State of Emergency

Christopher Blair Knapp
Westport, CT

BA, Middlebury College, 2007

A thesis presented to the
Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia
in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2017

1 – HEATWAVE

As the news spread around the city that temperatures in Paris would soon reach forty degrees and stay that way for the better part of a week, our chief concern became how the heat would affect the outcome of the medical procedure we'd undertaken precisely a week before the heat was to begin—if, that is, the forecasted heat would affect the outcome of the procedure in the least way. There were no air conditioners in Paris, none that we knew of, and certainly none at all in our apartment, at the top floor of a building held up by wooden beams, where the tendency of even moderate heat was to assume non-physical properties that defied belief, and where we felt especially vulnerable to whatever effects might result from the supernatural heat that was promised. It was true that in fancier parts of town, people lived within thick calcite walls, quarried from the cool and dank stratum of limestone beneath the city itself, and these would go a long way toward insulating these people from the air outside. And because as many as fifteen thousand people had died in France during a heat wave twelve years previous, senior citizens nationwide would be receiving daily phone calls from the government, to make sure they were okay. But the rest of Paris would be left to see to its own wellbeing, however it might: my wife assumed a stance of exasperation when I began to ask strangers—with my pen poised above a notepad as if I were a reporter, which she could have but didn't point out I definitively was not—how they planned to avoid being inconvenienced or killed. Many of the bazaars had already moved their fans and spray bottles out to the sidewalks, where they'd immediately sold out. Chinese prostitutes on Boulevard de Belleville asked passersby to buy them cans of beer, an odd, loopy provocation that seemed to gratify in them a sophisticated sense of irony. In the supermarket an elderly woman I recognized from the neighborhood was buying a cold pack, to be worn, she explained, grinning in a kind of sly embarrassment, beneath her hijab on the back of her neck. The Vietnamese bistro, which was hardly ever open anyway, remained shuttered

through lunch and dinner, and Estelle and her husband were nowhere to be found. West African men at noon in Nation, at Denfert and in Bastille, stretched out in shady patches of grass to nap. The shoeless Romani sat on camp chairs outside their vans, outside tents they'd pitched on sidewalks, drinking bottles of wine impassively, as ever, though I thought it best to leave them alone. Even trying to formulate the question, my wife observed—whether the heat would affect the outcome of the procedure, and then if so in what way—so that it wouldn't sound stupid to a medical professional, made her feel helpless and small. That neither I nor my wife was in a position to know whether it was plausible that heat or anything else would affect the outcome of the procedure, I said to my wife, could be taken as evidence that we were perhaps unfit to benefit from the procedure's intended result, which is to say, unfit to have and ostensibly care for a child. That in the second half of her cycle I would permit such a callow thought even to come into my head, she told me—to say nothing of giving it voice—could be taken as evidence to the same effect.

We hadn't been sleeping well, and in the cool mornings with our eyes burning from fatigue we held each other, in the blanket, with stiffness in our joints and in our necks and backs, as through the open windows evidence reached us of the earliest stages in the city's coming to life—the slightly chemical smell of the industrial bakery; the slightly carnal smell of the sanitation truck; the safety noise the forklift made in the warehouse across the street; the heavy-duty rattle of pallets being loaded in and out of box trucks; our own front gate swinging open and slamming shut; the rush of water in the walls as toilets downstairs began to flush; the morning songs of birds and the shadows of birds in flight; the lifting of the curtains in the stirring breeze; and of course the gradual appearance of the sun in the shafts of dust that hung in the air around us—and it was a strange experience, we agreed, to feel that the limits of self were expanded in the mere anticipation of intemperate weather, of extenuating circumstances, of heat, in

a word, heat and light; our sudden feeling, that is to say, that we belonged to the world outside, and that at the same time our place was here, with unbrushed teeth. This was the week that Alexis Tsipras threw the entire continent into turmoil by announcing that the question of whether Greece would accept the humiliating terms of fiscal reprieve that had been presented by the European Council, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—three discrete and outlandishly complex bureaucracies that the news media took satisfaction in referring to collectively in Russian—would be settled by the people of Greece themselves, in a naí-or-ochi referendum to take place in just a few days' time; it had in fact been the very day of this announcement that we rode the train from the lab on Drouot to Docteur Hainot's offices in Bastille, taking turns carrying a cardboard tube that contained a glass tube that the technician had advised us not to unsettle in the least way, to in fact imagine as containing a volatile chemical agent that would combust at the slightest disturbance, an image that had caused to appear on my wife's face—which despite my best efforts had been graven in disquiet all day—a perceptible grin, a moving assertion of her mischievous nature, as if it were a custom she herself observed fastidiously, never to describe sperm this way. The technician, a plain woman in her forties with an alluring crooked tooth, had shaken my freshly washed right hand, had wished us the best of luck. And moments later, on rue Drouot, a street notable chiefly as a center of philately, my wife and I had amused ourselves by wondering whether it was the best of luck in delivering my centrifuged sperm across the city, which the technician had explicitly described as a perilous undertaking, or the best of luck in conceiving a child and starting a family and having a happy life, the peril of which was implicit, that she wished for us. We'd ridden the train in the same playful spirit: my wife, taking over responsibility for the tube's safe passage, held it with exaggerated care, and in English described various scenarios in which its contents could be used to cause a public disturbance. There was a power to it, she mused: walking around with all this sperm—though of course, she said, she supposed I already knew that. I assumed

she realized, I responded, that in all likelihood many of the nice people around us understood English perfectly well. It was essentially in jest that I'd said so, but indeed, the train presently filled with tourists, who as it turned out not only understood English but spoke it without shame; we soon fell into silence, my wife and I, we were seated face to face, our knees were touching, and for a time I watched her grow brighter and brighter still as, I imagined, lighthearted thoughts continued to occur to her; and I despaired of having given her cause not to share these thoughts with me, to turn instead to inner resources for distraction from what she anticipated based on prior experience—based that is on five such experiences—to be not so much a painful procedure as one that occasioned a debilitating sense of panic, which until she became pregnant would continue indefinitely to protract. At length, her features settled from brightness into something else, into blankness, as if within herself she were enacting a calm and orderly evacuation, a drill I'd seen her practice often in the course of our marriage, in times that her thoughts turned dark; in my mind, this shift became oddly connected to the announcement of the Greek vote on the Troika bailout package, the details of which I was just then reading on my phone as I sat across from her on the

train with our knees touching, and which I took to be a further milestone in the long dissolution of civilized human society; in the days that followed, during which it seemed reasonable to hope that something definitive and irreversible was in store, she remained beyond my reach, so that I wasn't sure exactly what she meant when, in the last of the cool mornings that preceded the heat, nearly a week after the procedure, she observed, with a particular morning frankness, that it had not always been the case that she experienced hope as dread.

In the streets that morning there was a hushed busyness, as if it were a holiday and the shops would close at noon. As a public service, the grocery store was selling Perrier at cost. I bought two

cases and carried them home on my shoulders; my wife put two bottles in the freezer and by the time they were cold enough to drink it was hot enough outside to strip down to shorts and t-shirts. We spent the afternoon in a state of high abstraction. At a murmur, French radio streamed in a minimized window on my wife's computer. She fanned herself with a flattened-out Special K box, but decided it was beside the point. In our initial experience of it we agreed that the heat felt not quite like heat at all, but more like the gradual increase in pressure you'd expect to undergo as you sank toward the ocean floor. It would be hours before the sun would set, but to preserve the cooler morning air we'd shuttered the skylights, and covered the windows with cheap fleece blankets we'd acquired over the years from Ikea, and IcelandAir, and in the half-dark apartment, my wife's face was lit by the glow of her computer screen, which somehow contributed to the dreamlike sense I had that I was breathing underwater. The sounds of the city, meantime, were fewer, and fainter, another of the heat's strictures that I understood as a physical rather than behavioral phenomenon. There was a video available on YouTube that featured nine minutes of a failed attempt at in vitro fertilization, at a magnification of ten-thousand times—a nightmarish spectacle that in the preceding months I often found my wife watching intently, at any time of day or night—and I could tell she was watching it now because of the particular intensity of her expression, as if it demonstrated some mistake she could learn to avoid.

It was true that a long time had passed since we'd entered the first phase of our attempts to conceive, a phase that had entailed nothing more than a gradual suspension of our attempts not to conceive. A year or so into our marriage, when my wife stopped taking her birth control, it was both an organic development and a deliberate assertion of our adulthood, of our willingness to take things as they came, of our recognition that for true adults taking things as they came was the only option available. There followed in our intimate life a period characterized by the method of withdrawal, a

strategy familiar to us both from the pornographic material we had by that time each admitted to consulting privately, and one we had both from a young age been taught to distrust. Soon too the rhythm method, perhaps because the withdrawal method proved too effective, entered our thinking; for this purpose, we paid a modest sum for an app that my wife installed on her phone, an app that was very popular at that time in Brooklyn generally, but which, by the following year, when we'd abandoned the pretense of avoiding the middle of her cycle, in our own home fell into disuse. Meanwhile in this process of gradual de-escalation we somehow grew closer and closer, as what we perceived to be the stakes of our shared life rose; and as they rose, this feeling of lifelong commitment came to be the defining feature of my self-image; I had, I said to myself, put away childish things, and was ready to become what my father referred to as a man. In an idle and half-ironic way, as our second anniversary approached, we began to toy with baby names—especially at night, when having practiced the rhythm method in concert with the non-withdrawal method we lay awake in distress over other areas of our life, such as the financial area, an area of my own life in particular that at just that time was beginning to fall apart, for the reason that I had quit my job in a fit of aggravation at the state of still another area of my life, the artistic area, which had always been bone-dry—in the dark we began to toy with names, though it turned out to be difficult to think of any that didn't already belong to people we hated, or to the family pets of family friends. My wife's period, which in the earliest phase of our trying to conceive, the phase that is of not trying not to conceive, had come as a mild relief to us both, soon arrived as a mild disappointment, and later as a source low-frequency despair. Our discussion of names became a discussion of appearance: what would a baby we made together look like, would she—for we always spoke of a baby girl—would she have my beakish nose, my wife's round cheeks, was it possible she would have blue eyes, or that she would have straight hair. The same app, by that point, had been made over to include a rather vivid and distasteful graphic to denote days of ovulation; nevertheless, we reinstalled it on her

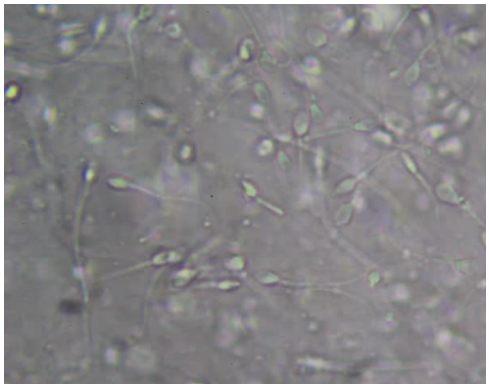
phone, and put it to the precise opposite of its intended use. Then began the phase of a desperation that mounted month by month. The sight of a pregnant woman, news of a pregnancy within our social orbit, the use of certain words in either French or English, had the power now to reduce my wife to fits of weeping so convulsive that they seemed even to her to demand medical attention. Was there anything, I would ask when these fits occurred, that I could do to help? Get me a straightjacket, she would sob, swaddle me and make me calm. We were into our third year of marriage, and second year of trying to reproduce, when the decision to consult a fertility specialist, to afford which in New York we'd have to sell the resulting firstborn anyway, became unavoidable, and we moved not only to Paris, my wife's hometown, but into, as it happened, an apartment on the very same floor as the apartment where she'd grown up.

As the temperature continued to climb, on the afternoon that the heatwave began, and our feeling of being trapped in our bodies increased, I began to understand what it was about the prospect of the week ahead of us that in a strange way I was looking forward to: namely, that the effort to escape our bodies would require the total focus of our energy; that the usual considerations of daily life would fall away; that in some way that I couldn't explain, though I did try, the entire experience would if anything be restorative. Heat was subjective, I said, which my wife pointed out was false. Heat was not subjective, she said: time was subjective, beauty was subjective; our bodies experienced heat within precise limits, it was a problem of regulation. We were, by this point, deploying the pullout sofa in anticipation of sleeping there, or at least lying there until morning, as there was no question of sleeping on the mezzanine level, where our bed was, and where the hottest air in our apartment, which had already gathered the hottest air in the building, had formed a dense

miasma. On my wife's computer, France Inter persisted, and for a minute I stopped what I was doing, having found myself suddenly following not only the general drift of the discussion, but every word, without any of the usual gaps to fill from my imagination—a rare experience of comprehension for me, in the same family of experiences as leaping aboard a train just as the doors shut behind you. My wife, too, paused, and for a time we listened soberly as two men hashed out the fate of Greece, the wisdom of austerity, the chimerical notion of supranational consensus in a union founded for the purpose of trading steel and coal. By this time it seemed safe to open the windows; beyond the permanent dusk we'd created in our apartment was the actual dusk of the world outside, an effect, it somehow made me uneasy to remember, of the planet's continual turning. For the EU, my wife explained once I'd lost the thread and we'd resumed making up the sofa-bed, to agree to restructure Greece's debt would be to admit that hundreds of billions of dollars in existing loans, none of which should ever have been approved in the first place, were now beyond recovering—a prospect no official seeking reelection could be expected to relish, and one that rankled German sensibilities in particular to the point of frothy indignation. For the Greek government, meanwhile, to accept the Troika's terms of austerity would be to lead the nation into protracted fiscal ruin, as well as a state of abject humiliation from which it was unlikely to ever recover. The self-righteous tone Troika officials had taken, furthermore, she said, switching to French now, both in public statements pertaining to the crisis, and in the language they'd used in the text of the bailout package, reinforced the grotesque principle that to borrow money recklessly, whether out of optimism or desperation, was a greater sin than to lend money recklessly, irrespective of the risk incurred. Yorgos, she went on, referring to a downstairs neighbor, had flown back to Athens just that week—with, I added, an empty suitcase, a joke I had been making for many months now. If that was the case, my wife said, unless he filled it with Aegean sand, it would still be empty when he returned, as banks were closed until further notice, and withdrawals at ATMs were limited to sixty euros a day. I

admired about my wife that the formulation of these thoughts ran parallel in her mind to the considerable and mounting psychic pain of waiting to find out whether she was pregnant, that she may even, for that matter, have formulated these thoughts as a result of that pain. Meantime, she continued after a brief silence, Syrians were walking across Turkey and paddling out to Kos or across the water to Greece's Aegean coast, where the resources and infrastructure to accommodate them simply didn't exist. For the privilege of which voyage, she said, they paid two thousand euros or more, a sum, I remarked in awe, by way of response to all this, that would cover the minimum payments on our credit cards for nearly three months.

