an outsider. Normally the world consisted of everybody plus George. He had always remained a stranger, an intruder or an addition, limited and insignificant, loosely attached. He was never an inalienable part of a larger group. Even in his own family, there had been the family unit -- his father and mother with Nicole and Tom -- and George, an extra. They all used to eat from the same white tableware, except George. He had his own plate, given to him when he was a child. On it was a picture of a faded, pink figure that looked ahead in full faith, his hands held upwards to the sky. When guests came over, more of the white tableware came off the shelf, but -- with the best intentions -- George ended up with the detested plate under his nose. When he was twelve he had let it fall, supposedly unintentionally, noting with satisfaction the pink figure lying in splinters on the ground at his feet, but his mother had bought a new one with the same design.

He didn't belong to the architects, but he was one. He hadn't felt at home with Alice in a long time, despite being married to her. And even Violetta had excluded him in the end. He always had to go that extra mile to be part of something; he didn't seek to exceed, simply belonging was hard enough.

Nothing could hinder him now. This was the ultimate form of

independence. And of arrogance; looking down on everyone. Everyone accessible, he himself inaccessible.

At the bar, an elderly couple was just paying the bill. Somewhat further, a man browsed through some documents. And at the corner a woman sat, alone. He put her in her late thirties. She was slim and good looking. Would he? It had worked out with Violetta. The presence of the man at the head of the family table diverted George's thoughts to his own father. George didn't want to become a geostationary satellite. From now on he would break through the fixed loops and patterns. He tried to make eye contact. Having an affair here would be the ultimate revenge on Alice. With that, he would once and for all expel Alice from his mind. It wouldn't be an affair, just a single man who fascinates a woman and has a great night. There wouldn't be guilt, as there had been occasionally when he had thought of Violetta after his return from Florence.

He made eye contact. He called the barman and asked him to offer the woman something to drink. He was amazed at his own slick conduct. The woman said something, then the barman came back and told George she didn't want anything. She smiled at him and he returned her smile, raising his glass as if toasting. With the glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he advanced along the bar full of self-confidence. He didn't need a cliché this time, his cigarette was burning and the drink was already offered. He just could sit next to her and start a conversation, as men and women do when they are alone in the bar of a hotel. He just had spoken his first line when the woman looked over to at a man just entering the bar. He nodded at her and she rose, saying they might meet again somewhere sometime.

Boldly George decided that he wasn't disappointed. This could happen to anyone. He couldn't expect that every woman sitting alone

at a bar would be available. He went back to his stool and saw the father in the wheelchair at the dinner table smiling at him. His look was midway between “I wish it had worked for you” and “in my time, it might have worked for me”. As if he wanted to straighten something out, George slipped his hand over his face. He needed to shave. A new resolution arose. He would let his beard grow. A new self-assured George. No one would ever associate him with the former loser. The strangest resolutions tumbled suddenly in his mind. He would move away from Holland. He was an architect after all so he could build his own house in Italy. And in that way create a double protection: his private house in his private land. He would be safe, without a telephone or an address. Maybe he could design a splendid villa as part of his project in Sicily. And if that turned out to be impossible, maybe somewhere on the coast of Tuscany or in Rome. What! In the centre of Florence, right beside the dome; or exactly between Violetta’s hotel and Coradetti’s house. He would honor his name and hit the dragon between the eyes. And then he would adopt a new name. What his brother could do, he could as well. With his new-found wisdom, George decided that he had no further business in the bar. Back in his room, he inspected his plans for Castiglione for the hundredth time. This time, he saw it again with fresh eyes and began to worry. Maybe it would just be better to raze the whole area and start with a clean slate. Too late. No time to begin all over again.

In a rented car, he drove on the highway, heading west. He had barely slept and as soon as the dim light let float the snowy top of Etna in the dark sky he had risen, shaved and left. On the back seat he had put his treasure, the plans for Castiglione. Every now and then he looked at them, specifically when something outside reminded him of

his trip with Alice, and every time he felt reassured.

Sicily didn't seem to have changed after all these years. He met hardly any traffic on the desolate, recently newly-paved four-lane road. The hills looked bare as he drove through them, although some turned out to have heather and the occasional tree. Then the road would bring him through more cultivated areas; mostly olive gardens, and a few villages, tucked away between the mountain slopes. Here and there he saw, as a *fata morgana*, a pretentious building project. It encouraged him: at least there were building activities, with up-to-date equipment, but it struck him that nobody actually was working on the sites.

When he came closer to his destination, he had to get off the highway and continue along local roads. For miles, he cruised alongside a low wall with overhanging oleanders. At steady intervals a small village would interrupt his journey, in complete agreement with the medieval atmosphere of the plains and the hills. Time had stopped here. On a steeply climbing road he had to wait for a flock of sheep to cross the road. The shepherd sent a friendly nod in George's direction and one of the man's dogs even tried to sniff him through the open window. His thoughts went to his nephew. If he were on vacation, he would have delighted in all of this. But he wasn't. He was on a mission, with a canon on the backseat that would rouse everybody. The delay hindered him. His momentum had been growing but now he was slowed down by the life that seemed to have come to a full stop here. As a rule it was the opposite; he wanted the world to stop. He wanted everyone at the same time, not the least himself, to dissolve into a blissful, floating state of mind, and not to demand anything of him anymore. He accelerated with the clutch firmly engaged.

When, three hours later, he finally reached Castiglione and drove through the city, he began to realize his plans might a bit too

megalomaniac for this provincial town. But he had started where they had asked him to start, he encouraged himself, so that choice was not his. He remembered the words from Herbert that in Sicily they willingly undertook huge infrastructure projects in order to misuse them as cash cows. He drove to his hotel. It was closed. It struck him as very peculiar that not one shop was open. The streets were deserted. All the shutters were closed and it wasn't even twelve o'clock, surely hours before the siesta would begin. He spotted an open cafe, right next to the hotel. He walked in and saw a stout man standing behind the bar, a long white apron around his waist. Another man stood at the other side of the counter, examining George, blatantly suspicious.

'Hello there,' started George, 'good to know someone is still alive.' He had wanted to make a cheerful jest, but the moment he said it, he realized that probably everyone in this town knew someone who had been killed in the earthquake. He murmured something that sounded like an apology.

The man behind the counter growled something, inaudibly. George ordered an espresso, hoping that there would soon be a new chance for conversation. He didn't have to wait long.

'It's *San Eligio* today. The name day of one of the many saints of the city. Everyone has a day off today.'

'But maybe Hotel *Il Posto* is open?'

The man hanging at the bar, said: 'What do you want? I am the manager of the hotel, Carlo.'

George informed him he had a reservation and that he would like to go up to his room. He could pay beforehand, he said, trying to humor the man. The manager told him to come along and George compliantly walked behind him. They entered through the back door and Carlo showed him to a room on the first floor. It was small and

very humble, with no view and it smelt bad. But George didn't want to offend the man, so he kept silent. As soon as Carlo had closed the door behind himself, George collapsed on the bed.

'I mustn't lose my energy.' He feared the stagnation of this town, where the name day of a saint completely obscure to him could paralyze the entire public. George jumped off his bed and decided to inspect the affected area. Better to get the worst over with. He left the hotel and set off, hoping to come to the center. Ahead of him he thought he could discern a faint black speck, perhaps the ruined church.

The next day he reported at ten to the Office of Public Services, *lavori pubblici ed i beni culturali*. He had an appointment with the coordinator of the project, *Professore Salvatore Bosoni, Capo del Restauro Generale e tutti i lavori nuovi per la Citta di Castiglione di Cristo*. The nameplate at the door of his room had presented it entirely in curly capitals. This was probably the first thing they had accomplished after the earthquake, George suspected. Cautiously, he knocked on the door and hearing a snarl, stepped in. Three men were seated at a huge table. On it were architectural drawings. George recognized the logo of his company and enough details to know that these were his plans. He dreaded the worst. He knew this Italian secrecy. Long ago he had met it, in an archive in Florence.

'*Signore Nobel, venga,*' a small stout man said. He had a fat head with a lush tuft of black hair. His expression was hidden beneath a rough beard and moustache. Opposite of him was a man, dressed too blatantly, with artificial elegance; he wore a three-piece black suit with a red silken tie. He was introduced as *signore Giovanni Cavalcanti*, a local architect, who would join forces with George to accomplish the further filling in of the project. When George heard the phrase "further filling

in,” he knew his premonition had been right. And the certainty of this was confirmed when the third person was introduced: il prete, Don Damiano, the priest of the devastated church. The feigned smile on top of his black clothes with the white collar, brought Coradetti back to George’s mind. That time, he had succumbed, going along with a dark scenario, but it would not happen again. George decided to play tough. He didn’t want to concede on anything, he would not even negotiate about types of stone or the widths of the avenues. After coffee was served and George had sat down on the empty chair, Bosoni started. It was worse than George had expected.

‘Very good, you have finally come. Why haven’t we had the honor of welcoming you earlier? We have dearly longed to have a dialogue with you about the reconstruction of our city.’

‘I was here in August,’ George lied. ‘I called you then to apologize that we couldn’t meet.’

‘We received your call, of course. We even have been in contact with your company,’ Bosoni said ominously, then continued in a more syrupy voice: ‘We are all very satisfied, yes really contented, with your plans. Your office has done a great job. We suspect, however, that you and your office haven’t taken into account our specific situation here, at least not sufficiently. When you didn’t show up, we took the liberty to get to work ourselves.’

George wanted to react, but Bosoni didn’t give him any time: ‘Let me continue, *per favore*, please. *Il prete* won’t agree with a restoration of his church. The only option according to him is a completely new building. His reverence hasn’t been idle. He has been in close consultation with mister Cavalcanti,’ he nodded to the man mentioned, who smiled humbly, ‘who has made some sketches and designs.’

George looked at the designs at the table, at the coffee and then

at all three men. ‘The plan is as it is. We developed it from the initial assignment we received and from the direction of your own people.’

Bosoni interrupted him: ‘Our own people, whom you didn’t meet, yes? And you have seen for yourself in what bad condition the church is in?’

‘I have seen it and I have drawn my conclusions,’

George felt superfluous: ‘Again, I was here and was of the opinion that the church can be restored perfectly. I still am, by the way.’ George bogged down more and more. ‘Your people also described the state of the church to us. I have the documents here, your own letters, or at least, the ones from your office in Rome, your superiors.’ Saying this, he felt more confident. ‘A restoration is absolutely justified. It would be a crime to demolish such a piece of architectural inheritance. And I have to add that a completely new construction on that spot would undermine the entire idea we have developed.’ From the moment George had seen the devastation, he had known that it would be much easier simply to tear everything down and to build a new church. But then he would have to start all over again. He knew that it would be wiser to stop arguing and just to make a deal with them. But then he thought of the words Herbert had spoken: ‘George, please don’t go merchandizing with those people, because before you know it, they will take over the whole project. You have your major assignment now. Don’t mess up.’

‘We differ in opinion,’ the priest said softly. His voice was high, descending upon the others, unintentionally maybe.

‘What the hell did you have in mind?’ George let it slip out. Twice wrong, according to the laws of PC&M. Lesson one: don’t give your advisory any space. Lesson two: never get your opponent up in arms by using the wrong words.

The priest peeped over his tight metal glasses, bending slightly towards George. 'The Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has ordered us to build a new house for him. I can add that the community has already made an immense collection.'

They had passed the point of open discussion; it had become a fight. He had to save what could be saved. He pretended to act dumb.

'The plan includes a complete reconstruction of the nearby cloisters, as you can see in front of you. I strongly advise you not to make any modifications. A complete new church building would raise the cost enormously.' George was prepared to argue with everyone here, even if he had to leave the town and find his support from higher authorities. They would leave his master plan alone.

Cavalcanti who had till now been listening, sometimes with amusement, sometimes more like a predator spying on its prey, joined in: 'Friends, we don't have to fight here; there is enough misery in the world. We must think of all those homeless people and all those devout believers who at this moment can't attend the holy masses in their dear house of prayer. We here in Sicily have the proverbial skill to solve any problem. *Sistemarsi*. I am convinced that, while thinking flexible and pragmatically, we can find a way out that also will be acceptable to *Signore Nobel*. A way that will allow him to execute his plans and return with his head held high, and also a way that will give the reverend his new church.' He nodded briefly at the priest, who answered with a look of secret understanding.

Cavalcanti now continued: '*Signore Nobel* will have to grant himself some moments to look at the plans that the reverend and I have made; thus he will comprehend we are not as backward here as they assume in the fancy offices. I have them here.' He picked up his bag and took out a pile of building designs. As far as George could see the plans were

completely elaborated. However Cavalcanti didn't give him a chance to look at them carefully, as he immediately folded them again. 'In addition, this will make room for local architects and builders who are currently without work.' He directed these last words towards Bosoni, but George recognized the shrewdness of his counterpart. He knew enough. These three had decided that Cavalcanti would get his assignment. Not as a local contractor, but with a major involvement with the project. All the public offices and ministries in Rome weren't up to this. He had ended up in the underbelly of Italian favoritism. Because of his absence, George had given them license to run with their own ideas, and he feared it couldn't be stopped. Desperately he tried once more.

'Dear colleagues, I understand your concern about your involvement in the project, but I can guarantee you our firm concludes contracts all over this world with local architects and building contractors. You don't have to fear sitting idle on the side. We will contact you as soon as possible about these issues. What I want, no, what the company wants... No, let me say, what the ministry wants and what we at PC&M agree to, is a coherent, unambiguous, systematic process. There can only be one main architect and that's me. Several people went out of their way in the last months to come up with this plan. It is good, it has been marked as good and I really would like to get it going.'

Bosoni took the floor again and the way in which he pronounced his words made it clear that he wanted to end the session: '*Piano, piano, signor Nobel*, of course you are the key architect; we wouldn't want to challenge that.' Bosoni must know his playing field very well. 'I am convinced that we have had a misunderstanding. I suggest we all do some hard thinking and then we maybe can cut the knot and figure out how we can include signore Cavalcanti's ideas. Do we not all want

a new beautiful city, Mister Nobel?’

Because he couldn’t come up with anything to add, George agreed. He had no space at all to negotiate. He got up, said goodbye and went out, trying to forget it all.

Despite this intention, he found himself going back to the ruined area. There were demolition activities going on everywhere. The sounds of levers, sledgehammers, screw drills and excavators that filled his ears created a gigantic cacophony that completely matched the view. Trucks drove off the site, loaded with the rubble that shovels had pushed forward in enormous heaps. As he opened the fence to enter the area, he heard the languid voice of the priest behind him.

‘Mister Nobel, you are such a wise man. May I ask you for a scant moment of your precious time? Maybe in the choir of the church, please? A perfect place to forget earthly business and direct our attention to the higher spheres, that which is good, that which God wants from us.’

George hesitated, looked at the church and reluctantly nodded his assent. Damiano shuffled before him into the crater and George followed, plodding through the debris. The area resembled a quarry. Every now and then, above the heaps of stones, there rose a single wall of a house, sometimes still bearing the remains of yellow-brown stucco. Pieces of wood and beams retained the idea that they still had something to support. The front of one house had been removed, leaving the floors intact. It had become a colossal chest of drawers, a monstrous doll’s house. In the middle of a heap of rubble, a lone drainpipe reached for the sky, an extreme example of futility.

The buttresses of the church stood as pillars of heaven, bearing nothing, completely devoid of function. It made them grotesque, almost hallucinatory. Through a small door still on its hinges, they entered the church. But there was no difference from the outside. The

vaults were almost completely gone, the light was the same. The last remnants of the vaults gave George the sensation that he was inside an enormous monster. The choir was mostly intact. The ambulatory was veiled in gloaming darkness, as it probably had been for centuries. The small windows had never let in a lot of light.

Although it was impossible, George thought he could sniff the scent of incense, which inadvertently reminded him of the obligatory masses of bygone days. When he was eight, Nicole had decided that it was nonsense to go to church and to endure the moralizing sermons of the pastor. Instead, the three of them had gone for walks on the Sunday noon, armed with a transistor radio on which they had listened to the top 30. After an hour, they then would return home, deeply impressed by the wise words of the disc jockey. For two years they had continued to do this, until their father saw them walking. First they had been afraid he would rebuke them, but the opposite happened. Adrian Nobel was pleased his children had found the wisdom not to go to church anymore; their escape released him of the empty obligation as well.

The priest knelt on the stone steps in front of the crucifix: ‘This is my life. God is challenging me.’ He spoke softly.

‘It’s impressive, the building, I mean.’ George didn’t know anything else to say. Gothic had never been his favorite style, not even the more reserved Italian variant. But now he was impressed by the building, not because of its size or function, but purely because of the architectural achievements of the Middle Ages. Now that the church was stripped of all its default ornaments and decoration and only the architectural skeleton remained, he respected it. Despite all of the complexity that seemed to go with Gothic structures, there was an overwhelming simplicity of constructive elements. It was a feast to see how a basic

thought ascended and how it manifested itself in the stone shapes. The low vaults formed a splendid crown that could be completely understood when one then directed one's view downward to the bundles of columns that attached themselves to the larger pillars. The first time he had seen the Rheims cathedral had been a shattering experience. He and Alice had played a game of getting surprised over and over again by the facade; walking in and out of the street to see the impressing masterpiece appear suddenly, then gazing upwards at the vast entrance. From every angle the building had appeared more majestic and glorious.

The priest's words broke into his thoughts. 'Forgive me, impressive is too poor, I would call it rather... awesome. Though made by men, it has detached itself from human interference. It is larger. We mortals may behold it, but we cannot touch it. God's hand has shown us that we are insignificant. To us the task is to announce God's greatness once more. Here is a chance. *Signore Cavalcanti* comprehends that, he was born here. With all due respect, you sit in your office making plans and drawing designs. We, the affected wretches of this unfortunate city, shouldn't talk big. We should be grateful with a new house of prayer.'

To George it was clear the priest wasn't worrying about his house of prayer; the only thing he wanted was to have Cavalcanti get the assignment. Demolition, restoration, rebuilding, the man would do whatever Cavalcanti asked him to do. The interests were of a different order. He knew the hypocrisy. He felt uncomfortable and wanted to get rid of Damiano.

'I intended to go home tomorrow to discuss this deadlock.'

'Deadlock isn't the proper word. A small difference of opinion. Your plans have to be designed in a way that leaves room for some slight modifications.'

George studied the priest attentively. 'I will have a meeting to see what are the options, but I can't promise anything, fine?'

'Everyone has to bear his own cross. As I said before, Mister Nobel, you are a wise and blessed man.'

The priest got up and made a blessing gesture in the air in front of George. Then he climbed through the rubble to the fence, holding his habit up with one hand. He didn't look back.

George stayed where he was, looking at the large lumps of stone on the ground with rough mortar still attached to them. His plans were untenable, not only on architectural grounds but also politically. Tomorrow he would travel home. Bite the dust in front of Herbert Jansen. Herbert would definitely bring it up with his superiors who would probably take George off the project immediately. Presumably Herbert would get suspicious over his reputed visit to the damaged area. Bosoni had called, that was certain. Why hadn't George heard about that? Were they already suspicious? He would have to maneuver very cautiously. He could make new designs, new calculations. PC&M wouldn't tolerate Cavalcanti interfering as an architect in their project. How could he handle this? How much work had he done for nothing, how many hours had he spent on the plans for the restoration, how much time had he lost, how much loss of face? Would they accept it? Would they give him a second opportunity? He cursed his trip to Florence five months ago. Should he come forward and admit to having played truant and repent, or could he get away with it? He wanted rest, a complete rest in which no one could reach him. He decided to move to another hotel, untraceable by the Bosonis, the Cavalcantis or his colleagues. Untraceable by the world. Maybe they would have to tear everything down -- the church, but also his plans. He looked up once again to the empty rib vaults and tried to imagine a

new, different building, but the ideas wouldn't come. His thoughts had come to a complete standstill. From all sides, from within and beyond the area of the devastation, he heard the busy murmur of activity, of a world alive.

He turned the tap of the bathtub. One day had gone by. Without having talked to anyone, George had left Sicily and was now staying in a hotel in Rome. His first intention had been to fly home immediately, but he couldn't bring himself to take a direct flight. Instead, he had driven back to Catania and taken the train to Rome. Perhaps a new consultation with the ministry, he invented in his despair. He would fly home from there, a retreat but not too hasty. He had to pull himself back together, to play for the time to come up with a plan. But on the train, his thoughts had gone a totally different direction. Now he had decided to accept his defeat. Not to fight anymore. He would admit his failure. Admit everything. He would tell about Violetta, his fiddling with his thesis to anyone who was willing to listen. They would know everything. If they wanted, he would even write it down and sign it. And once he had done that, he would be free. George had hidden in an anonymous hotel room, locking himself into the bathroom. He sank under the water. He felt like a wounded animal that retreats and dies.

Eventually, the water in the tub grew cold. He wanted to refill it with hot water, but what came out of the tap was cold. George didn't move. It was better to stay as he was than to stand up and to suffer the misery of getting up and getting even colder.

For years it had taken so much effort to keep the lie separated from the dream. But now he, in the end, wouldn't have to fight anymore. George felt depressed, rather than relieved at this realization, because it meant that the long fight had completely been in vain.

There was a knock on the door. Every time he felt safe, that damned world came by. Let them knock. But he was distracted. Now he wondered who it could have been.

He wanted to raise himself at the metal bar but as he trusted his complete weight to it, the upper screw that anchored it to the wall came loose. He almost tumbled backwards and more by hit than by wit, managed to keep himself standing. He cursed. George tried to attach the thing to the wall again, but the screw had left a gaping hole. He tried to push the screw back into it, but apparently this had been done many times before, because there weren't any threads left. In order not to leave the bar hanging there, he pulled it until the other screw also came loose. He stepped out of the tub and dried himself, leaving the shiny bar in the empty tub.

The only persons he trusted who could relate to his situation were his father and Nicole. They wouldn't lose respect for him.

He called and Nicole answered the phone. Her voice was both relieved and rushed.

'George! You have to come home. I've been trying to get in touch with you for. Things are much worse with dad.'

'What's wrong?'

'It's getting worse. He is in the hospital, in intensive care. He is deteriorating rapidly. It's his lungs, and he is also having mental problems, real dementia symptoms. How can you be so hard to find?! Your company didn't have any idea where you were either. Where do you hang out anyhow?'

He answered in his most natural voice: 'I'm in Rome. For work.' It was plausible. Should he feel guilty because he was lying in a bathtub in Rome? 'Who did you speak to at my office? That clodhopper idiot, Herbert Jansen?'

Nicole only remembered that they thought it strange they hadn't heard anything from him recently. The subject apparently didn't interest her. All her thoughts were completely fixed upon their father.

'Please, come as soon as possible. It's really bad.'

When he had hung up, he went back to the bathroom. For a moment he considered getting back into the tub. He looked in the mirror and saw his reflection. But it was someone else, a body to which he had no connection. Normally as he stood in front of the mirror, he would look at himself for a few seconds and think that he looked well or less good, sometimes old, and he often then wondered at the wearing out of his shell. But now it was different. There was no relationship with the man in the face of the mirror. That man could wave his hand and walk away.

'That's all we needed!' He said to the worried head that was looking at him. And at the same time the outrageous thought occurred to him that this might be the perfect excuse for the failure of his plans. He got dressed, grabbed his stuff and left the hotel.

A taxi brought him to Rome's airport, *Fiumicino*. It was lightly snowing, which rarely happened in Rome and, although everyone he met was very excited about it, the snow didn't interest him. He found that he was lucky; there would be a flight to Amsterdam in two hours. But when he entered the large departure hall, he heard a message from the loudspeakers: '*Signore e signori*, due to heavy snow, are all our international flights are delayed. We kindly ask your understanding.'

'In Rome nothing ever works properly,' he muttered to himself, determined to be vexed. He turned around and, stopping at the first bar he saw, plunged into a chair and ordered coffee. As he looked around, his gaze was drawn to a poster bearing the portrait of a young woman; it was an announcement for the opera *I Pagliacci*. It was very

tempting to dive safely into in a dark, unknown theatre; invisible. No wives, fathers, sisters, priests or colleagues. No obligations, nothing, save a few hours floating away in the lives of other people, however miserable, away from his own story. He looked at the dates and times. There would be a performance that night. The soprano Imogen Page in the role of Nedda. Pretty woman. As quickly, he dropped the idea. This was not what he was looking for.

Charlotte

I

She heard a message over the loudspeakers: ‘*Signore e signori*, due to heavy snow, all our international flights are delayed. We kindly ask your understanding.’

‘Heavy snow! Two millimeters and the entire city of Rome becomes paralyzed,’ Charlotte Vermeer muttered to herself.

Despite her vexation, airports had become places where Charlotte felt at ease. They represented a transitional phase between a life in which nothing was possible anymore, and a new life in which every second could open promising perspectives. But one didn’t belong to either of them.

The exuberance of neon ceiling lights and the brightly lit stores left no room for dark corners. Charlotte walked to a restaurant with a view of the runway. The only free table sat in the middle of the corridor.

Noisy passengers moved around her. With the menu in her hands she observed the waiting planes. She needed movement. Flight. Away from here, after everything that had happened.

Charlotte addressed a waiter: 'It's kind of crowded here. Don't you have a quieter spot, maybe near the window?'

'Sorry, we can't offer anything else at the moment.' He raised his eyebrows apologizing.

'But I'm almost sitting in the corridor.'

'I can assure you, signora, you won't find a better spot than this one.'

Again Charlotte looked around as if seeking a negation of what the man had said. Giving up, she tried to seclude herself from the noise. From her purse she took a folded page and she started reading it attentively, although by now, she knew the text almost by heart.

The nymph Cirécine lived in the dark north, where the woods are somber and heavy and the skies are grey. She was the daughter of the deity Panpter, but her mother, Anaïste, was a mere mortal. Cirécine grew up to become the fairest, the brightest and the fastest of them all. Her eyes were as deep as the water of the source Cala, her lips formed the loveliest smile since the times of the Geleids and her hair had the red glow of the light of dawn. Her skin was as soft and shiny as the divine fruit of the Kalloni. But when Cirécine reached the age of twelve and all praised her fairness and her wisdom, the deity Panpter turned his glance away from them. The hearsay was that he had said farewell to this sublunary world; assuming that he had accomplished his task, he had lost interest in mortality. But Anaïste sought a new spouse. Quickly she encountered Dolos, who was no other than the monstrous Omïno in the guise of a beautiful youngster. Dolos enchanted Anaïste and won her, bringing vice into the blossoming

life of Cirécine. Soon he wanted to disgrace the daughter and put her to shame. Cirécine wept for her father and for her mother, but in vain. Anaiste had sunk into a lethargic idleness, entangled as she was in the deviousness of Dolos. Cirécine implored her mother to relinquish Dolos, but she was forced to sit with this ferocious man and this woman, whom Cirécine could no longer recognize as her mother. She sought refuge in the chanting voices of the wood and the brook and she dreamed of a love that was good and that would redeem her. Four years, four days and four hours of unbearable shame and humiliation Cirécine endured, until, unable to bear it any longer, she uttered a heart-rending scream during the evening meal. Such a horrible lament had never been heard before. As she screamed, she started to run, run as she never had done before, and she didn't cease until she arrived at the great water in the warm south, where the sun always shone. There she collapsed, exhausted, on the rocks, calling out for her father and imploring him never again to abandon her to such a malicious man. From the foam of the waves emerged the merciful god Panpter. He proclaimed that she would always have to stay on guard for monsters like Dolos if she wanted to remain the girl that she was. But I am not willing, she cried out, I want to be unreachable for brutes like him. The divinity was compassionate, but not without command. He made Cirécine inviolable by molding her body to stone. Only scratches, scraps and fissures would remain on the outside, but her inner self would remain whole and unharmed; no one would be able to penetrate it. Cirécine stood still and rejoiced at her metamorphosis; she was as beautiful as always and as wise as ever, but now she had become inaccessible. Then the deity granted her another wish: She could again obtain the form of flesh and blood when she truly desired it. However, he would allow the transformation only, and it would have to be for the right one.

'Prega, signora.' She looked up at the waiter who brought her coffee.

She had been excited from the moment she had seen the invitation from the U.S. branch of ArtSale, the auctioning house for which she worked, to go to New York. To her, New York seemed magical. The city that never sleeps always stimulated her imagination. New York had no past, no matter what the travel guides asserted, it was always moving forward.

On an earlier trip, Charlotte had taken the ferry from Battery Park to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. The only thing she had seen there was future. The woman, pictured life-sized, having her eyes examined while everyone was checked for diseases, stands with her suitcase in hand and looks far beyond the doctor who opens her eyelids. Her eyes are large not from the test but with a visionary perception. What does she see? A plain in Texas? A life in a suburb of Chicago? A child raised in the streets of downtown Manhattan? One day she had decided to leave everything behind. She had packed her bags, given a last kiss to her loved-ones, and moved on. And after a journey of weeks, maybe months, she arrives in the antechamber of the promised land. The ship moors at Ellis Island. All other boats lay smoldering in an Old World port behind her. Now this final test. Will she fulfill her dream or will it be an illusion forever? Will she be granted this? Charlotte knew the answer. That woman standing there, in all her grace and beauty, submitting to the test, will pass. Whatever it will be, it is her future.

Behind the high glass walls, the airbus was waiting on the platform, ready to begin its flight. This wasn't Ellis Island, but for Charlotte, perhaps JFK could hold the same meaning.

For years Cirécine stood at the coast and repeatedly men came. They approached her but she did not have to flee. She was impenetrable and the men returned home to no avail. Finally, Omino in the shape of a man called Prodotis, presented himself to her. He had learned of the inaccessible stone nymph, with whom all fell in love. He couldn't bear the idea that there was a woman whom he could not completely seize. He had taken on the fairest disguise, and his words were more charming than any mortal ever had heard, spoken with the deepest and softest voice, a voice that made the sounds of the sea and the woods and the birds sound like harsh squeals. As Cirécine became aware of him, she regretted her body had become of stone. She called out to her father saying: 'father, I have found the man for whom I want to transform again.' And Panpter granted her this wish. Prodotis promptly revealed his true nature. From the moment she regained her female form of flesh and blood, he took her violently. He didn't call her by her name, but referred to her in harsh and icy words, which froze her heart and hardened her soul. Now, from this loveless cold, the marble shaped itself, transforming her once again to stone. The wind howled along her stone hair. The rain streamed ruthlessly over her marble face and slowly but surely the stone crumbled into sharp white sand. As sand, Cirécine slid cool and white through the fingers of any who attempted to pick her up. The wind sought to mock her, swirling the grains up into the air. The never-faltering sea flowed over her unremittingly, but the sand allowed nothing to get a grip on it; everything flowed past and through it and still Cirécine was untouched. As the flood withdrew and as the wind died down, the sand dried up at once, leaving no trace of wind or sea beyond a vague outline of a shiver or the slight rippling of a frown. Cirécine would never again be capable of showing love; the sand would be dry and barren forever.

But others say that Panpter has not abandoned her and that one day when the real beloved will appear, the sand shall again take the shape of the wonderful statue. Then Cirécine will be resurrected as a splendid living woman.

Two days earlier, Charlotte had returned to reality and had woken in bitterness. She had been dreaming for months. She was aware that she had been living a dream and had exiled the cynicism but now it returned, accompanied by frustration. The first night she had felt strong, but the second had been harder. Longing is a luxury; missing, an ordeal. She had considered going to her mother in Holland for a few days. Of course her mother would pamper her. She would speak evil of such a bad man and remind Charlotte of the good in the world. But immediately she realized that her mother offered no solution; she had just divorced her second husband, Charlotte's stepfather, and those who have erred become the most fanatic judges. Charlotte would have to listen to speeches and to verdicts in which she was not interested. She wanted consolation, not moralizing sermons. The chapter called home was closed.

Sometimes she wondered whether there really was a solution. Wasn't that why people declared that love was impossible? Wasn't that just the way things went? Hope, trust, and then disappointment, frustration and the deep dive down in order to climb up again and start the journey to the top anew. The cycle wasn't very appealing, since the next disappointment inevitably waited on the horizon. She had become so tired of it, this cycle that couldn't be stopped. Once, she had at least had believed that a love affair - after it had ended - raised her to a higher level. Then she had become wiser and recognized that the idea was preposterous. She knew with certainty that the place

where she was now, was one that she had frequented many times. It was not higher, nor lower. Like a bus driving its scheduled route, always waiting at the same bus stops. No one on the bus could change the itinerary. Charlotte was on it but wanted to get off, because she was sure that she had seen it all. All of the thoughts and feelings were the same as the last time she had ridden it, with only a slight sense of lost time. And even that became relative because in the end, the feelings never changed. Somewhere, there had to be another line, an exit that would mean a breakthrough. She just didn't know how to find it.

In the letter, the New York branch of ArtSale asked her if she would come to solve a puzzle. She had immediately called New York, because the letter had been very indistinct about the subject. It appeared that her expertise was highly appreciated. They wanted her to exchange views with her U.S. colleagues about a sculpture, a relief carved in slate. The item could be called curious at the least; nobody could comprehend it. An enigma. First of all there was the location where it had been found: An employee of a multinational corporation dealing in Amazon wood concessions had come across it beside a dead woman in the jungle. And then there was the object itself. New York had indicated that there was problem with dating it, in light of the subject's text. In an all-embracing attempt to describe the image on the phone, Pete Updike, her colleague, called it "Madonna in Full Flight."

'But we really don't know,' he had said. Pete sounded like a gullible, enthusiastic young man who probably hoped this relief would turn the history of art, including his role in it, upside down. Charlotte trusted him, recognizing that he could tell the biggest falsehoods sincerely because he believed in them himself.

Awe sounded in his voice: 'Since you are our greatest expert in sculptures, we thought it might be wise to have you come over.

Anyway we think it's a Madonna and a Madonna portrayed this way is unthinkable, especially in the Amazon!

'It probably isn't a Madonna then,' had been Charlotte's reaction.

After a pause, he offered: 'See for yourself. As long as you get here. We already have arranged with Rome that you can work here for the time being.'

Charlotte had decided not to argue about it. This was a fabulous opportunity to escape her old world, even temporarily. It offered her a flight from her stagnated adventures. Rome, the eternal city, where eternity meant that one could not feel change, even if change were possible. That was how she viewed it at the moment. A fruit fly would always make the most of one day; a turtle, however - because of its seeming immortality - would let day after day go by since it wouldn't matter if one day got lost. For Charlotte, Rome had become the ultimate symbol of stagnation, with its back turned on the future. The melancholy feeling that only past exists lay as an inevitable doom over the city. Here, the present was only an offshoot of that past; the future was already lost. She knew the city deserved better, but even her beloved Palatine couldn't offer new insight.

The previous two nights she had stayed with a friend on the other side of the Tiber. From the window, she had seen the hills and the monument to Victor Emmanuel. Without realizing it, her imagination followed the streets, watching the Roman campanile of the Santa Maria in Monticelli rising above the buildings. Eventually she reached the corner with the seventeenth century palazzo that contained her apartment. Though invisible, she could see it perfectly. She loved the building dearly. From the moment that she had moved to Rome for work, fifteen years earlier, it had been love at first sight. She never could have imagined that she would want to leave it. The warm ochre stone

glowed in the setting sun. The windows with the shutters through which the softly-filtered light came. That was her floor, her home, with its roof terrace. In her mind, she opened the downstairs door, went upstairs, put the key in the keyhole and turned it three times, hearing the safe, grating but supple sound of the reliable lock. She entered the room. It would be empty. All of her belongings would look empty to her, even her books and her music. The radiance would be gone. The affair had left everything tainted. Perhaps only the passage of time could erase it.

He would have left. She imputed that much decency to him, anyway. That last night, after the reception, she had left him a note in which she had written he had to be out of the apartment before she returned. He would vanish from her life, fluttering like a butterfly to new conquests. Or more like a moth, she thought, a dark spot restlessly drawing near to the attracting light, just as he had been pulled four months ago at a congress in the Auvergne to the intriguing appearance of Charlotte.

II

Early one evening at the end of July, Charlotte was driving her rented car from the airport Charles de Gaulle to Chateauvic, the little town where the conference would be held. The feeling had begun on the ring road around Paris – a vague sense that from now on everything would become unreal. The metropolis, although nearby, was nowhere to be seen. Around it, there were only endless meadows, occasionally interrupted by a building, and highways, lots of highways. The twilight mist that seemed to have come up from the city leveled everything, giving it all the same light-grey, indistinct hue. Charlotte felt Paris' presence, as if the thoughts, acts and feelings of all of its millions of residents hung in the air above that confined area. The landscape spread, soulless, and the roads were empty, as if everyone had escaped the dreary atmosphere. Eventually, it started to rain, which erased the dimness. How Charlotte longed for the darkness of night.

From the bottom of her heart, she regretted they had persuaded her to come here.

The conference of ArtSale was a biannual phenomenon; an event where the experts and specialists of the auction house immersed themselves in the good life under the cloak of exchanging ideas. The company held nothing back from its employees, clients and contacts, pampering them exorbitantly for three days with the best hotels, the best chefs, performances of renowned artists and not to forget the professionals. Everything was always in apple-pie order and Charlotte had to admit that after every gathering, she looked back on the experience with pleasure, although she held fast to her opinion that she was averse to such a display of luxury and abundance. This year the company had chosen a castle in the Auvergne, recently rebuilt as a hotel. The theme – and there always was one – was the Pre-Raphaelites, specifically the issues concerning forgeries. ArtSale was a commercial enterprise, after all.

The Pre-Raphaelites didn't interest Charlotte at all; she thought that their paintings were rather obnoxious. The worst of three worlds: the style of the Renaissance, but artificial and painted without real love; the intensity of romanticism, then perverted with stylish superficiality; and the melodramatic ideas of symbolism, poured over with a hollow, morbid layer. The style itself was obviously inferior to the art that inspired the painters, while the subjects were prompted by heavy nineteenth-century concepts, which linked eroticism to death and downfall. Paintings with titles as *Boudoir in the Meadows* and *Girls at Sea*. Weak, lingering women, beautiful angels, or tempting sirens, yearning and languishing on their beds, rejected by absent, mysterious men or waiting for the happiness that would never come; timid girls, deluded, in alluring poses thinking themselves unobserved, combing

their long hair, still pure and undefiled, but with futures that didn't promise much good. Or paintings in which that future was already the present, like in all the depictions of Ophelia. Death as beauty, beauty as death, did it matter? Sickly symbolism. If you weren't a feminist you would become one very quickly after looking at those paintings. When Charlotte heard of the theme she had been even more determined not to attend.

'You know, just make it a nice vacation, paid for by ArtSale. The Auvergne isn't that bad. New insights, new people, delicious cheese!' her direct superior had said. Since she did not have much going on in Rome, Charlotte had allowed herself to be talked into going to Chateauciv.

The last part of the journey took her along narrow winding roads: the first curve in the road as only perspective. It was a gloomy trip through tunnels, built of monumental dark-grey, somber firs, which isolated villages with houses of grey stone, basalt and granite barely interrupted. Sometimes there were barren plateaus, shrouded in mist. And then, more of the dismal trees, standing as in a dead wake, desperately directing their branches up to the sky, even as the needles hung downwards; cheerless silhouettes of agony. Even the headlights of the car couldn't pierce the impenetrable black wall of despondency. The desolate landscape felt like a breeding ground for crime and malice. Instinctively. Charlotte imagined bloodthirsty men with broad axes sneaking to the road from the remote houses every night to hunt for new flesh and blood. She shivered, locked the doors from the inside and silently prayed the car would keep moving. Instinctively, she checked the fuel gauge. According to her calculations, she had sufficient gas to reach the hotel, but certainly not enough to turn back. She had long since passed the point of no return. It was with relief that she finally

saw a road sign indicating Chateauvic.

The hotel was located outside the village. Initially Charlotte thought that she had ended up at the wrong spot, because the first view was disappointing. It looked no better than a construction site. The entire front wall was covered with scaffolding and piles of building materials lay everywhere. Her heart sank to her boots.

Taking a second look, however, she recognized a man standing outside, at the entrance. It was the General Manager, Europe, Fritz Van Loosen, a distinguished German, with blue blood running in his family somewhere. Charlotte clearly remembered his rejecting attitude at her job interview, fifteen years earlier. She had presumed that he was utterly opposed of appointing a woman to the crucial post of Head of International Relations, department sculpture. She wasn't ill disposed towards him, though. Later on, he had frankly admitted his incorrect assessment and had apologized profusely. Now he once again started apologizing, this time about the state of the exterior of the castle and the grounds, explaining that he had been told, only one month ago, that the renovations would be complete in time for the conference. He admitted he should have come here earlier to size up the situation, but busy, busy, busy... Please enter immediately, he urged her. Inside things looked dramatically different.

'It has been completely renovated and specially set up as conference centre. The ground floor is the actual auditorium complex. In addition, there are two large ballrooms, a mirrored hall and some minor meeting rooms equipped with cutting-edge technology and communication facilities.' He orated it as if he had learned the text of the advertising brochure by heart. Apparently he had been standing here in person the whole day, trying to atone for his organizational blunder. But the

details didn't interest Charlotte any longer. At last she felt safe.

'I forgot. The elevators don't work yet, but, other than that, everything is fine,' he added, while Charlotte picked her way over the planks to the Chateau's main entrance.

The interior did indeed look new, with an exuberant, festive presence. Neither time nor money had been spared, and the expense showed. There was marble everywhere, thick red rugs, impressive mirrors on the walls. Because she was tired, Charlotte decided to go directly to her room. She walked up the majestic central stairs and checked the card with her room number: 2.31. She supposed that this would be on the second floor, but she couldn't see any more stairs. On the wall she noticed two signs, golden with black engraved characters and numbers, one pointing to the left with the numbers 1.01 to 1.40 and the other to the right with 1.41 to 1.80, but no sign indicating a second floor.

Randomly, she went to the right. To her relief, she spotted a stairway at the end of the corridor. Dragging her heavy trunk, she climbed it. At the top, a narrow corridor led away from the stairs. A small sign, indecipherable from this distance, beckoned her, so she carried on. Chambres 3.30 a 3.60. Charlotte cursed. Apparently the second floor was some kind of unreachable, in-between mystery. Hoping to find a way out of the labyrinth, she walked on.

The corridor led her around a corner, then at the end, curved again. Charlotte trudged on and found herself in a small passage. Rooms lined one side, while the other offered large windows that looked out on what must be the courtyard. Trying to regain her orientation, she established she was still on the third floor, not far from the front of the castle. She was beginning to grasp the enormous dimensions of the building.

'*Excusez moi,*' a voice sounded behind her. Someone must want to go by her in the narrow passage. She turned and saw the speaker. From this first encounter she would later remember the voice in particular, with its dark, sonorous, but soft sound.

'*Je m'excuse.*' She pushed her back against the window. The man could have passed her without any problem, but briefly he brushed his body against her breasts, a slight friction. It might have been unintentional, but Charlotte assumed that it had not been.

'*Merci.*' He went on along the passage.

Because of the directness of the contact, Charlotte, confused, traced him with her eyes.

'*Monsieur, est-ce que vous savez ou est la deuxième etage?*'

The man turned and walked back. He was tall, tough in a friendly way. He had a good figure. Well dressed: a black suit with a claret shirt and black tie. As he got near, she could see his face better. Black, deep-set eyes and well-groomed whiskers. More an artist than an art expert, she thought, presciently. He directed her to the second floor, explaining that his room was also located there. Courteously, he offered to accompany her and to carry her suitcase. As they walked, the man attempted to start a conversation, but Charlotte didn't feel like talking. His unexpected touch had made her cautious and alert. Arriving at the correct door, she thanked him without looking at him. Only after she had closed her door, did she realize that they hadn't introduced themselves and that she had no idea who he was. No matter, it would be clarified in due time. He would show up at the conference. With a name tag.

During the first seminar the next day, Charlotte looked round the conference room with curiosity. She had seated herself at the back, which gave her a fine view of the audience. Here and there, she recognized

someone. The room was nearly full and slowly it quieted. Again she looked around. He wasn't present. Was she looking around for him? No, she told herself, it was her normal routine to check the scene and the people present. Nothing peculiar. Yet she felt disappointed that he wasn't there. He hadn't left her mind. The brief touch, his eyes, the way they had walked down the corridor, but most of all his voice... Then the first speaker began and Charlotte had to work to stay focused on his words. Throughout the session, she kept wondering who the man had been, irritated at the way that question kept occupying her. She knew why, but didn't want to admit it. Not yet anyway.

The last lecture that day bore the title *Counterfeits, Epigones and Imitators*, and Charlotte found herself feeling brave. After an hour of the presenter's vague theorizing, she stood up to take the floor, voicing her idea that the followers were always more fierce than the leaders, less flexible. As long as the leader controlled the masses, the situation would be stable, but it always deteriorated when the followers took over. Then everything was lost. In Charlotte's view, this was a well known, unchanging principle, as old as humanity. In the case of the Pre-Raphaelites, Charlotte continued, it becomes very obvious; we even see it to the second power. Painters like Rossetti, who considering themselves heirs to Lippi, Botticelli and the other fifteenth century Florentines, nonetheless violated the style and whole idea of the *Quattrocento*. The forgeries were, in turn, even worse than the originals. A child could tell where they had gone wrong. Stylistic research (which, according to Charlotte, was no more than using your eyes in the appropriate manner) allowed one to distinguish forgeries on the spot. End of the conference, she had dared to add as a punch line. The other attendees had listened, bewildered, and then hesitatingly nodded, if only because of the power she had put forth in

her thoughts.

After the session, the conference-goers repaired to the enormous mirrored hall, where large tables were set for dinner. The UK representative of ArtSale headed in her direction. Charlotte had seen the man before and hadn't found him uninteresting. An angular face with an intelligent presence, not unattractive. He looked at the name on her badge.

'Mrs. Vermeer, isn't it marvelous that of all people, someone with your name knows how to uncover fakes so easily. Just joking. May I introduce myself? The name is Hathaway, James Hathaway, Jim for friends. I work for the London office. I hope to speak tomorrow on the wet white layer that Dante Gabriel Rossetti used and which will give us full certainty in the question of attribution and authenticity.

'Highly interesting.'

Hathaway asked whether he could join her at the dinner and she consented. She was alone and it was reassuring to have somebody to talk to.

'Tomorrow I am going to demonstrate what you intuitively said today,' he continued, when they were seated.

'Really? In what way?'

'I can't give that away yet. But I will tell you my magic word: computers. Amazing results.'

Charlotte tried to divert the conversation. To be kept occupied with the subject beyond the obligatory hours was asking too much.

'What do you think of the conference so far? I mean the setting?'

'Splendid. I asked for a few very powerful computers and a projector with high light capacity and they took care of everything in the most marvelous way. 1500 watts is a big deal. We don't even have that in London. And it is important, you know, I mean, that everything is

well organized.’ His voice got a paternal tone, as if he was explaining to Charlotte the importance of healthy food.