Running the dishwasher was a mistake we would not repeat. The cloud of steam it released when it had finished its cycle condensed on my skin and immediately became indistinguishable from my own sweat. Through an open skylight, we could hear neighborhood teenagers marching up the abandoned train line that ran directly below; we could hear their footsteps on the loose stone ballast, headed into the tunnel up the tracks, a cool place to do whatever they did for fun; to better listen, I made delicate work of returning our plates and bowls and glasses to their shelves: the anticipation their voices contained, the faith in possibility, the sense they seemed to convey that the heat was only another aspect of their need for each other's bodies, and further that my wife had been one of these children, had made trouble on these same tracks, all of this pleased me to no end; and feeling playful, though neither of us had spoken for some time, I asked her now what she thought it meant about the type of adults we'd become, that we used so many more spoons than forks or knives. She didn't laugh but rather kissed me between my shoulder blades, and then asked me what we should eat, as if the taste of my sweat had reminded her that she was hungry. Turning on the oven, or even the stove, or even the microwave, was



unthinkable. When it was finally fully dark outside, close to eleven, we ate a bowl of frozen raspberries apiece, sitting cross-legged on the pullout. The digital projector generated a lot of heat but we agreed that it was indispensable. Two movies we started hinged on untimely pregnancies. A third involved a vivid miscarriage. My wife knitted her eyebrows but remained steady as we began a fourth. In the dystopian future this film portrayed, no children had been born anywhere on the planet for eighteen years, the global effects of which were outlined in the opening scene in news reports, in propaganda on posters, graffiti on gutted buildings, announcements made on loud-speakers planted above the streets. I said to my wife that it was hard to square the world that was being depicted—a world in near-total collapse, in which militarized police enforced draconian prohibitions on movement and asylum seekers were brutally corralled into chainlink cages—with the problem of under-population, with the problem of arrested growth. We were both of us by now completely nude, and with a bottle she'd bought for the purpose she occasionally sprayed a fine mist into the air above us, which caught in the projector's light before it fell down over our skin. In circumstances of under population and arrested growth, I said, you would expect if anything that society would become more manageable rather than less. She shrugged and said that maybe it was the other way around—meaning exactly what I never found out; by the end of the first act she was asleep. It was one of my favorite things about watching movies with my wife that by the end of the first act she so dependably fell asleep, and that she so soundly slept beside me through whatever drama developed onscreen; when it became the hero's business to escort the world's only known pregnant woman to safety, I continued watching, and felt extremely content. When she woke, however, the movie was in its harrowing climax: a six-minute shot, set in a bombed-out refugee camp, tracking a chaotic and sprawling gun battle, the emotional stakes of which were contained in the distant sound of a baby's crying. She blinked awake, my wife, in the blue light, nodding slightly, as if the events onscreen confirmed some problem of a dream she'd had. The apartment had not yet

perceptibly begun to cool. I watched her chest rise and fall and it occurred to me that it was when she was most vulnerable that I was most aware of her breathing. My own experience of the rest of the movie was a function of what I imagined her experience of the rest of the movie to be, in the confusion of half-sleep, in the confusion of half-darkness, of misfired synapses, private anguish. But when the credits came on she killed the sound, and began very lucidly to speak.

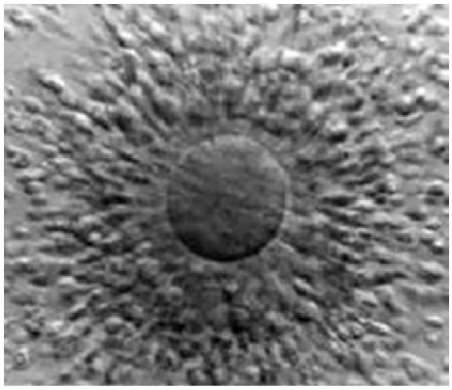
I have to explain, she said evenly, that it's not something I ever wanted consciously, but rather, it's something that my body suddenly knows: what it is to carry a child. What I feel is a physical emptiness—not a void to fill but rather something newly absent; I feel that part of me that always existed has gone missing. The kids were tromping out of the tunnel now and back up the tracks toward their homes. Some of them were singing. The projected light of the film caught the apartment's fan-tossed dust, and the sweat at my wife's temples and along her sternum, and of course her dark brown eyes. I know that your life, she went on, has had its deferments and frustrated expectations but I need you to understand that you don't know how this feels.

The heat was forecasted to last seven days and to break on the very day we would learn whether the procedure had worked and we would become parents. In that first day or so, it was still possible to think of perspiration as something that could be helped. We took cold showers, stood at the open fridge, my wife froze bowls of water and set them in front of the fan. In the evening we watched stylish works of French and Japanese and Czech surrealism, movies that, as my wife put it, crossed boundaries, slipped out of themselves, movies in which even childbirth was unrecognizable as a human process. If we didn't move when they ended, the projector would power down after fifteen minutes; because my wife's computer was set to play a slideshow from her photo library after five, inside a ten-minute window we were treated to our life in pictures: visits to beaches, our niece's birthday, one or the other of us trying on a wig or a funny hat. A lot of them were photos I'd texted

her, from the grocery store for example, to see if I'd found the correct brand of yogurt, or quinoa, or in one case a screengrab, from Turner and Hooch, which I'd sent her as a gesture of gratitude: T. Hanks, I'd said. One featured the graffiti that covered the door of our apartment, a chaotic tableau of tags and graphics in which the French term describing a biracial woman figured prominently: *Metisse*. This same term was the title that the white director who had once lived in our apartment had given his first film—it had in fact been in celebration of the release of this film that the director had spray-painted its title all over what had at the time been the door to his own home, an incident my wife, who was eight years old at the time and lived next door, remembered by the fumes that filled the stairwell, and by the mild stir it caused amongst the rest of the building's residents, many of whom had lent their names to minor characters in the film, and some of whom had even appeared as extras. The star had been the director's wife, who happened as well to be my own wife's first cousin, in the role of a young biracial woman who was pregnant for the first time, and what's more with a child who would be, depending on which of her lovers was the father, either three-quarters black or three-quarters white. It was this character, the pregnant metisse of the title, who bore the name of the director's wife's eight-year-old first cousin; who bore, in short, my own wife's name. None of which did I learn until later, but I think now that it must have come to my wife's mind during the few seconds this photo of our door was projected on our wall—a very direct reminder that this was the door we lived behind—for it was apropos of nothing else that she asked in a rhetorical way whether it were possible that our own daughter would be darker skinned than she herself was, and if so, would her life in certain ways not be easier; would it not be easier, that is, if she were to bear the outward traces of the history that was in her blood. I was prepared to say only that the less our baby looked like me the better; by this point a series of photos had begun that showed our wedding, at City Hall, the fourth anniversary of which event had only just come and gone, and when these came up, our breathing changed, and we fell silent. In one, my wife, at the

officiant's invitation, was placing the ring on my finger. Her smile was at capacity. My expression was somewhat wry, and I was looking at something the camera didn't catch, as if it were possible, at that moment, for anything at all to be happening out of frame.

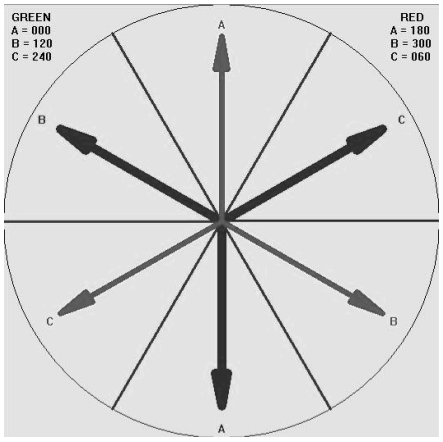
Daylight hours were characterized by long periods of silence, broken only occasionally by the articulation of thoughts we seemed to share, cool places we could think of, the abandoned train tunnel, the ocean floor, the dark surface of the moon; and I spent this time at my computer—



occasionally remembering my posture and then settling at length into my accustomed slouch—in the nominal process of writing, but in reality merely transcribing from notes, or recreating from memory, things I'd heard people say to each other, or things they'd said to me, regarding events of the world that they felt touched their lives either indirectly or, as was more often the case, directly. Such as the current heat. Mostly I stay inside, the woman in hijab had told me, and I presently transcribed, but if I must go out I crack one of the gel packs that I usually buy in lots of thirty-six from Amazon.fr, which, beneath the scarf, no one would suspect, and so you see it could even be said that the scarf has its advantages, although, she'd added, casting an ironical look around her, I don't expect it to catch on. For months now I'd been doing this, I'd been approaching strangers with my notepad out, my voice recorder running, introducing myself as a journalist, a modest, aspirational lie, and the results I had compiled into a single document, arranged chronologically, without the slightest notion what their future use might be—to simply keep adding to them indefinitely was all I could think to do. I'd long since stopped correcting my posture when I received a text from my friend Zach, announcing that the party he'd planned for that evening would have to be postponed until after the heat broke, if it ever broke, which didn't just then seem certain at all. That was a shame, my wife said—moving about in the kitchen, tying and retying her hair—meaning roughly

that it was not a shame, that there was nothing that appealed to her less than drinking lemonade or grape juice for six hours with my drunken expat friends, which I could understand, and in the present case I was even inclined to agree that it was something of a relief, it was at that time a struggle for me to show my face to the people who knew me best; who knew it was my ambition to become a novelist, for example, who knew that if they made gracious excuses to pay for my drinks I would never decline, who knew that the months of July and August represented a further period of retrenchment in my life, which was already, to their way of thinking, monkishly austere. Only a week before, the school year had ended and I'd had my last paycheck until the fall, and though neither of us had said so aloud my wife and I were both well aware that we would shortly be living on our credit cards again. Not since winter had she gotten a call to assist any of the casting directors who had her phone number; and even in winter, she'd had a run of commercials and music videos—the rates for which were excellent but which never ran for more than a few days—rather than for films or television series, which paid a lesser day-rate but came with contracts weeks or even months long. Claire, the casting director who adored my wife and often hired her to read with actors during auditions even when there wasn't money in the budget for a full-time assistant, had taken maternity leave stretching now into its sixth month; when she called it was for coffee, or to see movies she'd cast the year before, during the period we'd returned to New York for a play my wife was in. Claire, furthermore, whose eyes even before her pregnancy had a way of opening ever wider in enthusiasm as she spoke, as if she were preparing to levitate, was, in motherhood, truly, absorbingly radiant; for my wife, recovery from these visits was a days-long ordeal, and yet she continued to agree to meet her, she wanted to stay on her radar, in the event that Claire ever returned to work. Meanwhile, because my own salary from the various freelance teaching contracts I'd cobbled together that year didn't quite cover the whole of our monthly expenses, she'd taken the only job she'd been able to find, as a part-time nanny for a young woman who lived nearly an hour away by train, who for

obscure reasons was not in a position to take advantage of the generous combination of leave and material support that the state offered to most new parents. And so for four to six hours a day my wife would be alone with a weeks-old infant, and sometimes she'd Skype me during bath time and I would say, though it made my heart swell to see her, that I didn't think it was a good idea to be broadcasting video of someone else's naked child. She had use of a bassinet but to keep him from crying she took him everywhere on her shoulder, or cradled in the crook of her arm, either on errands or just to stroll, all of which she'd report to me on the phone, often in real time: he's asleep! she'd say—and I loved to picture her out in the world this way, it was very easy for me to envision her beaming, absorbing the warmth of this tiny body, swaying as she walked, from side to side. But on the other hand of course there always came the time that she had to hand the boy over to his mother, a nurse's aid in a nearby hospice, or else to his grandmother, an exceedingly frail woman from Guadeloupe who took over in the afternoons, and who in her brusque Caribbean competence reminded my wife of her own mother. And at parties—for we couldn't altogether avoid going to parties—when the people we were friends with, whose own arts-related careers were by then well away from the ground floor, asked what she was working on, she had to say that she was, at almost thirty, babysitting for ten euros an hour; and she wouldn't tell me how far below zero her bank account had fallen but I knew it was more than the bank would countenance much longer; and the nurse's aid, too, had in late spring taken her vacation days to visit her husband in Northern Ireland, and then had never returned, and to find that even so mixed a blessing as this job had been could evaporate as easily as it did was, for my wife and for me as well, an alarming lesson to learn in the context of our modest but pressing wish to create and nourish a life in the world.



It was five days until my wife would be able to test her urine for the presence of hormones produced in a developing placenta, and she took the occasion of her nakedness to watch her body for signs of what it would do, signs such as spotting, bloating, cramping, and fatigue. Change in appetite, irritability. In French, we reflected, so many words could be mistaken for their opposite. Dessous and dessus. Plus and plus. Hello and goodbye. With her free hand she tested her breasts for tenderness. That night, and all the next day and night, we watched a TV series that I'd downloaded from one site and encoded with English subtitles from another, and because of some compatibility issue in the encoding process, the crude pairs of eighth-notes that typically announced background music in standard closed-captioning were in the first season of this series rendered by QuickTime as *Åçâçâç Å*, which was in turn rendered phonetically in my brain as *AH-kah-kah-KAH*. The subtitles I'd downloaded for the second and third seasons didn't announce the music at all, but by this time whenever the score picked up, my brain, in what I thought of as a kind of breathy whisper, said to me, Acacaca, with the result that the pleasure of observing the drama inherent in this mental process surpassed the pleasure of observing the drama of the series, a development which itself soon evolved into an additional layer of drama to observe and fret upon. I'd begun to think of myself as sweating openly, a distinction that seemed to have to do with the animal indifference that now attended my sweating, although on the other hand indifference is perhaps the wrong word; I would have done anything at all to stop sweating, anything that didn't involve spending money. Beneath my neck, beneath my arms, behind my knees, my skin touched itself, an intolerable state of affairs. My wife and I, tucked beneath the large towels she'd soaked in cool water, lay side by side at opposite ends of the sofa, because we'd discovered how powerfully the heat of our individual bodies was increased by any proximity between them, the way that in a fireplace two logs that are merely hot will, as they approach each other, burst into flame. In a sense, we agreed, our bodies had become something separate from either of us, and my wife's body in particular, she noted, had come to

dominate our lives, not only that week but that year. Our present attempt at in vivo intracervical insemination was the last that the government would pay for, and if it failed, the doctor had told us, my wife would have to undergo an exploratory surgery to find out what if anything was wrong, before the government would sign off on in vitro. Each month since January, at the same time every night in the ten days leading up to the procedure, for the purpose of regulating the glandular secretion of luteinizing and follicle-stimulating hormones in order to precisely control the passage of her ovum from her ovaries into her tubes—a process typically regulated by the hypothalamus, or the brain, or what my wife liked to call the pois chiche—I had given her a shot in her belly, using a marker-size apparatus we kept in the fridge, which according to the statement of benefits we received each month in the mail could reasonably have been taken in trade for a used Peugot, or for passage to Greece for a family of Syrians. In our habitual performance of this task we each had our duties: she selected a fresh site for the shot and swabbed her skin with alcohol, while I affixed the needle and dialed in the dosage and flicked the syringe for air bubbles as I'd seen done in hospital dramas and drug films. My wife detested needles—though I think she could tell how much I enjoyed the opportunity to affect competence and expertise—and while I counted aloud to ten-one-thousand, per the instructions on the box, she squeezed her eyes shut and went away in her thoughts, so that she was absent from what I'd come to think of as an act of consecration; but on the other hand when I withdrew the needle from the tiny wound it made, she would collapse in my lap and throw her arms around my neck, a ritual of intimacy that compensated, or nearly compensated, for the impersonal turn our actual intimate life had taken. A turn, I should say, that no one regretted as much as I did, though I knew that my wife took my diminished sex drive as evidence that she'd gotten fat, that in fact she took even her own diminished sex drive as evidence that she'd gotten fat, for among the possible side-effects of this treatment was weight-gain. If she experienced which it was barely perceptible even to me, but as a result of the mere prospect she'd

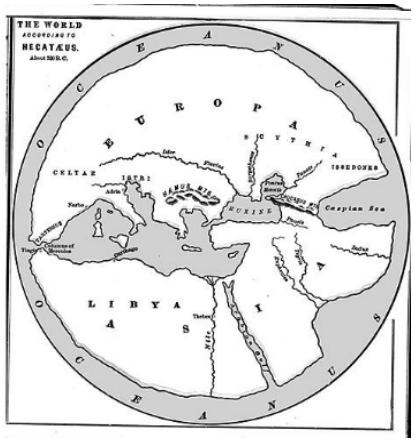
become terribly body-conscious and until the heat had made it absolutely necessary she'd avoided letting me see her in any stage of undress. This trouble was compounded by the small rashes she developed, which obsessed her, though the doctor insisted they were not side effects in fact, but an effect of stress, and at night as she slept her incessant scratching, together with her violent twitching, often kept me awake until nearly dawn. While she thrashed beside me, without quite knowing why I would sometimes inspect the chart she kept of her daily temperature, a chart that also indicated, for those who knew how to read it, when we were to have sex, a program from which we did not deviate. On those rare occasions that I caught a glimpse of, for example, her breasts pressed beneath a forearm while she pulled a shirt over her head one-handed, it had somehow become my conditioned response not to initiate any kind of spontaneous physical intimacy at all or even pay her some salacious compliment, as it was in my nature to do, but rather to lock myself in the bathroom to masturbate in perfect silence, an exertion that, in the present heat, with my wife in a state of continuous nudity, wasn't worth the extra sweat.

It may have been because I felt a need to get out of the house, if only for half an hour, that despite our financial circumstances I suggested we order bo bun, for which of course I offered to pay despite the fact that in an absolute reckoning my own negative money exceeded my wife's by tens of thousands of dollars. This was the third week of Ramadan, and it was out of my way but I took myself through Place de la Reunion, which fell within a district that Bobby Jindal had earlier that year declared unsafe for westerners, and where the streetlights were coming on and in dusk's deepest phase of blue the gold fountain seemed to glow; beneath these lamps, black and brown teenagers

crowded onto benches and stood around on cocked hips, holding close to their faces foil packages they'd carried with them all day, wearing expressions of seriousness and speaking very quietly, savoring, I supposed, like all teenagers, the resentment they felt toward a world they hadn't asked for but whose rules they were nonetheless compelled to obey. Younger children, meanwhile, were flirting with the idea of getting into the fountain, which of course no one could have blamed them for and in fact no one was actively discouraging them from doing; they hung at its edge and stared, as if the water itself would offer permission to enter, while at the margins of the square their parents and grandparents threw bed sheets over the picnic tables, and methodically smoothed the creases with their palms. It was among this last group that I was thrilled to find, in what seemed to be an unofficial capacity as leader, a woman I knew to be, or felt I could assume to be wearing, beneath her headscarf, a cold pack she'd bought from Amazon—a woman, that is, who when she saw me broke into a very natural smile, such that I believed, and still believe, that she genuinely wished me well. To have encountered this scene—the sense of community that was conveyed in this place as well as the momentary access I'd been given to it—as a source of well-being, I understood perfectly well even then, would be a signally patronizing exercise of both white liberal guilt and white liberal smugness, if those two things are in fact distinct, but there was no escaping that well-being was what I felt as I went on my way. The Vietnamese bistro was at the end of rue des Haies, a narrow and meandering street that never failed to excite in me an impulse toward homeownership. Graffiti in three different places repeated the phrase *#jesuischarlie* and in a fourth place read *not afraid*, a phrase I had spent a lot of time reflecting upon since January, when it had come into popular use. In my wife's youth many of these buildings had been abandoned and had fallen into disrepair, and during this time had come to be inhabited by squatters from Africa and the Middle East, who sent their children to schools named after Victor Hugo and Matisse, where they joined the children of other recent immigrants who lived in public housing nearby. My mother- and father-in-law, themselves

from Martinique and Algeria respectively, had been among what could be called the neighborhood's first gentrifiers when around the time my wife was born they moved into their partially roofless, partially floorless top-story walk-up, by simple virtue of the fact that they had managed to buy it. As a kid this street had been a gauntlet for my wife; she'd been catcalled and spat upon and physically assaulted but out of stubbornness had always refused to go the long way round: in front of the bakery, as she told it, for example, was where at seventeen she'd slapped the face of a young man who'd told her as she walked by that he wanted to fuck her in the ass, and who'd responded to being slapped in the face by punching her in the head.

Decrepit residential hotels all over the neighborhood had absorbed most of the squatter population and this may partly have accounted for the brisk business the stately public bath on the corner of rue des Haies and Buzenval was doing whenever I walked by. I watched as along a narrow



ledge on the side of the hotel across the street a striped cat was making its way from one open window to the next; on a tiny balcony a floor above a small child with his chin in his hand was also watching, to see, I thought, if the cat would fall, a thought that on closer inspection proved to be in fact my own projected wish that the cat would fall, an unconscious expression of self that didn't square with the feeling of magnanimity and largeness I was hoping to sustain at least through dinner. In Bistrot Zen when I arrived it was easily a hundred and twenty degrees, and Estelle greeted me in her usual manner—by observing in a kind of sing-song that Madame always called the order in and Monsieur always picked it up. As I stood waiting I searched idly for things to look at, but the dining room of the Bistrot Zen was almost totally undecorated, apart from a pair of beckoning porcelain cats—which I associated with Vietnam not at all, and even more than with Japan with the filmmaker Chris Marker, who adored cats beckoning and otherwise, and who was

often on my mind in Paris, more often in Paris that is than everywhere else, where he was already on my mind quite a lot—which I felt misrepresented actual cats egregiously, in their apparent guilelessness and good nature. While I stood there looking at the friendly porcelain cats and thinking about all the unfriendly real-life cats I'd known, a tall and elegant white woman came in and, excusing herself from the call she was on, passed the time while she waited for her food to be ready chatting amicably with Estelle in what Estelle, in her heavily accented French, told me after the woman had left was perfectly unaccented Vietnamese. Estelle had gotten a perm, I noticed, and this is what I told my wife when I got home; that Estelle had gotten a perm and the heat was doing a number on it.

Our days and nights remained defined by a constant struggle to direct the flow of air and sun. In the mornings for example it was important to wake up and cover the east-facing window, and at sunset to throw all of the windows open and orient the fan to the west, where the highest skylight was, in the interest of vacating the hot air that had accumulated during the day. It was never until evening that we put anything in order. Near dawn the apartment would finally cool off somewhat and we'd be able to get some sleep, then all day we'd leave the pullout pulled out, the sheets in gnarled tangles; and with the cushions thrown about, and with the windows covered with fleece blankets, and with our sweated-through clothes kicked into the corners of the room, it seemed that our life was progressing in the direction of true and irreversible squalor.

When three days remained before my wife could take the test she received a call offering her a position on a film that would be shooting in the fall, a call that had indeed come, quite early in the day, from radiant Claire, though the job would be not in the casting office but rather on set. The film in question, a road comedy the bulk of which would be shot on the highways of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, featured two children, six and eleven, both of whom had already

been cast; my wife, if she accepted, would be their handler. Much of this I gathered as I lay listening to her on the phone; and the rest she explained after, admitting that she had in fact known for several weeks now that this call might come but had said nothing to me, both for fear of jinxing it and because she hoped it would fall through. It went without saying that she would take the offer, which was worth roughly two used Peugots per month, and for a long time we lay in the peculiar daytime darkness, the fan at our feet oscillating back and forth in the neutral fashion of a moderator, and discussed what this would mean for the move we had planned to make together the following month, to a bland Southern town where I had earned a place in a graduate writing program on the strength of a story I'd written about my sister being eaten by wolves. The heat, I was amazed to find, had evolved into a source of not merely severe discomfort but rather continual, throbbing pain, as if our very skins, whose principal duty was to contain us, were in danger of dissolving. I had the spray bottle and occasionally sprayed cool water into the air, not so much for relief as for something to do, though I did close my eyes when it came down over us. Holding each other's hand was a compromise we'd made, and though it was rather disgusting we continued to do so as the morning became the afternoon and we talked circles around the only plausible conclusion, which of course we eventually came to anyway: that I would go ahead to Virginia and she would remain behind.

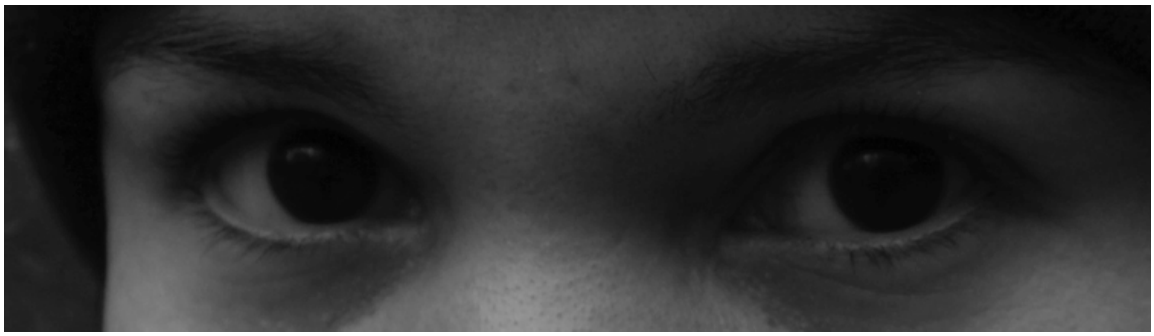
The referendum Tsipras had demanded was underway and I spent the better part of that day reading whatever related material I could find. Pundits in both French- and English-language

publications had all compared Greece to a troublesome adolescent, and the EU generally and Germany in particular to intransigent parents. The type of writer I hoped to become would be able to explain in every particular the course of events that had gotten them as far as this; I was beginning to see the outline of an essay I would write that would use Greece's geographic centrality to make its financial crisis the intersection

of whatever ideas came into my head—the relation between desperation and greed; the notion of global community; the difficulties of marriage; the anxiety it produced in me to share responsibility not only for my own life and not only for my wife's but for a life that currently existed only as an idea that could be carried in a cardboard tube from one part of the city to another. But in truth it was too complex for me, the various systems involved were interconnected in ways I couldn't trace, any vein I followed, to try to find the heart, instead branched continually outward, toward edges that resisted definition. What I understood was that the problem of Greece was an existential one for Europe, for the European project, as people kept saying, but I didn't understand what precisely the European project was. My wife kept directing me back to the shifting nature of national borders: so many Europeans had the feeling that the continent was being flooded with refugees, and among the vessels that rose on this tide was the odious Marine Le Pen, whose father Jean-Marie—founder of the nationalist party his daughter now led—was in office as the elected representative of the twentieth arrondissement the year my wife was born there, despite his agenda of sending the bulk of its residents back from whence they came. Meanwhile Angela Merkel, though Germany continued accepting refugees at a higher rate than any other nation in the EU, refugees who were walking out of Greece and through Macedonia and Serbia and Hungary to get there, was being described in the press as a pitiless shrew, because she'd admitted that there might not, finally, be enough Germany to go around. My wife had spoken to her mother, who would soon be returning from a theater festival in Frankfurt, where the municipal government, she told my wife, was going full guns to prepare for new arrivals; she was for her own part, although Airbnb was her principal income, considering making up her spare bedroom for a family when she returned—in this way she thought she could on a small scale nourish a larger hope. I said that I liked the way that sounded but my wife didn't have the energy even to consider at a basic logistical level what it would mean; all day at her own computer she sat riveted to forum threads on hormone treatments, hypnotic suggestibility, the

somewhat cruel and infantilizing bedside manner of certain Paris OB/GYNs. As she read, I was aware that a particular intentness of focus came over her that was very like fear. An unmarried woman who'd been trying to conceive for years had finally met with success and bid the group farewell, and this was the cause, I learned later, of my wife's eruption into the convulsive tears she'd been resisting since the procedure. The only possible thing to do was to take her in my arms and to hold her. It was like trying to restrain an epileptic fit; her whole body was like a claw that had us both. I have to have a break from this, she managed to choke out: my whole life has become this pinhole. By which she seemed to mean something about admitting light. The heat of our bodies and the heat of the room and the heat of this particular place on the planet, at this particular time, contributed to my feeling that I was at the center of something transcendentally real. My wife was in pain. Her body continued to rapidly contract and release and I continued to hold her tightly. This went on for almost an hour. In the calm that ensued when she'd finished, we retreated to our separate spaces, having brought perspiration to new heights, and I refreshed our wet towels with cool water, and we started the fourth season of the series we'd begun only a few days before. It was dusk, actual dusk, and the kids on the tracks were silent except for their footsteps. Subtitles weren't available for this season, but my wife didn't complain. Near the middle of the second episode, the central character, a reluctant and career-oriented mother, the source of whose genius as a spy was also the source of the volatility that was constantly threatening to undo her, found herself for the length of a day responsible for the care of her infant daughter. This was a woman known to her colleagues as obsessive and ruthless and profoundly mentally ill. Routine decisions she had made with confidence resulted in hundreds of deaths. At the end of the day she bathed her baby efficiently, drawing on a reserve of patience that was near its end—the scene was shot on a handheld camera, and the only sound was the water she splashed over the child's pudgy arms and tufts of hair. It was, of course, an accident when the baby slid beneath the surface; the mother quickly retrieved

her. Something took hold of her then, however, and she let the baby sink once again into the water, and held her there. It was less than two days until my wife would be able to take the test. Only once the scene had resolved in the decision not to drown the child did the ominous music the scene seemed to call for begin. Acacaca, my wife said.