‘Those elements are so easily forgotten. And then there you are, with all your ideas and good intentions, but nothing to show. Not to mention all the efforts you’ve put into it.’ His laugh was more of a whinny.

A sense of disappointment washed over Charlotte. Was he going to keep bleating about these boring details or could they possibly have a serious conversation?

‘Are you alone, here?’ she tried, before realizing that he might interpret this as a provocative question.

‘Yes, no kids, no cats. All alone. Gives me peace to work at night. I plan to edit some more scans after dinner, so tomorrow it all will be very clear.’

‘But...’ She hesitated for a second, but plunged ahead. ‘What about a nice trip tomorrow, after the morning sessions? I would like to visit the Puy de Dome. We could go together?’ Even as she was asking, she knew that the answer would be negative and that she would be relieved. He had not, in any way, given her the idea he might be remotely interested in her. It stung her. Here she was, single, not even forty, good looking, well educated. Maybe not in search of, but possibly willing to react to, a simple flirtation. But no, this Englishman was particularly not interested in Charlotte as a woman.

‘She gave it a last shot: ‘What do you think of all the sensual positions of these women in those paintings?’

A long analytic answer followed. Nothing suggested that the man related the subject to the real world outside of art, and certainly not to the woman to whom he was talking. While he was rattling on about the grandeur of the English romantics, Charlotte felt the need not to be

taken seriously because of her intellect and her knowledge, but to feel wanted as a woman. The thought annoyed her, particularly because some nerdy English scholar triggered it.

When dinner was over, Charlotte went outside. She needed some fresh air; in any case she was fed up with Hathaway. The dining room looked out through some large folding doors onto an extensive terrace, hedged by low shrubberies with some openings to the vast, lower park. Here and there, stood small tables with iron cafe chairs. In the far distance through the high trees of the park, Charlotte could see twinkling points of light, proving that people actually lived in this somber region. She wanted to be alone for a moment.

Instinctively, she looked up into the sky. She had done this since she was nine, when her fascination with the stars had begun. She had spent evenings, sometimes even entire nights, outside watching. With one of the neighbor's boys she had started an astronomical observatory, despite her stepfather's contempt. 'Useless activity,' he had said. She had saved money to purchase her own small telescope and every day, with childish earnestness, she had written her findings in her great observation-book: planets seen, open star clusters discovered, moon craters examined, star occultations tracked, meteor showers documented. 'Do you see the Andromeda galaxy? One ought to see it with the naked eye.' 'No, wait, Yes there it is. Yes I'm sure now. There, you see it? Next to that star.' 'Yes, I believe I see it as well.' Later they had admitted to each other, first a bit abashed, then laughing, relieved, they hadn't seen anything.

But there was plenty she had seen, especially in the winter when Orion stood unapproachable in the skies. Orion, so delicate in proportion, so graceful and at the same time vigorous. Male and female simultaneously. Years later, she had come across that same passion coupled with strength when she first heard the *Waldstein sonata*.

She had remained fascinated by the night sky. Whenever she came outside in the evening she looked up and poetically shared her expertise with anyone at hand. ‘Look there, it’s the Pleiades, so beautiful.’ And without even thinking a lot about it, she knew she treasured an enormous wealth. That she had seen the Pleiades in their blue haze through the telescope, realizing that this image was the most beautiful thing she ever had beheld, more beautiful than the most exquisite paintings she would lay her eyes on years later.

But now, on this late July evening, no Pleiades or Orion could be seen. She recognized immediately the star Vega right above her. Turning her gaze, she knew she would spot Cassiopeia. This gave her the reassuring feeling that things were indisputably as they should be. Newton is precious to me, she thought, as if things would be different had he not been around.

Inside, the concert was announced, so Charlotte went back to her seat next to Hathaway, who gave her a courteous nod.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we ask your special attention for the world famous tenor, Viktor Stavros; he has sung in all the great theatres of the world, from La Scala to the Met; and we are very appreciative that he was willing to find the time to perform for us while in Paris.’

Charlotte never had heard of him, but the moment the singer got up onto the provisional stage, she gave him her undivided attention. It was the man she had met yesterday, in the corridor. The speaker again asked everyone’s attention for the tenor, who was deliberating completely focused on his pianist.

‘Again one of those tenors. Last time they had a different one.’ Charlotte had completely forgotten Hathaway, who was still sitting next to her, sharing his random thoughts. With a small gesture, she asked him to be silent.

‘Maestro, can you please tell us what you plan to sing for us?’

Viktor Stavros looked up amiably. The warm voice reminded Charlotte of their encounter: ‘A few arias from famous operas by Puccini and because we are in France, also some by Bizet and Massenet.’ She had to laugh. He spoke like a caricature. Exactly the way French are supposed to speak English. As if Viktor Stavros had spotted he was the source of Charlotte’s laughter, he seemed to stare intensely at her. He paused for a moment, but didn’t seem to avert his gaze, making her blush. She knew he could not possibly see her in the hall, yet she still looked away, as bashful as a child.

‘Well, that is wonderful. Let’s have a warm and welcoming applause for Viktor Stavros, accompanied by Alexander Lasek on piano!’

The tenor positioned himself on the stage, looked down at the floor, then concentrated for a long time on the audience, turned again to the pianist and nodded as a sign they could begin.

Charlotte knew the aria: *Che gelida manina*. It was one of her favorites. She had started to love opera after the piano studies that had dominated a great part of her youth. At first, she had the unshakable impression that the tenor was somehow too explicitly singing in her direction, but soon she wasn’t preoccupied with herself anymore. The performance held such an intensity that she utterly forgot about time and place and was carried away completely into the world of Puccini’s music. Viktor Stavros was the one who expressed this touching emotion. He was the poet who addressed Mimi and gave her his arm.

When the aria was over the audience broke out in a deafening applause, which Charlotte joined passionately. She even shouted some acclaims. But, when she turned to Hathaway as a sounding board for her enthusiasm, his seat was empty. She arranged herself more comfortably in her chair, completely at ease; this tenor was special and she looked

forward on an hour-long treat of the emotions from which she had somehow become alienated.

Stavros himself announced his last aria: *E Lucevan le Stelle* from *Tosca*; the imprisoned hero looking up at the stars from the Castel San Angelo, bemoaning his fate. Although Charlotte had been in Rome for 15 years, she had never yet managed to visit this castle. And she hadn't heard the opera for years. To her surprise, it affected her even more than the aria of *La Bohème*. She found not only the intensity of the music overwhelming, but also the physical experience, the warmth of the man singing. How phenomenal it was to hear the human voice used in this way. The mighty sound of a master tenor, who goes up in scale, letting his voice grow in volume, with the power to let it float freely at the climax, leaving the listener breathless. Only a live performance can have that effect, Charlotte thought to herself. Enchanted she looked at the tenor who, in all the nuances, in voice, dynamics, phrasing and even in his posture, lived thoroughly through the piece and did exactly with it what the music demanded.

After the concert Charlotte went outside again and stood silently while the music lingered in her head.

'*Bon soir, mademoiselle*, or should I say *madame*?' She recognized Stavros' voice. She turned and found herself staring straight into his eyes. 'Are you enjoying the stars? Music and stars, isn't that romantic? *Lucevan le stelle*, I would almost say. Did you enjoy my performance? But still, let me introduce myself. I am Viktor Stavros.'

Slightly dazed Charlotte confirmed it had been a wonderful performance. She followed his look and saw that it was directed at her breasts. She fumbled with her badge.

'It was beautiful,' she repeated, embarrassed by his look.

'Thank you. You have to be Charlotte Vermeer,' Stavros continued

self-confident, 'I have heard about you. Very good. But we have already met a few times, no?'

'Once,' she stammered, still thrown off guard by the crushing straightforwardness with which he spoke. She wanted to say something cynical, in an effort to regain control, but the moving experience of his performance inspired a greater generosity: 'Perhaps the concert was a meeting in some kind of way?'

'Yes, we just met,' he agreed, 'when our eyes met, when I told you who I was: "*Aspetti, signorina, le dirò con due parole chi son*". I am sure you understand Italian.'

Finally the opportunity to tell him she wasn't just a nobody: 'Indeed, I have lived in Rome for fifteen years now.'

'Ah. *Una principessa romana.*'

This was precisely the humbug she was not waiting for. Too slick. And how on earth could he ever have heard about her. And he couldn't have seen her during the concert. A slight dislike arose in her, making her unable to resist the cynicism.

'Oh, you mean, that I was watching you, like the rest of the audience, because you planted yourself in the middle of the hall and started to sing, demanding a lot of attention that way.'

This was both too odious and too ridiculous. Charlotte felt stupid. Worse, she feared she might have insulted him, which had surely not been her intention. But Viktor Stavros was of a different mould.

'*Mais oui, bien sur.*' He laughed. Had he missed the irony or could he just turn a deaf ear to it?

'Shall I get us a drink?' he asked and she eagerly accepted his offer. Alcohol was exactly the right means to deal with this kind of awkward situation. She used the time he was away, to steady herself. Watching him elegantly passing all the people, she occurred to her that it would

be great to dance with him.

He returned holding two glasses. He really looked good. Now, as he approached, she got a grip on her feelings. Had she really been mulling the thought of asking him to dance? Now she decided that it would be much better to let him make the next move; that also would be more appropriate when she narrated the whole story to posterity. My goodness, posterity.

‘Will you be here tomorrow?’ she asked.

He would return on the last day to give another small concert. Tomorrow he had to go to Paris. But she would stay the whole time?

She confirmed she would be there.

‘I will sing you a request aria. Exclusivement pour vous. Or did I do that already today? I have the impression the Cavaradossi piece really got to you. A direct hit?’ He was standing, completely self-assured, both legs straight spread, the back slightly curved backwards, sometimes swaying forward, holding his glass in front of him. He turned his head upward a little, forcing him to look down to see her face. Charlotte was flabbergasted. What possessed him to conduct himself in such a way towards her? How could he not understand that he would be thousand times more successful if he dropped this whole charade? But she would play along if he wanted it. She had done it before.

‘Actually, it’s rather music for around the Christmas tree, but it was lovely. And you really sang it with immense empathy.’

‘*Mais j’ai chanté pour toi.*’ He had changed too quickly to the informal *toi*. Charlotte didn’t have a chance to answer, because a man, clearly a bit unsure of what to do, interrupted their conversation. He had been circling around them as if was too shy to intrude. Charlotte recognized the pianist, Alexander Lasek. They were introduced.

‘Alexander is my regular accompanist. He is Czech. We go way

back and we are inseparable. As a matter of fact it's deplorable because otherwise he would have a magnificent solo career, that's for sure.'

'Ah, *mon* Viktor, you are exaggerating.' He turned to Charlotte: 'You are also a musician?'

'No, I gave it up when I was twenty.'

Viktor looked surprised: 'Singing?'

'Piano. But I don't play anymore.' She wanted to be ahead of a possible, even probable, invitation: 'Not even at parties or weddings and certainly not at my company's conferences.'

'But I imagine you play superbly. For how long did you study?' Viktor asked. He was now completely disregarding Lasek, focusing only on Charlotte, who wondered how many times the pianist had witnessed these kinds of shows.

'Oh, many, many years. It was only in my first year at conservatory that I realized I wasn't a pianist.'

'But that's a shame. If you studied that long, you certainly can play. Wouldn't you please accompany me, Friday, one piece only?'

Charlotte declined the invitation politely but decisively. The last thing she wanted was to act as the pianist for Stavros. The situation was complicated enough already.

Viktor now drew Lasek into the conversation: 'It's really a shame, don't you think, Alexander?' He continued in a language Charlotte didn't understand. She supposed it was Czech. For a moment she felt like an outsider, but it gave her the opportunity to get some perspective. To rush head over heels into an affair seemed a preposterous idea; she could always decide whether she was interested in him when he returned, the day after tomorrow. A rationalization better not told to posterity. She chuckled at the idea. Viktor noticed and asked what was so funny. But Charlotte had made up her mind and resolutely she said:

‘Doesn’t matter. I am tired. It’s been a long day. I better get some sleep.’

‘But that’s terrible. Alexander and I, we didn’t realize we excluded you with our jabbering. We apologize.’

‘Don’t mention it. I really am tired. Good night.’ She wanted to leave, but Viktor stopped her, holding her shoulder; softly, but again there was that charged physical sensation.

‘But I will see you Friday?’

‘I’ll be here, so the odds are good.’

‘Until Friday then.’

Charlotte nodded and walked away. It took restraint, but she didn’t look back, sure that Viktor would interpret it as a victory if she did.

In her room she realized how restless she was. She tried to lie down, but couldn’t bear it. What a stupid joke nature was playing. She had come here in all peace and harmony, completely happy, and had let herself get all worked up by the first male who could sing an aria and tried to impress her. She rose and picked up a bottle of wine, a leftover from the previous day. Before pouring herself some, she looked out of the window. In the courtyard, nothing could be seen of the party. Charlotte thought she could hear his voice, but she realized that this was a capricious trick of her imagination. Filling her glass, she took a firm sip. Then, somewhat relaxed, lay down on the bed again.

Why did she get so confused when men like Viktor showed up in her life? Her old friend Arthur the philosopher could probably make some sense of the situation. Without any will of her own, victim of the great Will. The Will that couldn’t be denied. The Will you don’t control at all. That doesn’t take anything into account: neither feeling nor conscience, nor experiences, perspectives, analyses, or consciousness. Blind will to...? To do what, for heaven’s sake? Why should there be a

Will, elevated above her, that caused her to fall for a man like that. No sane argument could be found, not even an explanation on emotional grounds, because the type that Viktor represented had always repelled her. But now she only could think of him. Viktor Stavros, the classic macho man. He was probably more developed intellectually than the average braggart who wanted to intimidate everyone with his body, and she had to admit that he possessed a certain sensitivity regarding music. But then again, he radiated from a mile away he was the wrong man, exactly the kind she didn't need when looking for safety and caring. He would desire her for a time and then continue his endless hunt. Despite understanding this, she couldn't turn her thoughts away from him.

Why had that blind will gone to work just now? And worse, why did she not actually want to resist it? Probably for form's sake, so she could say later: "I told you Charlotte. You should have listened!" It had the force of a hurricane, but it had no power. As if she were in a sailing boat on a fast-running river. The inevitable falls were there, in front of her. The wind blew the sails, but the sails were full of holes so the wind just went through them and the boat floated on, unhindered, in the wrong direction. And Charlotte? She sat in the boat with no ability to move or to change anything. She felt the wind and was grateful that it was there; it allowed her to silence her conscience. She let herself compliantly float with the stream.

The assumption that Great Love exists had been woven into her very own existence. Misguided by nineteenth-century romantic concepts, she always had linked her welfare to the success of her love life. She always had thought that she had been born in full flight. That she would fly and never crawl the earth. Her love would be the ultimate perfection of that ideal. But since her stepfather had shown her his real

face, she had lost her trust in men. She had learned to fight to retain her own essence. It hadn't turned into a trauma, but it had molded her, creating her assertiveness, the way she stood up for herself. Like the impenetrable statue she wanted to be. If she would break, it would be forever; it would all crumble to pieces.

For a long time she had persevered, but some years later she had renounced her determination to stay away from men. Eventually desires and lusts had arisen which she couldn't and wouldn't resist. Men had come and men had gone. But they were interesting only briefly. In each case, she would discover their faults and she couldn't accept these in love. Maybe in a friend or a relative, but not in a lover.

And with each attack on the statue, her cynicism had grown. Until, on her thirty-second birthday, she had become a grown-up. She resolved that where she had previously abdicated men, she would now abdicate love. Forever. She could do perfectly well without the cocky ones. And the better ones could add no more to her life than her best friends did. The facts were clear. And the decision was easy -- renouncing something that doesn't exist is not so difficult.

But why did she always put on make-up even when just going out for some small groceries? Perhaps somewhere she had left a loophole; hadn't she slammed the door completely, for the one for whom it would be worth leaving behind the rationality of cynicism. But even if that one existed, it was very unlikely it would be Viktor Stavros.

She took another sip. It didn't matter to her anymore, right now. "Let me get drunk. Tomorrow is a new day." There was no point fighting. Her mood had nothing to do with Love. It was just a burp of hormones combined with the setting, the wine and the music. Why not flirt with this devil dressed as angel, just this once? It would pass when she returned home. Now she could dream away with the hope

that he found her equally exciting. Through the open window, she still thought she could hear his warm, soft voice. It had a deep and ravishing sound. It billowed around her and finally it rocked her to sleep.

The next day, as she made her way down the stairs – she had by now found the short way – she bumped into Lasek. Suddenly she decided to invite him to breakfast. He demurred, saying that he was waiting for monsieur Stavros, as they had to leave for Paris shortly. Then he reversed himself; he would be pleased to accompany her while awaiting le tenor.

‘But will *le tenor* himself not be present?’

‘*Monsieur* Stavros always stays in his room. He doesn’t like to meet people in the morning.’

‘So, it’s us then.’ Frankly, she was relieved to avoid Viktor. She presumed that they would meet on Friday, if she still wanted to. At this point, the scales weren’t definitely tipped in his favor; if by then the balance weighed against monsieur Stavros, she would return to Rome right after the last lecture. By Friday, she would be back in control, no matter which way matters turned out. Stavros was a man whom one needed to approach with a plan, and she feared that some random, blunt moment at breakfast could throw a spanner in the works. Besides, this was a good opportunity to learn more about the tenor in a friendly, not too explicit way.

‘How do you come to know Viktor?’ she started, when they had made the rounds of the buffet and were seated in a quiet corner of the breakfast room.

‘Well, that’s a long story.’ He looked as if he had to dive far into his memory to reproduce adequately his first meeting with the tenor, to make it a nice story. Charlotte hoped that the man would not come

up with too detailed account. She had asked the question as a starter not as something she was seriously interested in. But as if Lasek had understood, he said: 'Let me tell you the short version. I worked at the opera of Metz, he sang there and since then we have done a lot of recitals and concerts together.'

'You are a talented pianist.'

'You don't have to flatter me. I do what I can.'

'No, really. You played very well, yesterday.'

'Thanks. But the real stuff...' Again he looked as if he were searching his memories, then took a deep breath. 'You are a pianist.' He paused, as if afraid of telling too much about himself. 'The real virtuoso pieces, Chopin, Liszt, were not granted to me. How dearly I would like to play them. Do you know that I played the *Revolutionary*, etude number 12....,' He observed her sharply as if looking for a companion in misery. Charlotte nodded encouragingly and Lasek continued: 'I knew it completely and could play it till the last note. Fantastic. Only, it was just below that raging tempo. Which was not good enough for me. I worked on it for years. And one day, maybe twenty years ago, I said to myself: "I cannot inflict this on myself any longer. I have spent eight hours every day at the piano, learning tricks. I can't do it anymore." I had realized that I would never sparkle on the concert stage. No spotlights for Alexander Lasek. Flowers, okay, after the real star has received them. Never to be the star myself. I have accepted this and have become a reasonably good accompanist. Reasonably good, no virtuoso.'

Charlotte was surprised by the confession of this little man. She recognized it all too well. She had been there. She remembered a night, while still at the conservatoire, when she had attended a performance of Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. The soloist was a friend of hers and afterwards they had a drink. They had spoken into the night about

being professional musicians. She had asked him what he thought of her playing, her chances of really making it in that world, and had floated the idea of forsaking it all. She was twenty and she was concerned that she might be reaching the limits of her technique and persistence. Her friend's answer was succinct: "If you can stop, stop. Please. If you can." Charlotte would feel so much better without the pressure of the piano playing. Life would be free again. The comment hit home with a force that had taken Charlotte aback. She had quit it because she could. No more compulsion to perform well. No more eight hours a day coping with the same technical issues. She felt liberated so knew that she had been right to stop. Sometimes she sensed a faint nostalgia, the unrealistic pining of an illusion. But Charlotte Vermeer hadn't wanted to stand in the shadows. She had looked for another area in which she could excel, in which she would never be second rate.

'I understand,' she said.

She had to change the subject. This was too heavy. 'How did Viktor end up here?'

Lasek answered easily, now that they had developed a mutual respect. 'One of your directors here in France is a good friend of his, or anyway, that's what I was told. He loves to do these things. To exchange the regular opera environment for something refreshing. There he knows them all.' He made a face, but didn't pull his punches. 'It pleases monsieur Stavros to look on some fresh flesh,' he added meaningfully.

'Female?'

'*Mais oui, bien sur,*' the pianist admitted frankly, as if it were obvious.

'Interesting.'

'Don't be under any illusions. For each production he has a new

love. *C'est Viktor.*' As if stating the name was a sufficient explanation.

'I'm not under any illusion. As far as I am concerned, Viktor is the one who is imagining things.' Now Charlotte was quite sure she would leave Friday afternoon. This Stavros was exactly what he looked like at first sight. But she regretted that she wouldn't meet Lasek again.

Jim Hathaway, clumsily balancing a breakfast tray, interrupted their discussion. Charlotte looked up inadvertently, which he used as an invitation to sit down.

'I don't intrude, I hope?'

Lasek stood: 'Please have my seat. I was leaving anyway.' And addressing Charlotte: 'Friday I will play Chopin for you. Not the *Revolutionary*, but still Chopin!' He saluted her. For a moment she hesitated, wondering whether to send her regards to Viktor, but he already had gone. Charlotte also got up. She apologized to Hathaway, who stayed behind, crestfallen. Viktor Stavros left that day without Charlotte seeing him.

She spent the rest of the day in her room or sitting through sessions downstairs. She had no interest in meeting people. Hathaway made a new attempt to approach her. He came to her room that afternoon, apologizing for the intrusion. Since the afternoon schedule wouldn't resume before four o'clock, he proposed that they make the trip to the Puy de Dome that she had suggested yesterday. But Charlotte didn't feel like it. Politely but resolutely, she declined the invitation.

'But I just read that you can see Paris from the top, at least when the weather is clear. Look, here it says...' He pulled out a travel guide, but before he could read from it, Charlotte stopped him. With a smile she said: 'Sorry, if I want to see Paris, I will go to Paris. Please excuse me.' As she slowly closed the door, she saw him walking down the corridor reading his travel guide.

III

She could hardly grasp what had happened. Not the speed, but the intensity. They had taken their time. It certainly hadn't been quick. Not for either of them. He had conquered her, then given her all the attention she desired. It had overwhelmed her. She had surprised herself by losing all control. There had been no time to reflect, but nothing had happened that she didn't want. What she remembered mostly was his voice, soft and tender.

She looked at him and couldn't believe what had just happened. It seemed a dream, one about which she blushed and of which she was perhaps a bit ashamed, but which she didn't regret. It felt so right. With Viktor in her life in such an overwhelming way, there could be no room for cynicism.

He got up. 'I have to sing,' he shone.

Downstairs in the conference hall, where Viktor would perform, she bumped into Alexander Lasek. He greeted her cordially.

‘Chopin I promised and tonight Chopin you will get. After Viktor’s performance. You will stay with us after the concert, won’t you?’

‘I will stay, yes.’

Lasek nodded comprehendingly. She changed the subject. ‘Viktor is warming up his voice, so I can’t disturb him. Do you mind keeping me company?’ Friday evening at seven o’clock was the cocktail hour; the happy time before dinner, in which all the formally-dressed attendees tried to look important. For some, this was the culmination of the whole conference. The suffering was over and now they could build or strengthen connections, all under the delight of a drink. This was an important time for the ambitious employees of ArtSale, but Charlotte didn’t enjoy it so she was glad to have someone to talk to.

‘If we are to see each other more often in the future, let’s call each other by our first names.’ He invited her to a corner where they sank into a large couch. Charlotte didn’t react to his implicit reference of her status as Viktor’s new love. She asked where he lived.

‘I live in Paris. Alone.’ He didn’t add anything and Charlotte didn’t push. She turned again to the soft spot with which she had had success at breakfast the day before. ‘Don’t you ever dream of playing solo?’

For a moment he looked disturbed, but quickly his eyes cleared: ‘Let me tell you a story. Long ago I used to see, when I closed my eyes, a dangling rope ladder, infinitely climbing up upwards and dissolving ultimately as a dot in the sky. Compulsively I had to climb, whether I wanted to or not. For years I closed my eyes and climbed. Until one day, I opened my eyes and saw that I was nearing the end. The two ropes of the ladder passed into a loop with knots attached to an invisible ceiling. It was quiet up there, no wind, blue sky. Anyone who

sought to climb the last stairs of the ladder had to put his head through the loop. I didn't do it. I looked at the noose and said, 'you can't catch me.' And since then, there we are, high above the world, and we are examining each other. The rope inviting, me resisting, but more easily than I would have expected. Effortless, I stay in place, and although it's not completely comfortable up there, it is an endurable status quo.'

Charlotte nodded. Lasek remained silent, lost in his own thoughts, but the openness with which Lasek had spoken made her feel at ease. Her comfort came, too, from the lingering memory of her time with Viktor that afternoon. She looked up. Viktor had come.

'Are you ready for my performance?'

Everybody had left. The staff had switched off the huge lights. At one table, Charlotte and Viktor let the candles burn. In the same corner where Charlotte had sat earlier that evening with Lasek, she and Viktor now spoke about everything: Rome, Paris, opera, art, friends. No commonplaces, and only the here and now.

'You'll probably meet my friends when we go to Provence.'

He glanced at her, sure of his case, but seeking confirmation. Charlotte didn't react right away.

'You want to come, don't you?' He sounded less self-assured.

'Where to?'

'I just said -- Provence. My house.'

'And when would we go there?'

'Tomorrow.'

Instead of answering she took his hand into hers.

He continued: 'It's close to Aix en Provence. Picturesque location. Cost me a fortune. Are you coming, or what?'

'I have my work.'

‘Take time off.’

‘I have to bring back the rented car.’

‘We will extend. Money is of no significance.’

She had no more arguments. He repeated his question. She placed her finger for his lips. ‘Don’t ramble on. Yes, I am coming with you.’ And the moment she said it, she was relieved that she had dared. No way back now.

Lasek entered at the far end of the hall. Charlotte nodded him to come near. He apologized for the interruption: ‘Would you like me to play something?’

They both encouraged him, so he sat down: ‘On closer consideration, I don’t want to play Chopin but Brahms.’

Charlotte knew it well. Opus 117. Three intermezzi. But it had been long since she had heard it and the third part led her away from Viktor. Why had the pianist chosen this piece? It hurt, this opening to a lost future. It was more of a contradiction than she could bear. Not tonight, not now.

Charlotte was walking back from school, past hedges of jasmine. Their smell dominated everything. Summer vacation had just started. The sun was shining and it was hot. She wore her favorite clothes, the light blue dress she had gotten from her grandmother, her white stockings and open shoes. The colored bow in her hair. Everything was perfect. In her hand she held her report card, all A’s and B’s, with a note that she was the best in her class. The report would be good for everything her parents had promised her: a vacation at the beach, new piano scores. She started to skip. For the first time in her life she was conscious that she was happy. And the awareness of this joy became stronger than the joy itself. The notion that she could experience this.

But the more she considered it, the more the original feeling was pushed aside. Consciousness had poked the spontaneous joy. The thinking about joy led to sharp, stinging awareness. She realized that although she was happy now, the sensation would be gone in a few minutes, at most a couple of hours. The innocence of joy was lost to her forever.

She opened her eyes and looked at the pianist. She turned and saw Viktor attentively listening. Why on earth had Lasek chosen this piece? It had changed the evening completely.

IV

The fast-running river was actually no more than a wide brook. In some places, where the water was deeper and slower, it had the color of Prussian blue, turning to a clear turquoise in the sunlit shallows; here and there, ultramarine and emerald shimmered where the water plants swayed. Charlotte remembered a seminar at ArtSale about painting materials and their history. On a large table she had seen dozens of stones and all kinds of pigments with simple name tags: malachite, viridian, azurite, Egyptian blue, all the colors one could imagine, but it all had been dead material, lacking the spark of life. Here all those tones of green and blue came alive in the light and the brilliant water.

She had been alone with Viktor for almost eight days. They hadn't even left the house, but since she now wanted to see how she would react to renewed contact with the world, they had planned an outing. Viktor had spoken proudly about a riverhead near Avignon: Fontaine

de Vaucluse. Charlotte had never heard of it.

The valley got narrower. The sun disappeared behind the towering cliff. Huge rocks filled the riverbed beside them. The water had disappeared underground and the chasm narrowed.

‘Perfect spot for a person with claustrophobia.’ Charlotte laughed, in an effort to tame her own anxiety.

‘It’s not gratuitous that it is named Vaucluse, *vallis clausis* in Latin,’ Viktor taught.

‘*Mais oui, mon professeur.*’ She hated when he knew more about something than she did. She was relieved that he wasn’t a simpleton, but she wanted to remain intellectually superior to him.

The days had been exquisite. They lived from moment to moment, and she experienced how lovely it was not to have to be accountable to anyone. She hadn’t told anyone where she was going precisely; she had just called Rome and had asked whether she could have a few weeks’ vacation. And the change, combined with Viktor’s determined ignoring of any cynicism, had mellowed her; she found everything so much more pleasant as she became more kind both to him and to herself.

Charlotte could no longer imagine how she had taken him for some tough stud. In the beginning she had assumed that he was playing a role, but now, in his own environment, she could see that he was not pretending. She understood that he might have to adopt a pose in public, but with her, the real Viktor appeared.

She found his home wonderful. ‘I had no idea that singing could lead to a house like this,’ she told him. Here, his voice was even more enchanting. He was working on *Aida* and with the last tones of *Celeste Aida* she had the same sensation, almost physical, that she had experienced during his performance at the conference, when he had

sung especially for her, as he had put it. In a way she believed that now.

But not only his voice was impressive. Physically he was unsurpassed and in every way, he was irresistible. And she didn't want to resist. She had forgotten what it was like when a man really wanted her. Every time, she felt as if she were caught up in a storm, and every time the feelings that raged inside in her had been overwhelming. Meanwhile she had started to presume, or at least to hope, that this would be more than just a passing affair. She found herself thinking beyond the present, although she didn't let it show. What would it be like to stay here, to work here, to travel with him on his tours. She could almost imagine a future with him.

And yet she remained alert for signals that would contradict such a future: a weak spot in his deeds, his words, his passion; a flaw in his solid consistency. But she didn't find anything. He loved her sincerely and the affirmations were numerous. He didn't miss any opportunity to convince her, to reassure her and to share what he did and felt. This was, in fact, the nucleus of the mystery that occupied her musings. Why had she come with him so easily? She had no explanation beyond the clarity that she had felt on that first night, after the concert, but she was convinced it was right.

Finally they arrived at the source of the river itself, halting at the fence by the crater. Charlotte looked along the steep slope strewn with boulders and twenty feet down she saw the water, with immense rocks arching over it. It was a small pool, only about fifteen feet around. But even from the distance, it was obvious this was no ordinary pool, but rather the beginning of something huge. The color of the water suggested an unfathomable depth. The water was low this time of year,

Viktor said. There were days it whirled higher than the fence.

Viktor laughed. 'It's mysterious, isn't it?' he said, as if reading her mind. 'Nobody ever has measured the depth. Inscrutable. They have sunk robots into it. Three hundred yards and still they hadn't reached the bottom.' He started to climb over the fence. 'Shall we go down? Officially it's not allowed, but everybody does it.'

'Mysterious indeed,' Charlotte agreed, more to herself than to Viktor. The water had an enormous, menacing power, and its sinister depth inspired awe. She wasn't sure that she wanted to go any nearer. But not wanting him to think her a coward, she crawled under the railing, then jumped and slipped from one rock to another, down into the crater. It got cooler and darker as they descended, as if they were entering a different world. Now and then she looked up, but quickly found herself underneath the towering rocks, which blocked any view of the sky.

'Viktor, wait.' Confident of the path, he had moved ahead of her, while she still needed to pick her way along. He came back and reached his hand out to hers.

'I don't want to slip into your deep water. I assume it's freezing cold.'

He apologized and together they cautiously approached the water's edge. They were now at the bottom of the gorge. From here, only a small part of the sky was visible. In the middle of the pool, the water was dark, deep azure, while at the edges it became steadily more green. Viktor slipped his hand in the water.

'Lovely.'

She did the same and felt the unfathomable cold.

'Let's go back.' Suddenly the water had lost its magic, remaining nothing more than a fearful depth at her feet. She wanted nothing

more than to return to light and warmth. Viktor slid his hand into the water again and Charlotte suddenly feared that he might play some immature trick on her. She assumed that Viktor had been one of those boys who had played tough in elementary school to show the girls they weren't afraid of anything. And who then, instead of carrying out their sturdy male foolishness among each other, had forced the girls to participate. They were boys and boys do that kind of thing.

'Ok, we will return, but...' he said laughing, 'you have to know that according to the legend, there was a dragon, here in this water.'

'I don't believe in legends or in dragons,' Charlotte said, clambering up to the light. Viktor followed close behind.

That same evening they went to the village where Viktor had been raised. All of his childhood friends still lived there, he remarked contentedly, as if he had been the one chosen to discover the world. First they would visit Etienne, his mate from his teens, someone on whom he could always rely. They knocked on the door of a simple house at the edge of the village. A small man with the appearance of a bouncer at the next best obscure nightclub, opened the door. He wore his stretched black woolen sweater tucked into his jeans. As far as Charlotte could see, he had tattoos everywhere. It was hard to imagine that the two men were the same age. The man's face changed from annoyed to cheerful as soon as he saw his visitors.

'Viktor, what a surprise! You should have told me you were coming.' Etienne asked them to come inside and while Charlotte was still on the threshold, he grabbed Viktor and hugged him firmly. Charlotte enjoyed this frenzied welcome, but she felt a bit uncomfortable. She couldn't pass and the man stood there for nearly a minute with Viktor in his arms, whispering in Viktor's ear. Finally they parted and Etienne

merrily guided them into the kitchen. Under bright fluorescent lighting stood four wooden chairs at a kitchen table covered with a plastic red and white checkered cloth. On the walls were open cupboards and on one open side hung a life-sized drawing of a boy, probably about eight years old, Charlotte guessed. Etienne as child? Through a large, open window mosquitoes swarmed into the brightly lit space. Etienne uncorked a bottle and took down three glasses from the cupboard.

‘Viktor, tell me. Still singing and women?’

Charlotte perked up her ears, but Viktor must have been embarrassed because his answer ignored the remark about women. He started an enthusiastic elucidation of the roles in which he had starred lately.

‘Didn’t you hear I sang Pinkerton? It’s so delightful to play the bad guy. Absolument genial. I had superb reviews. Standing ovations! But enough about me; how are things around here. You can read everything about me in the papers, but one never learns anything about you that way.’

They all laughed and the implicit insult passed unheeded. Apparently Etienne was used to the arrogance and self-confidence with which Viktor spoke about himself. But Charlotte suspected that the name Pinkerton didn’t mean anything to Etienne.

‘And who is this fair lady at your side? Your latest conquest?’

Viktor spoke to Charlotte by way of answering Etienne. ‘I can’t help it. In this village they are not used to anything at all. When they see a picture of me with a soprano, just in some role, they think that I have a new sweetheart. You heard what he called it: a conquest. As if I have a new love every day. It is time they stop these *bêtises*.’ The last word he pronounced with so much emphasis that Etienne had to understand that it was meant for him.

He addressed his friend again: ‘This is Charlotte, *una vera donna*

romana. She is magnificent.’ He said it proudly and Charlotte felt honored to be introduced as a Roman woman. ‘She works at an auction house as an art historian,’ he added.

‘*Enchanté*,’ Etienne toasted. He took his glass and emptied it at a draught. Viktor followed his example. Etienne refilled them immediately. Charlotte intended to stay sober, especially here, so capped her glass with her hand.

‘Let’s go downtown tonight. Louis and Jacques will join us.’

‘Friends from my youth,’ Viktor explained softly to Charlotte and added: ‘Don’t judge them too fast. They didn’t go to university like you. They haven’t had the same chances as we had. Don’t be prejudiced. They are good boys.’

Charlotte nodded. She wasn’t that much of a hothouse flower.

Nevertheless, she soon discovered that she had set her expectations too high. Louis was a spiky type, nervous, lighting one Gauloise to the other, well dressed, or at least, his clothes had once been of good cut. He could immediately be type-cast as the insignificant aide of a mafia boss; the one for the dirty knife jobs. With every mumbled sentence he added a half-heard curse. Charlotte wondered whether he had a weapon under his wide jacket. Jacques was blonde and bulky; he would suit the same mafia film, as the mindless hulk, whom everybody mocks. They both were unemployed and Viktor’s arrival offered them the possibility to party substantially at Viktor’s expense. Deliberately, Viktor introduced Charlotte only casually, as if not wanting to call attention to this sophisticated woman. Why he kept up with this bunch and what were exactly the connections among them, she had not yet figured out. Rough diamonds, was her conclusion; for now, she would give them the benefit of the doubt. As long as Viktor was present, she didn’t have to worry. As a matter of fact, she thought it was kind of fun

to go out with this bunch of desperados.

They walked to the town's central square, which was actually one giant outdoor café with some booths and tents here and there. Chinese lanterns and strings of lights hung in the huge trees. It was crowded, but not so much as to make her uncomfortable. Soft voices were everywhere and luckily the music wasn't too loud. They sat down and Viktor immediately looked for a waiter. He gazed at the group in case anyone had a special request, but none of the others noticed, so he just ordered a bottle of red wine.

The conversation circled mainly around life in the village and the nearby towns, and the difficulties of surviving in these hard times. Viktor receded to the background, and when he spoke, it was without arrogance, something his status could easily have granted him. The general atmosphere was civilized. The men drank, but didn't booze. They laughed, but didn't call out. Charlotte felt ashamed of her earlier assumptions and began to adjust her opinion. Her only problem was that the conversation didn't interest her at all. They were now talking about Louis' new girl friend, whom he described as a chick from the big city.

Nobody paid any attention as Charlotte stood up. She might have been Viktor's new dog.

'Do you mind if I go for a walk?'

'No problem. We will be here for quite some time.'

She walked to the other side of the square. Softly she heard the *Kaiserwalser* by Strauss, the perfect accompaniment to the sights around her. Under the trees was an old merry-go-round with two levels. Silent pastel shades and soft black; mostly horses, but also a stagecoach and a cheerful looking elephant. With so much attention to detail, it was the perfect concept of melancholic harmony. About ten children were

circling on the animals, every now and then waving to their parents who stood at the side. With her father, her real father, Charlotte had spent hours of her childhood at fairs. She had delighted in the synchronous movements: up and down and around; later, lying in bed, she had continued to revel in her happiness at the pomp and circumstance of the merry-go-round. The movement was perfect. At high school she had learned the mechanics of this movement, but oscillations, sines, co-sines and even the whole wave theory of light had been no match for the enchantment of the horses' marvelous perpetual swing.

Happy in the memory, she walked slowly back towards Viktor and his friends. They were having a good time. Passionate gestures, laughter; men comfortable with each other. Best friends forever. Slowly she approached them. She could hear them before they could see her.

'Where's your new flame, Viktor?' she heard Louis saying. 'Ran off already? Having a hard time mastering the women?' He meant it innocently, but for Charlotte, the phrase jolted her twenty-two years back in time, to a foul-smelling café in the village where she had lived with her family. She remembered the scene so vividly.

Dim light that became even more dusky in the thick smoke. Despite that, everything showed its razor-sharp contours, because the smoke cut off the light beams so tangibly; putrid smoke, its stink exceeded only by the stench of stale beer. Moldy, red-brown carpets hung over worn out tables. Dark wood was everywhere. Deafening Schlager music reverberated from the speakers. Jabbering and yelling, the foolish ecstasy of the drunk. Only men sat on the bar stools, no woman were to be seen. Cigarette smoke spiraled up between the glasses. The suffocating conviviality of an afternoon drowning in alcohol. Her stepfather sat with two other men at the corner of the bar, the contractor between his

workmen. She approached, smelling on him only beer and the stench of failure. No one noticed her presence.

Softly she said: 'Mama asks you to come home. It's already seven.' No reaction. She repeated the statement, more loudly. Her stepfather looked up and assessed her if she weren't his stepdaughter but rather some new plaything. Charlotte looked at the ground. 'Tell mama I am coming. We will drink the last one to our best friend Nick, here.' He slams the shoulder of the oaf sitting next to him. Nick roared and tried to get even: 'Hard time mastering the women, Jake?'

Her stepfather made a face: 'Me, having a hard time? Are you kidding? I am the master; I lay down the rules.' Suddenly a broad grin stretched across his face, as if he had given the right answer to the million-dollar question. 'And as a rule I get laid.' Again an ear-splitting roar. He had scored. Charlotte ran out of the café, home to her mother, although she couldn't expect any comfort there.

Charlotte would never be able to forgive her mother for having taken Jake van Velsen as her second husband. The scene in the café was the first time Charlotte had experienced the camaraderie of men with each other and it had affected her perception of men forever. It convinced her that even the ones who behaved properly when they were in public, would reveal their true nature when alone with fellow men.

'Me! Not mastering the ladies?' Viktor asked. It seemed the worst accusation that could be thrown at him. 'But with Charlotte everything is different.' Charlotte looked up and realized that he had seen her. He winked at her. He knew that she had overheard the discussion, but he looked unconcerned. Apparently he didn't feel guilty at all and Charlotte considered the possibility there was no ill intended. Childish

men's talk. Innocent. Very different from the scum to which her stepfather belonged. But the exchange had planted a seed of doubt. If she left now, would the conversation drop to the same level of tough sexism as those of her drunken stepfather in that sloppy village pub in the low lands?

That night in bed she decided that it had been strange for Viktor to have voluntarily introduced her to his old friends and to risk possible revelations from his past. Maybe he wanted to take that risk. Perhaps he wanted to show, in all sincerity, that he had no secrets and that he was who he was. No skeletons in his cupboard. Certainly, she preferred a man without baggage. But still, the ambiguity remained, the distinction between the facade that he had put on at the conference and the pose that he had shown with his friends. And then there was the man of sensitivity, with the gift for music, the way he was when they were together. Was the macho behavior innate? Or was it armor he had acquired to survive?

'You don't have to do this. I mean, to offer me your past. It's not necessary.' She turned over to him. He seemed to be asleep.

'Actually I want to renovate the stables one day,' Viktor said as they walked through the garden the next morning. Before them, Provence stretched out in inviting grimness. The sparse vegetation on the hills made the landscape raw and desolate. But because of the glistening stone of the chalk formations, shining through the green, the landscape remained light.

'You could make it a holiday resort, for tourists.'

'I'd rather not, thanks. I was imagining a studio and a small theatre for concerts.' His voice was resigned. 'Sooner or later, I hope later, I will have to say farewell to the stage. And the only thing I am capable

of is singing.'

Charlotte looked at him pityingly.

'I don't want anything else but singing. Don't misunderstand me. I have the most beautiful life you can imagine. But I would dearly like to stay involved with music after my active career, so that I can pass on my knowledge and expertise. I already get a lot of requests to give master classes. But it's too soon. If I were to start that now, it would suggest that the end has already begun.

'But how old are you? Forty-five? You can go on for years.' Charlotte wanted only to reassure him. It was as if he were standing there, like a child lost on the beach, forced to ask complete strangers where his parents were. Charlotte didn't want to be a stranger to him.

'Perhaps you build your studio here now, just for yourself?'

'Yes, maybe I should give it a shot. Do you know by any chance a good architect?'

'No. But I can ask around at my work. There are a lot of creative people with a lot of connections.' ArtSale, she hadn't thought about it for a while. 'Now you mention it, I do know an architect. Or rather, I knew him. He was a fellow student of mine. George Nobel was his name. Nice guy. Special person.'

Was it strange to think of George Nobel now? He had been the only one she had ever allowed into her private world. But she had, in the end, refused to let him stay there. He had vanished from her world with understanding and love; character traits she had never experienced in any other man. Perhaps Viktor had them. She laughed. The past disappeared. George Nobel was history.

'Could you contact him? Find out whether he still works as an architect?'

'No. I seem to recall that he was more into restoration. Though,

looking at this waste, you might need a restoration expert.'

'Call him.' He gave her a sideways glance. 'Or is he an old boyfriend of yours?'

'It's long ago.' They walked through the ragged doors of the former stables. 'I'm afraid he dislikes me. Or disliked. Maybe he has forgotten all about me. A few years later, I wrote a review of a show he did. I don't think he appreciated it very much. I don't know. We never had a chance.'

They walked into the building. After the sharp light outside, Charlotte had to adapt to the soft brown shadiness. Some holes in the high roof allowed sharp lines of light to reach the ground, highlighting the gnarled beams that once had formed the livestock pens. In the corners, some farming tools stood in the straw; they had probably not been used within living memory. Viktor spread his jacket on an old feeding trough and Charlotte sat down on it. He examined her sharply.

'Last night you said you didn't want to know about my past, which I think is strange. But hearing you refer to yours, makes me incredibly curious about your youth, your time as student. Tell me about it.'

This took Charlotte by surprise. She wasn't prepared for the possibility he might ask questions about her. She had taken for granted that even if Viktor had wondered about her past, he wouldn't push for information, but would be content just to maintain the relationship with her as it was; she was sure that it would be up to her to start or to end their affair. Moreover, she had no desire whatsoever to expound on her youth, on the disappointments, the insults, the nightmares.

Stoutly she answered: 'No big deal. Not so much to discuss.'

'Tell me about Holland.'

'Why?'

‘You were born and raised there.’

‘Yes. But I don’t have any connection with it.’

‘Please,’

‘Not now. Not here.’

He looked at her with all his charms.

‘Well, if you really want.’ She paused. Telling him about Holland would be a nice way to avoid getting into her youth. She straightened herself, as if preparing to give a lecture. ‘In Holland there is a model country. It’s called *Madurodam*, and there, they copied, in a smaller scale, all the important buildings and sightseeing locations. Well, the thing is that *Madurodam* is actually the real thing and Holland is a large copy of it. It’s exactly the wrong way round. Holland is a country like you would explain to a child what a country is supposed to be, like a huge Lego building. All well organized, neatly arranged, everything regulated. Everything in order, but not human, or at least, not on an adult scale.

Viktor looked at her, not understanding.

‘Everything in Holland is described with diminutives – little, everything is little and small. You would have to know the language to understand. They talk about a little cup of coffee with a little bit of milk and some little spoons of sugar, accompanied by a little sandwich with cheese, a little bit of this and a little bit of that. How can I convey to you the drift and the petty attitude. The diminutive is authoritative.

Viktor laughed and encouraged her to continue.

‘Grandiosity is forbidden there. Only neatness counts. They ban ugliness and deterioration. What can’t be raised or lowered to mediocrity is eliminated or removed. Made low and convenient. In that way everything remains neat and orderly in the Low Lands.