*

When, a little more than a month later—after I'd moved to Virginia and my wife had remained behind—I adapted the events of the heatwave into a short story, I set the climactic scene at a party that was based on a party that did in fact take place at my friend Zach's house, whose fictional counterpart in that story and other stories I would go on to write that semester I renamed Knox. To make this scene dramatically viable, it was necessary to distort the reality of it in a number of key ways. To deepen the reader's sense of my wife's fictional counterpart's alienation, for example, in a story that didn't encompass my wife's counterpart's point-of-view—Odile's point-of-view, that is—I presented my friends in Paris, a loose collection of expats from all over the world, as more obnoxious, more vapid and superficial, pettier and more self-centered, than any of them in the real world is; and at the same time, more attractive, fitter and better dressed, quicker witted and more vital. For levity I added a number of comical props and gags—a wedgie, name-related confusion, a pair of Belgians—and it was convenient as well that party chatter of any sort, when transcribed faithfully, reads like uproarious satire. So it was that Knox, as compared to Zach, was brash and even somewhat domineering. So it was that my friends Maks and Aysegul, kinder and more

generous people than whom have never existed, in the story became the frivolous and self-obsessed Niks and Ruya, at whose expense I made some very clever jokes. The fatuous reporter from the Wall Street Journal in my story was based on an actual Wall Street Journal reporter who'd been covering the Berlaymont building for years, and whom in reality I rather liked, though it was true that his shirt was tucked in and he was wearing a braided belt. To convey the sense I had of having betrayed my wife in a subtle and important way at the actual party, it was necessary to invent a more obvious betrayal, the object of which was an invented freelance war correspondent with long blond hair and very good skin. I didn't see, at the time of writing, how any of this could be otherwise: in the rhetorical triangle I was setting up, the reader had to see what Odile saw, and to think of Arthur as a bit of a clod, which is to say, to think of me that way.

A key feature of the fictional party was that it fell precisely the night before Odile was to take her pregnancy test, and in fact so it was in life. That my wife, at this party, was not drinking, that she was horrified to think someone might notice she wasn't drinking and take for a settled fact what she knew better than even to hope for—that was there in the fiction as well. My wife, and Odile, at this party, were not so much alienated as vulnerable, exposed, fearful in a way that to think of now just breaks my heart. All night, hugging her stomach, she hovered at the margins of conversations, she picked things up and turned them over in her hands, failed to notice when people addressed her with questions or remarks, drifted from one end of the room to another before settling finally in an armchair, where she remained for several hours with a plate of cheese and dried meat. I remember looking across the room at her as Maks, a professor of applied mathematics, was compelled to explain to a small circle of people standing near her something called Bell's Theorem, which described the possibility that the same particle could exist in two places simultaneously; the idea of a world in which such a thing was possible, I could see, touched something in her imagination, though the idea alone was insufficient as a point of entry to that world. Not for the same reasons, I felt

more or less the same way. But because I was determined to convince myself that I felt at home with these people who were indeed all so much more accomplished and interesting than I was, I got really drunk, and so instead of sinking further and further into abstraction, as my wife continued to do long past the time that we should have gone home, I sank further and further into ebullient good cheer. My compulsion for causing laughter, unhealthy in the best of times, soon turned pathological, to such an extent that no one who didn't know me well would have believed I wasn't using cocaine. In the kitchen, where people were taking turns standing in front of the freezer, I found myself holding court, ranting about French bureaucracy, about the small-mindedness of French subway riders, about the un-picked-up shit of French dogs. Though the heat had yet to abate, by this time we had reached the early hours of the morning, and when I returned to the living room, the party had moved from the furniture to the floor; and not only that: everyone had, either piece by piece or all at once, and on whose initiative I wasn't sure, stripped off most of their clothes, so that now they were all lying about in their underwear. And immediately, eager to demonstrate how game I was, I began to remove my shoes; and only at that moment noticed that my wife, who had calculated to the hour the latest that implantation could take place, if it was to take place, was still in her armchair, her arms wrapped more tightly around herself than ever, and alone among those present in remaining fully dressed. Our eyes met, and at that moment it was not too late for me to keep my shoes on, to take her by the hand and bring her home—it was not too late, but then it was, my shoes were off, then my socks, my shirt, my shorts, until it was just me in my briefs and my hat; and what I wanted to convey in my story was that between Arthur and Odile, from that moment, nothing was ever the same.

Not quite two months later, on the day that the story I'd written was discussed in class, there was a total lunar eclipse, and I went up on the roof of the house in which I lived alone, in which my boxes were yet to be unpacked and my furniture yet to be meaningfully arranged; there, I sat for a

long time watching the moon move into the earth's shadow, or, to put it another way, as the earth got in front of the sun. It had been on the roof of our building in Paris that I'd found my wife that night, having discovered not long after I'd removed my clothes that the armchair she'd occupied all evening was empty, having searched for her throughout the apartment, out in the hall, on the stairs and in the tiny elevator, having gone outside, buttoning my shirt, to ask the prostitutes who were hanging around there if they'd seen her go, having shown them, for reference, a picture on my phone from the day we were married, having explained to them, somewhat frantically, that it was based on a medieval belief, in a vein that ran from the fourth finger of the left hand directly up the arm to heart, that wedding bands were worn as they were, having repeated the phrase, to summarize this convention, love unto to death, love unto death; and having arrived back home finally, it had been on the roof that I'd found her, the moon had set, and the sun was rising, the hour of her test had passed, and there she was hugging her knees, and though I suppose it had been in my mind all along, it was at that moment that the idea took definitive hold of me, that I would have to write all this down.

2 - FULL SPEED

It wasn't until I began to receive long, extraordinarily descriptive emails from my wife, who had checked into the hotel in Skopje a week in advance of the rest of the film crew to prepare for the children's arrival, that I realized—despite the thousands of text messages we'd sent each other over the years, as well as occasional conversations we'd had in various chat formats, and of course a number of brief emails we'd exchanged in the fall after the summer we'd met, when it was not yet clear that she would return to New York, and when her English was still not quite what it would later become—it was not until these emails began to arrive two or three times a week, often during what in her timezone would have been the dead of night, that I realized that I'd never had any concept of the ease with which my wife expressed herself in writing, in French and English both, and that, as a result, an important part of her inner-life had been inaccessible to me from the very start, a part of her, furthermore, that I could access now only because in every other respect she was out of reach. And it may as well be said that, though their subject matter along with their clarity of thought captivated me on their own merits, the real pleasure of reading these emails, if pleasure is the word, derived from the image that I attached to them in my mind: the image of my wife stationed in front of her computer screen in the dead of night—wrapped in a fresh hotel bathrobe, her hair twisted in a towel, her soft skin radiant with the heat of bathing, a breeze blowing in from the balcony—engaged in the earnest practice of composition. I hadn't been sleeping well myself, I wasn't adjusting well to life in Virginia, where the insect noise was deafening, where there were vanity plates in galling concentration, where the house I lived in, together with my very body, swelled with the moisture in the air. And so these emails became a comfort to me, and I focused all my best energy into reading them line by line, though in another sense they seemed to open a

distance between us, the very fact of them, or to expose a distance between us that I'd been unaware of.

It was the most concrete details of her life, she said in the first of these emails—in a phrase I hadn't realized was typical to the patterns of her mind—that had become the most abstract in her experience of them. She'd arrived at her hotel after dark, and because she'd taken a potent muscle relaxant to combat the anxiety that overcame her before even the briefest of flights, she was not as she put it in her right mind, and so had failed to get a good look at the Hotel Solun from the outside while she'd waited for the porter to unload her bags. Inside, however, the hotel seemed to be constructed entirely of glass and marble, and from dark, oiled hardwood of the sort she'd previously only ever associated with good taste. While she waited for some confusion about her room assignment to be sorted out, she strolled here and there in the lobby, which, as would turn out to be the case with many public areas of the hotel, was lit at night by colored bulbs—blue, purple, red; magenta, aquamarine. And likewise troubling were the surfaces of the side tables, surfaces that pulsed in ultraviolet white just as she moved past them, activated, apparently, by her proximity—a strange way, as she described it, to be reminded of her existence. The sluggishness in her limbs, together with the sluggishness in her mind, together with the garishness of her surroundings, became part of an idea she began to form, that her taxi driver, either because his English was poor or because he was on some kind of commission, had taken her not to a hotel but to the sort of

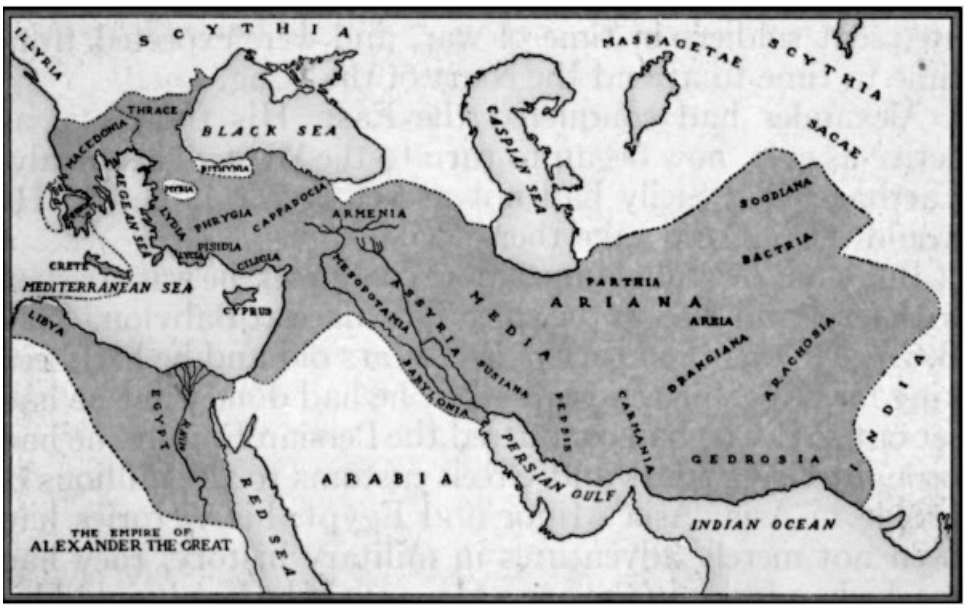
nightclub that was not entirely safe for a woman travelling alone; that this was plainly not the case only increased her disorientation. Likewise, when she woke in the morning, the cushioned headboard of her king-size bed, with its rows of buttoned dimples, looked to her for all the world like the wall of a padded room; and the breadth of the bed, and its lowness to the ground, and the bench at its foot, upholstered in the same dimpled padding, reinforced her feeling, without her quite being able to say why, that all was not entirely well—that she was under the compulsion of forces she didn't understand. I was awake, she wrote, but not yet ready to rise. And because my phone was dead, I needed something to read; on the nightstand, there was a brochure detailing the hotel's amenities. It made me think of you, my love, because I knew it would have made you scream, and I have to admit that in spite of myself a smile broke across my face, to think that all day, had you seen this brochure, which is clearly not the work of professionals, all day you would have been on about it, there would have been no shutting you up.

To illustrate her point she quoted from the introduction, in which the tranquility guests of the hotel could expect during their stay was described as *notional*, a solecism the intended meaning of which, whatever it might have been, could scarcely have been more accurate than its actual meaning. But the brochure's thematic emphasis, she said, was I think to be found in the word *experience*, repeated unrestrainedly throughout and even seven times in the space of a single page, headed Art of Spa, with respect to a number of features I couldn't quite picture, despite the pictures that were in fact provided—the Himalayan Salt Wall, for example, whose benefits were billed as respiratory—as well as with respect to features that were nearer at hand, such as the shower in my room, which was billed as transformative, and indeed, as I soon discovered, did seem to be designed to disrupt one's sense of personal continuity. The water came down over me in a continuous torrent, breathtakingly hot, and I set about washing my parts in the usual order: face first, as I believe is standard; then behind my ears; the back of my neck and top of my back; the front of my neck and my chest and

stomach; my left arm and then my right arm; my mid and lower back; an interlude of re-lathering; one armpit and then another; groin; asscrack and butthole; re-lather, left leg and left foot, finally, and right leg and right foot, including in both cases special attention to the gaps between my toes, an addition to this regimen I don't mind admitting I learned in America. I don't know why, she went on, but I kept losing my place and having to begin again, I could not for the life of me keep track of what I was doing, from one moment to the next I couldn't remember whether I'd even begun, let alone where I'd left off, let alone whether I'd skipped over anything. I found myself fixated on the water that ran in rivulets over my body, and on the impossible task of dividing the running water into discrete units and tracing the course of these units over the surface of my skin and down the drain. Simultaneous to which mental process, she wrote, I found myself, as I so often do lately, helpless to put away from my mind a vivid succession of imagined deaths, the deaths of all the people I love dearly, taken from me one by one with horrific suddenness until I was left alone under the falling water, with my naked body, lit by a single recessed bulb overhead and reflected in three thick panes of glass, alone in other words, if this isn't too dramatic a way to say it, in a ruined world.

And it was true, she told me, that transformation was all she'd ever hoped for—as I might have guessed by, for example, the various treatments and processes she'd inflicted upon her hair, which since we'd met was indeed irreversibly altered. The trouble in the present circumstances, she said, was that though she was being paid a wage and even receiving a per diem in Euros that when converted to denars became truly extravagant, there was not enough work for her to actually do in the empty Hotel Solun to fill her days. Her first evening, having committed the exchange rate to memory, she found the hotel bar empty even of staff, though there was music playing and the tables were set. And then retreating to her room, she was sure her hallway was changed in some way she couldn't quite immediately identify: it was the color of the light, a harsh saffron rather than the mellow indigo she remembered. She wasn't quite sure how she'd gotten off at the wrong floor, and

she wasn't sure how she'd gotten so far from the elevator, but finding her way back she discovered a room-service tray in the hall, beside a door whose number she didn't think to make note of. It had a peculiar effect on her, she said, it made her blood go cold, to know there was another guest in the hotel; it gave her isolation a certain form and context, made her feel like an intruder. Not least because she took the untouched fruit cup from the tray with her and ate it in vacant silence on her bed; it was into this soiled little dish that she deposited her steeped teabag the following morning as she got to work on a final sheaf of production materials to render from French into English for the Macedonian crew, a task she hoped would kill some time. By this point, however, the translations of various technical terms and industry argot had become rote and by lunch she was finished. In a group email she requested a meeting with the respective heads of craft and catering in order to review the children's many dietary restrictions, which included a number of life threatening allergies in addition to the litany of emphatic personal preferences; it wasn't until the following morning that



she heard back, when both men insisted, in essence, that simply invoking the need to review in an email was as good as reviewing in person, since the details of the restrictions and requirements she'd referred to were already clearly outlined in the original email of the thread, to which they could refer at their leisure from the comfort of their respective homes elsewhere in Skopje, where they both seemed to be enjoying time with their families. It was exactly

as if she were a waitress again, she said; to mediate the difficult relationship between the kitchen and your tables, the best option was always to lower your eyes, to fold your hands, to defer; and of course deference had never been a strength of hers, as I knew not only from my present role as her husband but from my former role as a colleague of hers in a restaurant in Brooklyn, where apologizing on her behalf had occupied the better part of my creative energy whenever we worked together, as it had when a particularly unpleasant regular—to use the example that she herself now cited with what I took to be a note of pride—had suggested that she'd do well to walk away from his table and come back with a smile on her face, and she'd told him that she'd happily walk away from the table but that if she came back it would be because she'd found something heavy with which to break his teeth. Animating her restlessness, point being, was an apprehension about the children's arrival—the children were in nearly every scene of the film; so much depended on their parents' cooperation, and the more she learned about their parents, the less likely their cooperation seemed. There had never been any hope of dissuading them from coming to set, but the production manager had nonetheless asked her to try; her failure to do so felt like an inauspicious beginning. Helene, the fourteen-year-old girl who would be playing the leading couple's eleven-year-old daughter, would be accompanied by both of her parents, both of whom, furthermore, were attorneys who had, when my wife had met them briefly in Paris, made their familiarity with the relevant articles of the Code du travail very clear, and had intimated that they wouldn't hesitate to report infractions to the Direction Régionale des Entreprises, de la Concurrence, de la Consommation, du Travail et de l'Emploi. Stephane, meantime, the ten-year-old cast in the role of Helene's character's six-year-old brother, would arrive with his mom, Fatima, who still tied his shoes. It had been at Fatima's insistence that my wife had spent an entire day with Stephane, in order to receive instruction in the management and regulation of his daily life. He wasn't allowed to run, for example, for fear of an injury to his face, and he was discouraged from holding both hands over his head simultaneously, as

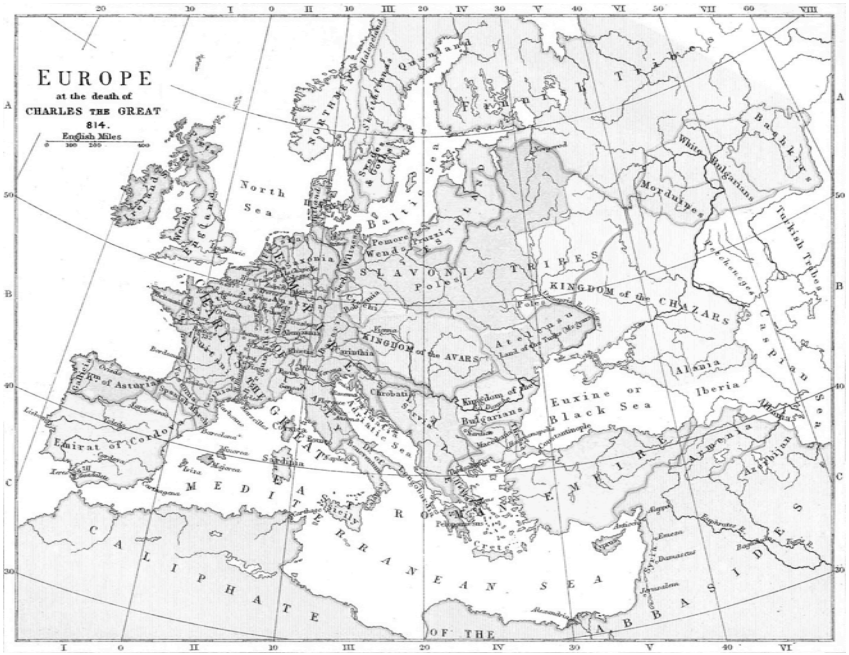
it might cause an unsafe rush of blood to his brain. Because of myriad life threatening allergies, none of which, it emerged, had been confirmed by medical diagnosis, Stephane's diet was limited to white rice and pasta with unsalted butter, and before he ate, Fatima tasted his food for temperature, consistency, flavor, and poison. For innumerable reasons, she considered both hot and cold beverages to be hazardous to his health. It was forbidden to beat him in games of any kind; the stress of losing could cause a spike in blood pressure. She bathed him herself, by hand—because it soothed him and because it was the only way to ensure his head would never be submerged in water—and for this purpose she required special pH neutral soap, which was marketed for washing vaginas. She was unwell, in other words, and in need of professional help she was unlikely to seek even by court order. The day he was born, she said, my wife told me, as they watched Stephane play on a blanket they'd spread out for him on the carpeted floor, the day he was born a light came into my life, a light that warmed in me what once was cold, and which has guided me every moment since. When, if ever, she'd stopped breastfeeding him, my wife said she dared not ask. Two out of his previous five jobs she'd pulled him off of over health- or hygiene-related disputes with production teams, with half or more of his scenes left to film; both productions had gone way over budget on reshoots, and in the end one of them had folded completely, most of the crew was still waiting on their final paychecks, and in neither case could she be sued for breach of contract because of the minor DIRECCTE violations she cited as cause. A mother's love, she'd said to my wife, allowing a hint of poetry to enter her voice, is not to be trifled with—it's the force of this madness, my wife wrote, I alone am somehow meant to contain; and so it wasn't entirely unwelcome news that the first day of shooting had been postponed, that there were problems with the highway where they were scheduled to shoot, that the arrival of the cast and the rest of the crew was delayed until further notice. The longer she stayed in her room, however, the more reluctant she became to venture out, and so she'd poked around, paced the floor, opened and closed the empty drawers of

the dresser and desk, turned the television on and then off again. She stood on the balcony as the sky changed, listening to the noise of a city the existence of which she'd never given a moment's thought, and which she couldn't remotely fathom even now as she looked out over it. The same porter, a sunken-chested man in middle-age the spelling of whose name she wouldn't venture, brought each of her meals—it impressed him, he told her, that she tipped like an American—though whether it was he or someone else who collected the trays from the carpeted hall she didn't know. The unknown other guest entered her thoughts at random; was this person a man or a woman, she wondered; was the fruit served in this hotel beneath this person's standards. Was the nature of this person's visit to Macedonia business or pleasure, and in either case, what sort. Her boredom, she said, had a way of perpetuating itself; in those first few days, she was so stultifyingly bored that she couldn't motivate herself to so much as watch a movie from the selection she'd brought on a hard drive, though she knew these movies represented the best hope she had of being diverted. For no more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a time could she listen to the radio, before the political discourse surrounding Donald Trump's campaign for the American presidency—discourse that dignified his policy proposals, such as the tremendous wall he proposed to build along the length of the Mexican border, merely by referring to them as policy proposals and not as deranged rants—such discourse, if it could be called that, on French and American radio both, produced in her an irritation so powerful that it was difficult to distinguish from debilitating panic. The sitcoms she sometimes left playing in order to break the silence, meantime, sitcoms like Mad About You, and Family Matters, as she futzed around on the internet or flipped through the room service menu or stood before the mirror weighing one and then the other of her breasts in her hands, only increased her restlessness; but in silence her mind returned again and again to thoughts of death and dying, existence and non-existence, the sort of thinking her psychiatrist had said was perfectly sensible given the inescapable facts but unusual in a woman of her age and girlish disposition, and which her

gynecologist had said was quite common in women who had been disappointed in an eagerness to conceive as many times as she. So in the end she let the sitcoms play for hours at a time, many of which she had seen for the first time as a child, dubbed into French—so that now the actors' actual voices seemed unnatural to their bodies—and though she gave these series' storylines almost none of her attention, she nevertheless found the thought fully formed in her mind as she drifted toward sleep one night after most of a week had passed this way, that honestly she could hardly blame the writers of such programs if they called so dependably upon unplanned pregnancies for a boost when things had otherwise grown stale—the complications involved being, even at their most farcical, so authentically human in scope. Morning after morning when she woke the tv screen had gone to blue, the curtains glowed in the early light, and she couldn't have said offhand, she told me, how many days it had been since her arrival when she rode the elevator to the spa, to submit her mind and body to its devices. The production delays continued, no one could tell her when people would start arriving, it could be any time now, the producer said, there was no sense in her flying back to Paris if it would only be to turn around and head right back to Skopje. Her room was already paid for, they would try to find her some more materials to be translated, but in the meantime, he said, she ought to *try to enjoy herself*. I had never known my wife to use italics—though she had for a period when we'd first met sent her text messages in all-caps—and it troubled me somewhat that she used them now, I couldn't have said quite why. I was having my own trouble enjoying myself, for starters. Things in Virginia were not going well: it was the beginning of August and classes wouldn't start for weeks. The apartment I'd rented was huge and mostly empty, I had nowhere near enough furniture to fill it, I'd torn open all my boxes but couldn't find most of my clothes. From one of the empty rooms upstairs, where I'd hoped to make an office, there emanated the very distinctive smell of cat piss, which was exacerbated by an overall unearthly dankness, and to combat which the management company recommended scrubbing the floorboards with vinegar and then leaving an open can of

coffee in the corner of the closet. Despite the headache this and other odors gave me, I left the house infrequently, the heat outside was an entirely different animal than any other I'd ever known, and I didn't have a car yet, didn't know how to get one, though I did walk periodically to the Food Lion down the street, arriving drenched in sweat and lingering in the cool aisles, filling my basket with frozen pizzas and Enteman's coffee cakes and frequently asking the cashier to split my balance across two or even three different cards. My wife's emails, therefore, served the additional purpose of escapism, I kept them open on my phone, read them and re-read them in the hope they would lend to my self-pity a certain texture, a certain depth and soul. Her per diem, she told me, was enough to cover lunch, dinner, and a thirty-minute massage from a woman named Biljana. Access to the spa, the pool, and the fitness center were each an additional five euros per day, or twenty euros per week; forgoing room service for a single day and eating instead a bag of beef jerky she found in her carryon, she negotiated a month's use of all three. On the treadmill, she said, she found more concentration than she'd expected was required to maintain a consistent pace; as her mind wandered, she felt herself drifting backward and forward over the belt; and it alarmed her to feel that she was at the mercy of the ground beneath her feet, rather than vice versa. In the sauna, with her pores wide open, the events of her life seemed strange to her, they seemed to belong to a narrative she'd memorized from a book; and the people in her life who meant the most to her seemed not to belong to her life at all—her mother or father, for example; her brother, or his young daughter, Thea; she began to imagine them as the inventions of another consciousness than her own. Me, her husband, for example, whose departure had been on the books for months but whose absence nonetheless felt very sudden: it felt, she wrote me, and still feels, like many months or even years since you left, but it hasn't been even quite two weeks—already, the facts of our shared life feel, in sum, more like a movie I've seen on an overnight flight, a movie that begins with the day I cut my hair short and left for New York with nine hundred dollars in cash and the address of a French

restaurant where I might find work. This is what astonishes me, she wrote: that the person I was then could be so determined to cause such a rupture in the course of her life. If I'd known I would become this fragile, and this strange, would I ever have left Paris in the first place? The point being that I've become fixated on this problem of describing the contours of a feeling that's come over me in certain moments since I was a child, moments such as the present moment; and I've come to believe that it's above all the fixation on describing the feeling that is responsible for the feeling itself, which might finally be best described as a feeling of *internal displacement*. It's been—I'll have to



double-check this—eleven days since I arrived here, and leaving aside the balcony I've yet to set foot outside. The halls are empty and the staff, when I cross paths with them, though they're friendly and professional, maintain a vacant, unblinking eye contact that makes my blood run cold. The prospect that another guest is present in the hotel, further evidence of which I've yet to find, nevertheless creates a certain turmoil in my imagination. In the steam room, the water in the air and the water in my body gather together on my skin, and I find myself wondering what becomes of this water thereafter. Running I lean forward slightly, and focus on striking the ground with the balls of my feet, just a touch behind my center of gravity. In the hot tub, I let my limbs float toward the surface, my ass takes the shape of the ergonomic molded-plastic bench, becomes numb. What a peculiar discipline, ergonomics, it occurs to me each time I soak in the hot tub and my ass goes numb; what a peculiar discipline, in all that it assumes about the human

experience; for what would become of *your ass*, my love—not an ass at all really so much as the tops of legs—in the same scenario? What can it be like to move through the world with an ass like yours, as compared to with an ass like mine, an ass that Biljana kneads vigorously each night, with what I take to be a certain professional appreciation, as all the while, against a pressure I can't define, I fill my lungs, again and again and again.

The cause of the delay, she soon learned, was a scramble to secure a new stretch of highway. The script concerned a plastic surgeon who, on the way with his family to a holiday by the Mediterranean, finds his brand new car's voice-operated cruise control stuck at maximum speed, that is, at a hundred and seventy kilometers per hour, with results that were meant to be both thrilling and uproariously funny. To shoot Macedonia as southern France was a convenient compromise for a road movie, because the highways there could be closed for hours every day and no one would make a fuss. But as the result of unchecked xenophobic violence—as my wife described it, having found herself reading quite a lot on the subject—along Greece's border with Bulgaria, the very road they'd arranged to shoot had become the route for thousands of Syrians making their way through the Balkans to Western Europe. This corridor had opened less than two months before, when in June the Macedonian government, responding to pressure from the European Council, and doubtless with its candidacy for accession to the EU in mind, changed its asylum laws to address the problem of widespread arbitrary detention of migrants passing through the country, as well as the barbaric, systematic abuse suffered at the hands of the Macedonian police at the Greek border—violations of international law which themselves resulted from EU pressure to crack down on Balkan smuggling operations that were taxing immigration enforcement agencies farther west. All of this was right here, within miles, my wife said, and yet it was as remote to her senses as it might have been on the other side of the planet. In a fresh bathrobe she became absorbed by the hundreds of images available online that documented what one article referred to as

the *migrant experience*, images that showed men and women, children of all ages, hauling their belongings in heavy black bags they hugged to their chests or hoisted over their shoulders, marching over traffic lanes in dense columns that stretched way out of frame into the distance, reclining here and there in the grassy median with their hats pulled over their eyes, like laborers on a lunch break. Many wore clean, new clothes and shoes in western styles, and she wondered whether they'd left home in these items or they'd received them as donations upon arriving in Greece. Think, my love, she wrote, of how many times we've moved in the last few years, and the outsize dismay it's caused us to part with even the least of our belongings, with our habits and little rituals; and how bizarre to be convinced, though I can't seem to help it, that our lives take place in the foreground of these events. It vexed her, she said, the way the word migrant evoked the course of life on Earth—that this was a major event in the history of a species. Was it not troubling, she asked, that the civil war these people were fleeing could be traced to a drought—the worst in the region's recorded history, a climatological result of carbon emitted in the world's richest nations, among whom, it went without saying, Syria itself could not be counted—the ravages and privations of which had compelled hundreds of thousands of Syrians to leave their homes for cities that were already buckling under. Even as she read, even as she examined these pictures in every detail, putting aside her tray of room service scraps to leave later in the empty hall, she was conscious of a secret intent to provoke a certain anxiety in herself: that the world was ever more crowded, ever more hostile, that as its habitable spaces grew ever fewer and farther between we would grow ever more brutal in defending them as our own. Among the fashionable remarks people were always making at dinner parties she remembered from our years in Brooklyn was the archly histrionic prediction that the wars of the future would be fought not over oil but over water, and though she'd always wondered what beside genuine concern motivated such comments—for they clearly were not motivated by genuine concern that one's own access to water would ever be in question—it occurred to her now that the