Viktor laughed again: ‘But what kind of idiots would want to live

there?’

‘Not me. Even when I was a child I planned to leave. That wish marked all of my youth. I studied foreign languages with the goals of getting out. For hours, I looked at pictures of countries far away, especially France and Italy. Where I went didn’t matter to me, as long as it was far away from Holland. I studied piano in order to give concerts abroad.’

‘But there must have been others like you?’

‘Well, mainly grumblers – that, by the way, is a national sport in Holland. But that was the difference between me and the others who wanted to leave. They left to look backward and feel better than the ones they left behind. I wanted to leave the country and forget it. Forever. And it worked. I have spent maybe thirty-six seconds thinking about Holland since moving to Rome. I remember a columnist, some stand-up comedian. He wrote in a column that he was in Tuscany but was still annoyed with some issue in Holland. What a loser. If you are in Tuscany, Holland can never bother you. For people like him, Tuscany is casting pearls before swine.’

‘But there have to be other reasons why you hate it that much. I mean, it sounds horrible, but it can’t be that bad.’

‘I had my reasons.’

Viktor continued to examine her. ‘Tell me.’ It wasn’t an invitation, more a command. It annoyed her. It made her want to dive into her past less than ever. They gazed at each other silently, each trying to assess the honesty of the other,

‘Why? Leave me. I told you how I hate it.’

‘I get the feeling there’s more to it.’

‘Do you want to know why I hate Holland? Because...’ She took a deep breath. ‘It is so simple. It is everything I just described. Exactly

everything I don't want. You would want to leave there too.' She hesitated for a moment, considering adding something, then resolutely concluded: 'It doesn't matter anymore. I have left the country. Basta così. Maybe I thought it was too cold. What do you think actually? That I ran away from the police or something?' She got up, handing him his coat in the hope of closing the subject.

Briefly, other words had tried to escape her mouth. A story almost ready to be told. But she had withstood the impetus and the words had stayed imprisoned.

Right now there was no reason to share with Viktor the rows with her stepfather, his provocative filth, his rudeness, all of which had always resulted in bigger clashes. Not to mention her reproaches towards her mother afterward, followed by her mother's hostility. Charlotte's inability to forgive him, which led to their ice cold attitude towards her. Not precisely in word or deed, not demonstrable, but in every detail, she felt the contempt and the hatred of that man and in every remark and in every act of her mother she felt the envy and indignation.

She was seventeen. On a Sunday afternoon her mother had gone visiting and she had been alone with Jake. Unceasingly he had harassed her. For hours she had to restrain her rage against Jake van Velsen's stealthy, suggestive obscenities. 'Lassie, take a sausage please? Feel how smoothly they slide in.' He filled each remark towards Charlotte with a sexual charge and each time she saw that self-confident grin which incorporated everything: his vile grossness and his disdain for her, but mostly his overbearing conviction of her impotence. Finally it had become unbearable. She had dragged the cloth off the festive Sunday table. Plates, cutlery, glasses, dishes and platters, everything had crashed onto the ground. Charlotte had yelled the provocative

words, “you filthy potato eater.” To Charlotte, the Potato Eaters were the nadir of Holland – its provincialism, its gross banality – it couldn’t get worse than that. But Van Gogh didn’t belong to the universe of her stepfather. His answer was: “Well, there’s nothing wrong with a good potato. But you, little girl, are going to behave.” He grabbed her by the arm, intending to thrash her. Fear got the upper hand now.

‘Drop dead, you bastard,’ she had cried.

She broke away from him and ran upstairs. He had chased her. With brutal force he threw her on the bed and held her there, her dress already torn. He threatened her again: He would kill her if she didn’t cooperate. She lay motionless, paralyzed with fear. She smelled his stench. One moment of inattention while he was ungirding his belt had been enough to let her escape. While she ran down the stairs, she heard him screaming after her.

She had run out of the house, never to return. Her mother would never believe what had happened. Charlotte had gone to a friend’s house. For three days she had stayed there. Her mother had called and asked her to come back. Instead, Charlotte had taken the train to the big city, where an older friend was already studying. She could stay and begin a new life.

Charlotte had never returned home; the incident had changed her life for good. She had only to close her eyes and Jake’s bullying face with that grin and the stench took possession of her again. It was enough to know what could happen with men like Jake van Velsen when the restraint was gone. And maybe it would be so with all men.

Viktor changed the subject, maybe out of consideration. He was more than willing to talk about himself. They walked back to the house.

‘I didn’t have an easy youth either.’ Was the either an arbitrary

insertion? 'I lived on the streets, in the South of France. As a street musician, I accompanied myself on the guitar. Went from bar to bar, having the barkeeps fill plastic bottles with wine when I had earned really something. I sang pop songs, you know. "Blowing in the Wind" and that kind of stuff.'

Charlotte had to laugh. She sang with high voice and with Viktor's English pronunciation: '*Ze enser mi frend.*'

Viktor didn't react, but continued proudly: 'I was soon fed up with it. I found out I could make more money by cleaning windshields at traffic lights. I really think I invented that. During these days I came to know Etienne and his friends. It is important that my biographer will also include these stories.'

'Biographer? Is someone writing a book on you?'

'Not yet, but it will surely happen.'

Etienne's arrival interrupted their conversation. He stopped by often lately and Charlotte was beginning to feel more comfortable with him. He got out of his old Citroen Dolly delivery van, greeted them and said to Viktor: 'It's all settled. Madame Lagrange proposes the fourteenth. Shall we go now? It is still early and if we leave now we can be there by noon.'

Viktor looked a bit guilty as if they were discussing thing that Charlotte was not supposed to hear and he nodded to Etienne to come inside. Two minutes later they came out again.

'What shouldn't I know about? Where are we going? Or where are you going?'

'We will go to Madame Lagrange. You can join us if you want. I just spoke with Etienne about it. I will tell you all while we are driving.'

They got into Viktor's car and drove off, Etienne sitting in the

front, next to Viktor. Although clouds were hiding the sun, the air was stifling, so they drove with the windows open. Charlotte was seated in the back, where the noise of the motor and the roar of the wind made conversation impossible. Had this been deliberate? She didn't even know where they were going.

Suddenly, they drove through a green entranceway. As they passed the open gate, everything seemed to have changed; they might have entered a different world. After the monotonous grayish-green of the barren landscape, it was lovely to drive through the ravishing fresh green of the park. Although Charlotte could see that the grounds were poorly maintained, it was obvious this had been once an impeccably organized garden completely in line with classical standards. Of the path only two deep worn-out furrows in the grass remained, and these led upward along an overgrown wall of rough, mossy stones. Then they took a steep turn, and before her, Charlotte saw the mansion. It was not very large, but looked very impressive because of its location. It had been erected in the style of severe eighteenth century French classicism, completely symmetrical, but inviting in a persistent way. The windows on both floors were large. The architect had avoided all superficial decoration and without it, the building came into its own. The color of the walls was a mixture of ash grey and yellowish ochre. At several places the stucco had flaked off. As they approached, the sun suddenly burst through the clouds, and when its light fell on the walls, the building came alive. At that moment, it seemed to shake off its evanescence.

Viktor parked the car behind the estate. When he turned off the motor, the silence was immense.

'Could you please tell me where we are and what we are doing here?'

But even if Viktor had planned to explain, all talk ceased when an aristocratic-looking lady came out of the house to welcome them. Charlotte estimated that she was in her late fifties, maybe early sixties. She had grey hair, bound in a tight knot, a face with sharp lines and a hawk-like nose; black eyes in deep sockets permitted no opposition. She was smoking a cigarette and in one hand she held a small portable ashtray into which she tapped her ashes every few seconds. The greetings were formal and Viktor introduced Charlotte. Charlotte learned the lady was Madame Lagrange, a good acquaintance of Viktor and Etienne.

Her attention was drawn to a boy of perhaps twelve peeking out of the entrance. He moved his head uncontrollably and Charlotte guessed that the boy would be the key to this mystery. An illegitimate son of Viktor? Was that the reason Viktor was acting so oddly? Suddenly she recognized in the boy the drawing she had seen in Etienne's kitchen. Viktor caught her glimpse and nodded confidently, as if to say that she didn't have to worry and that all would become clear soon. Etienne entered the house, disappearing with the boy.

Again Charlotte looked at Viktor who explained: 'That is Pierre, Etienne's son. He has a birth defect. He is a marvelous boy. I will explain the rest later.' As he said this, they walked to the rear of the chateau, where, on the terrace, tea was served. The conversation was polite but not very informative. Eventually, Madame Lagrange announced that she had to talk with Etienne and went inside. Immediately Viktor started: 'Etienne got the daughter of some café patron pregnant. The child was born, but he was mentally disabled. The girl ran off leaving Etienne stuck with the baby. He couldn't take care of him, too often in jail or drunk or whatever. I was his godfather so I wanted to help. I always have supported Etienne, not only financially. We tried to find a

home for the boy, because we didn't want him placed in some kind of institution. Madame Lagrange, whom I had already known for a long time, took pity on him. He came to live with her and in exchange I regularly do house concerts here. That's the story in a nutshell.'

'But you don't have to be secretive about that. It is very magnanimous. Something to be really proud of.'

'I don't know...' He stammered. 'I don't like to talk about it. You have to know... Etienne. He prefers that nobody know. Madame Lagrange isn't actually as rich as you might think. She keeps up appearances a bit, and with my monthly allowance, I not only support Pierre but also her. Please Charlotte, don't show in any way you know all this.'

'Of course not.' And then, just to be sure, she asked: 'You promise he's not your son?'

'I promise.' He smiled. 'I am not trying to deceive you. The kid is doing well. He is much better off here than in some kind of asylum. When I'm home I always visit him, with or without Etienne.'

'And what were you talking about, things being settled?'

'I am going to do a concert again. We are here to arrange the details. And of course to see Pierre. Shall we go to him?'

They entered the house and went upstairs without seeing anyone. On the landing was a large room with an open door. Toys lay everywhere, clashing strangely with the clean lines of the carefully designed chateau. They entered silently. On the floor sat a boy, looking, as if enchanted, at a model train, which ceaselessly circled its track. Piles of extra rail were scattered everywhere, but the circle apparently was enough for the boy.

'Hi Pierre.'

'*Uncle Viktor!*' the boy exclaimed enthusiastically. He jumped up and rushed towards Viktor who hugged him in his arms and caressed his

head. Charlotte was somewhat embarrassed with the whole situation. Viktor must have noticed this, because he let the boy go and said to him: ‘*Voici, ta tante Charlotte*. She is very kind and dear.’

The title of aunt was a bit too familiar for her, but Charlotte was charmed to be called kind and dear. It had been a long time since anyone had attributed these qualities to her.

‘Aunty Charlotte, come play with me. With the train.’

Viktor nodded encouragingly. She sat down beside the track and picked up a piece of unused rail.

‘Perhaps we can make the circle bigger? Put some more pieces in it? Then you can choose which way it should go.’

The boy agreed and they got started. In the beginning they were somewhat ill at ease with each other, but Viktor soon joined in to help. Soon they had added quite a number of junctions, until it became vital to lead the track back. Charlotte mentioned this but the boy strongly disagreed.

‘But that is no good. It will derail.’

He shrugged his shoulders: ‘Doesn’t matter.’

Meanwhile Madame Lagrange and Etienne had silently entered. Seeing them, Charlotte got up and collided with a plastic ball hanging from the ceiling. As she looked more closely, she saw there were more balls, in different colors. Viktor followed her gaze and said: ‘You just bumped your head into the planet earth.’ Superfluously he added: ‘It’s a planetarium, a gift from me.’ Charlotte recognized the planets, properly put in order, but Saturn was missing. In its place hung a cube, wrapped in foil.

‘Perhaps we should buy him a new Saturn,’ she said.

‘But that is *Cuby, le mysterieux*,’ Pierre replied timidly. ‘He is very special. He can’t go out.’

‘But that’s not correct. You have taken away the most beautiful planet. It would be much nicer to hang a planet with rings.’

‘No, Cuby is the best. Look.’ Pierre punched the cube with a heavy blow making the cube spin wildly.

‘Leave him,’ Viktor said. ‘Don’t try to impose your ideas on his world. I learned not to do that a long time ago. Pierre has his own world in which he is very happy. For him, these are eight beautiful balls and a very special cube.’

They returned home in the twilight. Etienne had stayed with his son and Madame Lagrange. Charlotte was silent. Not the silence of cold distance, but the silence of the redundancy of words. Cuddling up to Viktor, she saw him looking straight ahead at the road, one hand loosely on the wheel, the other one caressing her hair. She trusted him. And the future would stem from this happiness. She closed her eyes and pressed herself even more closely against him.

Once inside his house, they settled comfortably on the sofa.

‘Viktor,’ she started, ‘Only now do I dare to describe what has been taking place over the last weeks.’

Viktor looked as if he had seen this coming, partly with expectation, partly with nervousness.

‘Do you want to hear it?’

‘Yes, I do.’

Charlotte didn’t know where to start so, for lack of something better, she just stated forthrightly: ‘Until today I had my doubts about you. I didn’t trust you completely. I was always worried about what secret thoughts you might be having.’

‘I suspected something like that.’

‘Please don’t patronize me, or I will take it all back.’

Viktor made an apologizing gesture.

‘What you do for Etienne’s son is wonderful. And I have to say that the guy whom I thought you were at first sight would never have done that. You invited me here and showed me your weak spots. At first, I thought that you were no more than a tough guy and that there was nothing behind the façade.’ He wanted to respond, but she immediately continued: ‘Let me finish. I was mistaken. I sincerely apologize, if that is of any value to you. From today, I believe unconditionally in you. In us. You are real. My concept of true love exists.’

Viktor nodded: ‘I am real. We are real. Until now I only fooled around, but this is real. You are my final destination.’

‘You have to understand. I didn’t want to fall for something stupid; but that night in the Auvergne I said to myself that if you were real, I wanted to risk believing once more. For you, I was willing to be vulnerable. Now I know that real love exists and that we are it.’

Instead of replying, Viktor bent over and kissed her.

Later, when they were lying in bed, Charlotte turned toward him: ‘A good friend of mine once wrote a short story for me. A myth, somewhat in the style of Ovid. Actually it’s more a story about me than for me. I never dared to let anyone else read it, but I would appreciate if you did. It’s a myth about the nymph Cirécine.’ Elaborating, she added: ‘I once told this friend the story of my life, especially my love life. I have always regarded his story as a receipt. Instead of lugging my suitcases, full of that heavy content, I checked them, and carry this story as the receipt. It gives me a simple way not to carry the whole burden, but just this piece of paper. I have kept it with me since then. Maybe because of you the depository will be abandoned, leaving this writing as the only memorial of what I left behind.’ To make it all a little bit less heavy she added: ‘This is what that friend thought to fabricate. I like it very

much. Maybe it will explain some things for you.'

She got up and from a side pocket of her bag took a folded piece of paper. 'It's in English. If you want to I can translate.' She handed it to Viktor, who stated that English wasn't a problem.

'I didn't write it myself, really.' She hastened to tell him before he started reading.

When he had finished, Viktor said: 'I want to be the one the people talk about in the last lines.'

'I want you to be him. And I think you are.' After a pause, she continued: 'Shall I call Rome to tell them I will stay longer here?'

'I hadn't dared to ask.'

The next day she called and they agreed that she could work for the next six months on a catalogue of medieval sculptures that they planned to bring to the hammer in one year. They would deliver the documentation, pictures and source materials to her in the South of France.

Viktor's first performance, other the one at Madame Lagrange's, would not take place until January. He admitted to Charlotte that he had actually promised the opera director of Nantes to sing the role of the *Italian Tenor* in *Der Rosenkavalier*, but he had canceled it the previous week. It was a baloney part anyway with an aria that was cut halfway and he didn't want to ridicule himself by playing a role of someone who is playing the role of a tenor. But the main reason was that he had wanted to stay in Provence. Charlotte responded that she could never have agreed with such a decision, had she known about it, but she shone inside, because he had made her more important than his career.

Meanwhile the preparations for the concert went ahead. Charlotte didn't interfere. The material for the catalogue from ArtSale had

arrived and during the day she lay in the sun looking at pictures of the sculptures, realizing she never had been happier than she was now. She was sure that on her deathbed, she would look back upon her life and vouch that this time had been the happiest of her life. Thinking about it didn't change that. Lasek with the Brahms had gotten it wrong; he had lost. Even the thought of old age and death couldn't scare her.

She watched Viktor mowing the lawn. Strength radiated from him. In cut-off jeans, an exposed torso and a straw hat, he pushed the machine to and fro, sometimes with effort, sometimes easily. She closed her eyes, dreaming and in her half-waking state, an image arose of Viktor, pushing a pram.

Charlotte felt the desire for new life. Not a nervous desire, but a safe wish. Would she make the decision to let nature do its work? She knew that she would be rewarded. They would both be. Viktor wanted children. He had said it himself. Besides, she would take full responsibility, with or without him.

When she opened her eyes, she couldn't see Viktor anymore, but she could still hear the noise of the machine, now coming from the front of the house. She put on her sunglasses and let herself doze off again.

V

The warm welcome they received when they arrived Madame Lagrange's estate gave Charlotte the sense of a safe homecoming; she and Viktor would be staying for the night, as the concert would end late, and Charlotte liked the feeling of belonging. A group of about twenty people stood at the entrance. Charlotte immediately spotted Pierre, who came running to their car. Everyone greeted each other enthusiastically. Somewhat apart from the rest stood Viktor's childhood friends: Etienne, Louis and Jacques with his girlfriend. They looked uncomfortable, in ill-fitting party clothing clearly borrowed for the occasion. They were the only ones so dressed up. Charlotte thought that Etienne might even have combed the tail of his hair. There were many people whom Charlotte didn't know. Many were friends of Madame LaGrange's, concert-goers who had arrived early to help with the preparations, Viktor explained. At the entrance, she recognized

Alexander Lasek. Charlotte waved at him but didn't approach him; there would be more than enough opportunities to talk with him later. Primarily, she wanted to be carried away by the carefree promise of the joyous festivity.

'Hi, Aunt Charlotte, I made a completely new track for the train.' Pierre pulled her with him to the entrance and she reluctantly went along.

Pierre had really built a considerable length. She couldn't even take in the complete course, now that it had become so complex, with junctions and crossings, tunnels and viaducts. Instead of chaos, however, into which it could so easily have slipped, the track seemed to Charlotte to be very well organized.

'Well done, Pierre. Did you do this all by yourself?'

Pierre confirmed fiercely. 'I can make the train move in any direction. Exactly as you suggested.' He proudly put the train in motion. Charlotte hesitated. It was hard to choose between being here with Pierre's simple happiness, and downstairs with the guests and the festive spirit.

'Wait until the train has made all the possible courses.'

'But that would be... I am not that good in math, but I would say hundreds.'

In the meantime Etienne had entered.

'Daddy, you are like a strange bird.' Pierre said, referring to his tuxedo.

They laughed. Etienne proposed that Charlotte could go downstairs. He would stay with his son.

The concert would be held in the great salon at the front of the chateau. Decorated in the Classicism style with friendly brown wood and soft grayish stone, it offered the perfect setting for Viktor's

program. Eager concert-goers were already helping to prepare the room, dragging chairs to the salon where they arranged them in a wide semicircle around the grand piano. There would be seats for about hundred people. Madame Lagrange promptly claimed Charlotte.

‘Will you come with me to select the wine?’

Charlotte answered she wasn’t an expert, but Madame dismissed her objections: ‘A woman so classy and sophisticated can surely help me choose something for this concert.’ Charlotte could hardly refuse the compliment, so followed Madame to the door of the cellar. Downstairs they walked through a dark aisle to a cast iron gate. Creaking, it opened. The wine cellar was cool and pleasant, with stones that softly reflected the scarce light.

‘The first choice we have to make: heavy or light?’

‘Not too heavy, I would say. Viktor wanted to do a light program. Perhaps we should link the choice of the wine to that?’

‘That’s what I meant. A woman with sense and heart. Viktor can bless himself with you. How long have you been together now?’

‘Since the end of June. Nearly three months.’

‘I hope it will be forever. That Viktor finally has found the right woman. Maybe a wedding next year?’

Charlotte laughed evasively: ‘Let’s not rush into things.’

‘But I don’t rush at all. As a woman of... may I ask how young you are?’

Charlotte saw no reason to conceal her age.

‘As a woman of almost forty,’ Madame continued, ‘you should be thinking seriously about your future. You will need to make the right choices. I didn’t do it when I was young and until now I regret it.’

‘How so?’ Charlotte dared to ask.

Madame Lagrange picked a bottle out of one of the racks, took a

cork screw and opened the bottle. 'As we sit here and talk, we may just as well have a glass.'

They sat down and toasted on a successful concert. But Madame Lagrange didn't want to leave the question unanswered.

'When I was a child, I always imagined how marvelous it would be to have a family later, a nice husband, nice children. And I kept that desire as an adult. I was studying literature in Paris when I met my future husband. After we graduated we got married, and it looked like my childhood dream was coming true. But then I got a very good position at the university and before I knew it, I had obligations from early morning till late in the evening.'

After a pause she continued: 'When the old wish knocked again at my door, it was too late. I was forty-five and that part was over. There I was, with all my writings. It was a gift from God when Etienne gave me Pierre. That's the way I choose to view it. It's a blessing. My husband passed away ten years ago and my life did not much value, until Pierre came.'

'Pierre is such a lovely boy.'

Madame Lagrange finished her glass and got up.

'Do you agree that this is the right wine? Come. Let's go upstairs and find somebody to carry the boxes up. We won't start dragging them ourselves; men have to be good for something.'

After everything had been arranged, they all adjourned to the kitchen. Cheese and French bread were put on the table. The conversation was vivid. Viktor talked without restraint.

Someone introduced Charlotte to Antonin Kletsy, the opera director in Nice. He was a stout man with fat cheeks, small red eyes and the need to incorporate some kind of compliment to himself in every statement. But the conversation mainly focused on Viktor and

his role in the music world. It was Alexander Lasek, until then sitting silently at the table, who – with unexpected fierceness – brought forth a critical note.

‘What matters is the music. The rest is rubbish. If I can transmit and pass on music, I am happy. And it doesn’t necessarily have to come along with a lot of humbug or show, or even opera. Opera – all deceit and hypocrisy. All those dressed up and worked up people.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘The world of music has significance, the music world is of no importance whatsoever.’

There seemed no context for Lasek’s attack. Did he deliberately want to provoke Viktor? Then Charlotte realized that Lasek was addressing his comments mainly toward the opera director. Did Lasek have a bone to pick with him? She would ask later, but right now they needed to resolve this dissonance as quickly as possible. Apparently Viktor felt the same. Lightly irritated he responded: ‘Whatever. Whether it is perceived as show or something less contrived, I do it sincerely and with passion. Without passion, I can’t do anything. Either I act right from the heart or I don’t act at all. That is my reality.’

Charlotte agreed with him, but Viktor continued his defense: ‘You see, Alexander. The music world that you denounce does have some appealing aspects. I feel really at ease in and around the theatre. It is great to sit next to a stranger who is just in a cafe browsing the score of *Otello*. I know it doesn’t make sense, but, through this world, I have the feeling that I belong to a larger family. They eat, drink, talk, smoke. And they look into a score of *Otello*, as if it were as natural as food and drink. It’s a vital necessity and a delight. Not everyone is comfortable with a Verdi opera under his arm.’

‘I don’t feel the need to be safe by belonging to a group,’ Alexander replied.

‘Of course not,’ Viktor confirmed, but Charlotte suspected that Viktor saw this last remark as a new accusation. ‘But I do,’ he said, ‘I come from a family and background that considered opera elitist and snobbish. I had to fight for it.’

Charlotte pondered Viktor’s words. She didn’t want to belong to anything or to submerge herself in a group. She had always been contrary. Among musicians she was the art historian and among those she was something else, looking with pity at the ignorant blessed ones who couldn’t pursue her ideas. Driving the highway around Rome, she viewed the people who took the exit road to the airport as losers, because they didn’t belong in Rome; but when she herself took that exit road, she was the one spreading her wings above the unfortunate ones who had to remain in the city.

Without quite knowing where she was headed with the statement, she joined the slightly unfriendly conversation, adding: ‘Maybe it all is only illusory safety.’

‘You are the type who creates illusory safety,’ Viktor responded, almost too quickly. ‘In your world, passing trucks don’t hold any danger as long as you have put a safety triangle in the street.’

Charlotte, stung, had no answer, so she gave him a light kiss and considered walking away. The tension was broken when Madame Lagrange announced she needed a few strong men to move an armoire. Viktor left the room to start warming up his voice, leaving Charlotte in the kitchen with Lasek

‘Evidently I am not a strong man,’ he said smiling.

‘What was that all about?’

‘One day I will tell you. It has to do with that Kletsky guy and... Well, it’s all in the past. I shouldn’t interfere.’

‘Is Viktor involved in this?’

‘Viktor? No, no,’ he replied absently, then repeated with more emphasis: ‘No, Viktor didn’t do anything wrong.’

Charlotte didn’t push him and went outside. All windows and garden doors had been opened. She heard Viktor singing. Was it inappropriate to sit here, listening to him? She wanted to sit down on a low garden wall that formed the fence between the terrace and the lawn, but it seemed a bit too fragile, as if the stones would fall apart if she touched them.

Viktor was singing scales while looking outside. When he saw her, he smiled. A child, she wondered. With Viktor? Often she had pictured it: how she would go to the fair with her son – always a son. And how they would watch Orion at night and go to a concert to listen to the Waldstein sonata. Once more her thoughts circled around the same questions: Viktor was about the last man with whom she could imagine having children. Would he be stable? Could he be a father? Perhaps genuine fathers come ready-made. Maybe the role grew on men. Until recently she hadn’t even considered Viktor as a potential husband; perhaps a very close friend, a lover for a certain period, but certainly not a father. And yet Charlotte had become convinced that it was possible.

The concert was splendid. Everything sparkled. Charlotte looked at Pierre and saw him beaming. And his joy confirmed that her happiness was right. Beauty and bliss seemed to have obtained the same natural frequency, which allowed them to amplify each other, infinitely. She felt a vague ecstasy, which paradoxically sharpened and clarified everything. She wanted it to go on forever.

When the concert was over she didn’t know what to do right away. Join Viktor first, to compliment him, or to mingle with the guests and enjoy their festive mood. The large garden doors had been opened

again right after the concert and Charlotte decided instead to go to the terrace outside. She walked between all the shining faces and heard all the merry conversations. She smiled at everyone, but didn't feel like talking, so she just saw and listened. Someone put a glass of champagne into her hands. Everyone complimented her. Alexander Lasek joined her. Even he had shaken off his sorrowful mood and seemed to glitter. They sat down on the garden wall that she previously had rejected. It was solid.

The bright light beamed from the salon onto the terrace. From there it silently glided over the fence to the lower part of the lawn until it departed far away in the distance, where the lawn disappeared unnoticed in the hills and dissolved in the clear night.

'Wonderful this night. So natural, so good. No hidden agendas, no other motives, no critics, no egos. Even Viktor rose above himself.'

Charlotte let the pianist's subtle criticism pass and just agreed.

'This is what I meant by the difference between the music world and the world of music.'

Viktor interrupted their conversation. Happy as a child, he had been receiving the guest's compliments.

'Did you enjoy it?' he asked Charlotte.

As an answer she took his hand and looked straight into his eyes: 'It is the most beautiful night of my life.'

Viktor thanked her with a heartfelt kiss, then drew a deep breath.

'Come on, Charlotte. We will open the dancing.'

He led her back to the salon. Etienne had provided stereo equipment and put on waltz music. For a moment it reminded her of the merry-go-round a few weeks earlier, but if Charlotte had doubted then, now she completely surrendered to him. As shining couple, they swept over the carpet. People made space for them, pushing chairs hastily aside.

Swaying and floating she saw faces around her; she heard voices full of admiration. And any time she started to feel dizzy, she stabilized herself with the steadiness of Viktor's face. It seemed as if they were the center and the world turned around them.

More couples followed their example. More champagne was brought in. More dishes offered exquisite refreshments. People drank, talked, laughed. The conversations were not necessarily about anything, just as the first words of a child need not have meaning, because the import takes place on a different level.

Later on, when most guests had gone, Alexander and Charlotte sat in the salon. The doors were still wide open and from outside she heard Viktor talking with the last guests, some wealthy men who exhaled money. He was still dominating the conversation.

'Alexander, do you want to play a piece for me?'

'Sure. Anything. I have a car stuffed with scores. Perhaps the Brahms I played last time?'

'No, certainly not that one. But another Brahms, opus 118, the second part. Do you have it with you? It would be a delight.'

'I think I know what you mean.'

'Something has to be put straight.' Charlotte said determined.

'I will get it.' He hurried away.

Returning quickly with the requested score, he sat down at the piano: 'Shall I?'

'Please.'

Softly the main theme started, calm and peaceful. The music unfolded like a sloping landscape. It drew her in, serenely inviting her toward the next view. That came. Appealing vistas appeared again and again, but they had no power to disturb her. They were just there to see. Nothing more. Here and now were eternally enough.

When the last note had sounded, Charlotte got up. She looked at Lasek. 'Merci.'

He nodded with a sense of comprehension. 'I will play on, but don't be afraid. I know what I am doing. I won't make the same mistake.'

'Doesn't matter. You can play whatever you want.' Meanwhile Viktor had entered in high spirits. Turning to her he asked: 'Shall we go upstairs?'

The next day, Charlotte thanked Alexander again. He said he had played the Brahms with pleasure. Before they said goodbye, Charlotte suspected he wanted to get something off his chest.

'I shouldn't say this, but my overreaction yesterday actually did concern Viktor to some extent. At least, it was about something in which Viktor was involved. I feel I can't lie to you. So here you are.'

'What was it?'

'It happened in Nice, at Kletsky's. A soprano, a mediocre voice as far I am concerned, but still very ambitious, wanted at all costs to have a part in an opera. She was seeing Viktor at the time.' He hastened to say: 'It was a while ago. But that Kletsky talked her into his bed, with the role as a reward. Viktor stood by and didn't do anything. When I saw that man's face yesterday, I realized again how pathetic that world can be. All those singers, musicians, directors with their petty narrow-mindedness, believing themselves sent by a higher power to grant everyone absolute beauty. But then they behave like everybody else. I thought that man absolutely disgusting. He didn't belong here. He was the only annoying element yesterday.'

'But Viktor didn't do anything wrong? I mean really wrong? Maybe he let that girl go so fast because he didn't care about her?'

After waiting just a fraction too long, Lasek replied: 'No, Viktor can't be blamed in this story.'

When Viktor and Charlotte were driving home, she wanted him to ask about it, but the fear there could be more than this incident, restrained her. She didn't want any problems. Not now, while all was good. 'Let him be good,' she begged in silence. 'Let this be right.'

VI

She is alone in her room. A feeling of discontent steals over her. She looks out of the window and sees nothing but blue sky. Everything exactly as it has always been, but the discontent remains. She walks to the door and slowly opens it. At her feet lies an awesome abyss: hundreds of meters of sheer cliff reaching down as far as she can see. She looks up and realizes that the house is situated against a mountain, one mass of stone. Above her towers an immense rock formation topped with snow. All around her is air and rock. No grip, no hold.

Again that same dream.

Viktor and Charlotte were having a late tea on the terrace. Since the concert, more than a week earlier, life had stayed unchanged, happy. It reminded Charlotte of the first week when they had just met, but now the past and the future had been added. Viktor looked at her. He

waited and then he studied her again.

‘Have you ever jumped with a parachute. Skydiving?’ He said it in his unique French-English way: *skeedeevin*, with the emphasis on the last syllable. She couldn’t help laughing.

‘What? It’s not funny. I have done it for years. It’s great.’

Charlotte made a gesture as if to say it didn’t matter. ‘No, I have never skydived. You are not seriously implying that you actually do that?’

‘More. I wanted you to ask to join me and jump as well. It’s something you will never forget.’

‘Fat chance. Jump from a plane. Are you out of your mind?’

Viktor confirmed with a cheerful smile. ‘It is really fantastic. The ultimate freedom.’

‘Usually I kind of like flying, but to dangle on a few cords and then crash to earth. You can count me out!’

‘Of course you would be attached to me. You would not even be allowed to jump by yourself. We would make a tandem-jump.’

He started to expand on the rapture of skydiving: the freedom, the exaltation, the boost of adrenalin and simultaneous peace that overcomes you. ‘There is no comparison. The sighing wind during the free fall and the serenity once the parachute has opened.’ Charlotte listened with the increasing fear that he wouldn’t take no for an answer. Desperately, she sought an excuse.

‘Is there a place nearby to do it?’ she asked, hoping it would be far away. Viktor told her there was an airstrip in the direction of the Alps. It was more attractive to jump there. Above and between the mountains.

‘But I assume that I can’t just show up and jump, just like that?’ Please let there be some impediment.

‘No, no medical certificates, no experience, no nothing. My having all the qualifications is sufficient. You don’t have to do anything. Just fall.’ He laughed, but Charlotte didn’t. It was one of the worst nightmares she could imagine.

‘And what if I don’t dare to?’

‘You will be attached to me. Nothing can possibly happen. I will lead us to a safe landing spot.’

Not trusting herself to speak, Charlotte just nodded.

‘Actually I am planning to go tomorrow. It is perfectly safe. Please come with me. It would mean so much to me. The only thing that could spoil it could be the weather. If it’s too bad, they don’t jump.’

Viktor continued to describe the wonders of jumping and, after his hundredth reassurance and a few glasses of wine, Charlotte agreed to consider it.

That night she lay awake for a long time. Viktor had already fallen asleep, stretching out on his back beside her. He was snoring softly. Charlotte gave him a poke, but it didn’t help. ‘Maybe it’s not that bad,’ she tried to convince herself. But for the first time in her life, she hoped that the next day’s weather would be misty, rainy and gray.

‘And?’ He asked while they were having breakfast. They had woken to find the sun was shining in a clear, blue sky. ‘Have you made your decision?’

The bright light of day had lightened Charlotte’s doubts. Thousands of people jumped every day, didn’t they? It couldn’t be that bad. She would survive. And he would appreciate the gesture. ‘I suppose I’ll do it,’ she whispered. ‘But I’m only doing it for you, remember that.’

‘Great. Thank you. Let’s get going.’

After a journey of a few hours into the mountains, they arrived at a

vast open field with a small building next to it. This was the drop zone, Viktor told her. A large billboard announced that this was the *école de chute*. The weather was still fair.

The airport was crowded. A plane had just landed and from the other side seven people came walking to the main building, laughing exuberantly. Viktor greeted them enthusiastically, and introduced Charlotte to them and the pilot.

‘You jumping as well?’ One of the men asked her.

Viktor answered for her. ‘She will do a tandem jump with me. Her first time!’ Viktor had slipped into his macho pose again, as he had on the evening of the concert in the Auvergne. She didn’t like it.

‘I can tell them myself that I never have jumped before, Viktor.’

Not noticing the irritation in her voice, he talked on to the others: ‘But I imagine that after today she will register for the course immediately. I know my Charlotte by now.’

Charlotte squeezed her eyes. Do not react! Viktor walked behind the others in order to prepare himself. The plane would take off in ten minutes and there were two spare places for Charlotte and Viktor.

‘Here, this suit is for you. Of course there’s no parachute. That is on mine. The only thing we have to do is to attach you to me. Do you want to practice one time?’ Without waiting for an answer, he continued: ‘You lie down here. No, on your belly.’ Charlotte did what he asked. Viktor came lying on top of her.

‘We never have done it this way. Maybe an idea for the next time?’

‘Viktor, please. Not now.’

‘All right.’ Indignantly he got up. ‘We won’t practice then. As soon as you have your suit on we can take our places in the plane. Here, don’t forget your protective glasses.’

Charlotte got into the suit and put on her glasses, grateful there

wasn't a mirror near. She felt ludicrous and very unhappy. A trickle of fear entered her consciousness again.

The plane was exactly what Charlotte had pictured when thinking of skydiving, a near-wreck of a thing, held together, she was sure, with wire and string. It had been painted in clashing colors with pictures of sensual women. Inferior pop-art if that weren't redundant. The whole club gave her the impression of being made up of a bunch of wild fortune-hunters. The cabin was lined with benches on each side and in her monstrous suit she sat down beside Viktor. All the other men took their seats. They greeted Charlotte kindly. The pilot came to inspect that all was set and then closed the hatch. With a bump, the plane started to move. It gained velocity and suddenly took off in a steep rise. The engine roared. Because the plane made many curves, whenever Charlotte glanced out the window, her view was never the same: a piece of the sky and then a mountain or some field down on the earth.

As the moments passed, Charlotte's anxiety grew. This wasn't good at all. Could she chicken out now? How offended would Viktor be?

The flight up took some fifteen minutes, and increasingly Charlotte felt her heart pounding. Sweat dripped down her brow. No, this was not good. She wouldn't do it. He couldn't ask that of her. She would tell him that she wouldn't do it. He could hardly force her to jump. What would he do? Throw her out of the plane? The only thing she would have to deal with later would be his scorn, but she could live with that. It would be far less dreadful than jumping out of a plane into the void from a height of two and a half miles.

The airplane slowed and the men gave each other a signal. With thumbs up one of them opened the hatch. This was the moment for Charlotte to make it clear to Viktor that she wouldn't do it, but because

of the noise of the engine and the roar from the air outside, it was impossible to talk; all communication had to be done via gestures. Viktor already was busy checking that his gear was in order. He indicated that she should turn around so that he could fasten her to him. Fiercely shaking her head, Charlotte remained seated. With her lips, she formed the words: I can't do it. Either he didn't understand or he didn't want to; in either case he forced her back toward him. He sat down on the bench and pulled her onto him. Charlotte felt how he connected her to him, his legs beneath hers, his belly pushed against her back. She tried to turn around but couldn't manage it because she was locked in place. She was stuck. She yelled for him to release her but he didn't hear her.

Viktor started to move to the exit. The hatch gave a view of the earth, more than two miles down. Charlotte wept but impotently had to endure as Viktor proceeded. He put himself at the opening, with Charlotte in front of him. Vaguely she heard him saying something, counting down. He pushed her forward. She fell. She screamed. She felt how he lay heavily on her. A howling started. The pressure deformed her face. He took her arms and spread them. With his legs he pushed her legs apart. Faster and faster they went down, although the earth didn't seem to come nearer. The wind was wailing through her hair. She could discern mountain peaks. Then her view changed, apparently because Viktor had changed his course. She caught sight of marshlands and a little village; a church tower rose above the rest of the buildings. What if she smashed to death on the pinnacle? And if the fall didn't kill her, Viktor's weight would definitely crush her when they landed.

Suddenly it stopped. She felt as if they had come to a standstill. The wind was gone and all around her there was a serene silence. It seemed that it all was over. Vaguely she was aware of Viktor saying something,

but she couldn't focus on the words. She realized that she was breathing heavily, then felt relief at her ability to breathe at all. Slowly she came back to herself.

'Viktor! I want to go down. Now. I want this to end.'

She didn't know whether Viktor was listening or not, but in any case the ground now rapidly came closer. Instead of the existential fear of the free fall a few moments earlier, she now was just afraid that she would break her legs when they would hit the ground.

'Watch out. Move your legs as if you are going to walk. Now!' After they had stumbled for about twenty feet, the parachute also landed. Charlotte lay on the hard grass, her face toward the ground, heavily panting, exhausted. She had survived.

'Untie me. At once!'

'Unforgettable, isn't it?' he exclaimed triumphantly beside her. 'What a sensation.' He unhooked her. She rose faltering and without looking back she resolutely walked towards the building, not far off. Barely breaking stride, she took off her suit and threw it on a pile near the door. Viktor hurried after her.

'Didn't you like it?' He sounded really surprised.

'Give me the car keys.'

'But...'

'No but. Give me the car keys. Now.'

Confounded he reached for the keys and held them out to her. Charlotte grabbed them, turned around and walked to the car. Too angry to look at him, she started the car and drove off.

Without intending to, she retraced the route by which they had come. At the airport she had been furious, but now that the fear had gone, she had calmed down and a mixed feeling of shame and humor crept through her. Shame because she had reacted so unreasonably. And

humor because she kept picturing Viktor's stupefied face the moment she had taken the keys. Above all she was exhausted. It wasn't even seven o'clock, but what she wanted most was to sleep. With relief, she took the exit to his house.

The telephone rang later that evening, waking her out of a sound sleep. Charlotte heard the imperative sound and wondered whether she should pick it up. It might be a complete stranger. When she answered, there was not a scrap of amazement in Viktor's voice that she was there.

'Why didn't you come home?' she asked.

'You took the car! I can't get a lift before tomorrow. Otherwise I would come straight away.'

'Did you expect me to be here?'

The question surprised Viktor.

'I presumed you would be. Why were you angry? You said you wanted to jump,' he asked in his softest voice.

'We will talk tomorrow.'

She heard his sigh of relief: 'All right. See you tomorrow.'

Fifteen minutes later, the telephone woke Charlotte again. She went to the living room, but even as she reached for the phone, she decided not to answer it. Let him doubt for a while. The telephone rang two more times and then she heard the answering machine respond. It was Viktor's own warm voice.

'Vous-êtes bien chez le tenor Viktor Stavros. Vous pouvez laissez un message.'

'Le Tenor! Vanitas vanitatum,' Charlotte laughed out loud.

A woman's voice was on the other side, but not a French one: 'Hi Viktor, it's me. Imogen. Now my concerts are over, I thought that it would be the perfect time to contact you. Could you please call me

back. You can reach me on my number in Paris. Looking forward to hearing from you. *Ciao.*'

Imogen. No last name. A friend probably. Who in heaven's name was Imogen? In all the time they had been together he had never mentioned her. But apparently they got along very well.

She went back to bed. The last thing she remembered was the low sunlight on the pine trees on the Palatine in Rome, their umbrella forms offering a comforting protection.

At noon the next day Viktor arrived, care of Etienne, in high spirits. Charlotte had only just gotten out of bed and was still wearing her robe. Viktor held a bouquet of roses in his hand. Charlotte pitied him. He was the type who thought he could amend things with flowers.

'Hello!' He kissed her. She slightly averted her head so his kiss touched her hair. 'How are you? Why did you leave that quickly? You could have waited.'

Couldn't he come up with something else than this friendly brisk palaver with that patronizing undertone? However, it might have been worse; he could have called her *ma petite* or *ma cherie*.

'I am still here,' was the meaningful answer Charlotte gave. 'And you? Still flying high? I am warning you, don't you ever do that to me again.'

She wanted to say much more, but as she looked at him standing there, with his lumberjack shirt carelessly hanging over his jeans, she couldn't continue. The incident at the airport seemed almost unimportant.

'Who is Imogen?' She had no desire to beat about the bush or to torment herself with the question of Imogen's personality.

'Imogen? Imogen Page? How do you know her?' He reacted

completely normally. No nervous twitches. No tension in his face. 'Imogen is a soprano with whom I work now and then.'

Charlotte told him about the call the previous night.

'I will call her back in a moment. I have to check the oil level of the car, before I forget it. It starts erratically.' He walked with Etienne to the garage.

When Viktor called Imogen that evening, he did so from his study, and Charlotte couldn't hear the conversation. Whether he did this on purpose she didn't know. A few minutes later Viktor came outside. Charlotte was still on the terrace.

'Do you mind if she comes for a couple of days to take some classes with me? She has such an enormous talent. And you will like her. I am sure about that.' Viktor rattled on. 'Her real name is Molly Hopkins, but only people very close to her take the risk of calling her by that name. She is at the cusp of a terrific career. The roles for her will be superabundant. She has a fabulous voice.'

Charlotte listened to him and looked at the landscape, at the last rays of the sun on the chalk stone. She remembered the warmth that had blazed from it.

'She has guts, that woman, you know. Right after finishing at the conservatory, she recorded a tape in a professional studio and sent it to agencies all over Germany, France, Italy and the Benelux. She didn't have money, but she wrote a letter to all her friends and acquaintances announcing that this was the opportunity to do something exceptional for art. Purchasing stocks in Imogen Page. Ha ha! *C'était genial*. And I have to say, it worked, the money came. It more than covered the rent of the studio and the bill for the recording. Fair is fair, she later returned the money to all her investors.' He shrugged as if to indicate how unusual he thought the whole incident.

‘I can show you some reviews about her. They unanimously acclaim her unparalleled talent.’

Charlotte woke at ten. She heard the outside door shut and knew that Viktor had gone to pick up Imogen. She went to the window and from behind the curtains she watched as Viktor tried to start the jeep. It stalled. Viktor got out of the car and opened the hood. He inspected the engine, touched some parts, screwed down something that most likely was already very well tightened. She suspected that he probably knew that he was a total nitwit in this matter and that his actions were useless. He evidently acted this way even as no one was around. Did he always have to play that macho role? He got back in the jeep and tried again, but the engine wouldn’t start. He got out and looked stupidly at the vehicle. Then he went to the garage and drove off in the Mercedes.

Late in the afternoon he returned. Charlotte was drinking coffee outside. With bravura, Viktor parked the car right in front of the entrance, a spot that she had never seen him use. He got out, walked around and, with grandiose courtesy, opened the passenger door. In one glance, Charlotte saw a green hat, golden earrings and a lot of hair. Blond hair. Then shoes: red high heels. At last, a light-blue dress under a red shawl. When Imogen had gotten out, she looked around: ‘Viktor, this is amazing.’ Then she walked to the terrace and gave a friendly nod to Charlotte, who had gotten up to greet her. After Imogen had taken off her hat and unwrapped the shawl, an average woman remained, about twenty-five, a slight dazzled gaze in the eyes, more short than tall and rather more chubby than slim.

She reached out her hand toward Charlotte. ‘Imogen Page, soprano,’ she introduced herself speaking French.

‘Charlotte Vermeer, tout court,’ Charlotte answered, keeping the “Hi Molly” in mind for a later occasion.

‘How splendid that you live here, Viktor,’ she said when she had installed herself in a deck chair, talking with her eyes closed and with her head stretched out toward the sun. ‘Did you plan to do something this afternoon? I hope not, because it would be so ravishing to lie here the whole afternoon and do completely nothing. Just ravishing.’

Contradicting her own words, she got up: ‘I am going to change. At what time will we have supper?’ Without even waiting for an answer she went into the house. Viktor followed her hastily. ‘I will show you your room.’

During the afternoon, Charlotte developed a strange fascination for Imogen, her apparently blatant openness, bordering on mental exhibitionism, and her inconceivable impudence. It was hard to define what was real of Imogen Page.

At supper, the conversation mainly circled around singing and singing techniques. Full of himself, Viktor supplied Imogen with endless advice, displaying a superfluous authority.

‘Viktor,’ Imogen asked, ‘You have sung *I Pagliacci*, haven’t you?’

‘Canio? Of course, quite often. Most recently in Milan... Let me think, about two years ago.’

‘I will sing the part of Nedda in one and a half months, in Rome. I would dearly like to work with someone with your distinction on that part.’

‘We will have time for it.’

‘But I mean, someone who really is there for you; who supports you at the rehearsals and performances. I can imagine that you know the entire opera -- every part -- that you don’t restrict yourself to the

role of the tenor when studying. Someone with your musicality and involvement could guide me easily through the entire score. I would learn so much from you.’ Then, as if it were a new idea: ‘Perhaps we could sing together somewhere. And then do some parts of *Tosca*. Oh, I would love to sing *Tosca*! Perhaps a concert before my rehearsals.’

‘It have to fit in my schedule, then. When exactly will the performances of *I Pagliacci* be?’

‘I don’t know off hand. I think the premiere will be in December. Yes. The fourth.’

Viktor stared into space for a while, seemingly untouchable, as if he were considering whether Imogen fitted into his plans. Charlotte watched fascinated. Two people using each other.

‘I think I could come to Rome,’ he finally said.

‘Let’s do that. I remember when the rehearsals start. On the seventh of November. If you will come then we could work for more than three weeks. I will let you know my address in Rome.’

Viktor looked at Charlotte as if to check with her whether he could work with Imogen in Rome, Charlotte’s town for heaven’s sake. The glance had an innocent character but at the same time it was tainted, because it was clear to Charlotte that he would be unconcerned about her verdict, he would just feel better if he had her approval. He was always looking for approval and confirmation, but it didn’t affect his deeds.

‘Do you know someone living in Rome with whom I could stay?’ Imogen probably didn’t know that Charlotte was living in Rome. Would Charlotte mention it?

Imogen continued herself: ‘Doesn’t matter. We will see how we solve the lodging problem. It will work out. Most likely the opera house will offer me an apartment. Never could it happen that Imogen Page

didn't find a solution for a problem.' She laughed loudly, somewhat too self-assured.

The next day Imogen proposed a walk for the three of them, but Viktor announced he had to see to a lot of things: 'Why don't the two of you go? At the top of that hill there,' he pointed to a hill in the distance, 'you have a fantastic view.' Charlotte objected that she also had a lot to do, but Viktor wouldn't hear of it.

'You can get to know each other better.' It sounded as if he meant it. Charlotte agreed reluctantly and soon she found herself climbing up a small gravel path. During the walk they spoke little, both of them afraid to say something too frank or something that might be considered too trivial. The right opening had to appear. The only sound was their footsteps, scratching clearly on the white, dusty gravel. The sky was clear and the sun still shone with high intensity although October had already had set in. When they reached the top, they looked into the valley, a few hundred meters below; they found themselves on a small plateau, closed off by large bushes with thorny leaves. The slope down, wooded with pine trees, was steep. The plateau once had been tiled, but through the wind and weather most of the stones had come loose from their chalk underpinnings. The view was worthwhile. Imogen took off her jacket and she sat down on it.

'I hate sitting on cold stones.' It was the first she said since setting out. 'Viktor came up with this brilliant idea to send us off to this place. One might think he wanted to get rid of both of us.'

Charlotte, sitting beside her, didn't react to the irony. 'Have you known Viktor for a long time?' she asked and remembered having asked the same question of Lasek a few months earlier.

'About a year now. The whole story is quite strange. How we met, I mean. I suppose you don't want to hear it?'

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘Because the two of you are together now.’

‘So what?’

Imogen eased off: ‘Well, actually it wasn’t a big deal. I thought it might be upsetting for you to learn how madly I went after him.’ She gave a silly giggle of embarrassment. Charlotte guessed that she wanted to present herself as more interesting than she was. Imogen looked straight ahead, as if she were not aware of Charlotte and played absently with the tiles that lay about everywhere.

‘It is completely weird how we met. Viktor and I. So weird.’ It seemed as if she were dreaming. Without further invitation she started to recount the story.

‘One evening I got a phone call from my agent. That I answered that call was actually already a miracle. I had gone out, but I had to get back home, because I had forgotten something. I can’t remember what.’ She looked at Charlotte as if pondering whether she would tell the story in complete detail. ‘As I said, it was my agent, wanting to know whether I could sing Butterfly in the opera of Nice. Very short notice. I had to replace someone – the soprano singing the role had broken her leg getting her cat out of a tree. And that is where I came into the picture. I had to decide on the spot. I already had a contract in Hamburg, which I didn’t like at all. I hate Hamburg.’

She put the tile she had been playing with back on the ground. But Charlotte heard the name Nice echoing. Had Imogen been the woman who had given herself for a contract to Antonin Kletsy with Viktor’s complicity? She had to be.

‘I loathe Hamburg. Really,’ Imogen continued. And if she had to explain: ‘Lost love, abandoned, November evening, you know the picture. Hamburg. What misery I suffered there.’

Charlotte wondered why she had to hear all this.

‘But anyway. I had to make a decision and I said yes.’

Again Imogen looked at Charlotte but now her glance was more truthful. Her hand was playing with a new tile. Her voice had become calmer, more modest. The haughtiness had disappeared: ‘Do you truly want to hear this?’

‘Please, continue.’ Charlotte smiled reassuringly.

‘In Nice I ran into to Viktor. I was completely smitten. I hung onto his every word. I wanted to be with him every moment. What a man.’

All sincerity then left her voice as she continued: ‘You must be so happy having him. I’m so pleased for you.’ How she had done it Charlotte didn’t quite know, but Imogen had succeeded in playing the loser while presenting herself as superior to Charlotte. Self-assured, Imogen tossed her hair, every now and then putting a strand behind her ears with a grand gesture.

Charlotte responded, ‘having him? What’s in a word? It doesn’t mean that much. We are just sharing the same path for a while. That’s all.’ Saying this brought the fun back in the conversation for Charlotte. In a strange, almost disconcerting way, it pleased her to play down her relation with Viktor.

‘Have you ever done anything in the music world?’

‘No. Never.’ She remembered Lasek’s revulsion against the music world. ‘And I want to stay far away from it.’

‘That’s a pity.’

During the conversation Imogen had built a row of ten tiles standing up and leaning against one another. As Charlotte moved to get up, her foot hit the first tile and like dominos, the row toppled, save one last tile. Imogen laughed: ‘Nicely made, wasn’t it?’

Charlotte nodded. She didn't know whether she should apologize for having ruined it. Lightly she tried: 'Yes, very nice.'

'Oh whatever.' Imogen also got up and kicked over the last tile. Charlotte watched as the stone disappeared over the edge and split in two, hitting the ground some ten feet below. One piece remained there and the other continued to fall until Charlotte couldn't follow it any longer.

'Let's go,' she said.

On their way back they were silent. Charlotte was lost in thought. Had it been Imogen of whom Alexander Lasek had spoken? There could be no other possibility. Charlotte's fascination for Imogen had completely vanished. Her story had exposed her as a fraud, and therefore uninteresting. And as a rival Charlotte couldn't take her seriously. But she had been Viktor's lover. She had been beside him, with him, everywhere and especially in his bed. Charlotte comforted herself with the notion that at least she never had slept with him in the bed here.

Imogen slept in a room at the other side of the house. In the mornings she would sit in the deck chair on the terrace. In the afternoons Charlotte would hear her working with Viktor. Scales sung by him and then repeated by her. Viktor singing lines of soprano arias to demonstrate how she should do it: *vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore. Tosca*. At last, Charlotte could no longer suppress her curiosity and, giving herself the excuse of a stroll through the garden, she walked around the house toward the room where they were practicing.

Imogen was standing in front of him. Did she have to wear such a short skirt during a singing lesson? Slowly Charlotte drew nearer. She couldn't hear them talking; the thick windows only allowed the

music to escape. Imogen was wearing a blouse that left little to the imagination. Now Viktor was standing in front of her. While she sang, his hands slid constantly over her body. He was talking expressively, probably about proper positioning and breath control. He looked her in the eyes, took her face in both hands and tilted her chin upwards. Imogen submitted to it all, still singing. He brought her head forward and his eyes went over her body, downward. He grasped her waist and Charlotte could see how Imogen inhaled deeply.

Other exercises followed. But apparently they didn't go the way Viktor wanted, because he stopped her and took a padded bench from the corner. He indicated that she should lie down on it and to sing again. He now came behind her and pushed his hands again at her hips. Did you actually need all this to improve your singing?

At that point, the lesson seemed to end, as Viktor picked up his scores and went to the door. Glancing out the window, Imogen noticed Charlotte. She waved merrily and pointed to the terrace as a sign to have a drink.

When Charlotte caught up to them, Viktor and Imogen were involved in an animated conversation over a glass of wine.

'I'd love to work on Tosca with you. I would give anything to sing that part.'

'It would be too soon.' He sounded paternal. 'Accept that from me, Tosca is too soon. You have to be a real dramatic soprano to sing that role. But we can work on it.'

'For the time being you are too melodramatic,' Charlotte wanted to throw in, but she kept the thought to herself; they probably wouldn't appreciate the remark anyway. But she was inclined to provoke them a bit, so when she sat down she asked with the tone of an interested layman: 'Why that fascination for Tosca? I understand about the opera,

but what is it about the character?’

‘Ah, Charlotte, to understand that you have to be an artist, a singer,’ Imogen said.

Viktor supported her: ‘It’s a unique part, Charlotte.’ *Le professeur* had returned. ‘It’s a challenge for every soprano. I predict that Imogen will be up to it in five years or so. But she has to take care of her voice. Most of all, she has to listen to an experienced teacher who means well.’ He looked at her smiling and she answered with her own teasing smile.

Charlotte continued: ‘I think Tosca is somewhat languid, I mean her character. Living just for the arts and for love. She acts the role of a soprano who is acting the role of soprano. When I think about the opera Tosca, Scarpia immediately comes to my mind. He at least has some character.’

‘Scarpia is just a bully,’ Imogen replied childishly. ‘He is such a brute.’ She looked at Viktor. ‘I am glad you are a tenor and will never sing that part.’

‘Of course he is a brute, but dramatically he excites the imagination the most,’ Charlotte said, ‘he brings the drama to life. Without him there is no opera. He is the drama. He is a strong character, a bad guy, I’ll give you that, but still, a character.’

‘And what about Cavaradossi,’ Viktor said. ‘What do you think of him?’

Charlotte wanted to respond, but she saw that Viktor was addressing Imogen, who started lauding the hero of the opera. Charlotte wondered whether they were really talking about the characters or about themselves as interpreters of those roles. Or about Imogen and Viktor? Charlotte decided to give that thought no chance and plowed on: ‘I see him as a hypocrite. In any case, he’s worse than Scarpia. From the start it’s clear that he is fantasizing about Tosca’s rival. It is unconscious, but

nonetheless he is painting that other woman.'

'I think Tosca's reaction is rather exaggerated,' Viktor said. 'It's just jealousy.'

'Perhaps, but it's a sign on the wall, literally. Even if it is unconscious. Cavaradossi has made a statement and I don't believe him anymore. One day, that truth will surface.'

'But Charlotte, he is an artist. *Recondita Armonia*. Have you never heard of artistic freedom?'

'Yes, but you can't have it all. Artistic liberty is all well and good, but then you have to accept it in real life and live with the consequences. If you are an artist and you create a sculpture of chopped off heads from puppets, don't be startled that your wife isn't that eager to have children with you.'

This brought the conversation to a halt. After a while Viktor continued: 'Did you water the plants?'

'The watering can is in the garden house. Be my guest.'

Imogen left three days later. Viktor drove her to the station. Charlotte didn't wave her goodbye.

'And. Has she left?' she asked when Viktor returned.

'Yes. I thought it was nice having her over in the end. Didn't you? I had the sense that the two of you got along quite well?'

'She isn't my type. Let's leave it at that.'

He changed the subject: 'I have to go to Lyon tomorrow. I have a meeting about a production next year.'

'Don't you pay your agent to arrange that kind of things?' She had hoped for a peaceful few days together now Imogen had left.

'This is really important. I have to be there myself. But I don't think that you would enjoy it. It's not that interesting. Five hours in the car

and one hour of talking. I think it would be better if I go and return quickly and then we can spend a nice evening together.'

He called from Lyon. In the rush of leaving he had forgotten an important document. He described it to her. 'Can you look for it. It should be on my desk somewhere. I will call you back in half an hour. Kiss.'

Charlotte knew where the study was, but hadn't been there often. She certainly had never approached his desk, a black worktable standing in the middle of the room. After all it was his desk and she wouldn't have liked it had he gone sniffing around her space in Rome. She switched on a small lamp. Under the sharp light she saw all kinds of letters and documents, probably contracts. While she was searching, she bumped her knee against a small cabinet that stood under the desk. It must have been fragile because the front of one drawer immediately fell off, releasing a pile of documents. Pictures and letters floated to the ground. When she tried to collect them, in order to put them back, her eye fell on the top line of one of the letters: *Chère Viktor*. She wanted to look away, but couldn't resist looking at the signature on the bottom: Camille. Still without wanting to, she got down on her knees and browsed the pile. Her eyes fell on pictures of women. Beautiful women generally. And there were letters. More and more of them. Chantal. Claudia. She froze and looked around, apprehensive. She wished she had never seen this. She was sure this boded something ill for their relationship, but she wasn't sure what. An alphabetically ordered archive of love letters and pictures? She stuffed the lot back into the drawer and tried to reattach the panel. She wouldn't be a witness to his list. Nor to be an entry in it either, it crossed her mind. And Imogen, would she be in there? For once and for all she decided she didn't want to know. Her normal sense returned, bringing the

incident back into perspective. It didn't have to be that disastrous.

Spying a document with the logo of the opera of Lyon, Charlotte suddenly remembered why she was there. Assuring herself that it was the correct page, she grabbed it and left the room.

For the rest of the day she exhausted herself with possible explanations and solutions – intellectual justifications. But her intuition had done its job in that first moment, and the pain from the blow remained. The discovery had confirmed her unarticulated assumptions. And it was that which caused the sadness, not the shock itself. The intellectual justifications were only an affirmation. However, Charlotte knew that this was a black box that must stay closed. Past. History. Nothing to do with Charlotte and Viktor.

When he came back home that evening she didn't ask about the drawer in the black desk.

The days had changed. The shadows were longer and it got dark early. Evenings were chillier. Charlotte and Viktor sought the warmth of the living room, where everything seemed unchanged. The sounds were identical and so was the smell. If possible Viktor was even more attentive and charming towards her than he had ever been. But something was different. For Charlotte, it was as if she had been given a view outside the house and had seen the mountains and the abyss.

What could be better than to get some distance temporarily and go back to her trusted corner of Rome. There must be a load of work waiting for her. She wanted to erase the images of Provence and if Viktor would come to Rome, the thoughts about Imogen and the drawer might quickly disappear.

'I'm afraid that I will have to go to Rome soon, for work.' Charlotte said, off-handedly, when they were lying in bed. Viktor responded that

he still had a lot of things to take care of.

‘I will follow you. A few days or a week later. Take the jeep, if you like.’ He turned and slept on.

When the evening of her departure arrived, Viktor kissed her, hugged her tightly and he promised he would follow very soon. She got into the jeep – the local mechanic had eventually come by – and drove off. Quickly she headed toward the highway, some twenty miles away. She didn’t turn the CD-player on, just the radio.

In the twilight she arrived at the *Péage*. The toll-booth of the highway offered a transition between two worlds. She took the ticket from the machine and sped off, following the signs to Nice. The radio was broadcasting French music: the dreamy melancholy of a bygone holiday; a disposition for which the French chansonniers seemed to have a patent.

VII

Charlotte had never liked the booklets that allowed one to cover contemporary photos with illustrated overlays to evoke glorious times long gone; too many artificial tricks to recall the original situation. She preferred the rough ruins. Her Palatine was a splendid disorder, stone remnants with pine trees in lively light, made timeless by the ages. Crumbled masonry as witness to the waste of civilization. Ruined buildings, anchored to subterranean foundations, surfaced every twenty feet, rising in gigantic arches and vaults. The Palatine, and for that matter, the whole of Rome, had withstood the age-long attacks and riots with success. The flood of the papal lords and other dictators had come, causing a lot of mess and nuisance, but in the end they had not touched the fundamentals. A single Roman church had found its place between the ancient strongholds. Grass had been sown, gardens had been arranged, but the essence had remained.

Her Palatine. Here she went when she had seen a glimpse of the house on the rocks. It brought her peace and silence in the middle of the noise and chaos of the city, itself distant, but yet comfortably present; Charlotte heard it, but it didn't get through to her.

She had figured out exactly what she would show Viktor in which order and, just to be sure, she already had traced out the walks. She had tried to see it all with his eyes, imagining how it would excite him. Things were quiet at her office, so it would not be a problem for her to take these last few days off. Her boss had asked whether she had had a good time in the Auvergne and she had answered while heading for the door: 'delicious cheese'.

Every day she had called Viktor. His voice made the desire to see him only greater. Imogen hadn't entered their conversation and Charlotte felt the lost safety returning. She hoped that Rome would reignite the intimate connection they had found in Provence, but even better because it would be on her home turf. She had tried to direct him to her apartment, but this turned out to be too complicated for Viktor; he apparently possessed only a limited intelligence concerning location and direction. 'As long as I can follow the road signs, I am okay. When I rely on intuition it completely turns hopeless. I get lost immediately.'

They agreed to meet in a small bar on the corner of the Via Nazionale, near the train station. Charlotte arrived first. She chose a spot near the window. The walls on the street side were constructed completely of glass, reflecting in every direction the shop displays from the other side of the street. The entrance was also glass, but installed at an angle. From where Charlotte was seated, the two surfaces reflected against each other, creating a bizarre kaleidoscope. Every time she looked up, images shifted through each other. Everything seemed a

mere foreshadowing of what might come. Each movement at the door distracted her, as people appeared in her sight, who weren't really there; some entered afterwards, others just walked by, remaining a reflection forever. But every time her eyes went toward the entrance, she saw herself mirrored as a steady fixed point.

When Viktor arrived, he appeared as a reflection as well. He first seemed to move away from her, but after being out of her sight for a moment, he approached from the other side and came into the room. He saw her at once and came to hug her. It was great to feel him. His scent seemed stronger, enhanced by the fresh air.

'Sorry I am late,' he said cheerfully, taking his seat opposite of her.

'Never mind. We have plenty of time. No people waiting for us. No meetings. Just the two of us.'

After some coffee, they headed out, walking arm in arm along monument of Vittor Emmanuele. Viktor asked: 'Aren't we heading toward the Colosseum? I think I recognize the area.'

'The Colosseum is exactly the other way.' She pointed behind her.

'Yet, I do know this place,' he said, crossing the Piazza Venezia and looking around. 'I remember giving a concert here.'

'We are almost home. Why don't you give me some of your luggage, you have so much.' Viktor had a heavy shoulder bag and dragged a suitcase on wheels behind him.

'No, women shouldn't carry burdens.'

'*Molto galante*. Shall we speak Italian from now on?' she proposed.

'We started off in French. I prefer to keep it so. Otherwise our conversations would become so...' he was looking for the right word. '*Tellement bidon*. So artificial, don't you think?'

She thought it was a pity. She had loved to speak Italian with him. French reminded her too much of "*Chère Viktor*". But she didn't argue.

In the meantime, they had arrived at the Via della Seggiola and Charlotte pointed proudly at the corner house: 'Perhaps not as big and rustic as yours, but pretty nice, no?'

'Does it belong entirely to you?'

'No, only the two upper floors.'

'You know what. Let's find out who owns the other ones. Maybe I can buy them for you.'

She looked at him tenderly. He hadn't spoken in plural indeed, but his thought had surely been plural. He must be thinking that a man should take care of his wife. Buying a house was one way to do that.

'For the time being we can perfectly live in the rooms I have. There's even enough space for an addition.'

'Take it easy.'

His remark didn't affect her. The blissful feeling that everything was good welled up in her again. They hadn't seen each other for a week and Charlotte wanted him dearly.

At home they sat on the roof terrace in the setting sun, surrounded by huge terracotta pots filled with oleanders, Charlotte's pride. She had spritzed water on them and in the last of the light, their leaves shone softly. Rome presented itself as a panorama. Viktor was wearing the same suit as he had that evening in the Auvergne, when he had touched her in the narrow corridor. Now he stood behind her and moved his hands over her breasts again. Irresistible. His voice had the same soft sound as that Friday night in the chateau of Chateaucvic. He was the man he had to be. This evening there was no discordance. Again she felt the touch that brought everything to a standstill and that made everything good. The bliss of an evening and a night full of promise and future.

They woke late.

‘Do you have any plans for today?’ Charlotte asked.

‘No. *Rien du tout.*’

‘Shall we do some sightseeing?’

‘I hate walking too much.’

‘We can tour with the car if you like. We will do it the American way.’

‘That one I didn’t know. Is that doing it in the car?’

‘Come on, you silly man!’

Despite Charlotte’s objections that he didn’t know the city and that it would be much better if she drove, he insisted on driving.

‘I can drive everywhere. Besides, I know the jeep better than you do.’

Charlotte allowed herself to be persuaded. ‘It’s best to drive on the left, that’s where you are the least vexed by the traffic. It’s pretty rough out there,’ she offered.

He nodded and without looking backwards, shifted to the left lane, which resulted in a storm of honking and flashing lights.

‘Watch out!’

He grumbled something but had to brake suddenly to avoid hitting a cinquecento parked in the left lane. The driver was chatting with a newspaper-man. Viktor turned to Charlotte. ‘Please let me just drive my way, okay?’

His anger made her laugh. ‘All right. But go now; the road is clear and they are waiting behind us.’

Disgruntled, Viktor changed gears. He wanted to show who the real driver was, so sped along the left lane, leaving the honking cars far behind, as if he wanted to avenge his prior doltish behavior.

‘Where are we headed?’

Charlotte proposed to visit the Thermae of Caracalla, to which Viktor replied that he once had sung the role of Radames there.

‘When was that? I heard *Aida* here. Maybe I saw you.’

‘A few years ago. Let me see. The role of *Aida* was sung by Camilla Lendinara. I think five years ago.’

Camilla. Just a name. She decided not to give in to her somber side and in the end she was glad she hadn’t, as the day turned out to be splendid. They had an intimate lunch in a simple restaurant in Trastevere and, late in the afternoon, they arrived at Saint Peter’s basilica .

‘Do you want to go inside?’ Viktor asked.

‘Not this time. I like the museums, but we can visit them some other time. I’d rather just go home now and have a pleasant evening.’

‘That’s my girl.’

‘But tomorrow we are going to walk. You cannot grasp the real atmosphere of Rome in a car. I want to show you the Pantheon. And the Pincio. It’s a hill with a lovely view.’

‘Perfect. I will dig out my *chaussures de montagne*.’ As if he wanted to be sure that Charlotte understood he was joking, he said: ‘I don’t really have them, you know.’

‘Of course.’

The doorbell clanged loudly. It was ten o’clock in the morning and Charlotte and Viktor were still in bed.

‘Who on earth could that be?’ Charlotte asked. ‘I hardly get any visitors and certainly not unannounced ones.’

Viktor shrugged his shoulders. ‘I wouldn’t know.’ Then, after a deliberate pause, ‘Imogen is in Rome. Maybe it’s her?’ And he added: ‘Nice, perhaps. Maybe we take do the outing together?’

‘The three of us? I...’ But then it actually struck through: ‘She is really here? You mean, you made an appointment here?’ Reluctantly, Charlotte put on a robe and went down to the door.

A few minutes later she returned. ‘You wouldn’t know! You wastrel. Of course you knew it was Imogen.’

‘Well, now that you mention it, I did give her this address. But I never thought that she would actually visit us.’

‘What other intention could you possibly have had! Did you think she would send us flowers?’

‘Did you send her away?’

‘No, missy is sitting downstairs. She says that the two of you have arranged a rehearsal.’

Viktor had quickly pulled himself together after his first indecisive reaction: ‘Right.’ With studied reluctance, he nodded: ‘We agreed to work on *Pagliacci*.’ And with a blank face he added: ‘But I assumed that we would meet at the Opera. She must have thought: Viktor is at Charlotte’s place. I have a meeting with Viktor, so I will go there. *Voilà*.’

Charlotte mocked him: ‘*Voilà. C’est ça,*’

‘I will go down,’ he said, putting on his clothes. Charlotte raised her eyebrows, ‘I assume that you aren’t going to practice here?’

Viktor grinned and with his shoes in his hands he gave her a kiss and left the room. Soon he returned to confirm that they would be working at the Opera. It wouldn’t take long. Charlotte heard the door shut with a loud bang, which echoed in her head for the rest of the day. Viktor returned at five.

‘Let’s have dinner and spend a nice evening together,’ she tried, hoping to recapture the mood of the previous day.

‘I’d like that, just the two of us.’ He seemed to mean it.

After a lovely dinner, they came back in a romantic mood. The evening had just begun, Charlotte declared to herself. While she was in the bathroom, she heard the phone ringing.

‘Don’t answer!’

‘It’s a local number,’ Viktor shouted.

She came into the living room. ‘I really have no idea who would want to speak to me this hour.’

‘Perhaps it’s for me?’

‘Then it’s probably her again.’

‘Who?’ Viktor hesitated, then picked up the phone.

Charlotte couldn’t hear who was at the other end of the line, but she was sure it was Imogen. As he spoke, Viktor indicated to Charlotte that he wasn’t happy about the interruption either.

‘*Oui, je viens. Tout de suite.*’ He hang up.

‘She is desperate, Imogen. She doesn’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know what is going on. I think she is afraid that she can’t handle the role. I have to go there. I can’t leave her like this, in the middle of the night, a few days before the premiere. Who knows what she might do to herself?’ He took his coat and moved toward Charlotte: ‘I won’t stay long. I promise. Don’t be mad at me. I am only trying to help.’ He laughed meaningfully, ‘then we will pick up from where we left off.’

Charlotte let it be. He left the room and a few moments later the door banged shut for the second time that day. She stared at the candles. After half an hour, she startled and, taking a pile of documents from her desk, started to work.

One hour later he came home. He smelled of Imogen.

‘You are still working? Shall I put the lights on?’ He asked. Charlotte was looking intensely at some pictures in a catalogue but the candlelight was too weak to discern anything.

‘No, I don’t need it!’ she called after him, as he headed for the kitchen.

‘But you are ruining your eyes,’ he yelled back.

‘No not at all. Please let me work.’

‘Fine. I am going to take a shower.’

When she heard the water of the shower, she put on the lamp. Stay in control. Take care of it yourself, Charlotte. She knew the routine.

‘Shall we have a picnic on the Palatine?’ Charlotte asked animatedly. She had slept well and had succeeded in forgetting about the previous day and night. She had promised herself a special day. If the right occasion arose, she wanted to tell Viktor her big news. The weather promised to be perfect, sunny and not too cool. She had risen early to get fresh food at the bakery and the butcher.

‘Do you come here often?’ Viktor asked an hour later, when they were sitting on a blanket at the border of the Palatine. Beneath them they could view the ruins and the trees of the Circus Maximus.

‘If I need some rest.’

Viktor looked at her encouragingly: ‘And, do you need rest now?’

‘I think I need you, above all.’

Viktor looked around and pointed at the monumental ruins. ‘Do you know what this is all about? It’s pretty impressive.’

‘Yes, sure.’ She was glad to play tour guide rather than engaging in serious conversation. Being here, just the two of them, was enough for now. ‘That is the Domus Augustana and where we are sitting was once the Domus Severiana, the palace of Septimus Severus, an emperor of the third century.’ She examined him with cheerful suspicion. ‘Are you really interested or are you teasing me?’

‘No please, go on. I’m not teasing. At the Fontaine de Vaucluse you

listened to me, didn't you?'

She agreed: 'It's kind of funny. Severus was quite a megalomaniac. He constructed this building as an extension of the old little homestead he already had, even though things were not going that well in Rome at that time. The empire was long over its peak. Decadence and decline everywhere. And it is right at moments like that when you see men with big egos step it up a notch and initiate something completely over the top.'

She suspected that Viktor wasn't listening any more. Should she keep going?

'What treats did you bring us?' he asked, looking in her bags. 'It all looks really good. What do you want?'

That afternoon, Imogen stopped by again. Viktor let her in.

'I have to throw a coin in the Trevi,' Charlotte heard her say. 'Don't let this be the last time I visit Rome.'

'I hate the Trevi,' Charlotte responded. 'Really, it's ten times nothing.'

'Have you ever tossed a coin there?' Imogen asked.

'No never. And I have returned to Rome about three hundred thirty seven times. It's a farce, a show. I hate that bombastic trash; radiating glory, spewing water out of every hole to mark its presence. But it's only a façade; behind it there's a void.'

Imogen looked at Viktor: 'Shall we go then? And after that, what I also love to do is to visit all of the locations in "Tosca," so I can sense where the story actually is set.'

'A perfect idea. You coming with us, Charlotte?'

Charlotte didn't know which option was worse. To close her eyes and hope that what she feared didn't exist, or to accompany them and

at the risk of confirming her suspicion.

‘I will come.’

At the Palazzo Farnese, Charlotte was tempted to play the contrarian by calling the monumental palazzo a dreadful thing. In fact, she always had liked it, but she couldn’t resist pointing out that the French had leased the palazzo for their embassy. ‘Napoleon conquering Rome for the second time. In all honesty, flying that flag here is completely inappropriate. It’s like chalk and cheese.’ She pointed at the French flag waving above the entrance. ‘Scarpia would turn over in his grave.’

‘I don’t get it,’ Imogen asked, ‘why Scarpia?’

‘Scarpia fought against the French,’ Charlotte explained in a voice full of disdain. ‘Basic knowledge, my dear Imogen. I thought *Tosca* was your favorite opera. Or is your interest limited to the role of the soprano?’

‘Charlotte is right, Imogen. The setting of *Tosca* is genuine history. The story takes place all on one day – I forget which one. On that morning, Napoleon seems to be defeated, but by the evening he is victorious. Scarpia supported the Austrians.’

‘It seems to me that Scarpia mainly supported himself,’ Charlotte said.

‘Please Viktor, continue, it is so amazingly interesting. Don’t you think we could have a peep inside?’

‘I don’t think it’s open to the public,’ Charlotte said.

‘*Ah, mais moi, je suis Français.* I have had a *souper* with the president last year. I will handle this. Wait for me at the entrance.’

He strode off, leaving Charlotte with Imogen. Both stared fixedly in the direction Viktor had gone.

‘Rome is a beautiful city,’ Imogen tried after some time.

Charlotte pretended that she hadn't heard, so Imogen relapsed into her artificial nonchalance. Shortly Viktor reappeared. He had explained why it was mandatory that they go in – *la gloire de la patrie* and *la gloria d'Italia* – and after some goading the porter had consented to let in two people. With a staff escort, they could look at the piano nobile, the salon of the second act. Viktor looked pleadingly at Charlotte: 'Do you mind if I go with Imogen? They want me to be there and it's more relevant for Imogen.'

'You go. I don't mind. But I will go back home. No, I will go to my office.'

They said goodbye and Charlotte watched as Viktor led Imogen to the entrance, gesticulating grandly like a true guide.

In the end, she didn't go to work but headed for the privacy of home. To her surprise, she found Alexander Lasek sitting at the terrace opposite her house. He waved at her in welcome. Charlotte was glad he was there; he was pleasant company, but even more, he carried with him the reminder of the concert at the chateau of madame Lagrange with its inherent promise. Alexander explained that Viktor had asked him to work with him in Rome, admitting a bit contritely that he would be working with Imogen as well.

'Have you been sitting here a long time?'

'An hour. I figured that someone would show up sooner or later.'

'You should have called.'

'I don't like to bother people.'

'You always seem to be alone.'

Lasek looked for a while at his Orangina. Almost reticently, he answered: 'I was engaged, once. But it's a sad story. I don't know whether you feel the need to hear a depressing love story right now.' He hastened to add: 'In such sunny times.'

‘It isn’t sunshine exclusively.’

‘But I trust you,’ he said ignoring her remark. He surveyed the environment as if to be sure nobody was eavesdropping. ‘I lived in Prague. She was a student at the art academy, then the breeding ground for the resistance against communism. One spring we had the most beautiful time of our lives. But somehow we knew it wouldn’t last, that we were living in a flight from reality. Eventually we weren’t granted more happiness.’

‘May I ask why not?’

‘She was arrested and put away. In a mental institution.’

‘And you never saw each other again? The wall has come down. She should have been released a long time ago.’

‘Once, I saw her again. Not long after her arrest, they informed me that things weren’t well with her. That was the first message. They built it up, the bastards. The next message was she had a very serious disease. And one morning the official announcement came that she was incurably ill. I wasn’t supposed to visit her but an acquaintance of my father worked in the institution where she was held. Very rarely he could arrange something for an enormous price. So one evening I presented myself at the back entrance and two guards escorted her to the door. She had changed, but then again she hadn’t. She was so beautiful, even then, in those circumstances, but also fragile. What I remember mostly were the unbroken eyes in that pale face.’ After a pause he continued: ‘We both knew we had no future and that this would be the last time we would ever see each other and still we were so happy in our misery. In the end we talked and she made me promise to escape to the West.’

He paused again. It was almost too much for him. Up to this point, he had told the story calmly and soberly, almost as an outsider. He

wiped his arm over his eyes and got a hold of himself once more. ‘I never saw her again. One month later I heard she had died. I fled to the West.’

Charlotte didn’t know what to say. The story caused larger fissures in her wistful and unsettled state of mind. She imagined Lasek walking in Prague, through galleries of rain and loneliness, bent with sadness. She remembered the Brahms he had played; that opening to a lost future. His story had a higher truth than her own temporary unhappiness.

‘Please join us for dinner tonight. At eight.’

He accepted and asked where he could find Viktor. Charlotte shrugged.

‘Look for Imogen. Where you find her, you will find him. Try the opera.’

Lasek nodded, perceiving her unspoken thought. ‘Yes. Imogen,’ he whispered, more to himself than to Charlotte. He sat pensively for a moment and then he said almost out of the blue: ‘You should play piano again. It definitely helps me.’

‘Was it Imogen? In Nice, I mean? What you told me about then.’

He confirmed it with a ‘hmm,’ then with a simple ‘see you tonight,’ he stood. Charlotte watched him leaving. He walked down the street, erect and self-confident, and he disappeared around the corner.

Before she opened the door of her house, Charlotte looked at the sky. Only now did she realize that it was heavily clouded. The morning had started so promisingly, but then the day had gradually withered away; lost before it could start. Maybe it would end soon.

She went upstairs, and pulled out a big box labeled with large childish lettering: scores. Her favorite came out first: Chopin, ballades and impromptus. She opened it. *Ballade number 1*. As she read the first page, the notes formed music in her head. Instinctively, her fingers

moved as she followed the bars. Her notes and comments on finger setting and pedal use filled the margins. Words were underlined: *agitato*.

Score in hand, she went downstairs and took the CD with the ballades off the shelf. Painful melancholy soon filled the room. Her fingers slid over imaginary keys. She pictured Viktor standing outside, struck by the sounds emanating from the house. The second theme announced itself; imprisoned happiness escaping on newfound wings. Viktor would listen, look up and wonder what had come over him. And he would feel the same exhilaration that she did. With the repetition of the second theme he would come up. They would sit together and listen. The music took the space it required and if there were too little space, it would burst.

The ballade's mood changed. Frightening visions. Awesome. Did she want to hear this now? The descending scale with its crashing dissonants brought an end to everything, death. After the last note, Charlotte got up, took the score and walked to her bedroom.

She didn't want to become a sympathetic footnote in the man's glorious memoirs. She had taken a supporting role but now it was time to play the lead again, with all the consequences that would entail. She suspected that he wouldn't even understand why she might leave. Over the previous days, she had looked in his eyes, seeking the spark that had enchanted her, but she hadn't found it, and that alone was enough to herald the end. She knew things would never be the same again, even if nothing were going on with Imogen.

Looking back, she realized that she had known this from the start. Viktor was the kind that always moved on. His type never remained with its prey, but, having devoured it, sought more, perhaps to eat, but most likely just for pleasure. The prey remained behind, wounded,

hardly touched. 'It pleases *monsieur* Stavros to look on some fresh flesh.' She thought of Lasek and the Brahms he had played on that festive Friday night. He had literally set the tone with that piece. Had he been trying to give her a sign? To warn her because he was concerned about her? Or had he simply echoed the story of his own life?

With nostalgia she reminisced about the evening of the village party in Provence, remembering the merry-go-round on the square. She recognized the scenario: as on a summer evening, when the tempest gathers in the east, and when the sun, ignorant of her impending setting, seems to exert herself, then the sharp reflections on the clouds create a light that is inconceivable in clear daylight. The tempest exists and you know it's there, but as long as you look at the bright side, the threat doesn't exist and life appears more vivid than ever. But Charlotte no longer had the option to look away from the tempest; she couldn't even rise to the feeling of melancholy, since even that feeling suggests life.

But something more was in the offing, although she didn't want to share with Viktor her presumptions, her hopes. She was two weeks overdue. It had happened before, but somehow she felt this time was different. She had counted backwards and had figured out it had to have been the night of the concert at the chateau. But especially now, with Imogen present, she would keep the possibility to herself. Tomorrow she would go to the drugstore and buy the test.

Viktor and Imogen returned in high spirits.

'We can't have her dine alone in a restaurant,' was Viktor's predictable explanation. Like a lapdog, Imogen trailed him.

The feeling that she had lost steadily outweighed the thought it might all work out. Even the notion that she wasn't behaving reasonably and that he was acting in good faith couldn't alter it. It was like having

let a precious gem fall in the mud; the radiance was gone. Picking it up meant getting one's hands dirty. Not picking it up and walking on meant that it would be lost forever. Would she risk the dirt and treat him with benevolence? Would she desecrate her image of herself to save a nice perception of him?

She could, of course, just throw him out – whether or not as the caught lover of Imogen; take her loss and move on. In that way she could keep the past, the gorgeous splendor of the last months, unspoiled, only the present would be tainted.

She remembered a day when her stepfather had been busy sowing grass and planting flowers. He had attached a hose to the outside tap. Closing the head of the hose, he had temporarily blocked the spurt, but while planting the African marigolds, he hadn't noticed that the head had come loose. Charlotte had been sitting nearby, reading a book, but now she watched the pool of water forming. Slowly but surely the water had overflowed the entire terrace, had been streaming to the lower parts of the garden where it washed away the newly sown seeds. She could have closed the tap but the misfortune enthralled her, impelling her just to watch without taking any action. Grasping the drama, her stepfather had held Charlotte responsible for the damage. He had scolded her, screaming that girls who read will never amount to anything, and in the end, he had hit her. It hurt, but she had no regrets. The fascination of the event, the force of the inexorability, had been worth it.

Lasek arrived exactly at eight. Charlotte was in the kitchen preparing the meal. She welcomed him in and he walked with her back to the kitchen. As they passed the living room, he nodded at Viktor. He seemed at a loss about what to say.

‘Don’t you want to join the others?’ Charlotte asked waving her arm toward the living room. ‘Dreadfully entertaining.’

Lasek understood her meaning: ‘Viktor has always been a charmer. Maybe there’s nothing going on.’

Charlotte sighed and turned towards the sink, pleased that the pianist was on her side. To think that we have come to this, she mused, thinking in sides.

‘You are a good person,’ Alexander tried, to emphasize that he wasn’t siding with Viktor. ‘But we all think we are good persons. And with reason. Viktor thinks he is good and he is to a certain degree.’ When she didn’t react immediately, he repeated: ‘Maybe there is nothing going on. Do you want me to talk with him?’

‘Too late. Don’t get involved. You have to go on with him. I am free.’

Dinner was disastrous. She tried not to watch the two, laughing and enthusiastically reviewing all that they had accomplished that afternoon. Charlotte limited her conversation to Lasek, discussing piano music. She told him she had listened to Chopin’s ballade. ‘Playing is still too challenging.’

‘And? Did you feel better?’

‘No. Worse.’

‘It will come. I predict. You are too good to be sad and locked in. Go play it yourself.’

After coffee, Alexander left. Viktor’s and Imogen’s conversation mostly passed her by. Charlotte looked around – it was her own home, her own stuff, books, lamps, knick-knacks. And it all appeared new to her. Strange and still so familiar, as if she were meeting it all over again. In Viktor’s eyes she saw the gleam she knew too well. It was enough. Silently she got up. The others looked up for a moment but didn’t pay

any real attention; the conversation went on smoothly. She walked to the kitchen. She knew what she had to do, but still needed to pluck up the courage. She needed a few more moments. Her eyes fell on the new espresso machine he had purchased for her. It either had too much meaning or no meaning at all, but she wasn't about to decide which. Picking up her purse, she went to the front door. Should she close it with a bang, to let them know what she was doing? She opened the door. Inside the talk continued. A high laugh. She went outside. For a moment she waited on the threshold and then she walked off, leaving the door slightly ajar.

In the morning she returned. Viktor was about to leave.

'Where have you been?' he asked.

'Somewhere,' was Charlotte's neutral answer.

'We had such a good time last night. But now I really have to go to a repetition.'

'What repetition? You have to sing here?' Why should she use irony? He would steamroll over it anyhow.

Viktor straightened himself. He fumbled with the note he had in his hands, but Charlotte didn't want to wait for a new explanation from his side: 'Drop dead with your Imogen.'

Viktor saw her furious look. 'I am not going to her now and besides she's not my Imogen. Charlotte we have to talk, believe me. Really, there is nothing going on. It's completely different from what you think.' He tried to grab her but she pulled away.

'You have no idea what I think.'

In a different tone he started anew: 'Charlotte, you don't know how much you mean to me. You are everything, you have to believe me. I want a future with you. A house, here in Rome, children, everything!'

Charlotte turned her back.

He grew dramatic: 'I will give up my career if that's necessary.' He paused to see whether his words had any effect. 'For years I just fooled around. Messed up. And I was always alone. It's not that pleasant to live from hotel to hotel. Friends you never see. Never at home, no personal space. You don't know what it is. And now I have you and it all feels so right.'

'I highly doubt that you were bored in all those cities, all those hotel rooms. But frankly, I don't care. This is about how you are behaving now.'

His eyes were begging. Was he such a good actor?

'I have changed since coming to know you. I feel the time is right for a big step. A major commitment. I want steadiness. Don't you understand, my little Charlotte? I want to marry you.'

The words, the way they were spoken, everything in his attitude disconcerted her. Inadvertently she remembered the picnic on the Palatine a few days ago and her discussion of the decline of the Roman Empire.

'And Imogen? What about her? Don't you have to go to her?'

'Imogen isn't important. Listen, my jealous Charlotte, she is... How shall I put it? It is not easy for a man to refuse her. Can't you sense that? But it is... It has no meaning.' He wanted to kiss her but she fended it off.

Viktor got a grip on himself again. He looked at his watch: 'Sorry, I really have to go. I made an appointment with Alexander for eleven. I am going to rehearse with him, not with Imogen. That's the truth. Tonight is the premiere; they don't rehearse on the day of the premiere.' He thought it necessary to add: 'After tonight, everything will be different.' Almost hesitantly, he left.

Charlotte was alone, as she had been a few hours earlier when in the cold of morning on the Pincius she had seen the sun rise above the city that had changed.

She didn't believe him anymore, no matter what he did or said. Even if he were innocent, she would now have to live with the thoughts his actions had triggered. And the thoughts became the truth. One of them would have to leave. She had tortured herself for three weeks now with thoughts about Viktor and Imogen and now it was over. She knew it in every fiber of her being. No regrets.

For a moment she remained where she was, then she walked to the nearest drugstore. The pregnancy test took precedence over the misery. At home, she followed the instructions on the box and ten minutes later, she saw confirmed what she had known all along. She was pregnant. This revelation changed everything. It seemed that her own life had changed colors. It didn't matter anymore what Viktor thought or did. Whether he slept with Imogen or not. Whether he was a swindler, a charlatan or perhaps really loved her. The whole definition of their relationship became irrelevant. Breaking up would be just a formal matter of affirmation, a verdict sent to the interested parties after the trial. It was obvious to her that she wouldn't tell him about her pregnancy.

She knew she should leave now, but she hesitated. In a way, she was looking forward to his excuses and lamentations. It would make it easier, later, to remember him as pathetic. It would finish him off, as he had to be, for herself and for her child.

That evening she went to the premiere of *I Pagliacci*. She hadn't seen Viktor all day, but knew that she would find him at the theater that evening. He was waiting at the entrance and while he escorted her

to their seats, she decided she wanted to know one thing for sure. It wouldn't change her decision, but it would forever release her of any responsibility towards him. 'Are you having an affair with her? Tell me honestly. Did you sleep with her?'

He didn't answer straightaway, but focused on the stage. She repeated the question.

'Come on, Charlotte. Don't be a nuisance.' He paused a second. 'I am going to tell you once and for all. You are a musician, so you will understand. Someone is walking in a street and suddenly he hears a tune somewhere on the second floor. It catches him. Unaware he looks up. He wants to go there, touch it. But it's unattainable, so he halts and only listens. Touched. It's the same when looking at a female face or a female form. But it doesn't stop there. Because from the moment you start listening intensely to that kind of melody, you want more. You want chords accompanying the melody, then instrumentation. But above all, you seek the full harmony that makes the melody interesting and worthwhile.' He observed her, but she didn't react. Desperately he continued: 'Melody without harmony is so meager. Harmony adds depth. It completes the music. No shallow prettiness, but real life, your soul is touched and you want to bear that with you for the rest of your life.' Again he waited to see the effect of his words. 'Sometimes I hear a beautiful tune, like Imogen, but she is just melody. You are everything, melody, and rich harmony.'

But his words rang empty to Charlotte.

'You still didn't answer my question. Did you sleep with her?'

'But that doesn't have to come between us, *ma petite*.'

The lights went out. The curtain rose. She scrutinized him. He was staring straight ahead. Charlotte found it hard to concentrate during the performance. Every now and again she looked at him. Throughout,

Viktor followed the performance closely; to Charlotte, he seemed to empathize when Imogen appeared on stage. Despite everything, Charlotte tried to determine whether the soprano performed well.

The applause was deafening. Viktor announced that Imogen had sung well, with good technique and good musical feeling, but that he wasn't satisfied with her credibility in certain passages. Charlotte was taken aback at the genuine seriousness he possessed, at this moment, to evaluate Imogen's artistic achievement. But what was even more astonishing was his musical integrity doing so. It suggested that he possessed a musical persona superior to his everyday character.

As if everything were all right, Charlotte accompanied Viktor to the first floor ballroom for the reception. With its exaggerated chandeliers, mirrors, carpets, red plush, it was the very caricature of an opera house. A young man with an affected speaking voice, dressed in a black and red uniform, offered them champagne from a huge tray. People greeted Viktor enthusiastically and nodded politely to Charlotte, who, because of the crowd, walked behind him. Here she again witnessed a new Viktor. In Provence, he had been a bit of a naughty boy and in the Auvergne, the gentleman womanizer; here he was the star. This was his *raison d'être*.