thought had been present on the lowest frequencies of her consciousness for some time. Her own outlook, she realized, she'd based on a faith in a premise that was plainly refuted by empirical evidence: that the future would be better than the past. She'd put it in roughly those words, she said, in a Skype conversation with her therapist, Katia, and was troubled to see that Katia was charmed by the observation to the point of affectionate laughter. For my own part, reading this in my under-furnished apartment, I was stung to discover that Skype calls during which affectionate laughter might take place were a possibility, given what my wife referred to as the Hotel Solun's notional wifi connection, which, responding to an importuning note of mine, she'd cited in explaining that for us to speak on Skype affectionately or otherwise was beyond imagining. Which is not to say I was entirely convinced that her emails were a manner of keeping me at a certain distance, or anyway not to say I was convinced that they were only that, and less so when she began to attach to them some of the photos that, as she put it, *directed her thinking*. Because my experience of these photos became entangled in my experience of her thinking, in her consuming intensity and in the intensity with which I missed her, the photos too assumed an important role in my emotional life. They elevated me, I felt quite certain, from a spiritual perspective, even as isolated as I was in my damp and acrid existence in Virginia; it was my secret belief that they would reveal a new way for my wife and I to be close, and I examined them as I imagined she examined them, or at any rate I tried to. Loosely bundled nylon sleeping bags hung from backpacks and duffels in a variety of bright colors. Many of the children wore rubber rain boots, the thought of walking any distance in which made her wince, she said, and so I did my best to wince as well. They held hands, carried their hats, squinted in the heat of the day. The women wore lovely headscarves, many of them, and carried their children in their arms and on their backs. In one photo, a toddler had loosed a lock of his mother's hair, which he held closed in his pudgy fist, his face half-buried in her neck, staring fixedly into the camera's lens, the totality of his trust that she would keep him safe captured in pristine, news-wire focus. The

weight of him, in his mother's arms over thousands of miles, the evenness of his breath, the sweetness of his perspiration, the warmth of his sleeping and waking—all this knowledge my wife felt gather inside her own body, she said, as she herself slept and woke.

I don't think it's going too far to suggest that it was because she found herself in this heightened state of moral sensitivity that she suddenly felt compelled to watch the films she'd brought with her on an external hard drive but had until now been disinclined to even think of. The first among these was Persona, a film she hadn't seen for years—a story, as Susan Sontag had described it, structured not upon sequence-of-events but upon theme-and-variation, in which ideas about motherhood and about womanhood were breathtakingly difficult, in which psychic agony was presented as the condition to which all minds eventually default, in which intimacy was redefined as a kind of looking glass in which the boundaries of soul are distorted. What struck my wife on this viewing, however, she said, was something she'd considered, when she'd originally seen the film in her early twenties, as merely gestural suggestions of the protagonist's tormented mind: two horrific images, in a narrative framework that is otherwise completely self-contained, that appear as brief intrusions from the familiar political world—Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức's televised 1963 self-immolation, and a Stroop Report photograph from the aftermath of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising—images that seemed now, however, to relate in a crucial way to the protagonist's struggle to bring her internal and external selves into authentic unity. It wasn't so much that these small points of transit between an abstruse filmic reality and the recognizable world gave her access to the film's emotional material, she felt, as that they gave the film access to her emotional material. She couldn't remember it having such a powerful impact on her when she'd first seen it, as it did now in the empty hotel, and in the fog of her reflections upon its blurring and displacing of physical and psychic selves she found herself once again descending some time after dark, without quite being aware of having decided to

do so, to the hotel bar, where the same peculiar music played at just barely audible volume, and the colored towers of light left the corners of the room in shadow. And there, quite as if it were the most natural thing in the world, at a table in what could be called the red section, was a woman stationed before a sweating glass, sitting in abstracted silence.

And yet, my wife wrote in an email that followed a week of silence, Emina insists that our first conversation was not in the bar but in the sauna, where we and not our drinks were sweating. It's strange that after so short a time she would remember these encounters out of order, because the content of our conversation in the sauna proceeded directly from the content of our conversation in the bar, and too prepared the way for a series of excursions, each further afield than the last, first out into the Skopje streets and then into the surrounding countryside. It was in the bar that we first met, I watched as she set her drink aside and ate her cocktail olives one by one, as if this were the ritual that punctuated a long day: I resolved instantaneously to develop a taste of my own for olives, to stock them, even, in my home—the sort of minor, passing thought that was just then apt to assume enormous proportions for me, not least because I'd skipped lunch—and then, whether because she caught me watching her or for some other reason, she suggested without hesitation, speaking to me across the room without raising her voice in the least, that it would be bizarre if the only two guests of the hotel didn't share a drink upon finally meeting.

Our conversation began very easily, there was none of the posturing stiffness that adults tend to impose upon each other when they're getting acquainted; it may have been an effect of the light. But it was also the case that while I spent my days speaking to no one, Emina spent her days interviewing people at great length about the most intimate aspects of their lives, for a report she was compiling on human rights abuses committed against refugees by Macedonian police and immigration officials. I was particularly receptive, that is to say, to the gentle, hushed inquisitiveness she's developed in her work, which no doubt was in her nature to begin with. Her easy laughter, her

relaxed posture, and, strange to say, her good looks, made it easy to feel close to her; by the end of the evening I had shared, in its entirety and sparing no detail, the saga of our troubles conceiving—including, maybe because I thought it would make *her* feel close to *me*, a number of embarrassing sexual anecdotes, such as, I'm afraid, a rather vivid account of the spatula debacle—and had also confided in her a doubt I had not until that moment articulated for myself: that to bring a child into so blighted a world as ours had become was unfair to the world and the child alike. Having said so, the idea took very real dimensions in my mind, and in Emina's as well; with the help of the martinis we were drinking, not even martinis if we're to be precise so much as just very cold glasses of vodka, it became not just theoretical or rhetorical but something we could sincerely feel; and before long we'd agreed that to be human was to degrade the very ground you walked on, to increase the

suffering around you in inverse proportion to your own relief from suffering, and to nonetheless cling to the notion that pending certain adjustments things would soon be better all around. We had, in other words, a wonderful time, we made the barman turn the music up and we laughed until our stomachs ached, traded rounds and drank ourselves into an ecstatic stupor, we sank low in our seats, closer with every hour to the floor, ate olives for dinner and maraschino cherries for dessert. Whenever we needed his attention, the barman, who was otherwise absorbed in a ladies' magazine, sitting perched all night behind the bar on the corner of the trash can in exactly the way I remember you doing the night we met, my love, assumed a stance of theatrical exasperation, a kind of ironical, palliative reversal of the power dynamic that exists in

service relationships that was still further reversed when we made him take one of the quizzes from his magazine, which purported to determine what sort of woman he should be if he hoped to attract a mate. He had, Stojan, a wonderful way of moving, he was tall and knuckly and all night he danced in the minutest way you can imagine, the way one hums to oneself, and indeed all night the music remained enchanting, a charming mixture of American and what I took to be Balkan pop songs, together with songs I think were more traditional, one of which in particular I remember clearly, a kind of bluesy lament, Emina explained, of the Ottoman Empire, named for and presumably set in the remote lowlands of the Vardar basin—which is to say, the present-day Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia—in which a young woman, her mother's only daughter, as she says, and the apple of her father's eye, reflects upon her circumstances: her isolation, her ennui, her hopeless prospects, the impossibility of leaving, the impossibility of remaining, the burden she's become, the sight of white geese whose flight across the distant mountains is not dissimilar to the elegance of girls in heels, a sight that torments her own imagination and that, she fears, has moved the heart of her darling to distraction. So you see, Emina said, already laughing, we at least are the girls in heels, and though we were both by that point barefoot, our soles rimmed with dust, I said that yes, that sounded right; I felt at ease in a way that I haven't for years, however dizzy I was and nauseated, for the simple reason that I was convinced I'd been spontaneously released from the wish to have a baby, a wish that seemed even, or seemed to seem, hopelessly frivolous and small-minded.

Maybe best not to describe the dreams I had that night. Emina helped me to my room—how she might have done so, as drunk as she herself was, remains a mystery—and I awoke with the suspicion that, in the absence of anyone to help her to her own room, she stayed there in my bed, and left while I was still asleep. I seemed to remember, in snatches, rolling over in the night and being comforted by her presence; I seemed to remember, though not clearly, that in her sleep she made soft noises that made me feel very warmly toward her; that, like you, my love, she slept with

her mouth open, the indignity of which you know I find so charming. At any rate I can't say with any confidence whether these were things I actually observed or they were inventions of my un-sober mind, because later when I woke again there was no sign of her, I was once again alone in my padded room, and if it hadn't been for the throbbing pain behind my eyes and the sensation that my tongue had been replaced with the tongue of some dead wild animal, such as a boar, or llama, I could easily have convinced myself that I'd imagined not only Emina's presence in my bed but the entire evening I'd spent in her company. There was nothing within reach to drink, and I was in too much pain to move; for a long time, I watched a shaft of light make slow circles on the ceiling, and tried, though it did nothing for my headache, to discern the source of the reflection, and to understand the rhythm of its spinning, the irregularity of which seemed to taunt me. This is what I was doing when the front desk called, to say that they had found two pairs of shoes in the bar and that whenever it was convenient they would send someone up with both so I could identify which was mine. Could they come right away, I asked, and could they bring something rich in electrolytes.

All morning I watched movies of a certain frictionless sort: movies that on the levels of photography, lighting, wardrobe, casting, editing, writing, and direction—which is to say, on every level—demonstrated no more imagination than a spring mailing from Land's End; movies that are referred to *in the industry* as *vehicles* for their stars and that, like the one we'll soon be shooting here, challenge neither their stars nor their audiences in the least way. Which is of course what makes them ideal for hangovers and air travel and people with low IQs, though I didn't have any of these thoughts until after seeing a movie of an entirely different sort later that afternoon, when my hangover was moving into a more melancholic and serious-minded phase. This was an Iranian-born director's feature-length debut, sent to me by a friend of Aurelie's who's been screening submissions for Sundance, and it took place in Tehran during the latter stages of what's known as the War of the Cities, a tit-for-tat series of bombing raids and surface-to-surface missile strikes against civilian

targets that continued intermittently throughout the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. To say that the story is set *against the backdrop* of these events, however, would be catastrophically misleading; even to say that these events give resonance or heft to the story's intensely intimate interpersonal drama would be to miss the point: the events of the Iran-Iraq War—the only instance of total warfare since 1945—along with the social upheaval that followed from the Iranian Revolution, are in fact the defining features of the *horror* that qualifies the movie for that genre. The first scene finds the main character, Shideh, pleading with an official to reverse her expulsion from the university in which, before the war, she'd pursued a career in medicine; he tells her, bridging his fingertips, that because of her involvement with leftist protest groups during the revolution, there is not even the slightest possibility that she can continue her studies. The distant, barely audible explosion that sends up a plume of smoke and ash at just the moment she finishes speaking and he begins, which appears between them in the frame of his office's picture window and which a lesser filmmaker would have treated as a potent symbol of her disappointment, figures here as a merely incidental reminder of the multivalent crumbling of Shideh's world, a further point in her constellated anxiety. Stoically chewing all this over as she drives home in the next scene, she's stopped at a checkpoint by armed guards, who inspect the interior of her car, one suspects, as much for conformity with cultural norms as for threats to security, before they officiously wave her on; and only then, driving away from the checkpoint, does her frustration boil over into tears, as she realizes, I think, the measure of delight men like these guards, and like the university official, take in demonstrating their power within the nation's new social order, and in humiliating their defeated rivals. So, maybe ninety seconds from the credits, and I was absorbed in the desperate question, as if it pertained equally to my own life, of how to exist in a system that's designed to crush your spirit. Even her husband, a movie-star handsome military doctor and basically decent guy, seems to expect an apology when he reminds her that his prudence in remaining politically inactive as a student has

been vindicated, though she called it spinelessness at the time. She tells him he's *just like them*; he says that her enthusiasm for motherhood is subpar. And so though they part warmly, there is the sense, when he deploys to the front in Elam, leaving her alone in their

apartment with their young daughter and with Xs of tape across the windows in anticipation of bomb blasts, there is a sense that whether he returns intact or not, whatever once existed between them is broken for good. How is it that so much of what I felt connected me to Shideh—her vulnerability, her self-doubt—is contained in the determination with which she keeps pace with her Jane Fonda workout tape even as bombs are falling from the sky? Her sweat and her heavy breathing and her dark, knitted eyebrows—it's thrilling to see that she wants to feel strong. It isn't long before her apartment building is struck by a missile that fails to detonate, and her daughter becomes convinced that djinn have taken up residence in their home; as one and then the next of her neighbors evacuates the city over the ensuing weeks, as they become increasingly isolated, her daughter's dreams, her daughter's imagination, and then her own dreams, and her own imagination, become difficult for Shideh to distinguish from reality, and no less difficult for me. When I tried to describe this feeling to Emina later, after dark, she told me something I found deeply chilling, if only because she put it so simply, with a shrug, as if she were surprised to have to say so out loud: that for women who find themselves negotiating the terror of war in addition to the quieter terrors of everyday womanhood, there ceases to be any discernible difference between loneliness and fear.