Holding a drink, he walked from one person to another, nodding and chatting, ending up precisely as planned in front of an impeccably dressed man of about sixty years. This was professore Giuseppe Gentileschi, director of the opera of Rome.

'You have done a wonderful job with your new pupil, dear Viktor,' was the first thing the man said after Viktor had introduced Charlotte. 'A great Nedda. And I suppose that we have gold in our hands.'

Viktor admitted that Imogen had presented the part perfectly.

'Perhaps she can do *Tosca* in a few years, just as you suggested last

week.'

'Certainly.'

When the opera director had gone to greet some other guests, Viktor asked: 'Charlotte, shall we go together to visit her briefly backstage? Or do you think it would be better if I went alone?'

Charlotte realized that this was the end. She would have to be satisfied with this evening, this encounter. There would be no more.

Viktor was already planning his route from where they stood to the door. With whom to shake hands, whom to address with a pleasant word. He turned to Charlotte and gave her a gentle look. Then he turned around and paraded toward the wide doors that opened onto the hall and staircases. For a moment Charlotte saw his reflection in the glass. Then he was gone.

She didn't wait for his return, with Imogen. She would not grant him that victory. She emptied her glass and, passing the opera director who stood nearby, said merrily: 'A pity the knife wasn't real.' She left the ballroom by the same doors as Viktor used. Going downstairs, she calmly headed for the exit. There was not really much to do and she wasn't in a hurry. She would leave a note in her apartment with the explicit request for him to be gone by tomorrow. Then she would call her colleague, Maria, to ask whether she could stay at her place for one or two nights. Tomorrow, she would be at her desk by eight thirty. There would surely be plenty of work. Alexander Lasek crossed her mind. And all the other people? Pierre, Madame Lagrange? She shrugged her shoulders. Too hard right now. Perhaps later.

George

VII

In the distance George could discern the ferry. Although many people view the ferry as a symbol of connection, to George it only emphasized the unbridgeable separation between the two banks. When he had been living in Rotterdam, he had often taken the ferry to visit his parents, since the bridge further down the river added forty miles to the trip. But there were nights he chose the longer route, which allowed him to drive over the well-lit streets of the city, especially after dark, when the water was too black for him. But tonight, without even considering it, he had taken the shortcut that required him to ride in that enlarged version of a bathtub toy. The thing conformed itself helplessly to the caprices of its setting. Ragged chains pulled it from one side to the other as if in a trial of strength. But the match would remain a draw until the end of time. Every time the ferry reached one

side, it wasn't welcome and was immediately sent away. If you went by train you could feel that the journey itself had some importance. At some level, the difference between the ferry – a feeble assembly of iron and wood – and a track was so minimal, that George wondered why nobody had hit upon the idea of enlarging it, so that it would span the river and let the ferry abandon its Sisyphean journey. Completely out of place, brightly colored flags hung as coronation from railing to railing.

The boat opened its mouth to receive the sparse traffic and slowly George drove the car on to the deck. With no desire to leave its protection, George rarely got out of the car during the passage.

The crossing from Messina to Reggio di Calabria, only a few days earlier, came back to his mind. He had left Sicily disillusioned. The passage from Sicily to Italy had required him to take the train-ferry service that crossed the Straits of Messina. He had drifted off, falling into a turbulent dream from which he had awakened suddenly and cruelly. He was thirsty. The other people in his compartment were still fast asleep. He had looked out the window. Water. He feared he was hallucinating. Trying anew to wake up, he remembered that he was on a sleeping train on the water. He jumped up, realizing, worse, that he was on a ferry. In a train on the water with an enormous thirst. He had to get out of the claustrophobic double prison. He got off the train only to discover that he was in the lowest part of the ship. He climbed three flights still saw no one. On the top level, he found the toilets. *Acqua non potabile*. Instead, he drank, like a maniac, from the water that is used for the cooling of the ship. Sated, he returned to the protection of the train, no longer feeling safe in the vast, horrible emptiness of this monster. He raced down the last stairs to the comfort and warmth of

the train, sitting in the boat's intestines. With great effort, he found his compartment and collapsed, exhausted in his seat.

The ferry started and he put on the light in his car, but it brought no relief. He decided to face the challenge. He got out and walked to the rail. The water swirled around the bow. Unfathomably cold and black. His hands clutched at the rail. He felt as if he were the last man alive. He saw his reflection in the water, not like in a mirror, because the water didn't yield a real reflection, it was too dark. Rather, he saw his own loneliness, the feeling of having lost, but already a long time ago. Very briefly he thought of Violetta, far away. The cold pierced his bones. A longing to surrender took hold of him; what if he stopped fighting? He could allow himself to drift away, to succumb, and finally to be washed ashore, tired but safe, in a place where pain and agony no longer existed.

A memory from his youth came, unbidden. He is with his family at the beach. The weather is lovely. They go into the sea with an inflatable ball. They toss the ball at each other, having fun. His father is smiling at him. George himself stands the deepest in the water. Someone throws the ball towards him, but it shoots past and lands, seemingly at rest, some twenty feet further on. It bobs on the waves, challenging him, playing hard to get. His father encourages him to swim to it. He almost feels forced to retrieve it and he doesn't want to let himself down. He swims with a six year-old's desperate courage. Surely his father will be proud of him. He tries to stand but stumbles on the loose seabed, getting tangled in the seaweed. The water reaches his lips. The sun burns on his head. The smell of the salty water takes control of his entire being. He is swimming again. He can't see the ball. He knows that he can't stand anymore, the water is too deep. Then he spots the

ball, but it has floated further away. The sea is infinite. The sea, which looked flat from the beach, is full of motion here. The waves are walls of water. The only rescue is the ball itself, because when he reaches it he will be able to float on it. His vision blurs and the sun burns ever more brightly. Seawater fills his mouth. Just as he wants to give up, the ball appears in front of him. He grabs for it, but it slips away. Then suddenly he hears the voice of his father, coming almost from a different world. His father tells him to cling onto him. He will never know whether he would have made it on his own.

With a subdued metal clang that echoed over the somber water, the ferry anchored at the other bank. Beyond it stretched the road to George's savior from his youth. But now, it seemed, his father was the one drifting further away.

After Adrian Nobel had given up on painting, the only two things that mattered were his family and his work. And in his work he had no more ambition than to earn enough money to sustain his family fairly well. A Nobel task. But some five years earlier, his life had become more limited when he had to resign, having reached the legal age limit at his work. Pension was, for his father, a euphemism for being switched off. That left his family. His marriage remained self-evident: a static fact, with no expected development and from which the excitement had long disappeared. He loved his wife, but perhaps the most as the mother of his children.

It was on these children that he had once built his hopes. But he could no longer follow Nicole, with the rigor of her job. He was proud of what she had achieved, but couldn't empathize with her. And he understood her decision to have a child without a father even less. When she was young he had expected much of her. She went to ballet

and she was good at it: flexible and graceful. But one day she had come home from ballet class saying: “I am going to study law.” Nobody ever knew the ins and outs of her change of mind. It remained her secret. She had not even told George.

Although Tom had opted completely for the artistic side, Adrian Nobel felt cut off from his son’s work. In fact, the father recognized himself in neither child; where Nicole was too hard, Tom was too soft. He trimmed his sails to the wind. No spine, or as George’s father formulated it when his wife was away, no balls. Invariably this was followed by the story of the walking club. For Adrian Nobel, the family anecdote signified more than just an ordinary event, it crystallized Tom’s limitations: When Tom was fifteen, he had been a walking fanatic and had signed up for a walking club. He had purchased with his mother special, very expensive walking shoes and, full of pride, Tom had shown off the shoes at school. His friends had ridiculed him as a loser with preposterous shoes. ‘What? He joined a walking club? Too absurd for words.’ Crying, Tom had returned home and thrown his shoes in a corner. He had never again found pleasure in walking. When Tom had persevered in this refusal, Adrian had revised his initial pity to annoyance. The event conveyed the weakness of his son.

So it had to be George, the architect. This was exactly the right combination of rationality and creativity. Better yet, the job often took him abroad to Italy, the land of his father’s passion. George and Alice had actually taken him with them on a trip there. Steadily walking next to George through magnificent towns, he had heard all the interesting details about the buildings they were visiting. George was his favorite: sensitive but not weak, solid but not hard. Married to Alice, a beautiful woman; they made a perfect couple. Years ago, Adrian Nobel had placed his hopes on his son George.

The soft click of the door of the car was enough to trigger his guilt. Immediately the lifelong feeling that he was an imposter swept over him. He knew it all too well. An indeterminate feeling of guilt, that vanished when analyzed rationally, but reappeared with the same intensity at the next unsuspected moment; just the sound of his own footsteps on the gravel path of his parents' house was enough to do it.

Their house, with its lush garden, was located in a short way from the street. Since their move from the big city to the good rural life in this hamlet, George's father had purchased the most beautiful plants and trees. He told himself that his pastime was gardening, but in fact it was George's mother who tended them. His father rarely entered the garden himself. He found it sufficient to inspect the scene from his chair behind the plate glass window in the living room, more interested in the big picture of what the garden should be than with details of carrying out each plan. This attitude had carried him through the last twenty years.

Just as in the old days, George didn't ring the front doorbell, but entered through the side door of the garage, always unlocked. 'Locking is redundant here,' his father had always bragged, as if he himself were responsible for the village's low crime rate. As he neared his family, George contemplated his father's strange habits (in others, George would have termed them irritations). For example, he never had a penny in his pocket. It was his beggar's mentality; a man like him didn't need money to survive. He had witnessed the War. George was well aware of the heroic deeds from the Second World War that his father would recount on the spur of the moment. He had stood up to the Germans who had slapped his mother in the face, how brave he had been. It always made George feel compassionate to observe this hero of

the Resistance tucked away in his armchair.

George entered the kitchen, where his brother and sister were sitting. His mother rested on the sofa in the living room. Above her hung a reproduction Picasso's painting of a child with a dove in her folded hands. The welcoming present of a woman's magazine, his parents had framed it and hung it up, never to leave the wall again.

George's parents' life had been preserved here in layers: the carpets on the floor, the brick wall, the collection of little things, his mother had accumulated over the years – kitsch, gifts from friends and family, a horse mounted by a knight with a small person in front of him, a tile from grandmother's old farm. A few of his father's early landscapes hung like trophies on the wall; the later ones had failed to win approval. She had even kept the monstrosities that the children had fabricated during the obligatory hours of art in school: disfigured glazed ashtrays and a roughly hewn wooden candlestick shaped like a dwarf. Everything had a fixed position and stayed firmly rooted to its spot. The whole house was an accumulation of the past, layer upon layer, like sediment. George's presence here seemed to end at the time he married Alice. He was sure his bedroom would look exactly as it had fifteen years earlier, when he had slept there for the last time.

'Hi George, I'm so glad you are here. Such a pity Alice isn't with you.' His mother had gotten up and was walking towards him. She had tears in her eyes and George wondered whether he would hug her. For a moment she stood right in front of him, but the embrace didn't come. What had never happened couldn't begin right now, evidently. He ignored the remark about Alice.

'Cheer up, mom. It will work out fine. Dad is very strong.'

'No, it won't work out fine.' She sat down again.

George turned to Nicole, who was now standing beside him.

‘How is she coping?’ he whispered.

‘Given the circumstances, rather well, I would say. But she knows it’s not going well. Don’t give her hope. At least no illusions.’

‘Never take away someone’s hope,’ was the only thing George could think of in response.

They all drank coffee and updated George about his father’s situation. He had serious respiration problems, but more troubling was his declining intellectual power. Most likely the beginning of dementia, the doctor had said. Whether the two symptoms were related, the doctors couldn’t tell. Every now and again they treated him in the pulmonary department, then transferred him to the psychiatric institution associated with the hospital.

‘You go and see him tonight. I will stay here and prepare something for dinner,’ proposed the ever-practical Nicole.

George, Tom and their mother walked through the endless corridor of the pulmonary department on the twelfth floor. On both sides, open doors gave glimpses of lonely rooms, where family members were visiting their loved ones. George had the feeling that, more than a temporary stay in order to reach full life, this was the entrance hall to death.

At room z12.26 they halted. It was the only closed door on the ward. George’s mother and Tom looked expectantly at George. He knocked, but there was no response. Once again, more loudly, but again nothing. He cracked open the door and peeped through the narrow gap, almost expecting to see his father lying lifeless on the bed, but the room was empty. He walked in, gazed around and by the stuff on the night cabinet, confirmed that they had the right room.

Laconically he announced: ‘He is not there,’ then joked, ‘must be

having his daily walk.

‘I will go check with the staff,’ Tom said.

Their mother went with Tom, while George perched on his father’s bed. On it lay a newspaper and reading glasses. Examining it, George realized that his father was reading the news from two weeks earlier.

‘That doesn’t have to mean anything,’ he said to himself. ‘At least he is still reading newspapers.’

‘But certainly, my boy, I have to keep track of everything.’

George startled, then turned to see his father standing in the room. How he had appeared so suddenly was a mystery.

‘Hi, dad. Easy going? Stirring about?’

‘I went for a smoke, in the entertainment room. Those idiots here don’t allow anything. I won’t stay here long, I know that for sure. Hospitality, zip.’

‘Let’s hope you can leave here as soon as possible. You look good.’

George meant what he said. His father walked around the bed and took his glasses and the newspaper.

‘Does it surprise you that I’m reading the paper? Perhaps you think I am becoming a feeble-minded old lunatic?’ His father laughed heartily. Then he approached the bed. ‘Do you mind?’

George slid off the bed and sat down on a chair by the window, then jumped up again to arrange the pillows so that his father could sit straight. Settled comfortably, Adrian examined George for a while. George found it hard to answer his glance so looked out the window. All he could see were other buildings, from which other sick people looked out to this building; reflections of their own desolation.

‘Nice view.’

‘If you like glass and stone. But you are not an architect for nothing.’

George turned back to his father. This didn't fit with what his mother had told him. Here was his father, completely normal. The only thing that didn't fit was the setting. This man didn't belong here.

'How are your lungs?'

'I will probably leave here before the New Year, another month or so.'

'Great.'

'It would be lovely if everyone could be there then. Your mother, Nicole and Tim, Tom and Yvonne and you and Alice of course. Like the old days.'

George kept silent about Alice. There was no need to disconcert his father, although of all them, he would probably be the most understanding.

'Why not? As long as you are there. Completely recovered. Like you used to be.' Not having the courage to venture further on this subject, George asked: 'Are you in pain?'

'Pain! I don't care. Pain is a smart way of nature to help us say goodbye to life. When you are suffering unbearable pain in your arm, the only thing you can think is: it doesn't matter if I bleed to death, just cut it off and get rid of this pain. And the ultimate trick of course is to be in such pain that you are willing to renounce the most precious you have, namely your life.'

There was unnatural bluffing in his father's voice.

'Dad, I never heard you speaking that cynically.'

His father looked at him carefully. 'Did your mother tell you I am beginning to forget things?'

George evaded the question: 'You don't have to put a good face on it.'

'I'll put on a good face if I want to,' Adrian began. Tom's entrance

interrupted the rest of this declaration.

‘All well here, dad?’ Tom also tried to sound cheerful. Adrian answered: ‘Here at my department everything is okay. It is only that the staff doesn’t follow my instructions very well. I plan to complain about it tomorrow in the staff-meeting.’

George had no idea what meeting his father was talking about but had to smile at the persistent obstinacy.

‘It’s because they all are Germans, in disguise. Haven’t you noticed how strange their moustaches are. Attached, I think. As if I would fall for that!’ He laughed.

But the smile had disappeared from George’s face.

‘Germans, dad?’

‘Yes, anyway, they talk German. I don’t know exactly. They are not wearing their uniforms of course. Hidden in that wardrobe over there.’ Pointing at his closet he added: ‘On the radio I heard the order that uniforms aren’t allowed in this building any longer. But I don’t trust the radio either.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Fallen into the hands of the enemy.’ Meaningfully, he shook his head.

George was shaken. How could this complete nonsense spring from the familiar face of his father? And it was so convincing.

At that moment, George’s mother entered the room. She walked straight to the bed. George signaled Tom and they slipped through the door, out of hearing.

‘Terrible,’ was all George could utter.

‘Yes, if you witness this for the first time, you don’t get it,’ whispered Tom. ‘Dad, the stable civil servant, proclaiming absolute absurdities.’

Adrian Nobel saw his two sons standing in the doorway: ‘Hey, you two. You are not conspiring with them, are you? If so, I will have to ask all of you to leave.’

‘I can’t handle this. Not when he is this way,’ their mother sobbed, walking towards them. ‘I can’t take it anymore. Sometimes he even calls me his mother.’

‘Come on, mom,’ Tom tried to ease the tension, ‘it always passes quickly. Let’s go get some coffee in the cafeteria. By the time we come back, he’ll be okay. George, you will stay with him?’

George nodded and turned to reenter the room, then halted, startled. His father was still sitting on his bed. Apparently not realizing that George was back, he was banging his forehead with the flat of his hands. ‘Help me, help me!’ Again and again he hit himself with both hands, harder each time. ‘Please, help me, please.’ Then he noticed George. He laughed out of embarrassment, then nonchalantly picked up his paper and pretended to read.

George walked up to the bed and softly he laid his hand on his father’s hand. His father said nothing, just looked at George. Then he admitted: ‘I am losing it. I know. It’s true, my son. I am losing it. I don’t know what is happening to me. I even hardly realize what I am putting forth. And sometimes I don’t recognize anyone.’

‘But right now you recognize me, don’t you?’

George took his father’s hands and tried to arrange them on the bed. ‘Try to stay calm now, dad. Everything will work out fine. Here, have a glass of water.’ He handed his father a glass, ashamed he had nothing better to offer than platitudes.

‘Damn it. It won’t work out fine. I’m done.’ He collapsed back on his bed. ‘I feel so impotent.’ He took a sip and seemed to relax a bit. ‘George, I am so afraid. Please, help me. What is happening?’ It was the first time ever that George had heard his father ask for help.

In the car on the way back, everyone was silent. No one even

considered deceiving the others by saying that things might have been worse.

Over dinner, they agreed to take shifts, ensuring that their father would have frequent companionship. George came by daily. Arriving for one visit, he found his father in intensive care, temporarily, with breathing difficulties. George waited in a small room, separated from the main sickbay by a huge glass wall. It seemed to him that the separation wasn't so much in the interest of the patient but to isolate the nurses, so that they could smoke one cigarette after another. The air was impenetrable, blue with smoke. He found it a paradoxical reversal of the concept of quarantine.

His father was lying in a high bed surrounded by machines; tubes, hoses, racks, devices, monitors, infusion bags. It was as if his father's body had been assembled outside itself, like a physical phantom of benevolent robots. The heart as a machine with an electrical pump; the intestines as bulky bags on stands with probes attached to the arms, the lungs as a big sack with two small tubes fishing in his father's nose. What was left of his father relied on those machines; on his own he would expire within moments. The oxygen machine pumped continuously, for now a human being's most natural action was beyond his father's reach. Gradually the elimination of his body had begun.

VIII

‘Hi dad, writing your memoirs?’ George tried cheerfully, when he visited his father a few days later, after he had been discharged from the intensive care again, much to the family’s relief. George found his father sitting straight on the bed with a pen and paper in his hands. The nurses told George there was new hope. Adrian was managing to breathe on his own and his vital functions seemed to be improving. The hospital administration had asked the family to consider having him admitted to a nursing home. That would be the best for everyone, they said.

His father looked over his reading glasses and examined George long with an amused look, clearly very much in the present.

‘Do you remember when we went on vacation for the first time? With that red car. I have forgotten which brand.’

‘The Fiat?’

‘Yes, a Fiat it was. A “let it be so.” Some second hand vehicle. And as early as the south of Germany we thought we wouldn’t make it to Italy. Do you remember?’ George remembered that horrible journey all too well.

He had been six and for months the trip to Italy was the talk of the Nobel Family, their first real trip abroad. They had departed very early in the morning, but the dilapidated car soon failed them, the cooling water overheating much too quickly. As long as they held to a reasonable speed on the German highways, there were no problems, but when they had come to the Alps, the situation had become disastrous. Every forty miles they had to stop to refill the reservoir of the overheated, sputtering car. They had to turn on the heat to cool down the engine. They had ended up driving through the night, because their father wanted to make up the lost time. The next day they had limped their way through the Po Valley under the burning sun, exhausted but determined to reach their destination, a little town on the Adriatic. It was ninety-five degrees with the heat on, as they crawled along. And to cap it all off, the engine then started to leak oil. Every time they stopped to refill the reservoir, they left a puddle, fluorescent and black, on the ground. To replace the oil they had to stop, but to cool down the engine it was better to drive. Finally, his father decided – in good faith or on his own authority – not to halt anymore; they would drive to the bitter end because he suspected that after the next stop, the car would never start again. From then on, his father was constantly estimating how long it would take for each traffic light to turn green so that they wouldn’t have to stop. They were lucky and somehow made it all the way to the coast. Exhausted, dirty and covered in sticky sweat, they arrived at the entrance to the campsite. And the engine fell dead. It would not restart. The Nobels had to push the car over the last yards

to their reserved spot. Everybody who saw them laughed at the three sweating, crumpled children and a swearing mother pushing the car as their father steered it triumphantly. But they had made it. The next day the car was towed away and George never saw the thing again. Two weeks later they returned home by train.

‘That’s us, Nobels. We don’t falter. Every defeat we transform into victory. I have been thinking of that vacation a lot, lately.’

‘But it was misery, throughout! Can’t you remember nicer things?’

‘Did you have a splendid vacation or not during those two weeks at the beach?’

‘Yes, sure. Maybe the best I ever had, but...’

‘No buts. You had your vacation and I did too. And especially your mother. That what it was all about. The rest is irrelevant. I had promised her that trip for years and I couldn’t have it fall apart just because of a stupid car. We had to go on. No choice. Sometimes we think we can make choices, but deeper down, unconsciously, we only follow an unyielding will to succeed.’

He arranged the blanket tightly around himself, taking a cigarette and a lighter out of the pocket of his robe. Then Adrian noticed George’s studious and slightly disapproving gaze.

‘This is also stronger than I am. It’s not allowed, but how can they punish me? Discharge me? When you have a death penalty, they can’t touch you anymore. You hear, George? Nothing can touch me anymore. I have lived my life and can go on leave now. It has been stressful, maybe a complete disaster. But it is what it is.’ Adrian Nobel took a deep breath, ‘I will rest now.’

George fell silent, not sure whether his father meant the immediacy of an afternoon nap or something far grim. He hoped for the former.

A nurse, striding into the room, distracted them both. ‘Good

afternoon, Mister Nobel, how do we feel today? Better, isn't it?' She spoke while searching the cupboards for sheets. 'In fifteen minutes we have our afternoon occupational therapy. We have to get dressed, really. By the way, have we been smoking secretly?'

'I don't know what you have done, but I have smoked a cigarette at the window,' George answered. He didn't want this humiliating monologue to go on.

After the nurse had left the room with an indignant face, George's father said: 'Be calm, my lad. They mean well.'

'What! Can't they just act and speak normally. As if from the moment you start dealing with nurses and doctors, you become a moron, who at best has to remain quiet and in the worst case has to be shushed.'

His father shrugged. 'As you heard, I am about to have my occupational therapy. Drat! Life has been one long occupational therapy and now that I am finally set free, that basket case enters, telling me I have to occupy myself with something to feel better.'

Nevertheless, he got up and started dressing. Disappointed at his father's compliance, George said goodbye. But, instead of returning to his parents' house, he drove to his apartment downtown. He wanted to be alone.

As his hands stirred restlessly in the pocket of his jacket, George felt the key ring that Alice had once giving him. They had rented a hotel at the sea and after initiating the bed, they had gone out to wander the grounds. Alice had bought the trinket, a blue stone with a red emblem of a lion, at a souvenir shop. She had asked him to keep it always as a token of their love. George pulled it out of his pocket and stared at it, amazed at himself. He was getting sentimental. Why did he let himself get carried away by these trivialities? Were real feelings saved up, only to be triggered at times of need? Did one need a catalyst to reach one's

own emotions? With his father just now, his eyes had stayed dry. But now he had to restrain his tears.

George shook himself. Was this sentimental rubbish or a heartfelt emotion? He thought of the good intentions of all the people he knew, and of how the realities of life inevitably got in the way of those intentions, it seemed to George that everything was a waste, a vale of tears. He remembered when their family had faced diminished circumstances, his mother used to bike to the other end of the city to buy the cheapest bargains. To what end, he thought now. Had her good intentions and all of that effort actually resulted in enough savings to have been worthwhile? At the same time his father had set some money aside in a piggy bank every day, creating a vacation fund. The piggy bank stood on the window-sill, bearing testimony to their good intentions, only to be shattered to shards six months later, cracked because his father's salary was a few days late.

The next day his mother called. The doctor has asked for a consultation. It was very important. His mother immediately thought the worst: it is over. When George joined the family at his parent's house later that afternoon, the only thing she could voice was that Adrian was going to die. Nicole was there, but his brother and his wife had gone to the Ardennes for a few days to have a break. Nicole thought it was very inconsiderate, but George could empathize: they had been the ones who had stayed day and night with their mother.

George tried to comfort her: 'Mum, he is not dying. They don't bring that up in such a casual way.' He hoped his trust in the subtleness of the medical guild was justified, but he feared the worst.

'Didn't they say what it was about? Maybe it's something irrelevant, some tiny administrative matter.'

Their hopes that it was nothing of importance were dashed when

they entered the small office of a Doctor Bakker – they weren't invited to sit down.

'Your husband, your father,' the doctor said nodding at each of them and addressing them like a schoolteacher, 'your husband is gradually losing control. His memory is deteriorating very quickly and his mental powers are slumping. I'm not telling you anything new, I assume?'

'No. Please continue,' George answered.

'It's important for you to realize that he could engage in some very unusual behaviors. He could, for instance, leave the hospital, go to a broker and sell your house. Maybe an odd example, but still.' Doctor Bakker laughed loud. George's mother was too respectable and also too perplexed to be offended by the man's lack of subtlety.

George replied: 'Doctor Bakker, please make your point. If someone must laugh about my father's situation, we can do it ourselves.'

'I apologize. I am not laughing about your father. I am only trying to keep the conversation light.'

When no one replied, he continued: 'We recommend that you declare Mr. Nobel legally incompetent.' He saw the reaction on George's mother face and immediately continued: 'Of course it is just a formal statement. But I think it is advisable.'

George recognized that it made sense, but in his aversion to this man, he didn't want to admit the truth.

'Legally incompetent? You have no idea of what he is capable of. He is capable of coming home with us. He wants to sit and watch the garden. He is capable of doing that. Or isn't that legal? Should we sit here with a judge and some lawyers and hold a trial against him?'

'It was our intention – if you agree – to have a judge come to the hospital to render his verdict. Of course one of you should be a witness to state that we cannot any longer maintain the situation as it is now.'

‘A judge! With a robe and a gavel? For crying out loud!’ George yelled. He knew he was making a scene but he also knew that he had to give in. His father would be made incompetent. Like a baby. Or an idiot. The man who always had everything under control, always. Mr. Particular. Now, the man who had neatly calculated his finances to the last penny, would be not adequate: incompetent.

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, George suddenly grasped his role in this travesty -- he would be the one who would give the final verdict through which his father would lose his humanity. He knew it. He looked at his mother and at his sister. Nicole had the fear already in her eyes: don’t let it be me, please. And his mother shouldn’t do it. She wouldn’t recover. And Tom? Tom was not capable, too soft. He would run away. No, George was the only one who could do this and they all knew it.

The staff had it all organized. Dr. Bakker informed George that he needed only to affirm and to sign some forms. The judge would come the next day, accompanied by a lawyer and a clerk of the court. He didn’t need to worry, ‘just a technicality.’ Robotically, George signed the procedural papers.

When Tom called later that afternoon, Nicole told him all about the procedure. ‘Don’t you agree that George is the best of us to do this?’ Tom offered to return immediately, as if he were willing to take the burden on himself, but of course it was too late.

George said nothing but thought: ‘If anyone is not capable of handling this, it’s me.’

That night the family sat together in the living room as of old. Tom and Yvonne had returned. An outsider never would have guessed at anxiety hovering over them. George was conscious of the paradox – if

his father hadn't been ill, the whole family would never have gotten together. By his absence, his father brought them home. They were holding conversations they could have had ten years ago. A flight in time.

'We all need some distraction,' Tom said. 'I have an idea, George. My big show at Fanny Lieber's Art Gallery just opened, you know. Why don't you come see it? It's a new series of Art Objects: *'Concrete modeling? Modeling concrete!'*

'Sounds disturbing. No, thanks, it's not for me. I'm not going to waste my time with trash, even if it's great, ingenious artistic trash. Your concrete modeling is just a linguistic game.'

Tom shook his head pityingly: 'I am sorry you don't understand. But I have to say sometimes I myself am not even aware of how the creative process works. It's a highly autonomous method in which I only act instinctively. Sometimes I just watch and surprise myself. Pure inspiration.'

'Inspiration is an excuse for laziness.'

'And what would you prefer? Landscapes with trees? Sugary Hollywood feel-good movies with invincible heroes? What a primitive escapism!'

'I prefer art that is worthwhile. Art in which you can sense passion and compassion.'

'You put yourself above reality. You are closing your eyes to real life. The filth, but also the pearls in that filth. You mentioned passion just now. Do you know how low and dirty you have to go to find a gem? I am working right now with a band; I am sort of their manager. They rehearse in a squat house in Rotterdam. *Heartless Passion* they call themselves. Great paradox. It's rough, raw music. But honest. More honest than your safe, cultivated snobbism. You watch everything from

your intellectual, bourgeois life. You should live more instinctively. Descend into the deep caves of society and try to appreciate your own lusts and instincts.'

'Spare me your caves. I don't believe in your prime evils. Instincts! There's more to life than lusts and instincts. I detest the ease with which you justify everything based on instinct. Writing off all culture and refinement as just bourgeois varnish and sublimated urges. That's not how I see it.'

'Interesting concept: Prime evils. I can use that, thanks. It will fit perfectly into my introduction. But your ideas aren't logical at all.'

'Not that I like it, but you have to do without logic if you want to understand mankind.'

'Sorry, but I fear that the truth is slightly more prosaic. The soul doesn't exist. It's all biological theatre; one scientific incident, or should I say accident.'

Nicole joined in, breaking the tension: 'Can I ask you something, George? I once read a poem stating that a rainbow becomes less beautiful when you know how it is caused. Do you agree?'

'It's *The Lamia* by Keats. Beauty would be shattered by scientific analysis. On the other hand, for some, the scientific explanation is the beauty. I find the whole issue completely irrelevant. The beauty of the rainbow resides in the value we give to it. I recognize the chemical, neurological, biological processes, but they don't explain why we think a rainbow is beautiful. It's not in the thing itself but in men's power to inspire both the explicable and inexplicable world.'

'Old nonsense. Soul, again. Means nothing to me,' Tom argued.

'Extremely sad to hear that from an artist.' George tried to restrain himself, aware he was carried away by his indignation. Seeking conciliation, he offered 'So, maybe I should drink from your cup of

paradoxical rawness?’

Yvonne now stepped in: ‘Really George. You should come. For so many reasons. It’ll give you a break. And who knows whom you will find there. Now you have left Alice, aren’t you looking around?’

George hesitated, ‘I don’t know about that. However, if I can do you a favor with it, I will go with you to the show.’ He got up. ‘I am tired. I am going to sleep.’ He didn’t feel like driving home so went upstairs to his old bedroom.

The next day George found himself standing with Tom in Gallery Fanny Lieber. Tom had eyed George critically as they had left the house. ‘In these circles, acquaintances of the artist usually don’t wear a suit and a tie. Only buyers do that.’

‘I do not conform to assumptions any more than you do,’ had been George’s answer. ‘I don’t wish to wrap myself up in baggy clothes or drawstring anoraks. I fear that wearing jeans like an eternal student is not sufficient to keep me young.’

‘I stay young by having a fresh state of mind. Like working with this band I told you about yesterday.’

George tried to concentrate on the works on the wall, but against his will his glance kept returning to a woman of thirty-something, standing in the middle of a large group. At first glance, she seemed rather unsightly, but, upon closer inspection, George found something strangely intriguing about her. Laughing loudly, she tried to hold the center of attention with a stream of wisecracks. In the rare moments when she said nothing, her mouth remained open, as if she feared to dam the gushing stream of words. At the same time, she gesticulated widely as if to emphasize her cleverness. For no reason that he could name, watching her gave George the impression of an itchy anthill.

Tom told him that she was Ann Sheepway, a failed student of the art academy. After one year of Ceramics and Textile work methods – a study everyone looked down on, even at the academy itself – she had become the secretarial aid of Urs Wilhelmus, the celebrated German museum director. The position gave her a certain status, allowing her to expose her deficient knowledge everywhere, and giving her the misplaced idea that she was the one who decided which works the museum would purchase and which it would not.

George scratched his back, glad that Alice hadn't turned out like this.

Tom walked on, waited for George to catch up and then said seriously: 'Perhaps we should do something together, the two of us as artists.'

'Do what together?'

'Some huge project. You do huge projects, don't you? With your analysis and my creative essence we could dumbfound the world. The Nobels.'

'I thought you had abandoned that name?'

'Ah, well. It's all marketing, you know. It will be back in a flash if I ever need it.'

George smiled. He understood that Tom was aiming to worm his way into the architect's world. He looked at the umpteenth hollow installation that filled a room of the gallery.

'Right now I am in the middle of a huge project in Sicily. It's completely approved. No need for your essence.' But to seem not too standoffish, he added: 'I will keep your offer in mind. But let me warn you. Architecture is not without engagement. It is not a game. Stones can fall and roofs can collapse, leaving a lot of damage. The essence, first and foremost, is to construct something that stands well. Secondly,

it must be useful. Whether it is artistic is only the final pay off.'

They walked along a very nicely framed photo series through which one could follow the creative process of the installations. George unconsciously looked around for Ann Sheepway, but she seemed to have gone. 'You know what. It's all very impressive but I think it's time I go to dad.' Without waiting for an answer, he headed for the exit.

On the way to the hospital George recalled, unbidden, an event from his childhood. The family had been camping somewhere in the woods, far from home. The children were playing, running in the fields, sinking their feet into grassy, muddy pools, which, in their eyes, were vast, impassable swamps. As they chased each other toward the road that ran through the nature reserve, George saw a car coming by, his parent's car he thought. The car sped past and George wanted to scream, but he couldn't. His parents were leaving and all he could think was that he must deserve it, he must have done something to drive them away. The feeling that took hold of his was less abandonment than guilt. Back at the campground, he discovered his parents chatting calmly in front of the tent. Nothing going on. He felt safe again, but the sense of insecurity had entered his world; it would stay within him forever, appearing randomly but consistently.

George hoped his father would be in a bad state, that his father would hardly understand where he was, let alone what they were declaring about him. In this fantasy, Adrian Nobel would be sitting like a frail mouse, the way George had seen him over the last few days. He imagined what it would be like to say: 'Dad, you are legally incompetent.' When his father fantasized about dwarves digging holes who certainly had to be educated further in that practice, then and only then he could do it. Not that George was getting merciless. On the contrary, his heart shrank with every absurd sentence his father

uttered, but it would be so much more bearable to give up on him if he were in that state, instead of if he presented himself as George's reliable and respectable father.

Six people were seated in the familiar room. Apart from his father, George saw Dr. Bakker, and a nurse, two women and a man he didn't know.

'Please meet Mrs. Ter Kuile, the judge and Miss Simonsen, the clerk. This is Mr. Holz, he is a lawyer.'

His father sat there between these official people, wearing the pants of his pajamas and his green baggy sweater. Adrian Nobel sensed that something was wrong. His eyes flickered nervously from one person to another, and his hands restlessly fumbled at his sleeves, as if he were all too well aware of his shabby clothes and his awkward position. He looked expectantly at George, who shook his head as if to indicate he also didn't know what kind of charade was going on. Consistently, his father's eyes slipped past the others to rest on George, almost imploring his son to save him.

The judge took the floor: 'Sir, you are Adrian Nobel?' And when George's father affirmed, the judge continued: 'As you may know, we have gathered here today to make a decision about you.' The woman leaned toward him. She spoke loudly and articulated in an exaggerated way as if the man's capabilities had already had been taken away from him. 'Your son will make the decision today so that your life will become more calm and peaceful. You won't have to worry about anything.'

The nurse also leaned over to him. She spoke softly: 'Mr. Nobel, do you understand what we are about to do? Your son will sign a document allowing your wife to take care of all your business from now on. Do you understand?'

He understood. He understood all too well that there was something wrong. He sought again George's eyes. 'George, what is happening here? Why do all these people want something from me. The manager can prove I have always done my job properly. Why do they arrest me? Will they take me away with them?'

George had hoped for nonsense and nonsense he got, but the nucleus of what his father said was the exact truth. His father had trusted these people and now they had turned against him. He had felt safe and now they were coming after him. He understood. And the last straw at which he clasped would yield all too easy.

The judge spoke again: 'Sir, you are George Nobel?'

'Yes, I am George Nobel and this is my father, Adrian Nobel.'

'Mr. Nobel, do you agree to the statement your father is no longer legally competent of taking care of his own business, in the interest of himself and his family?'

His father was staring desperately and somehow, George found the courage to return his look. He tried to let it be reassuring.

Had his father ever actually abandoned him? Had it ever happened that his father hadn't been his support and anchor? Perhaps that one time when he was twenty? He had gone hitchhiking in the South of France, an adventure. After a few weeks of uncontrolled amusement he found himself stranded somewhere south of Avignon. No food, no money, nothing. Lacking a ride, he had walked all the way to the city's center. There, completely at a loss, he had gone to the police station, where they had allowed him to phone home. In a chaotic conversation, he had begged his father to help him, to transfer money or convince the gendarmes to put him on the train home, with a ticket. The policemen had understood the point of the conversation and had hoped that something would be arranged, if only to free them from

this responsibility. His father's answer had been a plain no. George had chosen out of his own free will to hang out in France and now he would bear the consequences of that choice. He would find a way home. His father had sounded almost unconcerned. It was a slap in the face. George had never felt so abandoned.

When he had hung up, the gendarmes looked pitifully at him and George couldn't find the courage to ask them for another favor. He had started walking and, arriving at the main road, he had held up his thumb again. To his surprise, a fancy sports car halted and gave him a lift to Lyon. His father had been right. It was so simple. He had never felt so strong in his life. At the speed of hundred miles per hour his bravura returned and, very pleased with himself, he started to view this adventure in France as a success, after all. But when the chauffeur dropped him at the Lyon train station, his mood immediately plunged to rock bottom. He was in a strange city at four a.m., surrounded by junkies, tramps and prostitutes. He was hungry and he was tired. For a moment he considered the idea of crawling into a dark corner and trying to forget everything. Now he knew that his father had not been right.

A small city vehicle came by spouting a hard stream of cold water to clean the trash of the day and at the same time to make it harder for the tramps to hang out here. George decided to stick with his plan of returning home. It was cold. A few feet from him a junkie was sitting on the ground of the platform, leaning against a pillar. George feared the man was getting too interested in him. Then from far off, a thundering sound, accompanied by the long high shrieks of iron against iron, came nearer and slowly the train entered the station. A frightening monstrous appearance. Inconceivable that this colossus could bring him safely home.

Without a ticket George stepped on the train. He fell asleep until the ticket inspector kicked him off, in Maçon. As opposed to Lyon, here the whole station was desolated. He waited for the next train and got on it, again without ticket. The next inspector handled him differently. In Dijon he was handed over to the railway police and he had to recount the whole story. To his surprise, after he had shown them his passport, they just handed him a train ticket, along with a very high invoice. Everything was copied threefold on paper, but he had a ticket home. Once back, it became very clear that he could not expect financial support from his parents. He had to work in a factory for two weeks, stacking toilet paper at the assembly line, to earn the money to pay off the charge. Years later, George and his father had laughed about the whole event and George had admitted that his father had been right to deny any help at the time. But still...

‘I agree.’

‘Would you please sign here?’

George took the paper and signed.

‘Thank you very much.’

‘George!’

‘Dad, it’s really for the best.’

‘What did you do? Do you conspire with these traitors?’

‘No dad, I...’ He looked away. He couldn’t bear it any longer.

‘Then I declare this meeting adjourned.’

They all got up. George went over to his father.

‘Dad, take it easy. Nothing bad has happened. It’s really for your own good. And it’s only for a short period.’ George loathed the lie, but continued: ‘Mum takes good care of you. She will always care. We will too.’ He felt sick, simultaneously sweaty and cold. ‘Come, let’s go back

to your room.'

His father stepped into his slippers. He swayed and held on to George.

'You will never betray me, my boy?'

'Never dad. Never. I promise.'

Had the last piece of truth left his life? He thought of all the promises that his father used to make – we will do this and we are going to do that. Little had ever come of any of it. But George didn't blame him. A promise is more a fragile spur of deep affection than an agreement for the future. He knew that the promises had been meant. At that time they had eternal value.

IX

‘George, at last! Do you have a minute?’ It was Herbert Jansen on the phone. A week had gone by since the court session and Adrian Noble had been moved to a nursing home. His physical condition as well as his mental state had deteriorated dramatically over the last days. George hesitated before responding. Herbert was the last person on earth with whom he wanted to be in contact. But on the other hand, he was extremely curious to find out how things were going in Sicily.

‘George, you’re still there?’

‘Yes, I can spare one minute. What is it about? My dismissal? Has the Sicily connection been gossiping nicely about me? Let’s have it. I can take it.’

‘Well, George. There’s so much. I don’t even know where to start.’

‘Just tell me, am I fired? Let’s have that out in the open.’

‘No, well, you are..., how shall I phrase it, you have been withdrawn

from the project. Yes, that's a good expression; withdrawn, but perhaps just temporarily.' George knew the last phrase was a lie, but he let Herbert rattle on. 'The project is continuing, of course, using your plans. Isn't that great?'

'Really great. Fabulous. They're using my plans, you said? I am so happy.'

George's cynicism did not deter Herbert, who continued undaunted: 'Sicily, man, I can't follow it anymore.' His unruffled tone calmed George.

'You want me to tell you the whole story?'

'I have no other business to take care of, other than to wait for the announcement that my father is dying, so yes, please continue.'

'George, don't be cynical. It's completely unlike you.'

'You have no idea how cynical I can be.'

Herbert took a deep breath as if he were preparing himself for the most important announcement of his life: 'Cavalcanti has been pulled out of the project.'

'How do you know about Cavalcanti? What's going on with him?' George was surprised to find how little he cared about the particulars; two months earlier he would not only have needed to know every minute detail of what had happened in his absence, but he would also have looked to the instant lies and contrivances to justify his role in it all. Now, it just didn't matter.

'Don't you worry. We know how things went when you were there. About your meeting there that morning and the fact you had never gone to Sicily beforehand. What I don't get is why you screwed up the whole project for yourself. We could have straightened it all out, if you had just been more up front about things.' Herbert waited for George to respond, but George was silent. It was horrible to agree with

someone whom you despised.

Herbert continued: 'Doesn't matter anymore. We now know how they tried to squeeze Cavalcanti into the project. Bosoni himself briefed us. When he didn't hear from you again, he called us and then the truth came out. You know George, you turned out to be the catalyst; it is all working out so well for PC&M. Only, it's a shame that you didn't come to us yourself. With our resources we would have dealt with it. Where, by the way, have you been these last few weeks? I have been calling like crazy. And anyway, it doesn't matter anymore. Bosoni has been promoted away to be some minor civil servant in some local village.'

'And when do I come in?'

Herbert hesitated: 'Now I will go to Sicily to take up the thread, according to our plans.'

'My plans.'

'Okay. Your plans.'

'But that's not all, isn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why did you call me? Not just to share this story.'

'No.' George anticipated what would come.

'Actually I wanted to meet with you. To discuss the plans thoroughly, so that I will be well prepared when I arrive in Sicily. But there's no rush; it doesn't have to be tomorrow, you know.'

'Oh, so that's the reason they haven't fired me, yes? At least, not yet. You don't have to answer; it's a rhetorical question, if you know what that means.'

'George, again, don't be so uncharitable. We don't have to obtain your approval to go along with the plans. They belong to us. There's a degree of justice in the way things are going. We all mean well. Believe

me.'

George felt empty, completely empty.

'I don't have time for justice right now. Perhaps later. Then I will call you, maybe.'

He hung up.

Later that afternoon, when he stopped by his parent's house, only Nicole was in. His mother had gone with Tom to the nursing home. George felt that he couldn't bear another moment of being inside, under Picasso's dove, so proposed that they take a walk. He wanted to be awakened by November's coldness.

The air was chill with a hint of a meager sun low on the horizon. They walked over the barren frozen farmland. Hard, heavy soil, recently ploughed. The furrows were cut so deeply that it was difficult to move without watching the ground. The necessary downward focus created for George the anonymity that he required for his confession.

'I received a call from work earlier today. They didn't say it straight out but essentially, they fired me.'

For a moment Nicole halted to study him, but George continued trudging so Nicole stumbled over the clods to catch up.

'The ground is terrible,' she said. 'Wouldn't it be better for us to take the path over there?' She pointed to the black strip that demarcated the border between the meadow and the trees. George didn't respond, so Nicole started again.

'Fired?'

'Not officially. But put on hold.'

'But they just can't throw you out, just like that, can they? After all those years.'

'They have taken me off my project. My project!'

'But something has to have happened. People just don't act that way

for no reason.'

'A lot has happened.' And George told his sister the entire story, without a break, relieved that he could finally tell all. He spoke as if he were reading from a book, and including every detail. Heedlessly, he mentioned that right after his liaison with Violetta he had gone to Sicily to investigate the situation there and to endorse his plans. The treacherous sentence just slipped out before he realized it.

When he had finished, Nicole shook her head with pursed lips, focused on figuring out how to clear her brother's name.

'I don't think it's as bad as you think. Do you want me to fight for you? Officially as a lawyer?'

'Thank you for your unending optimism.'

The path split as they reached the edge of the wood.

'Shall we walk on to the brook and then return?' Nicole proposed.

'To the bridge? Okay.'

They fell silent again, each lost in thought, until they reached the brook. On the bridge George looked down over the rail. A leaf was floating on the water. At first it seemed tranquil, but the appearance was deceptive. Looking more closely, it seemed to George that the leaf was locked in battle with an invisible opponent. It was spun fiercely to and fro, resting briefly near the bank, then taken again by the main current, which hurled it between the stones. It sank, reemerged, and even floating back a distance, as if sailing against the current. But the battlefield remained the same.