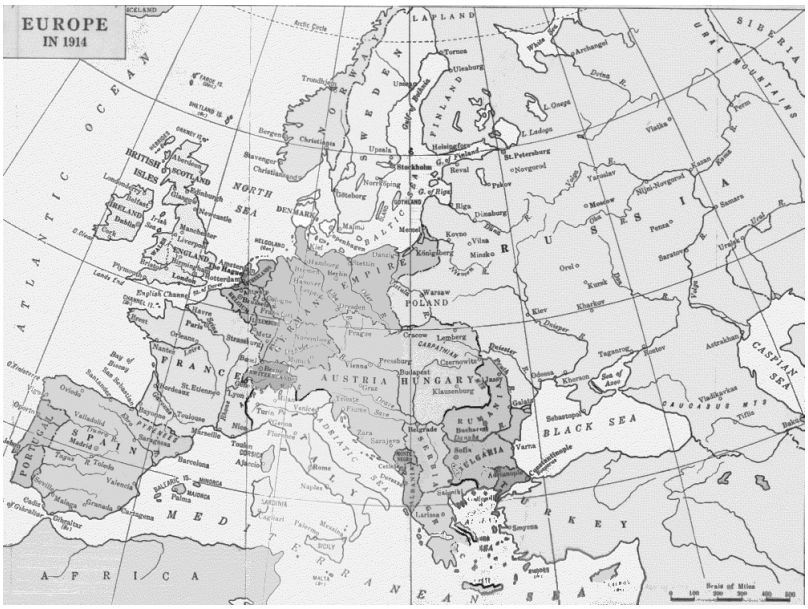
This was in the sauna, where the sensations of that week in our apartment returned to me, I don't think it was any hotter. I'd gone downstairs and found Emina in the pool swimming laps, and had stood for a while to admire her deliberate stroke and her long body and the various hollows her muscles formed, and the blades she made of her long, fine hands. And when she joined me in the sauna a little while later, as she continued panting I told her about the movie, Under the Shadow is what it's called—sometimes, I told her, my dreams were so vivid that during the day when I met the people who'd appeared in them I would feel an intimacy between us that didn't exist; with the movie it was like this too, perhaps because of the delicate condition I was in, vis-à-vis my hangover: I felt as if it were a memory of my own life, as if the daughter in the film were my own and my own love for her had been tested. Isn't it funny, I said in summary, the way movies become excuses to take our selves so seriously? Swimming is a wonderful way to cure a hangover, Emina told me with some authority, though, she added, she wouldn't know; she didn't get hangovers. I watched her chest heave as gradually her breathing returned to normal. Had she gotten her shoes back, I thought to ask her, and at length, though I'm not sure how we came to it—perhaps in connection with shoes and shoelessness—she began to tell me about her work, the research that filled her days. Of course I knew about the thousands of migrants who are passing through the country on their way to *the West*; I knew a bit about the circumstances they were fleeing and I knew a bit about the abuses they faced here in Macedonia, the extra-legal detention, all the details we more or less assume, I suppose, in these sorts of stories. Did I realize, Emina wanted to know, apropos of what I've yet to discover, that Mother Teresa was born here in Skopje, a Kosovar Albanian of the Ottoman Empire, born near enough to throw a stone to from the very spot where we now sat. For six months she—Emina that is and not the sainted MC—had been travelling to Skopje and around Macedonia to document the experiences of refugees of the Syrian civil war, a great many of whom were not Syrians at all in fact, but rather Palestinians from Syria, so she told me, patting the sweat on her brow with a dry

washcloth she'd taken from an enormous stack of dry washcloths, and looking out through the panel in the sauna door, where the glow of the pool and a suggestion of its shape, as seen through the fogged glass, made a somewhat mystical impression on me. It would, she said by way of preface, perhaps be enough to describe the plumbing. The Gazi Baba Reception Center for Foreigners, right here in Skopje, not quite close enough to throw a stone to but close enough to send a stone to in an Uber, was designated to house around a hundred inmates, and was equipped with two working toilets, a single shower, and three sinks, from none of which flowed potable water. For a hundred people, I could perhaps imagine, these provisions would be criminally inadequate; by the admission of the minister of the interior in a letter Emina had extracted from him, there were never, from the beginning of 2013 to just this past month, fewer than two-hundred-and-fifty *persons* being *accommodated* under the authority of the newly minted Law on Foreigners—a figure the Red Cross said was understated by half, as Emina herself had confirmed by calling the civil service society that had fielded a request for four-hundred-and-fifty sundown meals for those persons fasting during Ramadan. It may have been a small mercy, from a plumbing perspective, she said, that they were fed no more than a squat can or jar of food per person each day, sometimes containing only jam, and that therefore none of them was likely to be keeping very regular. Drinking water was in short supply as well; bottled water was available at the considerable premium of ten euros per bottle in the *informal* market operated by the guards, but those who could not afford to pay were forced to drink the dirty water from the bathroom sinks. The guards sold bars of soap at the same mark-ups, ten or twenty euros per, and likewise toilet paper, and pads and tampons, though some of the women she'd spoken with had confided that they'd stopped menstruating altogether, so profound was the paranoid depression they'd found themselves sunk into. There was no heat, no hot water, they slept on the tiled floor thirty and forty to a room, or in the hallways, some without mattresses or even blankets, huddling for warmth in the winter when the temperature dropped below zero. Most

detainees in the Gazi Baba Reception Center for Foreigners, furthermore—I might be interested to know, Emina said, as a foreigner here myself—were not permitted outdoors even once, for even a moment's fresh air during stays lasting as long as seven months, even in the stifling summer heat; and it was typical of their accommodation that they had no contact whatsoever with the outside world: a one-minute phone call would cost no less than thirty euros, and there was no access to legal counsel, or anyone at all who might tell them when they could hope to be released; and those who asked guards questions of this sort were severely beaten with fists, batons, the studded heels of boots, though of course you could be severely beaten, one young woman had told Emina, for almost anything, for laughing, for speaking, for smelling sour, and afterward they would douse you with cold water but it would be weeks before anyone cleaned your blood from the floor. Listening to Emina as this litany of horrors and injustices continued, it occurred to me that the dramatic question, in Under the Shadow, of why Shideh doesn't evacuate her home sooner than she does, which in the film's internal logic is answered supernaturally, is answered quite clearly in Emina's report as well—that when people flee their homes the horrors that await them are scarcely less horrifying than those they've fled. But what, I asked Emina, feeling somewhat unwell, feeling somewhat overheated and underwatered after so much sweating, what could the Macedonian officials possibly have hoped to gain by holding all these people, when it would clearly be easier to simply let them be on their way? The government needed the migrants, Emina explained, to testify in the trials of the smugglers who'd arranged their escapes to Europe. Like most governments, she said, breaking into a strange, discomposed smile, they're very exercised about due process.

I'm not sure why I've written all this to you, my love. I'm in a bus now heading back to the hotel, and that's what I started out to tell you about. I don't know how much longer my battery will last, and I'm not sure how long the ride might be, and in the bus I swear to you it's as hot again as it was in the sauna or in our apartment, although it smells altogether different than either. There will

be no washing the clothes I'm wearing, they'll have to be thrown out, or burned. This week has been stranger and stranger. It probably won't surprise you to learn that Emina drinks most nights the way she drank the night I met her. We spent the next few evenings in the bar—I learned not to try to keep pace—and it emerged that her research was complete, she'd gathered enough material, with a few days to spare before the series of flights that would take her back to New York, where she'd prepare her report, then set out again to report something new and, needless to say, horrific. Try to imagine spending your life this way. I was astonished to learn that she was born in Sarajevo the very same month that I was born in Paris, and appalled to think of everything she'll have to show for her years this fall when we both turn thirty. At any rate her days were empty, and she said that in her



empty days she liked to walk, to clear her head, to be occupied by none but the most pleasant, frivolous thoughts, to be light on her feet like a Jacques Demy girl.

The Vardar River runs through Skopje from west to east. We went over one bridge and then another, the famous Stone Bridge, the famous Art Bridge, the famous Bridge of Civilizations, famous being Emina's word, one she applied with a certain affection. In the streets, though a few weeks had passed, there were still some traces of festivities—tattered posters, grease-stained skewers, horseshit stamped flat and fossilized in the sun—connected to Ilinden, St. Elijah's Day, the national celebration of the 1903 uprising against the Ottoman Empire. Despite her fine bones Emina wasn't the least bit light on her feet, she walked in heavy, insouciant steps, flat-footed, like Serena Williams or Angelique Kerber

between sets, and in the searing light of those afternoons I was surprised to find that her face, which I'd previously known only in the peculiar light of the bar and of the sauna, became new to me: her hair was dyed a very dark brown—almost black—and recently cut, and her skin was much lighter than I realized, with long lashes that contributed to the overall impression of seriousness she gave even when she smiled. She often smiled, and I don't want to say she was joyless, but I came to understand that never far from the surface in her was a sincere despair, whose origins one might connect to the Bosnian War that began when she was six years old, though I didn't want to ask, and at any rate it didn't help either that Skopje's city planners seemed determined to give evidence at every turn—in the form of memorials, statues of warriors, statues of beggars, ruins of pre-modern forts—of civilization's millennia-long record of vile behavior, of invasions, occupations and assaults, of enslavement, of despoilment, of stamped-out revolutions, purges of dissent, political murder, murder for spite and vengeance, for honor, for religion, for general bloodlust, and of course lots and lots of rape, beginning even before the illustrious campaigns of Alexander the Great, an inordinately huge statue of whom occupied the intricately tiled central plaza beside the river, a powerful and contentious symbol, apparently, of Macedonian ethnic pride. Mother Teresa, Emina told me, when we walked by the supposed birthplace of the saint—from which we first spotted the towering Alexander statue—Mother Teresa who made it even farther than Alexander from Macedonia regarded human suffering as Christ-like and proper to any moral life, and she devoted her existence to perpetuating it wherever she went, obvious though it may have been that Christ's death on the cross, in the grand scheme of human suffering, was a fairly mild instance. It was Emina's contention that, for example, many of the people she'd just finished interviewing would have traded a few hours on the cross for their own months-long ordeals in the Gazi Baba Center for Foreigners, even irrespective of the millennia of idolization that would come to them as part of the package, together with the seat at the right hand of God. Of the many people she interviewed, she told me, one was a

guard, who reported anonymously that his colleagues treated the detainees *like animals*, not only beat them insensate on the slightest pretext but deliberately starved and tormented them, stole from them and deprived them however they could of hope, bragged to the men about coercing the women into sex. Not an ideal way to treat animals either, as Emina pointed out, but the misconduct in the Gazi Baba facility, she said, if we're to adjust for means and resources and systems of oversight, is of a piece with the misconduct you'll find in any American prison you can name, in any sweatshop anywhere, any prep school locker room or dorm. Anywhere you look, I think she meant, it's in a majority of people's hearts to be just as awful as they can get away with. It impressed her that the anonymous guard was reading Jean Genet, she saw the book among his things and she put this in her notes but forgot to ask what he made of it; and now she found herself thinking of him all the time, and especially at night, of all the faces she'd examined closely in the time she'd spent here, it was his that appeared before her just at the point of sleep, and his that—it went without saying—came to her in dreams.

All of which to say that Emina badly misunderstood the musical comedies of Jacques Demy, if she thought this kind of talk had any place in the voice of a female lead. On every corner there was a traditional restaurant in which—exactly like the brasseries you hate so much in Paris—clusters of men in bad clothes, in track suits or boot-cut jeans or vinyl jackets with wide lapels, were to be found on the terrace in a perpetual state of ruminatively stirring sugar into their tiny cups; Emina and I stopped in some of these from time to time for tea, where we observed the desultory custom of speaking only very occasionally, and acting otherwise as if we were numb with boredom, or as if we were trying to plan a robbery but didn't know quite where to start. I spent this time reflecting upon the outsize role that loss had begun to play in my mental life—how it was that I had come to feel so vulnerable. It's strange to say that each time you and I have tried and failed to conceive it's hit me as a kind of dress-rehearsal for true bereavement; that is, it's made the prospect of true

bereavement extraordinarily vivid to me: and I don't think it's far off base to say, as Katia has suggested in that non-committal way of hers, that the events of January, the Charlie Hebdo attack and the Kosher market, have changed the way I think about my world; and the fact that it's only one of a great many random ways to lose someone does nothing to set my mind at ease; quite the contrary: it only increases my certainty that one way or another I'll eventually experience the full, searing force of a grief I've until now only glimpsed on a twenty-eight-day cycle.

When it occurred to Emina to speak, it was to articulate one point or another from along a meandering line of thought that was mostly obscure to me, so that it was difficult to tell how the connections were formed. The scene in the café, and the life in the street, and the sound of the language, all seemed to touch something in her, and I gathered from what little she said that she had grown up in Sweden in somewhat modest circumstances, in the absence of a great many people she loved. For a long time, I wasn't sure why, she spoke about nothing but Polyxena, orphan daughter of a barbarian tribal king who as a child found herself betrothed to Philip II of Macedon, transplanted to his faraway court, whereupon she took the name Olympias and, after a long season of rutting and some troubling dreams, gave birth to Alexander. By this time—only yesterday, though it feels much longer—we were in Emina's rental car with the windows down, on our way through the bright shrubby hills to the Vardar's source, Lake Mavrovo, where we planned to spend the night and then to drive on to Lake Ohrid in the morning to visit an old professor of hers, an ethnographer who'd made his name, she told me, studying the role of Orthodox water rituals in reinforcing the fragile concept of Macedonian ethnicity. The car was a Twingo, a model of the late-nineties she'd selected from an otherwise brand new fleet, and though it didn't get stuck at full speed in cruise control it did seem to have a personality of its own, expressed for the most part in the form of dysfunction—of its radio, its window levers, its air conditioning, the seatbelts and the seats themselves. I liked the way Emina drove, there was a certain ferocity to it, she handled the gear stick

roughly and shifted always as if it were a sudden compulsion she couldn't control, smoking incessantly and letting her ashes fall where they would. Olympias, she told me as we went, was as it happened not to be trifled with. Plutarch in particular, she said, writing centuries later, was affronted by her strength of character, and in his Life of Alexander he expands at length upon her devotion to a Dionysian cult popular in her homeland, into whose ecstatic Orphic rites, in order to perform them with more barbaric dread, she incorporated great tame snakes, which, sometimes creeping out of the ivy in mystic fans, sometimes winding themselves around the sacred spears, or the women's chaplets, made a spectacle that men could not look upon without shriveling in terror. And indeed, not long after Alexander's conception, Philip, peeking through her bedroom keyhole, found her in seeming congress with such a snake; this more than anything else, as Plutarch says, abated his passion for her, whether for jealousy or because he feared her for an enchantress or because he subsequently lost sight in his peeking eye. Years later, the uncle of another of Philip's wives, Attalus, suggested that Alexander was not Philip's legitimate heir, meaning either because Olympias was a foreigner or because she was a slut; Philip declined to repudiate the claim, and when within months he was murdered vividly at a wedding by Pausanias, his lover—whose brutal gang rape, led by Attalus, he had failed to avenge—many suspected Olympias had invisibly orchestrated the entire thing. And while no one could prove she was responsible for her husband's death, she more or less openly arranged the murders of Attalus, Attalus's niece and her own former co-wife Cleopatra, and Cleopatra's infant daughter Europa, all of which, point being, not out of shrill and jealous rage, as Plutarch and any number of men have suggested, but to clear the way of even the smallest obstacle to her son's eventual ascension. On the shore of the lake, I hope it titillates you to know, I applied a thick layer of high-test sunscreen to Emina's back—she's very sensible about her skin—and for a long time we lay in the sun, where she occasionally read aloud to me from the biography of Olympias she'd brought with her. The sky was unspeakably clear, both as it appeared overhead and

as it was reflected on the lake's motionless surface, and apart from the distant calling of birds and Emina's turning of pages it was silent all around us. Her reading voice, when she read to me, captivated me in its evenness, its matter-of-factness, her confidence that the words themselves made the point she hoped to make about them. In one passage, describing a crucial moment in the early stages of Alexander's campaigns in the East, the young conqueror, encamped along the banks of the River Xanthos in Lycia, is writing to his mother of his difficulty in deciding whether to pursue Darius, the Achaemenid emperor of Persia, with his usual fierce, unrelenting abandon, or instead to grow his army and lie in wait; and at just the moment he sets down his quill, the waters of the Xanthos swell, and leave at his feet a copper plate engraved with ancient characters, which when he has them translated turn out predict a time when the Persian Empire will be brought low by Greeks; and thus emboldened he sets out straight away to lay waste to one population after another in the regions of Phoenicia and Cilicia—to *reduce* them, as Plutarch puts it—before moving along to the narrow beaches and daunting bluffs of Pamphylia, where the usual rough seas are miraculously calmed, and recede even, to allow him passage through the Ladders, from which point the long, tangled history of the East and West can be traced to the present day.