'Heraclitus vs. Parmenides 1-1,' George spoke solemnly.

Nicole ignored his remark. 'George, you have to fight for it. Don't give up. If you need a lawyer, I will do everything.' Nicole watched him closely. 'Don't let them get to you. I know things are hard, right now, but you made the right decision with Alice. And perhaps the

incident with Violetta was also useful. It did open your eyes and now you can move on and forget both of them.'

'I already have.'

Nicole repeated herself. 'You have to move forward. If you do, you can pull things together at work again too.'

George shook his head: 'No, I am beginning to realize that I have been a loafer all along.'

'Don't say that! We Nobels are not loafers. We're fighters.'

'You sound like dad, talking like that. I can hear him say it: 'We make a victory out of every defeat.'"

Nicole looked away. 'Dad...' She shook her head. 'With dad I don't think there's any hope left. More a question of days, they say.'

'Will you promise not to tell anyone about this?' Nicole nodded.

They walked back home along the edge of the forest.

'Incredible that this will all come to life again,' Nicole said, 'that everything will turn green again.' She pointed at the dark wall of trunks and branches.

George pondered whether to point out that it all would turn black and barren again afterwards, suggesting that the winter was the default state, but he let it rest.

When they returned home, the others were back. Tom and Yvonne were lazily hanging about on the couch, while their mother was busy in the kitchen. George stared out of the window.

'No coffee for us,' Tom yelled to the kitchen. 'Yvonne and I have to go pretty soon.' To the others he said as explanation: 'Concert by the boys.'

'George don't you want to come with us?' Yvonne asked.

'No, I really don't want to come. Perhaps Nicole feels up to it.'

But Nicole had to pick Thim up from the babysitter. George envied her the good excuse.

Yvonne and Tom kept insisting he should come and because he had really nothing to do, George eventually gave in. Anything would be better than sitting at home, waiting for a phone call with the final verdict.

The performance would be at four o'clock in the afternoon. The band was afraid that a police raid might spoil the fun if they tried to hold the performance at night. But the partying would continue into the early hours. 'Brace yourself,' Tom said, elbowing George in the ribs, 'now that you are single again, you might seize the opportunity. Easy chicks!'

The band was holed up in an old decrepit house. The neighborhood was undergoing renovations but, for various legal reasons, the municipality couldn't tear down the whole area at once. So, like a rotten set of teeth, graffiti-covered slum buildings and empty lots stood vacantly amid newly built houses.

The afternoon was darkening to twilight when they arrived. From a window on the first floor a scruffy-looking young man yelled that the door was open. Turn the knob three times. Tom went ahead, leading George and Yvonne into a barren hallway. They followed the sounds of the concert down the stairs and into the cellar. Through a hatchway in the floor, a wooden staircase led them to the substructure of the building. With every step downward, the air grew heavier and thicker with humidity and cigarette smoke. Someone had boosted the band's amps to a ruthless level.

Downstairs it was dark. The low ceiling only magnified the claustrophobic sensation. Everything, including the floor, had been painted black. The cellar was crowded and stank of beer and

decomposition. As far as George could see, there were about fifty people, mere silhouettes, shoehorned into a space no bigger than a living room. Most of them were moving their limbs in jerky, dance-like motions. Others focused on a small stage in the corner, where, between pillars of speakers, four half-naked men and a barely-dressed girl were producing a gargantuan sound. Bathed in sweat, they were snaking around the microphones and their instruments.

Without knowing how, George found a glass of beer in his hands. Tom said something but George couldn't understand him. He wanted to reply but realized that verbal communication was useless. The sound grew louder; to George it seemed as if an apocalyptic wall was approaching to crush him. Screeching guitars and fighting basses pounded unremittingly in his stomach. As if the smog from the cigarettes were not sufficient, a smoke machine on the stage vomited a thick white vapor. The oppression dizzied him. He tried to recall the adagio from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but failed; he tried to picture the sun shining through green trees, it was impossible. There was no room left here for one's own senses. The heat, darkness, stench and noise overpowered him completely.

Seeking an escape, George fought his way out of the dark, through the sweaty bodies. Gasping and staggering, he clung to the stairs. Once outside, he sat down on a cool stone by the front door and took a deep breath. He looked at the decrepit buildings with wooden panels boarding up what once had been openings to the world. In the dark grey sky, gulls circled high around the cranes, shrieking as if in reaction to the throbbing subterranean tumult. A soothing perception overwhelmed him: the world in all its ugliness and harshness still existed.

He was awakened from these contemplations by the creak of the door. Glancing up, he was surprised to see Ann Sheepways, the

itchy anthill from Fanny Lieber's Gallery. He hadn't recognized her downstairs.

'Hi, you're Tom's brother, aren't you? The successful architect?' It sounded more friendly than her behavior at the gallery had suggested.

'Yes, my name is George Noble,' George replied formally. He wasn't sure he wanted this conversation.

'I am Ann. I saw you coming in downstairs and I think you're cool. A real architect, wow.'

George didn't know how to respond.

'Do you like the concert? *Heartless Passion*. I think it's such a fancy invention.' She awaited George's answer with an open mouth.

'I thought the word 'concert' suggested something to do with musical performances?'

'Why are you sitting outside?'

'My ears are used to listening to classical music at normal volumes.'

'And what if I were to seduce you to come back with me? We could make it a crazy night, the two of us.' She roared with laughter: 'Come on you, sexy brother! Stick with me.' She took his tie and forced him up. George, taken completely by surprise by the swiftness of her actions and the forwardness of her proposal, let her drag him downstairs again, back to the inferno. He suspected that he wouldn't escape as easily this time.

Back in the cellar, he felt someone tapping his shoulder. Ann was saying something. George gathered that she wanted to dance. Before he could respond, she started making wild gestures, provocative and spastic at the same time. Around him other people were also jumping with abandon. He didn't know what to do. If he followed her invitation he would look stupid. And if he stood still he would look stupid. At a loss,

he decided to join for a moment and then explain to her, courteously but unambiguously, that this wasn't his thing. The last time he had danced, he realized suddenly, had been in Florence. That had been a safe, exciting, but above all a tender dance, a homecoming, embracing Violetta, with all those promises in the air. Now he was further from home than ever. In vivid contrast, he was in a hellhole with this hellion whom he had despised from the first moment and who was probably just attracted to him because of his profession.

Without looking at her, he walked toward the crates of beer in the corner, partly to escape from the dancing but also he was really thirsty. The hot air had dried his throat. He dropped down on a few crates and put a bottle to his mouth. Hanging his head, he tried to think quiet thoughts. After a while he noticed that Ann had followed him and was sitting beside him. 'Hot!' he said without making sound, as if that would have made any difference. He wanted to take off his tie, but she prevented it. Nonchalantly he shrugged his shoulders, noticing Ann mouthing the word 'sexy.' If he wanted, he could get her into his bed with no trouble if he wanted. And despite all of his aversion, lust arose. Heartless passion, he laughed to himself. It had been a while.

Ann took her handkerchief out of her purse and wiped the sweat from his face. He put the bottle to his lips and realized it was empty. She handed him a new one. With childish pride he demonstrated how he could open it; in his student years, he had learned how to open one bottle with another. She laid her hand on his leg and unintentionally he trembled for a second before moving away. His head was pounding and he felt nauseous again. He knew he had to reach fresh air very fast if he didn't want to faint.

George tried to find Tom and Yvonne in the dancing crowd, so he would have a good excuse to leave her, but he didn't see them. Had

they already gone? He glanced at Ann sitting beside him. Could he? He wondered. He imagined her without clothes. Although she was not really pretty, she had a nice figure. She had what George thought was important -- a waist. He was a waist-man. To see a female as really feminine, she had to have a waist. Without this, the woman in question could never be an erotic object. With it, George's interest was piqued. The distinction between the two categories was apparent in a split second. Ann had the right form; unfortunately he almost added.

He tried to let her know her that he didn't feel well, that he had a headache and a stomachache. He wanted to get up, but she prevented it at first. Then, her mouth pressed to his ear, she shouted, 'Okay then. Let's go upstairs.'

When he stood, the walls spun. The whole cellar seemed to be tipping. He tried to concentrate, closing his eyes, and to distract himself from his misery, he pictured Ann, naked and compliant, lying on his bed. But the dizziness increased. He reached out to support himself with the pile of beer crates, but he grabbed badly and almost fell. The sudden movement caused his head to swim. He had to get out of here, but feared that he wouldn't make it to the exit. Desperately, he staggered in the direction where the exit had to be, to the stairs, to the light of the night, to a world that offered the possibility of coming home. As he flailed along, the reproachful looks of the dancers estranged him even more. Why didn't these people leave to try to save themselves? His head burst. The music had changed to an ongoing screaming, high and shrill, occasionally interrupted by enormous low booms, like explosions. The smoke cut off his breath while the scorching strokes of the oscillating spots, flashes of red and yellow, blinded him. The entire universe had become an inferno. The world around him collapsed; now George existed only in his mind, and that wanted to explode.

He staggered on, then fell to the floor. The last thing that he thought he saw before losing his consciousness was a woman stooping to take pity on him.

Charlotte

VIII

Stone. Bluish grey. Nerves and veins in stone. Scratches. Branches. Dark and deep lines beside lighter ones. Are they traces of damage or deliberate lines? The scratches become more powerful outlines and lines become meaningful form on a bluish grey plane. A carving and a deeper carving. Surfaces, grey and blue-grey, all nuances of grey, leading the eye into the depths. Silvery grey like the reflection of white mist above the sea, dark grey, dull like lead, and clear grey like a hard steel plate. Hints of silken silvery blue like pearls.

At a higher level, well-considered dashes and carvings incorporate the natural cracks in the stone. A torso appears: a female figure in profile standing on top of a rock. Proudly she raises her head, her

shoulders set. Wings or hints of the wind emerging behind her, suggest movement. She seems to be lifting her right leg, knee bent. Her left leg, gracefully curving back, remains in contact with the earth, but it will follow.

The last dimension unfolds: time. Now the story develops. The woman seems to kiss the surface of the earth lightly with her foot, a last goodbye before leaving it in full flight. In front of her is depth. The wind rushes through her hair and appears to keep her balanced; to support her. She has already passed into the future, into the space in front of her. The stone bears a deep incision, like a skewer in the ground, pointed towards her. It is irrevocable -- nothing can prevent her from falling onto it. The moment she is airborne, her fate will be sealed. But it hasn't happened, not yet. Despite the inevitable outcome of the story, time has stopped. Perhaps the last act will never take place. A vain hope? Who knows?

Charlotte was fascinated. They hadn't told her too much ahead of time. The stone was not larger than twelve by sixteen inches, but it was fantastic. Grace, movement, drama. Charlotte could not tell what caught her first; was it the fine figured shape that seemed to reach to her out of the stone, or the compelling movement forward, or the dramatic ending? The incision forming the skewer appeared to be rough and wildly scratched in. Charlotte instinctively wanted to intervene and stop her. Apparently she actually made a movement with her hand towards the stone.

'We did the same thing,' Pete Updike said, nearly whispering. 'We all want to save her, our Madonna, but we can't. Isn't it fascinating? Incredible.'

Charlotte suddenly realized that they were standing, the three of them, in a room of ArtSale's New York office; Charlotte, Pete and

John Martin, the managing director of the department of Ancient Sculptures. They faced the stone, but stood back with respect, as if it were some kind of idol. She startled and took a hold of herself, trying not to show how it affected her. She did not want them to see her getting carried away.

‘It’s fascinating. And it’s not a Madonna, that’s for sure. I am glad to have seen it, but I have no idea what to do with it. I can’t even start to date it, let alone place it. If we have to place it?’ With these last words she looked questioningly at John, but from his expression she understood right away that this was the reason they had brought her here. It had to be placed. It couldn’t exist as just a beautiful thing. Without context, it was worthless on the market. ArtSale couldn’t sell art without a background. ‘Please, fill me in again precisely where it came from. Maybe there are some clues?’

Pete spoke: ‘I can’t tell you much more than I already did.’ He took a pose as if addressing a college hall. ‘A man, Clint Casey, with a wood concession in the Amazon region, takes a walk and finds a woman, dead, with this piece of art beside her. Our man is smart, takes some pictures, talks with the natives. He probably also thought it was bizarre. He takes the relief with him. And when he returns to the civilized world, he contacts us, just for fun. That’s it.’

‘But that woman, the dead one, what about her? This is too absurd for words. Do you have these pictures here? And physical research; analysis of the material, name it.’

John now took over. A former museum director who had tried, vainly, for years to impose his artistic views on the public, he had sought safety in the sale of paintings, ending up at ArtSale. He was in his early fifties, stout. He wore the minimal hair he had left bound into a ponytail. ‘She was an Indian. I can’t remember the name of the

tribe right now. I can check. Never had any contact with civilization, except maybe that wood company.' He walked to the desk and came back with some pictures in his hand. 'These are the snapshots.'

Charlotte took them and studied them carefully. The first showed a little lake, surrounded by a tangle of green ferns, bushes and a thick coverage of foliage of sky-high trees. Next to it, a landslide had left a pile of rocks, perhaps the same stone as the relief. The scene had a fairytale quality, sheltered and safe. The second photo offered more details. A woman lay peacefully on the stones. As far as Charlotte could tell, she might have been sleeping. The relief rested in her hand. The third photo offered a close-up of the woman, lying stretched out, her head slightly turned, her arms spread. She had long dark hair, her eyes were closed and her face had a brownish tan; she looked serene.

'What caused her death?' Charlotte asked.

'Cause of death unknown. Before we could investigate further, her tribesmen had burned the body,' Pete responded.

'Did you check the type of stone?'

'We checked everything,' John replied. 'It's exactly the same material as the stuff in that pile. The problem is, we have absolutely no idea what's going on. Did she make it herself; did she receive it as a present? But it's the same material, so knowing that wouldn't solve anything. That she could have made it herself presupposes a basic knowledge of sculpture. Twentieth Century Pre-Colombian Art. That beats everything. She never could have made this. In this way, out of the blue, with such refinement.'

The strong conviction with which John spoke and his lack of respect toward the dead woman, vexed Charlotte; she felt the urge to pursue the idea that the woman actually had made it herself. The word that John had used for the photos had said it all: snapshots. Behind

the amiability, emanated the cold calculation of the salesman. Where Charlotte wanted to chase her instincts, John thought only about the sale, and the realization of this bothered her.

‘Is there any way that the woman could possibly have had the opportunity to, I don’t know, browse a book on the history of art? Or might she have seen pictures of Hellenistic sculptures? Is that tribe, by the way, even acquainted with arts and crafts, anyhow?’

‘Zip, nada, niente, nulla,’ Pete answered.

John added, ‘Never fabricated anything whatsoever. We have been briefed very thoroughly by the department of...’ he looked at Pete for help and Pete continued: ‘The department of cultural anthropology, South and Central America.’ John nodded, but Pete went on, the model child showing he had done his homework. ‘The tribe, the Yanomama Indians, is known to be very primitive, no writing, no fine arts, no culture beyond the worship of nature. The other members of the tribe didn’t recognize the woman, or at least that’s what they said. Perhaps true, maybe a lie, we don’t know. The anthropologists speculated that she might have been an exile.’

‘Impossible that she made it herself,’ Charlotte muttered to herself. Turning to the others, she asked, ‘But then, where does it come from? And that stone, it’s from that spot. Could it be that maybe that this Casey guy made it?’

‘We thought about that,’ Pete said. ‘But the man can hardly reproduce a child’s drawing. Perhaps he asked someone else to make it, but he didn’t seem that kind of person. I suppose we have to take it into account, however.’

Charlotte looked at the relief again for a long time. ‘I have to think and look, look carefully.’ The last words she directed again to herself. She turned to the others: ‘Can I get a good reproduction? I know that

the original has to remain here. Whose is it right now, anyway?’

‘Ours. Casey gave it to us, on the condition that when it is sold, he will get fifty percent of the profit.’ Pete took a small black attaché case from the desk. ‘But we did our job properly. Exact copies, enlargements of all the details, anything you might need. All the documents of the anthropological department, analyses from the lab and a copy of Casey’s story. He himself has gone back to Brazil, so you will have to make do with the report.’

‘Thanks. I’ll get back to you when I know more. Or rather, when I think I know more.’

She was on her way out, when John remembered: ‘Wait. Since you are here... Yesterday I ran in to the head of the 19th century department. Davide Caspari is his name. He’s an extremely strange bird; some lost romantic dreamer, but a very well respected art historian, a walking encyclopedia, what, a walking library. After he left Venice, he came to work for ArtSale in New York. He asked me if I knew someone to take care of a job he has. Can I give him your number? You are well grounded in Romanticism, aren’t you? And who knows, he might come in useful with the Amazon-sculpture.’

‘Who knows, indeed? What kind of chore? Sculpture, painting?’

‘No idea. I will ask him to call you for a meeting, okay?’

‘Okay. Perhaps he has something interesting. I’ll be in touch.’

Back in her hotel room, Charlotte had immediately opened the attaché case and now she was sitting on her bed with the photo of the relief in her hands. She couldn’t take her eyes from its mythical beauty in primitive expression. At the office she hadn’t said too much, afraid the others would mock her emotions, but now she could fully surrender herself to the image. And again she had the sense that she was

looking at herself. She felt the woman's every emotion.

Coincidence. It was the only word that came to Charlotte's mind. Coincidence. She contrived hypothesis after hypothesis, but when compared with the facts, none of them proved compelling and she returned to that one word. It had to be coincidence. So unlikely, but still possible.

Charlotte took a piece of paper and started putting lines on it randomly, looking to see whether some concrete image appeared, something that no one could misinterpret. She repeated the exercise tens of times, then reversed it, trying to see in the relief just lines, no forms. She found neither method helpful. They were her own drawings, and she could interpret them in thousands of ways: streaming brooks, drifting clouds, washing women, fighting men or a combination of them all. Not once she had drawn something that compelled her to see it in a fixed way, as opposed to the relief, in which it was impossible not to see the woman.

She had gone to the computer center of ArtSale and had scanned the photos in order to subject them to the most advanced graphic design programs: these could create images in which only shadows remained; or one with pure lines, black and white; even color changes. She had asked them to make a 3D-animation of it. But throughout every iteration, there remained one form: a woman, on the brink of liberation and inevitably encountering tragedy.

On her way back to her own department from the computer center, she thought she recognized a woman further down in the corridor.

'Rachel?' Charlotte called, approaching her.

The woman looked up and when she recognized Charlotte she replied joyously: 'Hi Charlotte. What brings you here?'

Rachel Rosen, whose Master of Law degree didn't prevent her from thinking and living. Rachel had worked for a while as counsel to the CEO at an international bank and had then gotten a position as ArtSale's in-house lawyer. She had flown to Rome a number of times for consultations. Charlotte had met her during one of these, becoming friendly, they had gone out for dinner more than once. Charlotte knew her as honest and smart, but above all, as cordial. She seemed immune to everyday worries. Charlotte had often found her perspectives helpful.

After exchanging some generalities, Rachel examined her for a long time: 'You have changed. As if... I don't know. Tell me, what has changed?' As if she knew the answer, but was granting Charlotte the honor of telling it.

Rachel wasn't a person to fool. Besides she was familiar enough and at the same time, sufficiently distant so that Charlotte could announce it. 'I am pregnant.' It was the first time Charlotte had said it out loud. It felt great.

'Wonderful! Mazal tov. When?'

'Seven months to go. But it does really feel great. Sometimes.' She laughed meaningfully. Rachel had three kids. She would understand.

'Are you having a good time in New York? You know what? Come stop by. I have an apartment at Brooklyn Heights. Or even better, next Tuesday I am throwing myself a birthday party. Don't guess; even if you were right, it would be either too insulting or too flattering. I have chosen a café in Brooklyn as the crime scene. Do you both want to come?'

'Two? Who should I bring? Oh right! Sure. We will come. We look forward to it, both of us.' The pleasant feeling that she was always with someone hadn't settled in yet. 'Next Tuesday? That's Christmas Eve? Will anyone show up?'

‘We are not so into that Christmas business,’ Rachel laughed. ‘Our assertion: without conception, no birth! Of all people, right now, you should realize that!’

Rachel gave her the address and they said goodbye. Still smiling and feeling more self-confident than ever, Charlotte walked into the office of John Martin.

‘Coincidence?’ He shouted. ‘Coincidence doesn’t exist, at least not in our business. Impossible. You have to come up with something better than that.’ He apparently didn’t believe in beauty that just could exist.

Charlotte didn’t want to admit how much the stone had touched her. And in the end she agreed that it could not be coincidence, even if she did not mean it the way John Martin did. She realized that she didn’t even want to believe that someone other than the dead woman had produced it. It had to have been created there, on that spot at the lake, by that woman with her own hands. Charlotte had started to feel a deep sympathy for the unknown woman. Had she tried to picture herself? Had she seen her reflection in the water? Could she work that idea out on a stone? An unending stream of questions flooded Charlotte’s mind, but she had no answers.

IX

When Charlotte let her eyes wander over the people in the restaurant on Barclay Street opposite the Woolworth Building, she immediately found the person she was looking for: Davide Caspari. He was around fifty, slim and tall, stylishly dressed with a black vest over a grey ribbon shirt and a red bow tie. He had already spotted her and was heading in her direction, his brown eyes examining her closely. Authority radiated from him. He welcomed her in Italian.

He had called her and she had agreed to a meeting. Caspari had offered to treat her to dinner, suggesting that the matter was a private one, not appropriate for an office conversation. It felt odd to sit alone with a man at a table; the break with Viktor had been only eight days earlier, but it seemed months ago.

The simple dinner gave Charlotte the opportunity to study the man. He appeared to be an intelligent conversation partner, but, to

her frustration, the conversation went nowhere at all. Every time when she tried to find out more about him, he had parried her question with some general story on art history. To be fair, every time he tried to do the same, she averted it as well. Instead, she told him about the relief and he remarked that he would like to see it one day. He was pleasant, but she felt no need to let him learn more about her. He clearly felt the same, so their exchange became a strange play of diversion.

‘John Martin said you were a university professor before you started working at ArtSale. Disappointed in the students?’

‘Not only in the students. It was the overall mentality that I didn’t enjoy. My focus is the nineteenth century – art, literature, philosophy, politics, everything really – and you have to have a lot of patience and the time to study that. And enough love of the subject to understand it. No, not to understand, but to grasp and to enter it. To put it more bluntly, you have to take pains. People’s current need for instant satisfaction obstructs their patience and love for this kind of study. There’s no profundity any more. Science and even art history are absorbed in the travelling circus of more and faster. Unwritten laws of research are neglected, discarded; source verification hardly exists; they all run after each other. And you know what the funny thing is: the others thought that I was the strange one.

‘I hear what you are saying.’

‘Worse, it has become a general symptom of the culture; it’s not only in our specialty. But in Art History it is more stinging, because there the value of the subject is so immensely high. At least that’s my opinion. Last year, a colleague of mine produced three publications and helped to organize two exhibitions, all on different subjects. He is very celebrated in the art circles and he runs like Orlando Furioso himself, to get it done, and why? Not out of love for the art or science, only

because of the love for himself, to be part of the scene. And sometimes that makes me very sad, because he's not the only one.'

Charlotte couldn't agree more, but at the same time she wondered whether this was the real reason why he had left the academic world. He just could have secluded himself with his research. But Caspari changed the subject before she had decided whether to point this out.

'When I left Europe, I was in an awful rush. I just dumped all of my belongings into some boxes and shipped them here. Now the whole load is stored in an old warehouse in Tribeca. The boxes are stuffed with manuscripts, unpublished articles, ideas and scraps and who knows what. It has to be categorized. That's the job at hand. It's not ArtSale business, but I will pay you well. Twice what ArtSale does, if you wish.'

'I don't get it. Why don't you do it yourself?'

'Good question.'

When there was no further response, she pushed: 'And you have an answer?'

'I will explain it one day. What matters now is that I don't have the time for it and perhaps you have.'

Reluctantly, she decided not to ask why he had left Europe so abruptly. Mostly out of curiosity she said she would give it a shot, as long it didn't get in the way of her ArtSale activities.

'Basically, I need you to go through each box and sort it all out. I will give you a global classification of the possible subjects. It's all nineteenth century stuff and pretty specific, so it presupposes a fair amount of knowledge.'

'When shall I start?'

'Whenever you want. Tomorrow? The day after? Everything is there so you can start at once.'

‘Let’s say in two days? Oh, before I forget. Can we meet about the sculpture? I really don’t know what to do with it.’

‘Sure. We can do that back at the ArtSale offices.’

On her way back home she wondered why she had accepted the job. Probably to take her mind off all the things that had happened recently. She reassured herself that she would stop the moment she got bored.

The next day, Charlotte found herself taking the subway to Canal Street. She walked around the corner, almost stealthily glancing back, as if she wanted to be sure nobody was watching her. She could scarcely take in the panorama that stretched before her: dangling electric cables, high concrete ridges, red-white cordoning, broken pavements, billboards, walls covered with graffiti, the occasional apartment building. No rest for the eye, although nothing was in motion. The only reassuring beacons were the old warehouses, ten floors high, brown brick-masonry with huge windows. Not yet in decline, they only made the surrounding apartment buildings look worse.

One of these warehouses was her destination. Caspari had given her the key. Charlotte pushed open the door and found herself in a small hallway, between the apartment of an absent janitor and an elevator. She pushed the button for the sixth floor. With a jolt, the elevator started to ascend.

Reaching the sixth floor, she walked down a corridor lined with doors in hardboard walls. The builder had apparently not bothered to make the internal space very sturdy. At the door with the label “Davide Caspari,” she halted and, instinctively, knocked. Since there was no answer, she went in. The room was sixteen by twenty feet, with a window at the far end. There were boxes everywhere, in every corner, stacked five high. There was no furniture save a desk and a chair. A

glass and a crystal ashtray stood on the table; clearly Caspari had made at least some attempt at unpacking.

'Heavens, what a dreadful mess,' Charlotte said out loud. Realizing that there were paths between the towering stacks, she picked her way through the boxes and she sat down at the desk, facing the window. For a while she didn't move. Then, fearing that she would never get started, she decided not to think about the task but just to open the box nearest at hand. Out of her purse she took the classification list that Caspari had sent her and spread it on the desk. Opening the chosen box, she found a pile of photocopies and papers, copies of magazine articles with titles like *Keats and the Romantic Reaction: Unweaving Logical Positivism* and *The Science of Art seen from a King's Mountain*.

The sun came out and shone through the window. The light fell on a rather large painting leaning against the wall. A Canaletto by the looks of it, surely a reproduction. Like a rainbow, the light fell on the water and she saw the movement in the buildings of the San Marco Square. It touched her. So simple, but so intense. With moist eyes she looked again at the colors of the painting. She closed her eyes and was back in Venice, the city on the water, with its ever changing light, its buildings, its scent. The water, reflecting the sky on all sides, amplified its sharp, piercing grey. The fading blend of the contours of light and water deceived the senses. Like a fantasy, a mirage, the city floated on the lagoon. All buildings faded into each other and mirrored their own vulnerability in the water. When she opened her eyes again, the sun had disappeared. She swept her arm over her eyes and forced herself to focus. At the end of the day she had completed three boxes.

For a couple of days she went at three in the afternoon to Caspari's archive. After spending each morning researching the relief, without

any answers, Charlotte appreciated the distraction. At her meeting with Caspari, she had told him everything she knew about it, but he had not been able to offer much clarification:

‘Stylistically I would say it’s Hellenistic, but then again in its elaboration one can see a touch of primitivism,’ was his first reaction upon looking at the reproduction. ‘Perhaps it would be better to see the real object.’

‘That can be arranged quite easily, I think.’

Examining the photos again, he talked to himself: ‘Let’s forget about form for a moment, however fascinating it is. I dare say we won’t find answers there.’ He turned to Charlotte: ‘If I were you, I would focus primarily on the content. That’s what grabs you.’ He hesitated for a moment. ‘One might rush to the daring assumption that a disastrous love affair is transpiring; a woman who, out of despair, thrusts herself into the abyss of death. I definitely envisage this scene as suicide. Could she be pregnant? Abandoned perhaps by her lover? Ein *Liebstdod*?’

‘Why pregnant?’ The suggestion caught Charlotte off guard.

He waved his hand. ‘I don’t know. The thought just occurred to me. I guess I have to put some drama into everything.’ He smiled. ‘Okay, she’s not pregnant. But do you agree she is attempting suicide? Like the woman with whom it was found; you told me she was dead, wasn’t she?’

‘Yes she was, but I don’t agree, about the suicide I mean. I think she wants to be free. To be liberated. And the moment she reaches that state of independence, it isn’t granted.’ She hesitated, wondering whether she would say what she really thought. ‘Sorry, I hate the defeatist view. I’m still looking for another solution.’ She was tired of the feeling of predestination that had hung over her from the moment she had set eyes on the relief. It wasn’t Charlotte there on the stone and nothing

would happen to her, she reminded herself.

She wanted to end the conversation: 'Maybe it's just a piece of stone. And nothing is going to happen,' she said out loud. Caspari obviously had his reasons for overdramatizing. Thanking him for his time, she took her purse and left.

Rachel's party was in a small café in Brooklyn Heights. The small room had a long high bar lined with stools along one side and, on the opposite side, a number of tables and chairs. Plenty of light and mirrors, warm colors and entertaining Latin-Jazz created a welcoming atmosphere. The place was almost full, with people sitting in the chairs or standing in the gangway.

Charlotte walked past the bar, nodding toward the friendly smiles she received. She didn't know anyone, hadn't expect to, but she hoped that Rachel could give her some attention amidst all the guests. Although she was glad to be there, she didn't feel liking taking the initiative this evening.

But Rachel looked up cheerfully as soon as she spotted her. 'Hi, I'm so glad you're here. Let me introduce you to a couple of my friends.' She let Charlotte to a quieter spot towards the back of the café. 'I think you will appreciate these two.' She spoke softly but loud enough for the men in question to overhear her.

'Please meet Richard Dobson. Richard is a pure-bred New-Yorker. Blunt. Bachelor. His main occupation seems to be making money. He has his own ICT-company that installs networks at other companies. His slogan is: We connect computers, not people.'

Charlotte inquired laughing whether he didn't scare people away with that line. But he answered: 'I don't believe in that new age nonsense about putting the people in the center. At least not in the

business world. My statement is, and I also convey this to my customers, when your network works well, your company functions better. I can't improve your people, only the hardware. What the people do with it afterwards, I don't care. Actually, to be honest, I omit that last part. People don't expect me to offer wisdom; they just want the thing to do what it is supposed to do when they push a button. And I have to admit, I am quite good at that. Better than others.'

Rachel visibly enjoyed this speech; as if validated the expectation that she had offered Charlotte. 'And last but not least...' She turned to the second person at the table: 'Alfred Vanderhoof. Alfred is a philosopher who works as a freelance journalist. His articles, mini-essays as he calls them, are mainly about alienation and always bear catchy, intriguing titles like *The Delicate Balance Between the Dead and Deaf Horse*.' She looked at Alfred: 'Did I remember it correctly?'

'Very nice. I couldn't have done it better myself.'

'Guys, this is Charlotte Vermeer, a good friend of mine. She works at ArtSale in Rome and has been temporarily outsourced to the New York office.' Charlotte felt honored to be introduced as friend.

'Pleased to meet you.' She shook their hands.

'Please sit down. Richard, make yourself useful and get some drinks.'

As she sat down, Charlotte asked Alfred: 'dead and deaf horse?'

Rachel answered for him, over his protestations. 'He wonders about everything in this world and in a dilettante way he tries to mingle his philosophical knowledge and range of ideas in his articles. He calls himself a joyful cynic.' She encouraged Alfred: 'Come on. Tell Charlotte one of your stories. Carry her away with one of your delightful, funny tales.' Smoothly, she disappeared to tend to her other guests.

Alfred thought for a while and then replied: ‘It’s sub rosa, but on the condition you will respect the embargo, I will tell about the essay I am writing now.’ Looking teasingly at Charlotte over his glasses, he warned: ‘But there is no fun stuff, young lady.’

Quietly, Richard rejoined the group, setting a tray with three glasses on the table.

Alfred straightened himself and said: ‘Well, let me start with the title; that will be food for thought. *The Fiasco of the Unfinished Puzzle*. You know what is so painful? You have labored for three weeks, day and night on a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, and now you have completed it, save for the last ten pieces. But, everybody starts niggling you about those ten, instead of complimenting you on the job of getting 990 right.’

Charlotte thought to herself, ‘I am so lucky to be here.’ Then aloud: ‘After that profound thought, nothing but silence is appropriate.’

‘Give us more,’ Richard encouraged Alfred.

‘More of the same? Every distance is measured to the end and nobody counts the distance covered. You always split up the route again. And what you did is no longer relevant. You have driven thousand miles and just have the last twenty miles to your hotel. Talking about Achilles and the Tortoise!’

For a moment the table fell silent. Charlotte loved these interactions. She could be witty herself, but always felt the need to hold back when meeting new people. This was very pleasant, however; away from all the hassle, she had the sense that they were playing a carefree intellectual game without requiring any decisions, without involving real worries. The talk would remain hypothetical, and therefore highly enjoyable. When was the last time that she had sat down and just talked easily with people? At Madame Lagrange’s chateau, she figured; in the

kitchen before Viktor's concert. Alexander and Kletsky suddenly came to her mind. What was Viktor doing right now? How would he behave here? Were there any female victims? Or would he still be doing his act as *le professeur* with Imogen? Teaching à la Viktor. With Charlotte gone, they would have no reason to restrain themselves during singing practices and they could rip each other's clothes off during musical scales. Without bitterness she laughed, inadvertently picturing them. I am doing much better, she thought.

'Let us in on the fun,' Alfred said.

'Never mind, I was drifting for a moment.'

'As long as you are not laughing at us, it's okay. European arrogance towards us Wild Men is inadmissible. Don't forget that.'

'I wouldn't dare. It has been a while since I heard a conversation on such a high level. Let's continue.'

'Are you a critic or historian or just a secondhand saleswoman?' Richard asked.

'All of the above. But mainly I consider myself a lover of art.'

'And, is there something to love at your auction house?'

'More than enough. For instance, right now I am working on a relief that nobody understands.'

'Well, this then is the place for the ultimate solution.' Rachel had suddenly reappeared and sat down to join them.

'Didn't someone use the word arrogance?' Charlotte teased.

'That was that joker over there.' Richard pointed to Alfred. 'Always had a big mouth. He would be better off as a chatterbox instead of a writer.'

'Synonyms. Just synonyms,' Rachel said.

'Writing, Richard my dear, is something...,' Alfred paused, amused.

‘Come on,’ Rachel challenged him. ‘What is it actually?’

‘Writing is... of a higher order. Let’s leave it at that.’

‘Meager. You have to come up with something better.’

Charlotte nodded: ‘Yes, too easy. I could as easily say that singing is of a higher order.’ Would she mention Viktor? ‘I am never more touched than by the human voice. Or music. Why should the written word be of a higher degree than sound or image?’

‘Do you know the statement that one image says more than a thousand words?’ Richard asked. ‘In my management courses people kept repeating that.’

Alfred sighed audibly showing his disappointment, but he couldn’t help countering Richard’s remark: ‘An irrelevant point, but okay. It’s just the drivel from this computer and television age. People use it to justify letting children spend ten hours a day staring at their screens. But unfortunately for your image, one cannot communicate even that statement without using words. I will dedicate an essay to the subject shortly. What I am trying to convey is that images are mainly used to keep people stupid, while words enlarge their knowledge. Not for nothing did the Christian church keep an Index of forbidden books, that, by the way, was valid until 1948 and in which you could find books as *Madame Bovary*, Zola’s *J'accuse*, Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* – all banned by the Roman fools.’

‘But you could say it’s typical that the Church tried to destroy both image and word,’ Rachel said. ‘Like the Nazis. Book burnings and iconoclasm, it’s all the same. The Church’s index and the Jesuits’ covering of the intimate parts of the Apollo of Belvedere are principally the same as the Bebelplatz and the banning of the *Entartete Kunst*.’

‘I think it is more nuanced. For the Catholic Church, the prudishness of the counter-reformation was the decisive influence, not

just a theological foundation. For the Nazis, the rigid guideline was whether something was Jewish. But underneath it all, their reasons for burning and banning books was the same – fear of truth and hatred of thinking.’

Rachel confirmed: ‘*Mein Kampf* never made it onto that list! But there’s always hope. As Rabbi Akiva once said ‘they can burn books, but then the words will fly away freely.’

‘Ha, is he one of those learned rabbis of yours?’ Richard asked.

‘That’s a pleonasm.’

Alfred took the glass in front of him and held it like a microphone in front of his mouth, mimicking a sports commentator: ‘And that was a goal for the Jewish Arts and Antiquities Experts team. The team of Weehnoohnotting is behind, 1- 0. Let us see if they can catch up.’ He turned to Charlotte: ‘Which team will our newcomer join?’

Charlotte didn’t know how to react: ‘To which do you belong?’

‘Me. The Crucial Critical Cranks, I’ll call it.’

‘Okay,’ Charlotte laughed, ‘I will represent the old continent. Would be a waste to drop it to second string, to stay in sports terms.’

‘Europe is a lost continent, I would say. It is sinking away under its own mountainous debt.’

‘America’s debts are much higher,’ Richard objected.

‘I am referring to the moral debt. No nation in Europe has a leg to stand on when it comes to questions of guilt, justice or, for that matter, any moral subject. We were already talking about the Church and Nazism. Do you want me to add to the endless list of barbaric, inhuman acts and thoughts?’ He softened his statement a bit: ‘We are not that much better, by the way.’

‘Then where can we turn?’ Rachel asked.

‘Nowhere. We have to sit still and keep quiet. We mustn’t talk

big.'

'Look who's talking!'

'Richard, you are completely right this time, but I can't be different. I can't keep quiet. Not tonight and never.'

'Tonight is Christmas Eve. Maybe that will soothe your moral angst,' Richard offered.

'I do realize the date. The old literature describes this evening as the saddest night of the year. Sitting with a candle by the window, lonely, grieving and waiting for the lover who will never arrive. I love it. What could I, as a failed romantic, want more?'

'To me, this whole evening feels like a blessing,' Charlotte said. 'I don't miss the flickering candles.'

'I think the decoration here is a bit sparse,' Richard retorted. 'I always thought it was odd; that funny tree and those little silly figures underneath it. Cute wasn't it?'

Rome with its hundreds of cribs and trees dropped into Charlotte's mind. The puppet show of the clergy was obnoxious, but the feast itself had something. Naivety. The childish illusion that there was peace on earth, if only for one night. The darkness of every street corner chased away by thousands of lights and candles. For her, at least, Rome and love hadn't proved to be a very good match. Charlotte was glad that she had not waited at the window for Amor to come. Now she was alone, but soon she would never be alone again. It would be wonderful to walk in Rome with her child and rejoice. When they were together, she would need no one else in this world.

When she picked up the thread of the conversation again she heard Richard say: 'You are always only talking about art. What is so important about art? What do you look for, anyway? Truth, beauty?'

'I don't seek anymore. Sometimes I find something,' Alfred

responded.

‘But you are a cynic.’

‘I know. Suits me well. Fits the spirit of this time.’

Charlotte was determined not to be intimidated by their witty brightness. She really wanted to be a part of this discussion: ‘Cynics are nothing more than frustrated romantics who have waited too long at the window.’

Alfred laughed: ‘Score. That is why the twentieth century is so ruthless and violent. Some say it is modern, autonomous, even cutting edge, but I don’t see it that way at all. In my view, this century is merely post-romantic. The nineteenth century is not the lead-in to the twentieth. Rather, the twentieth is the expiration of the nineteenth. The century of frustrated and traumatized romantics. With all the misery that comes from that.’ He pondered his words and as if he had been too harsh against the pleasant backdrop of the evening, added: ‘But don’t forget, I am a merry buffoon at the court of modern complicated life.’

Rachel kept the discussion going: ‘Is art something you can build your life on?’

‘I don’t know,’ Charlotte said. ‘For me art is deeper than anything else.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with a good bed scene.’ Richard couldn’t help it.

‘Love and art,’ Rachel said, undisturbed. ‘One can build on both, perhaps! *Vissi d’arte, vissi d’amore.*’ Again a door to the past opened and Charlotte felt the draft pass her soul, but she let herself be diverted by Alfred’s response: ‘Yes, keep talking. Opera has no relation to actual life. I have never seen an opera libretto that could keep up the façade of reality for even a single page.’

‘But that is exactly what it is all about,’ Charlotte said. ‘Appearance and reality. Of course art is a lie, if a very big one. Only, to quote Picasso, “art is a lie that reveals the truth.”’

‘Very nice,’ Alfred applauded.

‘That’s art, but what about love. Is love a lie as well? A huge romantic conspiracy to make the world go round,’ Rachel laughed. ‘What about you Charlotte? Where is your love?’

‘Not here.’

‘Oh.’ Rachel realized that she better not dive in too deep, but Richard pushed: ‘Are you looking for your prince on a white horse?’

‘No, done with the fairy tales,’ she said. Trying to outsmart Alfred she added: ‘But, I am not studying with Alberich.’

‘*Nur wer der Minne Macht versagt!* Rejected?’ Sorry, I shouldn’t ask.

‘Not rejected, Alfred. Just disappointed. The gold doesn’t interest me at all and the world will not come to an end because of my love life.’

‘And that little one? What about him?’ Rachel spoke softly. ‘He came from someone, didn’t he? He wants a caring mother, not a cynical survivor.’

Despite Rachel’s discretion, the implication of her remark came through. Clamorous congratulations followed, with a toast and some questions.

A little cryptically, Charlotte replied: ‘Origins are another story. Completely closed down. What counts is the future. Don’t be afraid. I don’t have to vow on that. I will do the very best for that little one.’

‘Hence the abstinence,’ deduced Albert, glancing at Charlotte’s untouched glass.

Richard had drunk his whisky toast in one gulp and it seemed to have its effect: ‘These times are probably the options to grab the

opportunities. A gigantic challenge.’ He looked confused: ‘What am I saying?’

‘Time. Challenges.’ Alfred said disapprovingly. ‘For sure a slogan of your company. Apart from the totally incorrect grammar and the inherent nonsense of the statement, I think that it’s the cheap advertising rave of the IT department. Business talk. As they all chase after that one opportunity. Probability calculations. I can’t do anything with chances. I don’t believe in statistics, or at least, I think it’s irrelevant to worry about the percentage chance of something happening. It either happens or it doesn’t happen. In the first case, the chance is one hundred percent and in the other zero. You may find that primitive. But it works for me.’

‘You don’t believe in anything,’ Rachel accused.

‘That’s not true. I am not a principled atheist. I am a jolly cynic. Let me tell you what I believe in: choice, free choice. A human being with free will.’ He emptied his glass and said: ‘And that free will has, unfortunately, no authority at all right now, because, however much I’d love to stay, I have to leave. The alarm goes off tomorrow morning at six,’ he almost apologized to Charlotte. He took his coat and got up. ‘It has been a pleasure meeting you. I hope we will see each other again and I look forward to our further discussions.’ He nodded to Rachel, who also got up.

‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘I have to entertain the other guests as well. Charlotte, will you stay a bit longer?’

But without the balm of the alcohol and her new friends around her, Charlotte decided to leave as well. She looked at her watch. It would be midnight when she got home. It had been great finally to have a real conversation with real people. She had to make sure that there was more of this in her life. Alexander Lasek had the capacity, but he

was firmly attached to Viktor. And perhaps he was also too sad. In a generous spirit, she resolved to call him tomorrow.

Saying goodbye to Richard and giving Rachel a huge hug, she walked with Alfred to the door. After he had helped her on with her coat, he looked moodily outside and said: 'The weather worsens, it has become dark, the hall is empty, the drinks have been drunk. The lights go out. The applause fades. The creditors are at the door. It has been good, goodbye.'

She also said goodbye. It would be enjoyable to see him again. He reminded her of a long gone friendship. The subtle sagacity, the charming courteousness without getting cocky or showy, the well-considered intelligence, the vulnerability. George Noble had been like that as well. She walked serenely to the taxi stand, softly caressing her belly.

X

For the umpteenth time the woman on the relief flew off and again there was the skewer. It was New Year's Eve and Charlotte was alone in her hotel room picturing the scene she now knew even in her dreams. She had declined an invitation for a big party, despite the fact that Alfred and Richard would be there. Too many people and too much noise. It was more pleasant to sit here alone and ring in the New Year with her own thoughts. She hadn't even bothered to turn on the television to watch the New Year's festivities in Times Square. She hadn't noticed the passage of time and when she looked on the clock she saw it was already half past one.

She delved into the photograph of the woman at the lake again. The setting was beautiful, although not so overwhelming that it created a compelling story that would explain the relief. But perhaps it played a part. Something must have driven the dead woman to create the

carving. Charlotte tried to picture it. Dawn. The warmth hanging like a cloak over the trees. The light barely penetrates the world under the foliage. Hundreds shades of green battle but the red and purple orchids win the fight. The night has brought neither a cooling nor a solution to the woman's distress. Desperate, she takes a stone and uses it to scratch lines on another stone. She creates a piece of art. Nobody will ever know what it means; in all likelihood, nobody will ever see it.

Over time, Charlotte's perspective on the relief had changed. The skewer no longer frightened her. She had come to realize that her life's story was much broader and removed herself from the image on the relief. She no longer felt the need to run away from it.

She remembered how she had escaped from the house of her youth. Actually she had intended to do it for almost ten years, ever since the death of her father, before finally gathering the courage to run away. As a child she played a game with herself, going around a corner and hoping no one would know where she had gone, that no one would come to capture her. She had imaginary enemies, but the fears were real.

She was eight when it had happened. Her father was the head of a building company and he was caught under the stones of a wall as it collapsed. Three days later they had buried him under a new stone, forever. Jake van Velsen, one of his foremen, had been at the funeral. He had taken pity on her mother. Given her consolation. And, seeing the intimacy, Charlotte had wanted to flee. He had already visited, especially when her father was away. She had heard the two of them laugh, having fun first downstairs, and later on in the evening, upstairs. What exactly was going on she only realized later; as a child, she had just felt uncomfortable. When she had finally escaped, nine years later, once and for all leaving that life, she had reproached her mother, but it

was no use. The only thing possible was to keep far away from it. Apply mental hygiene. She had become very good at avoiding the traps. And if necessary, she could always run away again. But that was all long ago.

Caspari's momentous job was turning out to be nothing more than a stupid chore. Charlotte had barely started again after New Year's, when she decided to call Caspari to tell him she would quit. He had better work up the courage to open a box and look at the papers himself.

It was already darkening, and she decided to sort through one last box as a farewell. At the top of the pile was a handwritten page, neatly written but without title. In order to classify it, Charlotte had to read it.

Laura,

Aut Caesar, aut nihil.

I have finally concluded that my assumptions do not reflect reality. What will be, will be. Perhaps that in itself would be bearable, but add to it my deceit and I can't take it anymore.

I am a damaged man. I have thrown away everything to pursue a delusion. All that I care about I have stained. I committed treachery because of you. But you are not to blame. I can't stay here anymore.

Davide

What was this? A farewell letter? Charlotte had no idea what it was about. A woman, suicide, treason? It was Caspari's, she was sure of that; she recognized the handwriting. Should this be categorized?

She laughed nervously. Her hand dropped down and inadvertently she looked at the door as if he might enter there every moment. Was she supposed to read this or had he left it there inadvertently? She guessed this was the reason behind why these boxes were here. Quickly, she put the letter on top of the already vast 'Literature' pile. Suddenly needing a break, she left the building and went to a café nearby.

In the café her hand went automatically to her purse, although she had quit smoking because of the pregnancy. But she touched something else, the nymph story. She took it out and hastily cast an eye over it. Was the myth her romantic will?

A boy with a baseball cap entered the café. He was wearing wide pants and a loose shirt with I LOVE NY written on it in capitals. He dropped into the seat a few tables away from Charlotte, examining her with a 'you want something?'-look. For some reason, the sight of him calmed Charlotte down. She returned to reality, convincing herself that whatever the problem, it wasn't hers. After finishing her coffee, she returned to Caspari's storage room to pick up her belongings. She would call him later in the day.

As she reached the space, she thought she heard something in the room. Opening the door with a jerk, she saw Caspari sitting at the desk. For a second she startled, then realized there was nothing to be frightened of: 'So, you got to work yourself, after all?'

He laughed. 'No, not exactly, but I was looking for an article. It bothers me, this mess.' He looked at all the boxes. 'Terrible isn't it? I guess I owe you some explanation.' He straightened himself, then tapped one box nearby. 'I can't live without these, but neither can I live with them. It's a long story. I won't bother you with it. Asking you to work on it seemed the golden mean.'

Caspari got up and leaned over the pile of papers Charlotte had been working on. Suddenly, he froze. He was standing right in front of Charlotte so she couldn't see what had caught his attention. Caspari held up a sheet asking; 'Did you read this?' She recognized the letter to Laura.

A little embarrassed she stammered: 'It was at the top of the box. I apologize if I wasn't meant to read it.'

He sighed: 'It's my fault. I shouldn't have left it with the other papers.' His voice became calmer: 'It's okay. No state secrets.' He laughed again: 'You found the heart of the problem. This is exactly why these boxes are here.'

Charlotte looked away: 'I presumed something like that,' she said awkwardly.

'Maybe you want to go? I can understand.' His voice was modest. 'But perhaps you want me to explain it. At any rate, I would be grateful if you would listen to the whole story.'

Charlotte doubted whether she wanted to hear his confessions, but at the same time she was very curious.

'Actually I came by to ask you if you wanted to have dinner with me, at my place,' Caspari continued hesitantly, when Charlotte didn't respond. 'I live in Brooklyn. Would you mind a long stroll? Half an hour? It's really worthwhile. And I don't bite.' He looked miserable. She guessed that he had never had someone over for dinner. What did she have to lose? This man wasn't dangerous. He was lying, knocked-out, before her. Shouldn't she help him up? How strange the thought, as if she were the stronger of the two.

They walked through the crowded, glaring streets in the direction of City Hall, then Caspari led her on to the Brooklyn Bridge. Charlotte didn't ask anything.

‘Have you ever done this? I mean walked over the Brooklyn Bridge.’

Charlotte said she hadn’t. Caspari smiled. ‘Don’t peek over your shoulder until I gave you a sign.’ Beneath them, the traffic thundered between Manhattan and Brooklyn. Charlotte sensed the city behind her. Caspari led her to the first tower of the bridge.

‘Behold,’ he invited her. ‘I think it’s even more beautiful than Venice.’

She turned around and saw New York. Heavenward light. In the background stood the enormous, challenging Twin Towers. To their right rose the neo-gothic form of the Woolworth Building. Further on she recognized the Empire State Building. There were skyscrapers as far she could see. A magic forest of unyielding, glowing giants rising from the water, all adorned with thousands of lights, all reaching for the skies. She gasped.

‘You were right. This is more dazzling than Venice.’

‘And you know what? As in Venice, the individual buildings are horrendous, but the ensemble has a breathtaking effect. These are the Pleiades on Earth.’

As she kept quiet, he continued: ‘In another way it’s also comparable to Venice, entirely built by mankind in an impossible location on the water. Built for trade and commerce, neither by popes nor by kings. It has become what it is by circumstance, not plan. Not because of vague prattle about concepts or ideas, but through a hard fight about what is realistic and what is not. It emerged out of man’s battle with space and matter, with stone, with the concrete world. This is the triumph of life. Mankind is the victor. And the way that New York exuberantly proclaims itself, that sympathetic but undeniable arrogance, is what touches us; what brings tears to our eyes.’

They walked on. When they reached Brooklyn, Caspari turned up a side street. They halted in front of a stately mansion. He directed her up the stairs. Inside, another stairway led to an elegantly decorated room.

‘Please enter *Casa Caspari*,’ he said with a touch of drama.

The atmosphere inside the room was mysterious, with deliberate echoes of Venice. The space itself was not large, but it was graced with a high ceiling. To Charlotte, it was clear that Caspari had thought through every detail in an effort to let the original architecture disappear in a delusion of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an illusion of the past. The capricious stucco on the ceiling repeated itself on the walls; the corners bore the exuberant ornamentation of putti and angels. He had affixed a fresco in the style of Tiepolo between the baroque lines in the ceiling. On the walls, dark red carpets of damask hung. From below them peeked marble, with quadrilateral incrustations. Red rugs covered the flagstones. Around a round table stood three sturdy, upholstered armchairs, probably empire furniture of French origin. However, the rest the room was hardly furnished.

‘Did you assemble and install this yourself?’

‘Yes. It cost me a fortune, but I didn’t want to say goodbye to Venice completely,’ he apologized with a smile. ‘I know it is all fake, but somehow that is appropriate as well.’ Without pausing to give her the opportunity to comment on that last remark, he continued: ‘But I think it works, my piano nobile.’ Charlotte had to agree. Even more, it fit the man completely; as if it were not he who had created the room, but the room that had created him.

When Caspari had served the coffee, he began to tell his story.

‘Do you know the difference between New York and Venice?’ he

started, then answered his own question: 'New York radiates while Venice is just a mirror. That's why I can't live there anymore.' When she looked puzzled, he expanded the point: 'I had always compared myself to a mirror that received the glorious rays of the greatest artists and thinkers, structured them and then reflected them out again, in order to let them shine into our age. But then I saw myself in the city and it became too much.'

He paused, but Charlotte, intrigued, encouraged him to go on.

'I don't focus on it so much these days, or at least, I try not to think about it. What happened, happened, and I can live with it, but I don't have to hide it. I put some of the things that I did then in writing; a kind of therapy, perhaps.' He laughed. 'I even considered writing a novel about it, *Davide e Laura* or something like that. You can list it with the great tragic couples of all time: *Abelard et Heloise*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan und Isolde*. *Davide e Laura*, it doesn't sound too bad.'

Charlotte heard a melancholic undertone in his voice. 'You are making me curious.'

Caspari took a deep breath.

'I lived in Venice. I was a professor at the university, engaged in the research of the magical and mythical power of Venice on nineteenth century artists. My magnum opus. Through these studies, I could express my love for the city. Perhaps I was looking for authentication, hoping to see myself reflected in those great names. So far nothing wrong,' he smiled.

'But then...?'

'Then Laura came. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I was lost. She studied Art History and fate determined that she was looking for someone to assist her with the research for her thesis. Her focus was the German painter, Anselm Feuerbach; to be precise, his portrait of Paolo

and Francesca.’

Charlotte showed him with a small gesture she knew both the painter and the painting.

Caspari went on: ‘I offered to help her. I assumed that she was attracted to the 19th century: the grandness of ideas and especially the depth of thought. Yearning. All encompassing love. Melancholia. The unattainable. Death in which lovers continue to embrace each other. But except my knowledge, I had nothing to offer to her. A weird man with a lot of knowledge. The last evening that she was in Venice, we had dinner together and made a trip along the silent palaces of the canals in the ever-thickening mist. At the end of the evening, we stood at the window of my home, listening to Wagner – Tristan und Isolde. I assumed that she was impressed, perhaps not by me but certainly by the characteristic melancholic mood of Venice. And I hoped that my home, the view, the light of the city and the music would combine to touch her. But nothing happened.’

He looked at the window. Outside was the clear unambiguous light of the new world, the future, but inside one felt only the twilight of transience, the fragile reflection of Venice. Charlotte felt the weight of the past. Caspari closed his eyes for a moment. ‘I was completely smitten by her. I spent that entire evening trying to charm her. I wanted to declare my love for her. The chance was there. But I didn’t use it. I remained by the window looking outside.’

‘But if nothing happened, it seems to me that nothing is wrong.’

‘True. But I made more out of it than it was.’

He took a sip. ‘Life had always passed me by, but now it had knocked on my front door and I hadn’t answered.’ He got up and walked to the window. ‘For a moment I wondered whether perhaps I was experimenting on myself to see how I would cope, in order to

increase my empathy and to imagine more precisely how my great masters felt and thought. In that way, perhaps I could gain entry to the gallery of the tormented souls.'

He spoke as if reciting a play; as if he had spoken these words a hundred times. 'I had always taken the role of the beholder or at the most, a witness, but now suddenly I was forced to play a part and I didn't know the words. I lived in my private, self-created world, in which I could control a sentiment like love and let it lead me to even greater feeling; like the landscape parks of the 19th century whose design included the ruins of temples in order to evoke intense romantic feelings. In my world and in my imagination, longing or love was a theme, a marvelous idea, for a painting, a poem or an opera. Love was an organized thing, bent to the will of the artist. But it is something else altogether to burn with desire, rather than mirroring those sentiments; be in the art itself instead of beholding it from a safe distance. I had fallen into a work of art and I really had no idea what I was doing in it.'

Turning suddenly, he addressed Charlotte directly: 'To put it briefly, I let the moment go. She returned to Florence. For weeks I agonized about how to get in touch with her again. Finally, at my wit's end, I invented something enormous. I told her that I had found a document that was essential for her thesis. The night that we had floated along the Canale Grande, we had discussed the value that a letter by Feuerbach to Wagner would add to her work. So I used my superb imagination to create this letter as way to meet her again. I must have completely lost my mind; I gave her a fake document. I actually delivered it to her in Florence. Just to impress her.' He laughed a hollow laugh. 'I have to say that I was a pretty good fraudster.'

'Well, it isn't that smart, but is it unforgivable?'

‘Unforgivable indeed. I wrote something like: “I have found it! The letter of which we both have dreamed. The letter by Feuerbach to Wagner. You remember, the one we were talking about in the gondola, that evening on the canal. I will bring it to Florence so we can read it together.” Something like that. Anyway, the very idea was totally insane. I violated every law and all the norms and values of research.’

Charlotte imagined he knew every word and sentence of that letter.

‘But when I got to Florence I was too nervous to deliver it and sent it by messenger. Then I sat in my hotel room all night, waiting for a response.’

‘But things didn’t turn out right between the two of you?’ Charlotte asked.

‘No.’

‘But then nothing is wrong.’

‘Everything was wrong. The next day I heard from her professor; he explained what was really going on. Laura had only gone to Venice in order to break up with him. She had used me to get even with him. Even the subject hadn’t been her choice; a colleague had pressed it upon her. And all along, I had been blind to reality.’

‘After this, I lost all confidence in the world,’ he continued. ‘And at the same time, I realized that I had made a complete fool of myself. A nothing, thinking he can captivate a beautiful young woman, acts against every principle he has ever believed in. Nothing remained of my values.’

But then I had to ask, were they values or just delusions? Wasn’t Francesca just an adulterous woman who was killed by her husband? Was the opera about the sublime feelings of two wandering souls who, like the doves, were called to love, or are they just two people wanting

sex. And Tristan? The same. He betrayed his king to marry the king's fiancée; they took their pleasures in the king's garden. And what about the artists, the human beings? Wagner? If there was one composer with rotten morals then it was that anti-Semite. He abandoned his wife, then took up with the wife of his good friend and sugar daddy, finally ending up in bed with the wife of a conductor who had helped him.'

His voice grew calmer. 'It would have been safer to have remained involved with love only on the academic level. It is simpler to dream than to live. But I couldn't live with my lies anymore. And if the whole world were stuck together with deceit and treachery, then I didn't want to be part of it. I had lost not only my love, but also my self esteem and my world view, my love for Love. There was nothing else but to bear the consequence unabashed. It would be an atonement, a way to release myself from the maliciousness of this world.'

I decided to find redemption in death. But even here, I clutched my old conceptions, hoping to endow my death with the grandeur of a music drama. Hadn't Feuerbach himself not said: or Caesar or nothing.'

He sipped his coffee, then continued. 'I planned it to the smallest detail. I didn't need much. At the Campo Santa Maria Formosa, I bought a bottle of Campari to make it all more bearable and a large bread knife. In my boat I navigated past the long wall of the cemetery of San Michele. The lagoon stretched endlessly before me. I turned for a last look at the city I loved. The boat bobbed on the waves. I took a firm drink. [The light bothered me. It got on my nerves. Everywhere those reflections. When would that terrible Venetian light finally die down?] With the knife I cut a deep hole in the boat. As if in trance, I wrenched it to make it larger, watching the water bubble up through it. At first it seemed to me that the water in the boat was rising, but after

a while it didn't rise anymore. The boat sank lower, until the thing had gone completely under water.'

Caspari was sitting with his eyes closed.

'They picked me out of the water in time,' he concluded dryly.

'An compelling but depressing story,' was all that Charlotte could think to say. 'Did you ever see her again?'

'No. I never tried. I felt completely ridiculous. I still do. But as long as I am in New York, I can function. To tell you the truth, I don't even think about her any more. She was, I realize, the catalyst that triggered those tempestuous emotions. Beyond that she's irrelevant. A harsh verdict, but true.' As an afterthought he added: 'But still I have to say that on that evening, when we were standing at the window, listening to the music, it could have happened. I knew what to do, but I didn't do it. Now I will never know.'

'New York isn't Venice. It must be hard to live here. I mean, everything that was valuable to you was there.'

'All that is valuable to me is here,' Caspari pointed at his head. 'With my boxes in the warehouse, my CD's and books, I can do anything. I am anything that I could have been in Venice. I don't need the city anymore.' There was bravado in his voice.

Charlotte didn't believe him. The man still lived in Venice. He had brought everything with him from the old world; Charlotte understood that he would mourn his exile for the rest of his life.

'It is the reality of today that makes the memory of the hope so bitter. As if happiness can be knocked down retroactively.'

'No greater grief than the memory of bliss in times of misery.'

Caspari agreed. 'But Dante's story is only partially true. There are two necessary conditions. The happiness must have been real and its loss cannot be caused by external elements. Imagine that Francesca had

said that the relationship didn't mean that much to her. Just a stupid instance of lust; this, it seems to me, would make Dante's verses a bit ridiculous.'

After a while he continued: 'We have fled from the melancholy of the Occident.' He spoke in plural, making her his accomplice in a shared misery. 'We don't chase happiness anymore; we just try to evade sorrow. In Europe the stones are eternal. They have been there for hundreds of years and in hundred years they will still be there. Eternity doesn't care about our wretched temporary existence.'

His words forced Charlotte to ponder her own situation. Once she too had believed that she would resign herself to her fate and that her life would be one long defeat. Never be able to fly, always wandering on earth. But listening to Caspari talk, she realized that the opposite was true. Everything was changing for her – new friends, new life, new possibilities. Charlotte was beginning to believe that she would fly again, even shine.

Caspari had convinced her without intending to do so. She would not be like him. Unlike Alfred Vanderhoof, who could offer new insights, Caspari was all past misery, living with his boxes as the wreckage of a failed flight. He might be useful company at a museum, but there was no solace to be found with him. He was a frustrated, tormented soul – he had said so himself -- trying to forget the past of Venice by living in the past in New York.

Getting out of the taxi at her hotel, Charlotte felt more buoyant than she had in weeks. She knew that she was finally ready to return to Europe, to the beloved apartment that awaited her in Rome.

George

X

His first sensation was an intense thirst and a burning, swollen throat. A stinging headache followed, then nausea. These tortures drove George forcefully from a dreamless sleep to the harsh light of the morning. His mind reluctantly followed his body over the threshold, as he tried to figure out the cause of this miserable situation. Slowly he recalled the events of the previous night: the underworld of the squat house, the inferno of the band, Ann Sheepways, his fainting. He remembered vaguely being carried outside and, later, standing up and laughing foolishly. Ann and Tom and Yvonne had been there; had there been someone else as well? He remembered saying goodnight and going home as if nothing had happened. Despite his ever-growing physical discomfort, a blissful feeling came over him.

Ann's advances had made it clear that he was interesting material.

Violetta was not once in a lifetime. He had future. Perhaps Ann's interest had started because she looked up to him as Tom's brother, perhaps because she thought George could open the doors to a more interesting job. But in the end, that didn't matter -- she wanted him. That had been clear. He convinced himself that he hadn't wanted her. No anonymous sex, and nothing with a jezebel like Ann. Going back to Alice would be better. He didn't need a failed artist. His conviction that he had rejected her made him feel surprisingly good. See, he had some pride after all. Encouraged, George got up to confront his physical misery with some water, a toothbrush, coffee and a few pills. When, some fifteen minutes later, he looked out the window at the dense, swirling snowflakes, he felt ready to face the world.

But during the day a feeling of disorientation crept in; a mental disorder greater than the previous evening's events could justify. In the afternoon he fell asleep on the couch and the events of the previous night appeared again as nightmare. The last minutes in the cellar haunted him. Eventually, they startled him out of his sleep, gasping and sweating, wondering where everybody had gone.

As diversion he turned on the television. The anchorman was narrating over endless images of traffic jams on snow covered, scarcely recognizable highways: cars, bumper to bumper, aiming their piercing lights at the camera through the swirling flakes; disorderly traffic merging at a bottleneck, guided by large blinking arrows and red and white poles flashing yellow, asynchronous lights. George watched for minutes, fascinated by the endless chaos and the bombardment of light signals.

Nothing he did shook the disoriented feeling, although sometimes he managed to push it into the background. But, like a pursuing nemesis, it reappeared suddenly in moments of inattention, an electric

impulse shooting through his head. Startling, he realized that he hadn't visited his father yet. He'd better set that straight. The last day of the old year was even better than the first of the next.

'He shouldn't be sitting around all by himself on New Year's Eve. That's no good. I want some time alone with him,' he let his mother know: 'You can stay home.' She hadn't opposed him.

Later that evening, a bottle of wine tucked under his arm, he parked his car a few blocks away from the nursing home. It was hard to reach because a new wing was being built, while the old parts were being renovated. The building was covered in scaffolding. A crane towered above the building like a vulture.

It was pleasant to walk a bit. He could organize his thoughts. What could he mean to his father? What could he tell him? Could he wish him the best for the New Year or would the irony be too painful?

The weather had changed again. The frost had disappeared and the thaw soaked everything. All contours and lines that had previously seemed so clear and harsh now appeared soft and shrouded. The mist floated around the street lamps, creating a magic atmosphere in which everything seemed possible. Underfoot, however, the snow had become sloppy, even black. To reach the entrance of the nursing home, George had to walk along a long wooden fence interspersed with iron bars. Behind it stretched a large working area with images familiar to George. Piles of bricks, wooden pallets, boards to bridge the deep ditches, masonry drums. A small cabin for the workmen to have their lunch and another prefab cabin as lavatory. Would they be building in Sicily?

Nearing the entrance through the half melted snow, George felt nothing but pity for his father. He knew what he could expect: a deteriorating man who continuously ticked imagined ashes from

fictitious cigarettes. Who called his wife his mother. Heart rending moments, at which George's mother could hardly control herself, turning her head away from the man with whom she had lived for more than forty years.

But tonight George would be grateful for any emotional connection. He couldn't distance himself right now. People said it so easily: try to keep some distance, try to get some perspective. But distance means alienation; with distance comes emptiness. Perspective changes the angle. And if things get too abstract, what is left? Like words losing their meaning. Sometimes George tried to hear a word as if he hadn't heard it before. To stare at a word or to repeat it so often that it separated itself from its meaning: HOUSE. House, house, House. HOUSE, House. The more he repeated it, the emptier, the more sterile it became. HOUSE it was, but it was nothing anymore, meaningless, distant, empty.

He must never let his father become meaningless. Perhaps when this all was over, George could distance himself. But not now.

The revolving door carried a bleak, impersonal warmth, drawing him into the building's cold tubular lighting. Doors lined the corridor; facing him, they looked innocent but they hid behind them the presumption of suffering. He took the elevator to the top floor. At the end of the hall was the closed section where he would find his father. The door was locked. A small handwritten notice informed him that, due to renovations, section 4c was temporarily reachable only via the stairs. He looked through the etched glass next to the door, but discerned only vague shapes sitting at a table. He thought that he recognized his father, but the image was too blurry to be sure. For a second he considered knocking on the glass to attract the nurse's attention and to impress on her that they couldn't treat visitors like

this, but on second thought, he decided not to put on airs and to behave according to the rules.

‘Most likely they want to discourage the visitors a bit,’ he complained to himself. Eventually finding the right staircase, he worked his way back to the closed unit. Every step up seemed heavier than the last. He passed window openings, covered only with large pieces of plastic. Generally, George relished objects that hadn’t been finished neatly; that hadn’t reached the state of perfection. Like a door that had been replaced but nobody had taken care to make its color match the lintel. It was part of life to see things in their temporary state. But right now he wanted security, the reassuring feeling that everything was as it should be.

The wind blew at the sides of the holes, bringing in snow that melted on the lowest stairs. Higher up, the stairs were covered with dust and gravel. The workmen’s tools lay everywhere. Because the central lighting didn’t seem to work here, the only light came from a weak bulb that had been screwed into the wall. At the top of the stairs George knocked on the door. The nurse opened.

‘Like ascending to hell,’ George announced. He found his father sitting in the communal hall. He was wearing his familiar green sweater over jogging pants and blue pajamas. His pale face was bent, neckless, on his body. His hands clutched the arm rests of his too large chair, as if he didn’t want to let go, but the tension in his arms made him look like a predator spying on his prey, ready, catlike, to strike. Small and hunched he was watching the other patients watch him. George vaguely recalled a painting of a pope in a chair.

‘Hi, dad.’

His father turned around and observed George sharply. He coughed and took a deep wheezing breath.

'Hi, George. Our architect. Very good you are here. Yes. Very good you stopped by.' Despite his weakness there was recognition and vivacity in his voice.

George rejoiced, although he feared the nonsense that might come next.

'I just said to my assistant here that some colleagues would visit today to get the files finalized. It's so nice of you that you want to help too.'

George realized that his father's mind had gone back twenty years to the days of his unbearable work. He had always returned home complaining about the stupidity of his colleagues, the unbearable heat in his office, the ruthlessness of his manager and the injustice of the world in general. And it hadn't gotten better when Adrian Nobel had seen his neighbor, a French teacher, watering the flowers in his backyard. Adrian Nobel had assumed, rightly, that his neighbor had been doing this for hours with arduous dedication because he had nothing better to do. After that, the entire country of France couldn't do anything right in Adrian Nobel's eyes.

'Did you bring the documents?' George's father asked. His eyes were clear.

'Which documents?'

'For the renovated Town Hall. I have to work in such a small room. I can't go on that way.' He looked regretfully at George: 'George, you didn't forget your assignment, did you? They have already started. I see the masons every day.' A mix of fantasy and reality beyond comprehension.

'Sure.' George looked around, sorting out his thoughts. Some patients were interacting in groups at a table, others were completely involved in their own worlds. Most of them wore white gowns and sat

in wheelchairs. Phantoms who had lost all hope of life. An oppressive feeling washed over him, suggesting that here, the real world receded, leaving him in some kind of limbo. George tried to focus on his father.

‘But we are not in a hurry,’ he said in an attempt not to let go of the here and now completely. ‘Perhaps we could do something more entertaining.’ Conspiratorially he whispered: ‘Want a drink? I brought some wine.’ George moved to pull the bottle out of its plastic bag, but his father restrained him. ‘Not yet. Let’s wait until that guy from taxes isn’t watching us anymore. There. You see him? I don’t trust him. Never did. Never trust anyone in the tax department, those loathsome losers. I call them civil servants. That’s all they are!’

Adrian Nobel pointed his head toward a man in his nineties with tubes all over his body. Between his raspy breaths he sometimes cried out for help. The nurses seemed to think nothing strange of this, as they didn’t react to it.

‘We could go out for a while. Nobody could watch us then.’

Was this misanthropy and paranoia the result of his deteriorating brain or had his father always been this way? Eventually the nurses resolutely carried away the protesting civil servant from the tax department and put him to bed. George’s father seemed to come back to himself. Calmly he said: ‘He has to go to bed early. The nurses stick stringently to the rules. Let’s go to another room. It’s cozier there and they don’t pester you there as much. We can chat there. Like in the good old days.’ He coughed a laugh and added ironically; ‘As if there ever were any.’ George saw the gentleness and generosity in his eyes.

The other room turned out to be furnished more comfortably than the central hall, with deep couches and armchairs and a glass coffee table. This must be the room for those who did not need to be

carried away under protest and who had something to communicate to their dear ones. It was empty, however. On the walls hung Christmas decorations -- tinsel, silver balls and paper garlands. Little glass side panels let in a dim glow and in its reflection the balls became a glass mosaic, like the leaded windows in a gothic cathedral, softly filtered, mysterious and poetic. George's father tapped him on the knee and invited him to sit down.

'It's no Hilton, but for tonight we will make the best out of it. I don't want to talk about myself,' he said, as if he was finishing a thought he had been deliberating for days: 'I am not that clear, lately.'

George started to protest but his father continued: 'Take it easy, George. I know how things are. But I don't want any drama. I want diversion and now that I can see and hear you, free of delusions, I want to use these moments to hear what is going on in your life. How it is, outside...' He waved vaguely towards the window. A coughing fit kept him from finishing his sentence, but he fought to regain control again over his breathing.

George looked at him and he recognized the man he knew. Still he didn't know what to say. Noticing, his father continued, 'Do you know, George, the finish is within sight. I am on my last legs. I feel that I have been in a relay race, but as the only one runner, I always had to hand over the baton to myself. I am tired now. I have started to lag, which let them get their hands on me. I am entirely to blame for that. I can't accuse anyone but myself, because I chose my own path in life. Eventually, the fear of losing becomes greater than the will to win. But you, George, are different. You are going to win.'

'Perhaps it's not too late. Pass the baton once more to yourself and maybe you will find the strength.'

'No, it's over. I can feel it. Even if it weren't for my mind, my body

is spent.'

It was impossible to fight this truth. But accepting this impossibility was even worse. A constrained fury took away George's breath. He knew his father was right. And there was no way to soothe or negate the facts. For once he didn't want to lie.

'Dad, I have to tell you something.' Could he make a victory out of a defeat? Could it be both at the same time? Could he tell this man that he had been fired? Could he do that to him? 'I am working at a very huge project in Sicily.'

'I have always known you would show the world!'

George didn't know what to do. Unbosoming to a mentally declining man would be easy. Perhaps his confession would have a point; his father couldn't give him absolution, but it would allow George to tell the story at last. His father would probably forget it by tomorrow anyway. Was it all selfishness then? Was he only looking for a release? George couldn't bring himself to do it. His father's happiness, even for just these few minutes, would be of infinitely greater value in the end than his own relief.

The wood above them crackled. The snow on the roof was melting and the frozen stones were defrosting. The water dripped in an irregular cadence. Heedlessly, George's fingers found a rhythm and tapped along.

'Dad, I don't have to lie about anything when I am here.'

'I am not a priest, my boy. You are in the seat of worldly power here. If you seek the other one, you are at the wrong address, not the town hall.'

It could have been a joke like one his father might have made ten years earlier. But George realized he had lost him again. The spark had left his father's eyes. Certainly for now, and maybe forever. He looked

again but his father was pouring a glass of wine with great joy, while glancing occasionally at the image of a nurse, vaguely visible through the distorting glass at the other side.

‘What has become of that nice girl you were dating? What is her name? Alice? She was nice at any rate.’

‘Yes, nice.’ George let it rest. He wouldn’t be redeemed, but he had spared his father the disillusionment. What remained was a glass of wine together with his father. Nothing more, nothing less.

But it was enough. During the night the harsh reality of the nursing home and the image of his sick father were pushed away by a much simpler and more peaceful awareness. He was present with his father, who might make some ridiculous remarks every now and then, but in the end was his father. The nonsense he proclaimed could also originate from the glasses of wine he drank. Adrian Noble soon reached merry, tipsy state. And as the evening went on, George managed to distinguish more and more of the genuine thoughts from the absurdities that his father spouted. It grew into an evening that could have happened ten years earlier; they might have been sitting together in his father’s studio with the world shut out, talking in the same absurd ways about the world his father wanted to depict through his paintings. Fantasies, ideals, dreams. Then, as now, Adrian Noble might have been embarrassed had the outside world overheard them, but on this evening, in the world of Adrian and George Nobel, there was no place for shame. No subject was too farfetched, because in every incongruity George could distinguish a desire, a dream, an anxiety. He easily filtered out the lunacy. His father seemed to use the language of a child who sees clearly but makes strange associations. But, unlike a child, Adrian Noble’s experience was immensely more rich. His wealth of thoughts wasn’t lost, but had only been disturbed

by physical failings, lack of oxygen, worn-out synapses and declining neurotransmitters. His soul hadn't left him.

As the evening drew on they considered toasting the New Year, then made the resolution not to do it. Both of them knew that it would not be a good one. It was half past eleven.

'Let's stop here, dad.'

'Time flies. I understand you have to go home,' his father responded.

'I didn't mean that. I mean, let's stop time. Let's make everything remain as it is now, forever.'

A nurse interrupted their conversation to announce that George had to leave, his father had to go to bed, what they were doing was really out of line, the drinking and so on. But father and son rebelled and said they would stay where they were; she had better report it to the management.

George pulled the plug of the table clock out of the outlet, freezing time on the 31 December, 11:34 pm. They would remain forever in this situation. There would be no new year, an invented phenomenon, ridiculous in any case. This, and the evening's ludicrous spirit made the conceit altogether convincing.

They made eternal vows. That they always would support each other and that they would stand the ordeal together. Without saying it, but also without evading it, they knew that ordeal would inevitably come and that, in time, George would let his father go; but these thoughts had no power as long as they were together. George described this last path, as he saw it, and his father understood immediately. Each shared his imagined view of what it would be like and, with tears in their eyes, they supplemented each other's ideas.

Adrian Nobel's eyes fell shut. George fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning, after George had returned his father to the nurses' care and after they had lectured him, he walked, somewhat disoriented, back to his car, through the empty streets covered with the remains of the previous night's celebrations. The new year might have been averted, but time had gone on. The moment he left the nursing home, it had started moving again, at first slowly, but with more and more determination; by the time George reached his car, it was running at full speed. Putting the key in the ignition, George knew, once again, he was in sync with the rest of the world.

It occurred to him that perhaps this had been the most important night of his entire life. It had been good, he thought and they would never take it away from him. He wouldn't have missed it for all the money in the world, not for Violetta, not for any project. Although it had stemmed from guilt, the way that the evening had developed had given him the most valuable gifts of attachment, understanding and friendship. Smiling to himself, he thanked Ann Sheepways who had contributed in her obnoxious way to the state in which he had decided to visit his father. Without her, the trip through snow and desolation would not have been the same; he might not have gone at all. He looked at his watch. Half past eight. The new dawn was already fading. The morning would not provide more insight or cause any changes. Let this day pass. He had no idea what to do, so drove aimlessly for a while, until eventually giving up and going home.

He lay down on the couch and fell asleep again. He dreamed, or was it a nightmare? He is with some friends on an enormous square. They decide to go to the other side of town, but George can't join them, not yet. He has a task to fulfill; only he hasn't the faintest idea what he is to do. His friends leave. George has to go his own way. Quickly he flees into an alley to do whatever has to be done. He doesn't want to

abandon his friends, but he needs to be alone. As he walks out of the alley an obscure figure approaches, menacing. The man says not to be afraid. Is he a friend? He stretches his arm toward George; it seems he wants to embrace George, but suddenly George fears that the dark shade wants to attack. What if it wants to hit him? Almost in slow motion, the figure's arm with its big dark fist comes near, but what starts as a dozy punch ends as a tender caress, a helping hand. But even as the figure embraces him, George feels the darkness suffocating him. There is no escape. He senses the strangling grip and begins to fade. But he doesn't fight; this is a safe haven from which he will never have to wake.

Yet he had woken with a shock, recognizing the dream: he had first experienced it when he was eight years old and he had never again been able to take his life for granted. He would never completely lose the anxiety, the fear of death, the dark light. That light was tremendous, at once comforting but empty. And it attracted him. He knew that someday he would approach it, and that when he did, there would never be hope again. Someday he would accept the deadly silence, the painful welts of loneliness that left him no option but to accept the path, resigned until the light completely surrounded him.

The feeling could overwhelm him at any time, but strangely in his childhood it had generally appeared on Sunday evenings. He had labeled it therefore the Sunday-evening-feeling; giving it a name had helped. Later, in his twenties, when he had realized that this feeling was ultimately the basic feeling of life, he had tried to devise a mindset that would help him cope with it. He would confine the despair and the uselessness of it all by hammering poles in the chaotic space of his worldview. He knew that in reality they were not fixed at all, but thinking of them as fixed points helped him to get a grip on his

existence, and that allowed him to give meaning to his world; his father, mother and Nicole, Alice, his work. However, these had all been outside of him, and so had provided him with relative stability. Internally, he still felt that he couldn't hold on to anything. And now, one after another, all the poles were falling down.

George suddenly remembered the first photograph he had ever taken. His father had bought a tent so that the family could go camping. To complete the holiday feeling, he had also purchased a camera to record the happy family. For practice, they had erected the tent on a barren field on a hill nearby. As the youngest, George had received the camera last. He had focused on the side of the forest as it sloped down at a sharp angle. The edge of the trees was square to the picture frame. The foreground was empty. No car, no tent, no parents, no family. Emptiness, edged by a wall of beeches.

The last time that Sunday-evening-feeling had visited him had been in Florence, the day after Violetta had abandoned him. After his vain search he had decided to visit the San Miniato al Monte. The church had been his guidepost. The day before, when he had been lying with Violetta, it had dominated the city with its light. Now he wanted to find out whether the radiance had left his life, now that his love had vanished. He ascended the first flight of steps and entered the gate to the second one. High above him he could see the church. In the depth behind him he could sense the city that warmed itself in the last sunbeams. The tops of the pines were still glowing. From the top of the stairs, he turned around and looked down on the shining valley with its great cupolas and magnificent towers. His eyes went from the city to the church and back again. His thoughts were clear and he felt strong. Gazing once more at the façade of the church, he saw the white and dark green marble. How fantastic architecture was. Hadn't

Byron called it frozen music? George decided that the San Miniato represented a sonata by Beethoven, not overcomplicated or confusing, but harmonious in composition and clear in its details.

He turned again, ready to descend into the city. The sun just lingered above the hills and the light shone into his eyes as if Florence were trying to blind him. He kept them shut and descended as a blind man. Reaching the shadows he looked back and saw the last of the sunlight reflecting on the white marble. He waited until the last ray had slid from the building and the church was completely in the dark. Almost immediately a few enormous spotlights, from the sides of the stairs, grabbed the façade in their claw-like beams, a poor imitation of the sun. He returned to his hotel room, deeply in the grip of that Sunday-evening feeling.

The sensation was overwhelming; it was too much to live with. He felt that he might burst. Unable to do anything else, he went to bed and started to cry like an eight-year old boy; he cried for his father, Violetta and Alice, for Florence, for George the child and for himself now as he lay crying in bed thinking about himself, about everything, about death.

He woke again to the ring of the telephone. He looked at his watch. Just two o'clock in the afternoon. For a moment he was tempted not to answer and go straight to the shower. But he knew this couldn't be disregarded, this was death's announcement. With a mix of distress and fear he picked up the receiver. The voice at the other side was calm and clear, but not insensitive.

The words got slowly through to George. They hit him like stones thrown forcefully into water. The sound of the first, as it ricocheted along the surface, caused commotion. But then each sank aimlessly to

the deep. Some floated briefly, now and then lingering on an indefinite depth, as if in doubt. At the bottom, they formed a meaningful construction of sentences, although George couldn't completely perceive them as a unit.

With a soft click he ended the conversation. This was it. This time was different than all the other times they had called. This time was for real. The dark light pulled involuntarily into its path. Returning was no longer possible.

He called Nicole. She promised that she would bring their mother, but it could take a while. Resolutely he left his apartment and returned to the nursing home. A waiting nurse escorted him gently to a separate room at the end of the corridor.

His father was lying in a high bed. The blankets were pulled up onto his chin and his head rested on two pillows as he stared up at the ceiling. He didn't turn to look when George entered the room. George addressed the nurse: 'How long has he got?'

'Minutes? Hours? Who can tell? We could stretch the time, but our directive is to treat him only with palliative care.'

George's aversion towards the terminology grew, but out of respect for the situation he kept calm. 'Never mind,' he said and sat down on the bed. He wanted to hold his father's hand, but something was in the way. Did the physical contact with hovering death frighten him or was it just the presence of the nurse?

His father's breaths were heavy and slow. It seemed as if after every successful one he would stop for a moment of repose and deliberate whether he should make another effort and whether he could accomplish it again. Apparently convincing himself that it was worthwhile, he followed each pause with a long inhalation. The breaths made a sucking sound, filling the functioning parts of his lungs completely. The

exhalations had deep whistling tones. After each, George wondered about the next attempt for a split second, but he was sure in a way that it would come.

The door opened and a man entered: an old man wearing a black robe. In his hands he bore a small jar with all kind of chains and a book. A black hat partially covered his eyes. George had to suppress a laugh. This was too pathetic. As if his father did not already have death within himself, the church had to impose him with this black-gowned starving promoter. His father would surely know how to die perfectly well without the help of this prayer servant.

George said briefly: 'Your presence is not appreciated.'

The man inspected George superciliously: 'Are you related?'

'Yes. And I am telling you again that your presence is not appreciated. I don't want any fuss, so please go.'

'But the nursing home has informed me that mister...' he glanced quickly at the notes in his book, 'that Mr. Nobel is leaving the temporal state for the...'

George got up and directed him resolutely but gently to the door. He whispered once more: 'Please, go.'

When the man had left, George looked at the nurse. He felt that he owed her an explanation: 'my father was, is, not religious. He would think this grotesque.' The nurse nodded, but seemed uncomfortable.

'You don't have to stay,' George said, 'you can come back later. That's fine with me.' He was relieved when the nurse left the room.

Adrian Nobel's respiration hadn't changed. Perhaps the intervals had become longer. Now alone, George found the courage to approach his father. He bent over to his father's face and saw the eyes staring dully upward. His stare was empty, no recognition, nothing. George took his hand; it felt cold. He rubbed it. No reaction. Again George looked

at his father's face, watching him through his tears. He swallowed, removed his glasses and swept with his arm over his eyes. His father took a deep breath once more. Desperately George tried to dredge up some images: images of how his father ought to be. His father biking with him around the neighborhood; the man who went to drink a few pints of beer in the evening in the local pub without letting his wife know; the man who had saved him as he swam for a ball in the sea. George defined the images; he put them together, constructed them consciously, but couldn't make them come alive. An album with family pictures, but shown to a stranger. The man lying before him was too far away from George's memories, from that what he had been. "Have mercy." The phrase appeared from nowhere in George's mind, "have mercy. Liberate me. Make him healthy." He stood up and went to the corridor.

'I want to see a doctor,' he shouted. The nurse, still outside in the hall, said: 'The doctor has already visited your father. There is no hope left. We could take him to the hospital and give him artificial respiration. For how long? An hour, a day, a week? It wouldn't change anything.' And in a soft voice she added: 'Really, there is nothing we can do. You have to accept. Come to peace with the situation and say goodbye in a dignified way.'

'But for crying out loud. This is my father!'

He turned. Tears streamed over his face. He felt so helpless, so little. Here in the corridor life went on with full intensity. Here deeds mattered; nurses served dinner to those who didn't know about what was happening to his father; they dressed and undressed patients.

George reentered the small room. His father's breathing hadn't changed and George found it soothing. The quiet in the room offered him a benevolent tranquility. From outside faint sounds reached him.

The window had been closed and the blinds filtered the light, making it fall softly on the bed. Here was the serenity of his father, here timelessness had commenced. George realized how much he loved this man. He found that he was able to talk to his father now.

‘Dad, we still have so many things to do.’ He took his hand. ‘There is a concert next week. You can’t let me go all by myself.’ His embarrassment had completely disappeared. ‘Come on, dad. Don’t let me go by myself. Don’t leave me alone.’ For a moment he thought he saw a glimpse of understanding on his father’s face, but realized that it was probably just the sun peeping through the clouds, giving the room a more friendly appearance.

For a long time it was quiet. Then the breathing started again, as if his father were gathering all the energy and all the life he had in him; George knew this was the end. It took a while before the last breath came. To George it seemed that this inhalation contained a full life and his father were considering the possibility that it would not be the last one at all. As if with that bated breath, his father were judging what his life had been worth; from the eternity of childhood, to the hope of a young man, to the disappointment of an old one. The breath contained a glimpse of children; a woman in a wedding dress; an evening that might offer endless bliss; the smell of a May-bush; a view of an office in a glass building; the sensation of pain, a lot of pain, in a declining body; the sound of footsteps, promising, on a farm path; stealing apples from an orchard; the same woman again with children, three, on a hill, at the forest’s edge.

As if there were a choice. It was as if everything that could be reconsidered hung on one side of the balance, while on the other side sat the final escape, the silent light, inevitable and so appealing. But in fact, there was no more choice; the choice had already been made

before the final inhalation. What remained was only a matter of letting go of the air, a long whispering sigh.

Charlotte

XI

A new realization had taken hold of Charlotte. There was no point in staying in New York. She would return to Rome, home, where she belonged. She would have her child. She would not leave it to fate but would determine her destiny herself. Perhaps that was the message of the relief. Perhaps there was only death ahead for the stone woman, but Charlotte had the future. She no longer needed the grand, even grandiose, concepts of love and art, she could look forward to new life, possibly the most sublime wonder that one could experience.

She decided to close the case on the relief. Her conclusion was simple: even after all of the research, she didn't know what it was. As she was writing up her final report, the telephone rang. It was Pete Updike.

'It broke,' he said.

‘What? The relief? What happened? Where?’

‘Cracked. It’s broken in two. Right where the sharp incision was. John held it up to show it to some visitors and it cracked. The dead woman must have used a natural crack to make her heavy incision. It was probably that fragile from the beginning. The left part is just a piece of slate now and the other part still has the Madonna.’

‘Stop calling her a Madonna! How bad is it?’

‘In my opinion it wasn’t worth much to begin with,’ Pete replied. ‘Now, I think, it’s worthless. John agrees.’

‘I am sorry.’

‘It’s not that terrible. The world will go on.’

‘It is terrible.’

‘You really liked it, didn’t you?’

‘Yes. Can I come to see the damage?’

The relief lay on Pete’s desk, broken roughly right where the skewer had been. As Pete had described, one small part was now just a piece of slate. The other half depicted the woman on the rock. She still made an impression, but the drama was gone. What remained was a beautiful figure scratched in stone. There was still a hint of movement, but because the scene that had been in front of her was gone, you had to imagine it. One seeing the relief for the first time would think that she was just standing there. There was no vista compelling her to leap. The fatal ending had disappeared, there was no more story.

‘Did you find out anything, anyway?’

‘I don’t think there’s anything to find out. It’s just there. Or rather, it was there. No story. Some things you just can’t explain, I think. We have to accept that.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Can we fix it?’

‘Perhaps. But I don’t think anyone is interested in dealing with it. Restoration would involve a lot of money. Believe me. It’s a dead end, this whole thing.’

‘What does John think about all this? Where is he, anyhow?’

‘John is pretty fed up with this story. He invested a lot of energy and money in the stone and now he ends up with a broken, inexplicable object. He’s not in; went to Chicago, I think. In any case, he left me to finalize things with you. ArtSale’s business lingo for saying ‘forget about it’. Strike out, I would say. In many senses.’

‘Doesn’t the whole thing mean anything to you? On the phone you just said that the dead woman must have made it. And you keep calling her a Madonna.’

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

Charlotte let it rest. ‘I want to get back to Europe.’

Pete agreed: ‘Yes, no problem.’ He thought for a moment: ‘do you want to take it with you?’ He pointed at the stone. ‘To Rome? I have been told that Europeans are more sensitive?’ He laughed kindly.

‘I think it’s marvelous and fascinating, but if I were to take it, I would be confronted with it all the time. And now that it’s broken, it has lost its power. So I would put it in a drawer, but it’s too extraordinary for that. On the other hand if no one here has any compassion for it, I would take pity on it. It is too good to be in an ArtSale storage bin. Does Casey want it back?’

‘I’ll ask him, but I don’t think he cares. You take it. It’s valuable to you.’ He giggled at his own joke: ‘Here we will start with a clean slate.’

She agreed.

‘Thanks.’ She paused for a moment. ‘It has been great working with you guys.’

Pete said goodbye and Charlotte left.

To say farewell to the city she went up the elevator to the top floor of the skyscraper that housed ArtSale's offices. She gazed over the city. Not only did she see the will to flaunt money, but also the will to live. Caspari had been right in his observations about New York. Although it contradicted the purpose of the tycoons showing off their immense egos, all those skyscraper boxes had sacrificed their individuality for the sake of the bigger picture; jointly they shaped New York. She turned her view to the south. The Flatiron building lay restrained like a stake between the avenues; the sun touched its upper floors, which seemed to elevate the building even more. There was no limit here, everything was possible. Literally, the Flatiron pointed ahead to the skyscrapers, rooted in the past but looking toward the future. Maybe the building had never realized its full potential, but it indicated a world with a great future.

Her gaze went further, beyond the city, to the Atlantic. Europe was out there. Her future. Caspari's lost continent. Even Alfred had called it something like that. But it wouldn't be a failure for her. She would start her run and then take the huge leap. Not like the one on the relief and nor anything like the free fall from the plane with Viktor. She would fly. Thinking back at that jump, she smiled and, to her surprise, felt a feeling of pride that she had done it, though forced. She looked down at the dazzling depth of a few hundred feet. Marionettes on the ground. Tiny toy cars. Unbelievable that she had defied such an abyss.

That Friday night in the Auvergne they had talked about New York. Even about the Flatiron building. He had pronounced it in his typical French way: *Flattirón*. They had fantasized their perfect day in this city. Visiting museums, eating dinner in a Japanese restaurant in

SoHo. Later, they would go to the opera and then conclude the day festively in their hotel room. He had consoled her when Lasek's piano playing had saddened her.

She went down again, more sure than ever of her decision to leave. She called Rachel.

'I have finished my job here and the time of putting up safety triangles is over. No more illusory safety. I'm going back to Rome tomorrow.'

'I gather New York wasn't the best place for you this time?'

'No, it was okay. Before I leave I would really like to see you again.'

'Great. Why don't we go to the opera?'

'That is actually the last thing I want.'

'A concert? Or let's visit the museum this afternoon. There's an exhibit on Cézanne at the Metropolitan.'

'Paintings of rocks in Provence. I'd rather have the stones of New York. But eventually I like the stones of Rome best.'

'So what do you propose?'

'Let's just meet somewhere. We can talk.'

'The same place where the party was? Shall I invite Alfred and Richard as well?'

'Yes, it would be fun to see them again.' Charlotte responded.

She met Rachel that evening in the same small café. It turned out that Richard couldn't make it but Alfred had said he would come, although he wasn't there yet.

'We hardly had the opportunity to catch up last time,' Charlotte said when they sat down. 'How are you? Daniel? The children?'

'Great. Daniel is still teaching at the University and the children are

growing up.’ She laughed at the commonplace.”

Charlotte pushed, ‘and what about yourself?’

‘I don’t complain. I am busy preventing lawsuits against ArtSale. And this I really have to tell you: I’m handling a case for Alfred. Privately.’

‘Tell me all about it. Has someone sued him because of his essays?’

‘Right on target. Alfred wrote a rather sarcastic piece about Mike Crissophe – you know, the CEO of *Excel-Land*, the software multinational – and the boy feels hit below the belt. He is not amused. Can’t take a joke. He has brought a libel suit against Alfred.’

‘Doesn’t he have other things to do?’

‘Exactly. That was what Alfred’s essay was about, at least in part. He wrote a parable about an evolutionary sin of death: an immoral and corrupt *ménage a trois* between an omnivore that took its genetic instruction somewhat too literally, a selfish parasite that didn’t tolerate its partner and a simple herd animal that was a tidbit for everyone. The new hybrid, coincidentally by the name of Mike Crissophe, caused all evolution to come to a standstill and thus end in failure. Everyone wanted to eat the omnivore, but instead, it ate most of them and trampled the others until it had no challenges left. It got fatter and fatter, slower and slower and finally it perished, full of condescension. The end of the story was God having to log off and do a complete reboot.’ Rachel laughed. ‘My synopsis doesn’t do the story justice. It was really very funny.’

‘And how are things now?’

‘Well, you know, it’s David against Goliath. Richard is also involved. He supplies the technical backup. It’s kind of fun. We laugh and they take it enormously seriously.’

‘Alfred is a nice guy.’

Rachel observed her closely: 'Nice guy? A platitude or a sincere statement?'

'Sincere. I wouldn't insult you with platitudes. But I don't have any interest at all, if you were wondering.'

'I wasn't. But you are right. He is a nice guy.'

'You are not having something going yourself, I hope.'

'No please! I am very happily married and the last thing in the world that would attract me is having an affair. The idea.' She shook her head.

'Sorry. I figured that already. Sometimes it's very pleasant to find the world the way we expect it to be.'

'Do you have any interests at all, right now? I mean romantically.'

'No.' Charlotte thought for a moment. 'There was someone, of course. He might have been the right one, but in the end, he wasn't.' She paused. 'He is the father, but he doesn't know. I will never tell him. The child is mine.'

'So fierce! I was only asking.'

'Sorry. The last weeks have been busy with research and new insights. I have to calm down. But I know now that I can and that I will be happy. I return to Rome tomorrow.'

'I hope it's a girl,' Charlotte continued. 'Do you have a beautiful name for her? Give me something lovely from your holy books.'

'Does it have to bear any symbolic meaning?'

'As long as it is beautiful.'

'What about Esther? Esther didn't have a father; but then again neither a mother. That won't do. What if it's a boy?'

Charlotte let the name sound in her head. Esther. A daughter with a name. Until now she had just thought about a mother and a child, in a tender way like the paintings of Giovanni Bellini. The question of

the gender hadn't occurred to her until the moment she had asked the question. But now, hearing a name pronounced, gave the being inside her a new dimension: a daughter with an age, an appearance and a future. With character. And with a father who wasn't there and never would be.

Would her child resemble Viktor? A girl would never have Viktor's macho character traits. Those were unconditionally connected with masculinity. But what if it were a boy? Could she prevent Viktor's genes from producing a new Viktor by educating the boy differently? Was the machismo innate or was it behavioral? She realized that these were the same questions she had asked about the father. On him, at least, she could turn her back, escape, take a plane to New York. If it was a matter of the genes, she could be stuck with a small version of Viktor in fifteen years.

As genetic father Viktor had of course also a lot to offer: his unmistakable tenderness, his artistic integrity, his physical appearance. Suddenly she realized she would always remain tied to him. The eyes of her child might reflect the light of Provence and the voice could be an echo of Viktor's. Could she ever let that go? A child wasn't a piece of text that you could stash away in your purse, hoping that would solve the problem forever.

'No, she has to be a daughter,' Charlotte repeated. 'I like Esther.'

'It's also an intriguing story. All of the apparent coincidences lead to something very good. It would suit you.'

'I suppose that it is all coincidence?'

'I don't know, but talking about coincidences, I have to be in Rome in two weeks. Shall we meet there as well?'

'Come with me tomorrow! I'll show you everything.'

'When you have your baby, you will learn that just coming along is

not really an option. But you could stay here a bit longer.'

'No, I am determined. I will go tomorrow.'

Their conversation was interrupted by Alfred's entrance and enthusiastic greetings. When he had sat down and gotten his drink, Charlotte told him, 'I am leaving New York. Tomorrow I fly back to Rome.'

'I'm glad to have the chance to say goodbye to you.'

Charlotte thought it might be interesting to hear Alfred's perspective on the stone, especially now that it was broken. 'I have a question.'

'Let's hear.'

'What do you think about beauty, as a concept? Is it abstract? Does it exist autonomously?'

'Funny you should ask. I am just beginning work on an essay titled *Raphael and the Pigsty* in which that is the key issue.'

He couldn't help glancing at Rachel to see whether the mere title had impressed her. 'It goes as follows: we take a painting by Raphael, a very famous one. Let's say, the *Sistine Madonna*. And we take this really beautiful painting out of Dresden -- and put in the sty. Then we put one hundred pigs in that sty. Those pigs really make a mess. They live there for a week, so you can imagine what happens to the painting. Dirty, disgustingly dirty. A literal pigsty. The question now is: is that painting still beautiful?' He crossed his hands behind his neck and looked expectantly at the others.

'Too much Plato,' Rachel tried to evade the question. 'Of course it's physically spoiled, but we know that underneath it is still beautiful.'

'But,' replied Alfred, 'does the original, untouched Raphael still exist, outside of your mind. In other words have the pigs affected the essence of the painting? You know the painting, Charlotte, but can the beauty still exist for someone who doesn't?'

‘Perhaps the beauty remains. Beauty might be intrinsic; absolute. Not a value that we bestow on something from the outside. But that is precisely what I just asked you,’ she laughed.

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,’ Rachel added.

‘Let’s go back to square one then. Forget about the pigs. We clean the Raphael and we neatly fix it back on the wall, beautiful as ever. Then we set fire to the museum. Everything inside is turned to ashes. What about beauty now?’

‘Now it has become just an Idea,’ Rachel contributed. ‘Plato again. The beauty hasn’t been spoiled, but its physical appearance no longer exists. To me, it is of little importance whether the painting actually exists. Beauty should not depend on our judgment.’

‘It seems to me that beauty exists just because I am thinking about it,’ Charlotte replied. ‘Like I do with my stone.’

‘Your stone?’ Alfred asked puzzled.

‘We will come to that in a moment. Please, carry on.’

‘Okay, but what you were talking about was just an imaginary image.’ Alfred said. ‘Terrible expression. Forgive me.’ He paused for a moment. ‘In the end, I think you need the real thing, because an idea is inadequate to keep the beauty alive. Indeed, what if every memory of it faded away? And what about someone who never saw the painting -- will he be able to grasp even a fragment of its beauty? Unlike other values, like truth and goodness, beauty has a cognitive aspect, so I think you will get into trouble if you let the physical thing go. The beauty may remain the same, but the reality is different.’

‘Let me tell you why I asked in the first place,’ Charlotte said, having decided to tell the whole story. ‘I was called to New York to try to find out the history of an intriguing art object. It was truly beautiful.’ She described the stone and then added, ‘I learned just today that it recently

broke in two. I have the picture of the original if you want to see it.'

Charlotte showed her companions the photograph of the intact relief, adding, 'I have to say that the damage comes almost as a relief to me. It has taken away the edge and some of the drama.'

Alfred studied the photograph carefully and then passed it to Rachel.

'So, where's the beauty now?' Charlotte asked. 'Or is it still there?'

'It broke just where that skewer is?' Alfred asked. He thought for a moment: 'I'll let you both in on a secret, but don't tell anyone: I don't have the answers, only questions.' He smiled. 'What do I think of your stone? You are right; it has lost its drama. I presume that what makes good art is an inner tension, that is resolved, for better or for worse, it doesn't matter, somewhere in the work. When that contrast is gone, so is the art. In this case, I would say, the stone is still very nice, but it is no longer special.'

'Yes, it has completely changed.' She put the photo back in her case, while she continued: 'I haven't told anyone, but for a while I had the notion that I was the one jumping from that rock. But just as I had managed to release myself from that idea, the relief broke. I don't believe much in symbolism but still...'

'Maybe the essence of beauty is that it hurts.' Alfred put in. 'Beauty tells us about our own imperfection. As I said before, I am not so skilled in answers, but maybe it all will make sense in the end. I can't predict the future. I am no prophet.'

'Is that the reason you are leaving New York?' Rachel asked. 'The danger is averted and you can go home?'

'No I had already decided to leave. But it is quite a coincidence, don't you think?'

'But why rush back to Europe?' Alfred asked.

'Don't interfere, Alfred, Charlotte knows what is best for her,'

Rachel answered.

‘I don’t doubt that. I just was trying to be polite.’

‘Don’t worry about me. I will be okay.’ Charlotte said. ‘I have the feeling that a huge storm has past, and now everything has quieted down.’

‘Like the Bernoulli Principle.’ Alfred said.

‘What’s that? A new thriller or one of your essays?’ Rachel teased.

‘It’s a physical principle. If you hold two pieces of thin paper next to each other and blow between them, they come closer instead of moving apart. I think it’s appropriate, that narrowing. When it storms and many things happen at the same time, one’s consciousness is restricted, as if you have blinders on. But when the winds die down, everything has the space that it needs again.’

‘I like that idea,’ Charlotte said.

They talked on but for Charlotte it was very clear that there were no answers. It was just as Alfred had said -- a new reality had come into being.

As the conversation wound down, they said their goodbyes and as Charlotte walked away, she realized that this was a beautiful friendship, one that she would cherish.

She was ready to go, but one more call she reckoned was important: Alexander Lasek. She found his number in her purse where she had put it the night when he had played the Brahms. For the first time, she allowed the memory of that night to wash over her. Until now she had efficiently packed the nostalgia away, but at this time she wanted to sense it completely, to evoke the atmosphere and the emotions of that evening. And, in New York, far from the events of that night, she succeeded in feeling again the intensity of that moment, his tender

caress. To hear his voice again, the tones that seemed to make everything pure. After a while she shook her head, picked up the telephone and called Paris.

The pianist answered and responded enthusiastically to Charlotte's voice. He asked after her well being and, after Charlotte had convinced him that everything was superb, she asked, 'Is Viktor in Paris as well?'

'Yes. He is Pinkerton in *Butterfly*. He is rehearsing now.'

She had known that. In February there would be a reprise of the production of *Madama Butterfly* he had done before.

'How is he? Does he ever mention me?'

'You probably don't want to hear this, but he never talks about you at all. He has found, no surprise, a new love. Guess three times. Right, the soprano who sings *Butterfly*.' Ironically he added: 'And you can also guess how that will end.' He apologized for laughing.

'Is she young?'

'Thirty five, I guess.'

'Better than expected.'

'Do you mind my still having a connection with your traitor?' The question sounded honest.

She hesitated. Immorality was stronger than righteousness. It permeated every corner and afflicted everyone. But she trusted Lasek. She had felt safe with him from the beginning. As Charlotte saw it, Lasek had mastered the sadness of humanity with a respectable meekness. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'I think you are on a plain above the tricks and chicanery of that singing charlatan.'

'Thank you. That's very pleasant to hear. You know, he is my money.'

Charlotte blurted, 'I'm pregnant.'

'Congratulations!'

Charlotte sensed Lasek holding back. To help him out she said, 'Viktor is the father. But don't tell him.'

'Your secret is safe with me. A boy or a girl?'

'I don't know, but I think it'll be a girl.'

'I would love to see the little one someday.'

'I hope so. I would also like to stay in touch with you. I fly back to Europe tomorrow. From Paris to Rome is not far for friends.'

'Right. And exactly between them is Provence. Whatever you may think of it now, it was a beautiful time.'

'If anyone ever asks me about it, I will sincerely answer that the night of the concert was the happiest night of my life.'

'Try to remember that. Trust your feelings; they flow as they should. Remember, water courses downward, from the source to the sea, not the other way round. What does a drop know about its destination? It has a final objective, but who knows where fate will direct it. But from the start there's a watershed that ensures that two drops starting a fraction of an inch apart, have completely different fates. A drop melted in the glacier of the Rhine will never reach the Mediterranean and the sun, but will eventually find its way to the North Sea. It will never feel the warmth of the tropics.'

'If I weren't happy, you would make me sad.'

'Or it might just evaporate,' Alexander tried to soften the image. 'Eventually they all come together in the ocean.'

'No, you are right. That drop has travelled another route. Poor Rhine drop. Always streaming under cold, grey skies.'

'I am a drop that has fallen into the Moldau,' Alexander laughed.

'I want warmth and light,' Charlotte said.

'Then you have to head for Rome. The little one will need those as well.'

‘Thank you. We will meet again.’

‘No farewells.’

‘No farewells.’

She hung up. For a moment she stood with his number in her hands. Then she put it in her suitcase with the ArtSale documents and closed the lid firmly.

George

XI

George lay in his hammock, watching the stars and letting his mind go free. He could die, if necessary, on this island near the equator, where he could hear nothing but the breaking waves on the reef and the soft rustle of palm leaves. Without looking, he sensed the sky, studded with thousands of stars, and ten thousand miles of dark ocean.

Orion shone directly above him, a random conjunction of four bright stars with the triplet of the belt between them, recognizable but just an image, a formulation by well-intentioned stargazers. The stars stood tens of light-years apart with no connection to each other. But the human tendency to give everything a place and an aesthetic form, had created a brilliant image of inconceivable splendor. George tried to discern the nebula, but his eye could see sharply in the dark only by looking beside the object in question; as soon as he focused on

the nebula itself, the view blurred. It was elusive. It was there but he couldn't seize the image; he couldn't pin it down.

The first night of his sojourn here had been a life-altering trial. While lying in his hammock, surrounded by those palm trees, an extraordinary notion of futility befell him. He tried to convince himself that he needed nobody else in the world. He wanted to reach a state in which sadness still was an intense feeling but didn't cause pain. He wanted to rid himself of his past, but at the same time that thought made him desperate. No one would ever have the same past as he did, the same feelings and associations; no one could have his memories. The past, his loyal friend, now leading an independent life, had to be abolished. But on the other hand, everything in the present, even the future, was related to the past, everything connected. 'Le Passé, c'est moi,' George had to admit.

He started to play Brahms's Fourth Symphony on his Discman. His father had treasured this music. But after the second movement, he stopped, thinking about that recent New Year's Eve. How serene his father had been, in spite of the depressing setting of the nursing home and his own terrible decay.

Despite his intensions, even his desire, to remain outside all night, George found himself simultaneously wanting to go inside the rented bungalow, lock the door and take a hot bath. Determined, he remained outside, silently reviewing his former deliberations but making no progress whatsoever. Instead, he looked at the stars. Far away on the beach, he could make out, if he wanted, the next bungalow of the resort. It wasn't a desert island at all, of course.

Over the course of that night, his reflections had become more abstract until, with the first light of morning, he went to bed. At noon, he returned to the beach and tried to absorb the enchantment of the

lagoon. Every now and then he succeeded in forgetting about himself, consumed only with the here and now. But as soon as he became aware of this serenity, it evaporated. Then some irrelevant thought would pop into his mind, such as the realization that Alice never would have enjoyed this island the way he did. The scene would just be a décor idea for her. Upon returning home, she would surely want to have the bedroom hung with wallpaper of a sunset and palms. These considerations ruined his contemplative mood completely. Back to square one. He tried again to focus on the serenity, but as in the night when he had wanted to look directly at the stars of Orion, he didn't succeed. And every time he focused elsewhere, the heaviness of the past overtook him again.

After the funeral, George realized his life had changed definitively, he had reached a watershed and now there would be a new order. The bankruptcy of his old life loomed in his consciousness and he saw no future, no way to move ahead. From now on, it would be just a matter of time; the rest of his life would consist of the moments ticking away. Slowly he had opened the door to his apartment. His drawing table still stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by piles of papers and pictures of that Sicilian town. He dropped onto the couch. He even hadn't the will to remove the flotsam of his late existence as an architect. Leave. Leave now. The thought hammered his brain. Leave this dreariness, leave this life. Leave everything. Not before it's too late, because it was already much too late, but at least as soon as possible.

He took the atlas of the world off the bookshelf and after staring gloomily at one page, he let it fall to the ground. For several minutes he couldn't even summon the energy to pick it up. Finally he reached for it again. Before him was the world. He stood up to pour himself a

whisky then returned to the couch. The world, contained in the atlas, was still looking at him from the drawing table on which he had set it.

Slowly, very slowly, little by little, like the first light of dawn, he realized that he shouldn't be making plans at all. Only one plan to silence all other plans. He filled his glass again. Say farewell and leave it at that. But even as he recognized the thought, he knew he couldn't do it, he would never choose the ultimate farewell. On the ferry it had been an interesting theoretical exercise, but now the conviction was so real that it scared him. It had come too close and he knew he hadn't the courage. Besides, his father would never have approved. No, the farewell had to take a different form. Disappear without dying. Change the defeat to victory. It would be respite in the shape of a vanishing trick.

With these thoughts, the spirit of juvenile bravura returned to him. It was such an attractive idea, just to leave. He took another sip. He hadn't slept well for days and the alcohol went straight to his head. His mood turned victorious. In his mind, his farewell began to take on triumphant proportions. Ascend to hell or descend to paradise, what did it matter? Who could touch him? He would be unreachable, leaving no address, giving no notice. He flipped the atlas pages wildly until he found the map of the Pacific. A desert island. Here, no there, no better here, yes here was his ideal.

He needed two days to get there. One for calling and organizing and one for travelling.

Quietly George let the sand slide through his fingers, feeling how the grains rubbed his skin. He buried his hands again deep in the sand to reach the underlying coolness, then pulled them back above

the sand, which again flowed away between his fingers. For hours he repeated this action.

He lay splayed on the beach – a pleasant feeling to be one with the earth – his chin in the sand, his head slightly raised, so he could discern all the nuances of blue in the lagoon from his low perspective. At the same time, everything he perceived was blurry; this morning he had forgotten to put on his glasses. This had bothered him briefly, but gradually he adapted. In fact, he found it agreeable. He decided that from now on he would only reflect on the world from this low vantage point and with imprecise vision; this would be his daytime position. In the evening and at night it was better to lie down in his hammock between the palms outside his bungalow.

Perhaps there had been some truth in Tom's statement about essence and the relativity of form and content. But thinking of Tom brought George back to his father and the days after the death. His mother had insisted that George accompany her to the morgue. George had reluctantly agreed, but it seemed to him that the trip would inspire only unnecessary grief. It had been even worse than he had expected. He had seen a body, neatly presented, in a suit, with a tie clip, a pocket handkerchief, a shaved face; George suspected they had even used eyeliner to make him look good. And to cap it all off, a rosary in his folded hands. But George hadn't lost his temper; he hadn't revoked this profanity of his father by tearing the religious dud from his hands. They couldn't insult his father for the simple reason that the man that was lying here wasn't his father. The mortal remains resembled him, but everything that was essential to his father, had gone. Even through his closed eyes, it was clear that the spark was missing. His soul had left his face, leaving emptiness, a shell. Realizing this let George distance himself.

The funeral was even more painful. In the speakers' words of faith he had heard only hollowness that echoed bleakly under the stone vaults of the neo-gothic church. He had walked with his mother behind the coffin, supporting her with his arm, the rest of the family behind them. He had seen Herbert, but had avoided him. Alice was there as well and she had consoled him. He had hardly had spoken with her, but appreciated that she had come. The presence of these people was comforting, but offered only a temporary suppression of the misery. It made the pain bearable for a moment, but afterwards it only intensified.

The next day, he had gone to the quarry with his mother. His father couldn't be left uncovered. George insisted that the mason incise only his father's name and his dates of birth and death, no symbols, no cross. In the quarry, between the stones that would cover the last remains of human beings, he wondered how long people could survive in the memories of those who had known them. And once the last person who had known the dead one died, would the memory disappear completely? Could the memory pass to new people, creating a derivative? But in the end, the mathematical derivative equals zero. On the other hand, is the human soul, mathematically considered, only an infinitesimal diminution, perhaps only approaching absolute zero, but never actually reaching it? Can a stone offer solace?

Made restless by the ongoing stream of thoughts, George got up and walked into the sea; slowly he slid under the warm water until he was fully submerged, cleansing body and mind, releasing himself from the treadmill of thoughts, until he was completely relaxed. He repeated this ritual a few times a day. After several minutes he came out of the water again, didn't dry off, but warmed himself in the

pleasurable sun. The shivers caused by the refreshing water subsided in the burning glow. One more moment and he would be dry and warm again. A guaranteed prospect. The drops evaporated from his skin that – when dry – was pierced by heat. The physical satisfaction had the same intensity every time. The body had no recollection, so no way to measure any minute variations. Pain was always as painful. Hunger and thirst were agonizing on the same level and the relief of physical needs always offered the same delight, whether it were the quenching of thirst or the satisfaction of sexual lust. If there were any inflation, it happened when the mind got in the way. The brain put no limits on craving; every lust could evoke a new, stronger one.

Slowly his thoughts of the past diminished and after a week George was capable of thinking of nothing for a few hours. He could focus solely on the palms, the continuous thundering of the reef in the distance and, from the moment he had discovered the timelessness of the sliding sand, the grains on his skin.

After two weeks the monotony broke. Until then, the sun had risen every morning at the same hour and had gloriously set in the evening at the same time. No change. Clouds were only visible on the horizon. The breeze was always the same. The continuity and the uniformity offered sheer bliss.

But this afternoon, he knew that change was coming. In the east the sky got darker, grey at first and then black. And steadily the darkness drew upward. The sun weakened. The light became surreal. The clouds expanded to take possession of the sky, eclipsing the sun, as if the light had gone out. The wind rose more and more strongly until it raged with gale force over the island. The water of the lagoon was still quite calm but far off George could hear the violence of the ocean

against the barrier reef.

Yet he was caught off-guard when the rainstorm broke. The streams fell in an overwhelming shower, warm and hard as steel, in thick beams. Sight lessened to a few feet. One of the palms to which the hammock was attached moaned. The tree straightened again, but with the next squall it cracked deeper and bent even more. With the third gust it broke. His hammock clacked in the storm, but George no longer cared. He walked to the waterfront. The wind tried to blow him away, but he kept standing, bolt upright. He remained on his feet until the storm died down, late that night. First the wind dropped and then it stopped raining. One by one the stars reappeared. The sand dried quickly and the water grew calm. George remained at the waterfront, looking out at the vast ocean.

The storm had affected him, driven him to a decision. The Sicily project was his and he would not abandon it. It would become a monument to his father. Its stones would reflect all that his father ever meant to him. In doing this, George would actualize that evening in the nursing home so that people would feel it and understand. It was a matter of deeds, not thoughts.

George knew what he had to do. He had to live. He would return to civilization. Nature was amoral and inhuman, it couldn't validate his existence. Nature was an overture to death, a volatile shore of timeless loneliness. If he wanted to live he had to look not at nature but at humanity in its often woeful, sometimes triumphant civilization. City lights in the dark night, a child in an ice cream parlor, a fresco in the atrium of a church, a woman with a sad look in her eyes, the crowdedness of rush hour, a conversation in a café. In these one could find solace. If you wanted to embrace life it made more sense to listen to Brahms' Fourth Symphony than to the breaking of the waves on the reef.

Flight

As Charlotte checked in at JFK for the flight to Rome, she saw him at the transfer desk: George Nobel. She quickly moved to hide among the throngs of moving people, watching the departures screen, then peeking back to see whether he was still there. Relieved when he disappeared, she went to her gate. But on the plane, while fastening her seatbelt, she heard his voice.

‘It looks like we are sitting next to each other.’

‘George! It’s been such a long time. What are you doing here? Where are you going?’

‘As far as I know, to the same place as you. Flight to Rome it said on the screen. Or will the seats of this plane separate and go their own ways?’

Charlotte laughed. She hadn’t forgotten George Nobel’s charming

sarcasm. The familiarity relaxed her and diminished her fear of a confrontation with the past.

‘But then again, your question is not so stupid. I am actually flying to Amsterdam. But it seemed faster to take this flight and then connect to Amsterdam from Rome. I feel like I have been on a plane for three days already. You are going to Rome, though?’

‘Yes, I have an appointment with my new life,’ she said in an attempt to sound as lighthearted as he.

She waited whether he would react, but he just nodded courteously and then put on his headphones and seemed to focus on the music on his Discman. A bit bored she turned to the movie, once the flight had taken off. But it didn’t interest her. She tried to get the conversation going again a couple of times, but he appeared to be asleep. When he woke some time later, she asked whether he really had no inclination to talk with her.

‘George Nobel – disrespectful of architecture and of himself,’ he quoted sleepily, ‘by our special editor, Charlotte Vermeer.’

He sank back in his thoughts while Charlotte pondered his words: ‘I don’t even want a recollection to recollections.’

A message by the captain made them look up. ‘For safety reasons we will make an immediate landing at Heathrow Airport, London. We expect to resume the planned flight to Rome as speedily as possible.’ He assured the passengers there was nothing to worry about, but requested that all passengers remain in the designated area of the airport.

‘This might work out well,’ George mused. ‘Perhaps I can connect to Amsterdam from London.’

The corridors seemed endless. George knew she was walking just behind him and a few times he looked over his shoulder without knowing what to do. Walking right beside her might suggest that

he wanted to stay with Charlotte, but leaving her completely to her fate wasn't in his character. What he did was a sort of compromise. Hesitatingly, he looked back sometimes to see if she was still following him; then he halted, half waiting, but never stopping, and when she had almost caught up, he walked on. He didn't want to lose her.

Charlotte saw him walking ahead of her and hurried to catch up, but every time she nearly did, he speeded up, thwarting her hope of suggesting that they stay together during the delay. In her haste to catch him, she tripped down the last of a flight of stairs. Sitting at the bottom, she rubbed a painful ankle and looked at George who had halted a few feet further on.

Suddenly George recognized in her the Florentine fresco. Especially those great, sad, begging eyes. He stepped toward her.

'Does it hurt?'

'It could have been worse.'

George gazed anxiously around.

'Is there something wrong?' she asked.

'No, I was just looking for a phone,' he replied. Feeling the need to explain his restlessness, he said: 'Do you mind if I take care of a few things. I have to call some people. I would have done it in New York, but it was night in Holland then. Will you manage here?'

'Yes, go. But don't stay away too long.'

'I'll be back in a second.'

He walked through the huge hall and saw a telephone booth. Steady he dialed the number of PC&M, renewing his contact with the world from which he had turned away a few weeks earlier. The operator put him through to Herbert Jansen.

'George, you have resurrected!'

'I am... never mind.' After some vague explanation how he was

doing and where he had been, George came to the point: 'Herbert. I'm sorry that I haven't managed to call you before now, but listen. This is important. The Sicily-project has to continue. It has to. Promise me that.'

'Easy, George, take it easy. Everything is under control. I can assure you that it is continuing.' And in a monotonous voice: 'Exactly how you planned it. As you pictured it in your shabby model. I have gone through it all and I have organized everything. Good old Herbert, isn't it? Everyone is madly in love with it.'

'Herbert, thanks. But I want to be involved. Doesn't matter how. Unmentioned, unaccredited, unpaid. I don't want anything, just to be there. I want to see it created, as I imagine it. Herbert, please, you have no idea how important this is to me.'

'All right, don't get melodramatic. Visit me a.s.a.p.'

'The moment I am there, I will come,' George stated cryptically. He ended the call and immediately called his sister. He ignored her questions and accusations and after apologizing, told her that he was preparing a monument for their father. He said she shouldn't worry and then he said goodbye. Feeling more relaxed, he went back to Charlotte and sat down beside her on the steps.

'Odd to run ashore here, don't you think,' She said.

'Ashore, yes. Hilarious, considering I have been lying on a beach for days.'

'Do you feel awkward here with me? Not only because of what has passed, but maybe you want to be alone, anyhow.'

'No, if I wanted to be alone, I would have stayed where I was. It is precisely because I don't want to be alone that I am here.'

'Are we supposed to talk about the past?'

'Perhaps. Do you feel the need?' He didn't state it meanly, but he

wasn't inviting that conversation either.

'It's nice you are here. I can use someone who's on my side. I want to feel safe. I felt safe when I left New York, but the sensation is getting weaker. You are someone to feel safe with. Then and I think, still. I could never forget that.'

George indicated vaguely that it didn't matter: 'I have never forgotten our past.'

'The review or the rest of it?' she asked casually, but George assumed there was a serious concern beneath her words. He really didn't want to dive into those days. They both had been there, but it had been long ago.

'What do you think?' He asked. She didn't react right away. A tacit agreement to let it rest was very appealing, but they had to discuss it; until they faced the past, resolved it even, every well-intentioned attempt to move forward would fail. Anything else would be just small talk. Did he want something more serious? He evaded the thought by saying: 'Actually, I don't feel safe with myself at all. But if you feel that way, so much the better. I have to admit that, when I saw you in New York, I tried to make myself invisible. But now I am happy we are sitting here on these ridiculous stairs. I also could use some safety and security after all the things that have happened.'

'Actually we were quite good together.'

George nodded: 'Were is past tense.' For a moment he saw a glimpse of disappointment gliding over her face, so he continued more cheerfully: 'What shall we do? Future tense.'

'Let's have a drink. I am very thirsty.'

'I will get us something at that shop over there.'

He returned with a cola, a small bottle of wine and two cups.

How eager she was to have a glass of wine. To let the warmth of the

alcohol expel the chill of the irrational. One small glass wouldn't cause any harm.

'I'd love some wine, thank you. Let's drink to us.' Charlotte requested.

In an inviting gesture George held the cup before her: 'Can you clink with paper cups? Well, never mind. Let's try. The two of us will form a wonderful chord.'

They drank. Because she had made her choice so consciously, the effect of the wine was greater than usual. This was exactly what she needed. Some injection from outside to direct her to the state of mind she ought to have in the first place.

'Actually there are three of us.'

George understood the implication right away, but he pretended to be ignorant. He didn't want to make an enormous blunder like asking after a pregnancy that didn't exist. 'What do you mean? Three?'

'I am pregnant.'

After having congratulated her extensively, he asked if she knew it would be a boy or a girl.'

'It's only eight weeks. They can't tell.'

'And may I know who the father is?'

'Someone whom I briefly thought was okay. But he is no longer relevant. I am the mother.'

'So can I deduct that your reservations about men have completely disappeared?'

'I don't think so. They ought to have grown after this guy, the father, but they haven't. Instead I have become stronger.' She looked at him confidently. 'I dealt with him and it didn't devastate me.'

George didn't delve any further into the topic, restricting himself to a simple: 'Children are fun.'

'Do you have children?'

'No, just a nephew, but I consider him a bit like my own son. He is eight now and he is great. Tim. The only person, I think, who inspires spontaneous happiness in me. He wants to be an architect, by the way, like me, his great example. He should know the truth.' George tried to put a casual mix of gravity and irony in his voice.

'Where are you actually coming from? Were you staying in New York?'

'No, I was on a tropical island.'

Charlotte laughed: 'A coconut isle? What were you up to there, for crying out loud? Designing a new coconut beach tent?'

'Don't start with your sarcasm.' But he sounded merry, free of reproach. More seriously he added: 'I have had a lot on my mind, the failure of a huge project, divorce from my wife, my father's death. I needed a break and some fresh air, some distance.' It had been a long time since he had spoken so easily with anyone. Perhaps that night in Florence, a few months ago; but then he had fled. Now there would be no flight. He was free.

'Sorry. I didn't know all that.'

'Doesn't matter. How could you?'

'You were married?'

He laughed: 'We all make mistakes.' Was he too hard on Alice now? He suddenly remembered that Alice and Charlotte had been fellow students at the university. 'Alice Winter. Perhaps you remember her? We were married for fourteen years, until a few months ago. I left her, so you don't have to be cautious about it.' He laughed again.

'Alice, yes. I remember her. Good looking girl. You did well. Did she come right after me?'

'If you want to know, yes. She was the next.' He looked at his

watch.

Immediately Charlotte got serious again: 'I am sorry, perhaps that wasn't thoughtful.'

She looked away at the never-ending flow of passengers, visible through the great windows at the other side of the hall; an aimless stream it seemed, endlessly in search of new destinations.

'You know, Charlotte, life took an unexpected turn the last night that we were together. The road split and I pursued the other path. I don't even know that it was the wrong route. Dead end street, detour, who can say? But I have not become some wounded romantic. The road was surely not unpleasant.'

'But if you look back, would you want it to have gone differently? Do you wish that I hadn't sent you away?'

'That,' he responded slowly, 'is an unanswerable question. If I say yes, then I declare that my life has been second best and if I say no, then I am a rude dork. And,' he added, 'not completely honest towards you.'

'So you feel some remorse. Don't be ashamed. I also have the sense of a missed chance. Or rather, a messed up chance.' She smiled. 'I still remember your letter so well.'

'Like your criticism of my show?'

'I probably wrote that out of frustration.' Her smile grew. 'You see, I really can be magnanimous.'

They both laughed.

'Yes, that letter,' George pondered. 'Like the one after your criticism, also written a bit boozed. But genuinely meant; I think I remember what was in it. You haven't kept it, I hope?' He hoped she had always kept it.

For a moment it was on her tongue to say she had thrown it away;

he seemed to think it strange that she might still have it. But she didn't lie. 'I know exactly where I keep it. And I remember perfectly how courtly you were and didn't show any resentment. You didn't reproach me. I had held out the prospect of a beautiful future together and then suddenly I ran out on you. Reading that letter gave me the safe feeling that somewhere in this world someone would always care about me, no matter what might happen. But you probably saw it as just a heartless rejection.'

George nodded. He remembered too well. But he didn't want to reminisce about the past. Could this chance meeting offer them a future? 'I want to erase guilt from my vocabulary. Guilt and remorse. Both get you nowhere. I have lived my whole life under the pressure of having to feel guilty. Believing that I was guilty because of the choices I made. Or, at least, I was supposed to show some regret. But I am not guilty. And I don't need to have regrets. Regrets stem from wronging somebody else, not yourself. And I did you no wrong.'

'I know. But I wronged you. And I regret that.'

'No. You made a choice. One that made complete sense to you, back then. And now, yes now. Now your perspective has changed. Then you decided that we wouldn't prolong what we had; that was right for you. I acknowledged that situation, I understand what you did and why you did it. End of story. At least for the moment.'

Charlotte found the open-endedness of his summary encouraging, so she continued seriously: 'if it matters to you, I have messed up considerably. The last half year in particular, has been incredibly chaotic. Almost farcical.'

'Wait, I have still to reschedule my flight. If it's possible. I will check at the counter of the airline. Will you come along with me or would you rather stay here?'

Charlotte hesitated. George noticed and with an encouraging “I will be back in a second” he got up. Cautiously he touched her shoulder and by the touch, he remembered why he had desired her.

It seemed that he was gone for ages. In the meantime, she recalled the poignant moments of that decisive night. She had abruptly and unintentionally seen George as some newfangled appearance of her disgusting stepfather and had viewed him - as she did all other men - as amalgam of that evil and that pain. She had sentenced George, knowing that she was doing it unwillingly and without justification. That night had been out of her thoughts for a long time; she had exiled it to the darkest corner of her memory. Now, she tried to imagine how hurt he must have been. In his place she would doubtlessly still be furious. But George was different. The letter he had written that night proved it.

Finally she saw him returning. ‘I had to buy a new ticket. Never mind, now I have two!’ he laughed. ‘In either case I will fly to Amsterdam at some point.’

So, they still had some time together. Not much, but it was enough for now. She tried to recreate her earlier carefree mood.

‘Why didn’t you stay on that island?’

‘As I said: I didn’t want to be alone anymore. Actually, I need to finish my project. I am going to battle for that. But I just called and it looks promising.’

‘Which project?’

‘A plan for the rebuilding of the city center of an Italian town. The city was hit by an earthquake and my task was to restore some buildings and to find a fitting solution for the new ones in between. I had it all worked out. Fabulous architecture, if I may say so.’ His enthusiasm increased: ‘I wished to do justice to the catastrophe by

creating a combination of restored older buildings and spectacular new ones, linked by a common architecture and all bound together by a splendid monument right in the middle. All light and reflection. My plan was, correction, is, amazing.'

'How did it go wrong?'

George started as he had before with Nicole, but now he told everything. Without hesitation and without lies. He told her about Violetta: 'For one night I thought I would be happy for the rest of my life. But it was all a house of cards. Later, I considered checking in into that hotel where we had been together, but I recognized the absurdity of it. Ludicrous to think that, if she could abandon me there and then, in the middle of our happiness, she would reappear. She has had her chance and she explicitly did not choose me.'

Charlotte listened to his story and when she heard about the death of his father, she felt her eyes getting moist.

'I just called Herbert Jansen and it looks like the project is on track,' he reiterated. 'Wait, I've kept a sketch. I was not capable of saying goodbye to it. There you have it; how odd fate can be. You intend to leave everything behind you and such a tiny item you carry around the whole time. That speaks volumes.'

He pulled a folded paper, the size of a letter, from his wallet. On it Charlotte saw a drawing of movement like an undulating wave, that came to a standstill right at the moment the wave would curl over; a sharp needle, slightly oblique, pointed upward from the ground.

Charlotte wanted to break in, but George was continuing: 'Of course this is an early, rough sketch. But you get the drift.'

Charlotte observed him for a long time: 'Is it coincidence, us, sitting here after all these years, together?'

Somewhat taken aback by the change of subject, George said: 'you

know what Einstein said: “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.” I agree with him. I don’t want to think everything is predetermined. And, even if it were, there are still so many things you can’t explain. It often narrows down to a semantic problem – what do you call something you can’t explain? You could call it God, or just a problem you haven’t solved yet. Or you give it a nice tautological scientific name. Not everything is logical. Who are we to see the connections? We are too limited to have a real insight even into our own lives. The world fits together by contradictions and I am glad about that. It’s good to know that we can’t explain everything. Are we capable of seeing the use and logic of all things? It’s coincidence and at the same time it is not. But that doesn’t mean that there is no line or structure. We ourselves make the coincidences in our lives, there is no fate. Every influence counts. Each conversation, no matter how short and superficial, makes a difference. So does every detail. And, because we can’t see the big picture, we call it coincidence, or fate, or God, or predestination. Or a miracle. The burden of being human is that we are blessed with phenomenal comprehension, but unfortunately we were not granted the ability to grasp it all.’

‘Still the same inveterate old windbag,’ she laughed. For a while she fell silent, looking down. When she raised her head, she said softly: ‘If the opera singer hadn’t been there, I would never have left Rome and never come to New York. I would never have been here and certainly I wouldn’t be pregnant. Coincidence or not?’

‘I wouldn’t joke about it, in any case,’ George warned. ‘But what do you mean, the opera singer?’

‘I am not joking. My fiasco was with that opera singer, Viktor Stavros! You wouldn’t believe how I let him charm me. And then my trip to New York. Do you really want to hear this?’

‘Let’s have it. But not too many feelings of guilt. Deal?’

‘Deal.’ Charlotte too spoke without restraint. It was wonderful to pour her heart out to George. He listened and a sense of timelessness took hold of him, as it had on New Year’s Eve; again the whole world stood still and now it was just the two of them.

Charlotte told him about the relief and the connection she had felt with the woman. ‘Wait, I will show you the picture,’ she said. She reached for her bag and drew the picture out of it. ‘You see, here, that’s me. I’m taking off and there I crash down, right on that skewer, or whatever it is. But I know now that it is not going to happen. Do you know what?’ She feared that she was getting too rushed, but she continued. George would understand. ‘The stone broke. Right on that skewer. Something happened. Call it a miracle.’

‘I don’t much believe in miracles. They are just somewhat too divine. But I can understand what you are getting at. Good looking lady, by the way. That’s why you were reminded of yourself.’ He gave her a wink.

Charlotte noticed the flattery, but didn’t let it show. She looked at the relief again. ‘Not any more. But it was my future. You probably think I am crazy.’

‘No, I don’t, actually. But it doesn’t sound very scientific.’

‘*Passengers for flight KL 563 to Amsterdam, please proceed to gate 25 for boarding.*’ The announcement reverberated from the omnipresent but invisible speakers.

‘They are calling my flight,’ George said and Charlotte thought that she heard regret in his voice. ‘However, it would be nice if we could stay together for a bit longer. We could drink to our new lives. I could use that and I suppose you could too.’

‘Come with me. To Rome,’ Charlotte couldn’t help but say it,

despite her concern that with her words the enchantment would be gone. ‘Change your plan again. Or, let’s stay here. We’ll do whatever you want. Go to the Savoy. We can disappear in London. In the National Gallery. Respite. Although, rainy London is not the place for us, isn’t it?’ Her voice was agitated. Catching her breath, she tried to slow down: ‘Let’s have coffee. There, at that bar.’

He agreed. As slowly as they could, they finished their drinks, all too aware that their time together was running out. Both accepted gratefully the postponement of the end when the waiter offered them a second cup. But the waiter couldn’t make the final decision for them.

‘*Passengers for flight AZ 356 to Rome, please proceed to gate 22 for boarding,*’ the second announcement came from the speakers.

‘Seems that I have a choice to make,’ said George, ‘or, we do.’

‘Let’s make the right choice, this time’

‘Rome,’ George reflected. ‘Sounds nice. I don’t know. Perhaps it would be better to stick to our original plans. You have a plan as well, I think. But still, Rome is more alluring than Rotterdam.’

‘Spring is coming. *La Primavera*. It is delightful to promenade in Rome now. Don’t you have to be in Italy for your project?’

‘It can snow in Rome, you know.’

‘Of course, but it rarely does.’ Charlotte responded eagerly. Anything to delay the parting. ‘Funny you would mention it. It snowed a month ago, when I was in the airport in Rome heading for New York. They have no experience whatsoever with snow, so all the planes were delayed for hours.’

‘I was there too that day. Too bad we missed each other. Although...’ Without finishing his sentence he stared long at the wall of glass that provided a view of the runways.

‘*Last call for passengers for flight KL 563 to Amsterdam. Please proceed to*

gate 25 for boarding.'

'Don't take that one, George.' Again he heard her: 'Let's build a new perspective from this coincidence. Come with me to Rome. I am having a baby and I want her to be safe. Please come with me to Rome. Let's just stay together.'

'Miraculous, Charlotte.' He got up. 'Come. Let's go.'

In the twilight, a fierce northwestern wind rushed over the airport. Everything else was quiet, anonymously silent. On the platform flight AZ 356 was ready for takeoff. Slowly the airplane started to move, its wings and tail shuddering. Sluggishly, it taxied to the runway, awaiting take-off. Suddenly it came alive. The humming became louder, turning into a monstrous roar. It moved forward, faster and faster. Just before the end of the strip it took off, first reluctantly, but then with more conviction. Gradually its flight path grew steeper. It had discarded its inertia and like a bird, it gracefully gained height, freeing itself from the earth. Higher and higher, it sought the skies through the low clouds. For a moment the sunlight reflected off of the tip of its wing, and, as if that were the sign, it arced elegantly toward the west and the last weak light of day. Eventually, it was only a dark spot against the grey dusk of the twilight. Higher and smaller and further away, on its lonely course, until it was hidden from view by the clouds.

Epilogue

The needle of the monument seemed to point to the small, moving dot of an airplane in the clear dimming sky, which was full of expectancy for the first infinite twinkles.

Esther loved to walk under these porticoes. To her left stood the old cathedral, now restored, with its long stretching arches repeated in the surrounding buildings. To her right she saw the new cultural center and the library. In between them stood the lower buildings, all connected by arcades. Underneath the porticoes she sensed the vitality of shops, bars, restaurants. There were people everywhere on the square, in the open space between the trees, terraces and fountains.

At the center of the plaza, the wafer-thin spiked stone rose, pointing upward in a slight curve. The light played on the stone, transparent, translucent, diaphanous. Nearly ethereal, the stone suggested an impossible connection between heaven and earth.

Esther's eyes traveled up the needle to the shining dot of the airplane far above it. Like a proud star, it proclaimed victory over the downward force of the earth, suggesting that the escape from the world had triumphantly begun.

David de Wolf was born in The Netherlands in 1958 and studied Dutch Language and History of Art at the University of Nijmegen. He graduated with a Master of Arts in 1988. Since then he has worked as journalist, tour guide in Italy and since 1995 independently as communications manager, with a specialty in the field of New Media. In 2011, he moved to Israel and he now lives about 10 miles north of Tel Aviv. Solace of Stone is his first novel.



An earthquake has destroyed the center of a Sicilian town. Architect George Nobel is charged with creating a plan for its restoration. At about the same time, someone finds a mysterious piece of art in a South American jungle - a relief carved in slate. Art historian Charlotte Vermeer gets the assignment to catalogue the relief.

Solace of Stone chronicles their separate stories. Charlotte is pregnant after a passionate love affair with an opera singer, a love affair she had considered completely improbable. Stretching to find new directions in new places, she learns once again to value her future and that of her child.

George is confronting a failing marriage and his father's death. Drowning in cynicism, he is tempted to turn his back on the world, until he recognizes the importance of his town project. When the two meet, they consider the prospect of a future together.