When night came we didn't drink at all. We'd gotten a room in a sort of bed and breakfast, within sight of the lake, to which we returned after dinner to swim. The water was warmer than the air, and so we were in no rush to get out. Above us the sky was almost perfectly black, and for a long time we floated on our backs in the shallows, talking about this and that in the hushed, tranquil voices of women contemplating the stars, until, after a period of silence, Emina began to describe the events of her childhood from which her entire identity proceeded. She was six years old, she said, when she was awoken one night by the sound of artillery fire—the distant reports of the cannons, and the whistling of the shells through the air, which preceded their sickening, earsplitting impact by a matter of milliseconds. The plume of smoke in Under the Shadow, she said—having

watched it the night before—that was long-range artillery; shells like these landed by the dozen within a hundred meters of her apartment on a daily basis: and each one shook her building to its foundation, knocked glass out of windows, dishes off shelves, brought ceiling plaster raining down in her hair, while outside the shrapnel rained down from the sky. There's almost no way to describe what happens inside you, she said, the hollow, helpless, gutsick feeling—which still quite often returns to her when she tries to sleep—as you listen to an artillery raid draw closer and closer with each strike. For four years, the length of the siege, more than three hundred artillery rounds fell on the city each day; on some days, it was close to four thousand. She remembers always having a headache, always tasting bile in the back of her throat. She described the insanity that overcame some of the children in her building as the result of the shortage of food, the shortage of drinking water, and the shelling and ceaseless sound of gunfire that reached them through their blown-out windows at all times of day and night. A sniper killed her father. A mortar round killed her mother, while she waited in line for bread. Her sister and her best friend were crushed when a tank gun turned her building inside out, and from there she developed a distinct feeling that more of the people she knew were dead than were alive. She left the city at the end of 1994 with a family from her building, a husband and wife she realizes now were themselves no older than twenty-five, whose two toddlers it became Emina's job to help look after over the course of the next few months. Bringing with them what they could carry in their arms, they proceeded on foot in the dead of night to the border, where they spent weeks in a refugee camp. A pair of smugglers brought them into Croatia, and after several weeks living in a basement they somehow secured funds for the forged Croatian passports they needed to cross borders into Slovenia, Austria, Germany and Denmark, until finally they arrived in Sweden, where their ordeal continued in an asylum center, and in a certain sense, never ended. Olympias was likewise an orphan, Emina said, making slow circles beneath the water with her hands—Olympias was an orphan and she was taken from her home, and

when I read about her life what I understand in it is a rage that won't subside until it's brought the whole world to its knees. She left her story at that, and for a long time neither of us spoke, but remained mostly submerged in the lake, listening to the insect noise, the passing of cars behind the trees, and to the water's faint lapping over the shore, and over us as well.

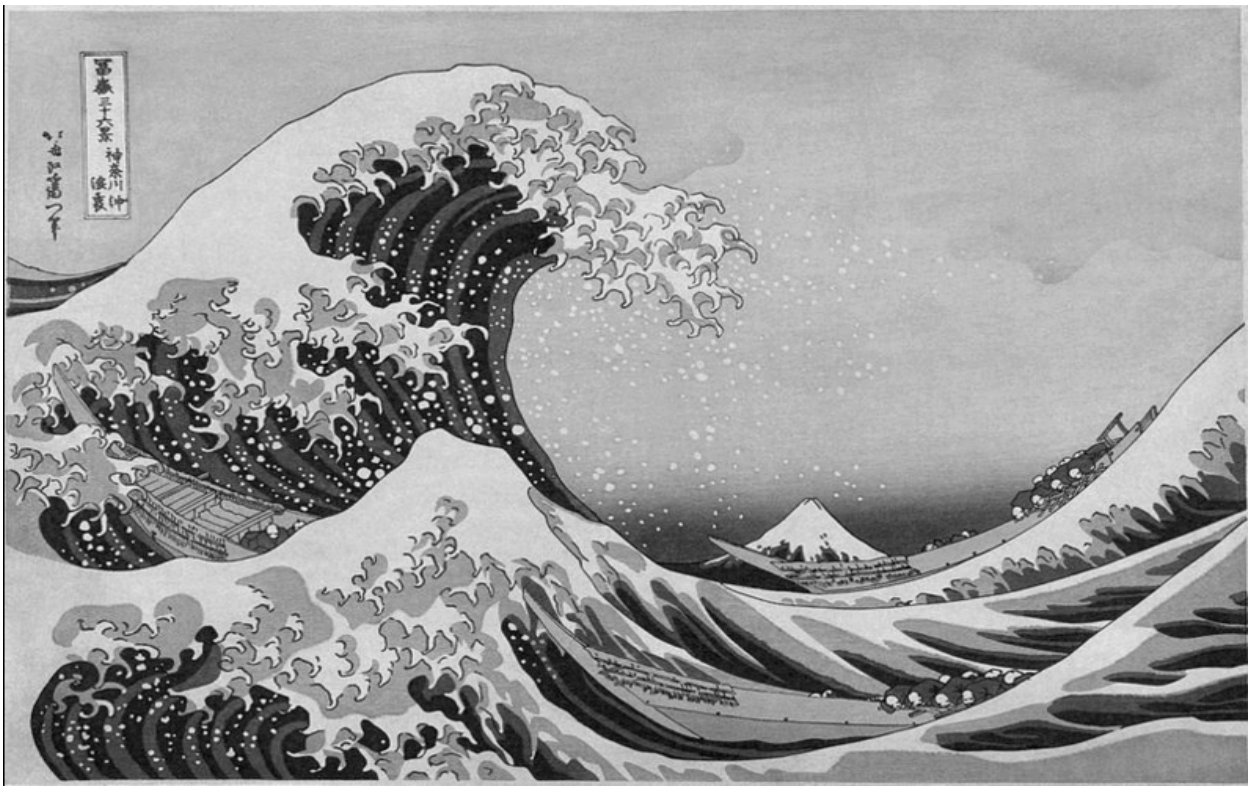
It was last night, my love, that I began writing this email. I was glad, when we finally went in, that our room had only one bed; having heard her story, it was soothing in a way I can't quite explain to be near her, to feel the warmth of her body reach me where I slept. This morning, however, we got up early and made the drive to Ohrid, only to find once we'd arrived and I'd connected to wifi that I had an email from Bachir, announcing among other things that the children are to arrive this evening; and so Emina put me on a bus and wished me luck. One strange result of this whole period—all the isolation and all the typing—has been an insight into what the world must be like for you, my love: how I've allowed myself to become completely absorbed by my own thoughts, to take myself ever so seriously in a way that had never even occurred to me before. As satisfying as it is, I mean, to try to get everything down, I'm not sure it's any kind of way to live. But it's a long ride, with frequent stops both scheduled and not, and with so much time on my hands I've continued to write. Because what I sat down to tell to you about before I went to sleep was the movie we watched last night, Emina and I after the lake—one of Chris Marker's earliest: Le Mystere de Koumiko. Now that I've seen it I can in fact remember Chris describing his first trip to Tokyo, in 1964, where he intended to cover the Summer Olympics, but instead, by supposed accident, met a woman in her twenties whom he began following around with his camera, and who, he reports, is amazed to find herself starring in a film that bears her name. It's a film, like most of Chris's work, that seems like little more than a loosely assembled collection of random footage—military pageantry, boxing matches, a news dispatch on a disarmament rally no one showed up for—and it would be just that were it not for the many shots in which Koumiko can be seen in the background

looking on, or in the foreground inspecting the small marvels of modern life; and even where she disappears from frame for any period of time, her presence is implicit in the images we know we're seeing through her eyes. Chris asks her questions about herself, about her country, about the things they hear, various spectacles they encounter, and she replies shyly, in halting and heavily accented French that achieves an eloquence of its own, though she rarely speaks more than two or three words at a time—as when he asks her, for example, what makes life in Japan different from life in France, or in America; it's the air, she tells him, and he asks her what exactly it is about the air: that it's wet, she says.

Koumiko is ethnically Japanese, but we learn that she was born in Manchuria; and though the film leaves it unsaid, it occurred to me that if she's over twenty and under thirty, as we're told, to have been born in Manchuria would have been to be born at the precise point of Japan's entry into the Second World War, though she would have been too young to remember the events that followed. About two thirds of the way through the film, there's a kind of formal rupture: the Games end, and Chris returns to Paris with only the dimmest impression of Koumiko's inner-life; but having left her with a questionnaire, he soon receives a series of Magnetophon tapes on which she's recorded her answers—letters, he says, thirty-five millimeters wide and a hundred and eighty meters long. And this is what I adore: how obvious it becomes that these letters can't possibly be Koumiko's own compositions; in them, her accent remains, but she speaks in the exact cadence and register and abstract vocabulary Chris would later be famous for in documentaries like Sans Soleil—so much of what I love about art is contained in this conflation of selves, which among other things permits the astonishing flourish that ends the film, in which we return to the moment, in the car with Koumiko during a downpour, that Marker nearly asks her a question and she nearly answers: *but what do you think of…* he begins, before trailing off, unable to finish, though on screen at this moment, we see a very fast montage of scenes from the War: Dachau, Pearl Harbor, the Enola Gay.

Did that, he asks, inform your sense of what could happen to you—or did it happen in another world?

No, she says in the car, it could happen to me also; it's like a wave, rolling over the sea. And then in a recorded letter she elaborates on her response: we see her in a train now, alone—gazing out the window at the passing scene, in fact, exactly as I'm now gazing out the window of my bus—as her voice resumes: when I was a small child, she says, I lived by what I tasted with my tongue, or by the sweet smells I followed through the streets, while at the very same time, mankind was beginning to suffer; men went off to war, and were made prisoners, they resisted and wept, their flesh was mutilated; and yet, when I learn about all this today, I'm astonished that I didn't know of it for so long a time, I'm appalled each morning at how little I understand, because soon, the results of all these events will arrive, like a wave rolling over the sea, when there's been an earthquake in the distance, a wave that advances on its way, so to speak, until it will finally reach me.



*

With that, emails from my wife became fewer, and briefer, became not emails at all but iMessages, containing only the most basic sustaining platitudes of marriage, as the shoot began and her daily responsibilities ran her off her feet. With less than a week now until the semester began, I should have been getting started with work to turn in for class, but I became determined to rise, as I saw it, to the occasion of her monster email, by responding with a monster email of my own. In this email I described in exhaustive detail the various aggravations of my daily life: the heat and humidity, the circumscription of carlessness, the featurelessness of Virginian culture, a long list of vanity plates I found to be in particularly poor taste. One of my shoelaces had snapped, and I didn't know where to replace it. The Food Lion, I wrote, didn't have the kind of peanut butter I liked, and its Fuji apples, when it had Fuji apples, were invariably mealy and bland. In the welter of official and unofficial orientation activities that was just then beginning I had met my cohort—who had to a one grown up within a hundred miles of my New England hometown—and among the things we had discussed, over *cider* of all the dumb things, were the unrelenting output of Joyce Carol Oates, the evolution over time of our feelings toward the work of George Saunders, modes of address in the work of Ben Lerner, and various live music opportunities that were coming up in the fall, to see bands like The National, and Saint Vincent, and Neutral Milk Hotel. I'd subscribed to Hulu and had already watched several seasons of Grey's Anatomy, was starting now on the Good Wife, and already I was wondering about dropping out of my program before it even began, and trying instead to become something like a doctor or lawyer, or even a notary public—to find some way, that is, to make myself useful to the world. I wrote, and this was true, that without her my existence was joyless: that I couldn't feed myself properly and that more and more I was letting hygienic lapses go unaddressed; and I told her that in our apartment, if she chose to join me there, she would have an

office all to herself, I would work in the dining room, so that I'd be on hand by the kitchen when she called down to me for things to drink.

After another silence of about a week, my wife sent a brief and somewhat impatient reply to my email—an email I felt featured some of the strongest writing I'd ever done—to tell me that she was still waiting for me to say how dismayed I was to hear that she no longer wanted to start a family, and to try to persuade her otherwise. Her work, she said, was exhausting, her days were full of the minutest anxieties one could imagine, which nonetheless bore on the fate of the entire production; and Fatima, as well as to a lesser extent Helene's parents, were driving her up the wall, though her relationships with the children were satisfying in ways she hadn't anticipated. That day, the day of her email, on the way to set, the massive convoy of trailers, set cars, camera cars, and tech vans had come to a stop on an overpass beneath which a long line of migrants was passing on their way north and west. She'd gotten out of the car, she said, and stood for a long time looking out over them, thinking of course of Emina and of how many times within this crowd Emina's wartime experience was duplicated, a thought that made her feel utterly hopeless, and very small. She'd been thinking, she said, about the emphasis people place, when they're speaking of interconnectivity in terms of the natural world, on the fact that the carbon that forms the basis of our existence has its origins in the cosmos—the stardust from whence we came and to which we shall return. Because tonight by the pool, she wrote, Stephane, who despite everything about his mother is charmingly levelheaded, said something that resonated with me—relative to what I'm not sure—in the offhanded way of children: that if it's true that sixty percent or more of our bodies are composed of water, it must also be true that they're not always composed of the same water; that the water inside our own bodies must at one time have been inside other bodies, plants and animals, other living and non-living things, and in the ocean and in the very air around us, in various places around the planet

at various moments since creation—the exact sort of remark, point being my love, that in times like these I'm so tempted to make too much of.

3 - Two Weddings

In June of 1958, two residents of Virginia—a black woman named Mildred Jeter, and a white man named Richard Loving—were married in the District of Columbia, pursuant to its laws; and shortly thereafter, the newlyweds returned to Virginia and established their marital abode in Caroline County, whereupon in the dark of night they were arrested by Sheriff Garnett Brooks, a cussed and violent man with a high-pitched voice, and his two deputies, Massie Samuel and H.Q. Taylor, the three of them together composing the entirety of Caroline County law enforcement. Richard was released on bail; Mildred, being black, and in spite of the fact that she was six months pregnant, was detained in the rat-infested county holding cell in Bowling Green for four days before the couple appeared for arraignment before Judge Edward Stehl, a self-described racial moderate who decades later would disinherit his eldest daughter for marrying a black man. During the October term of the county circuit court, a grand jury issued an indictment charging Richard and Mildred for their violation of the statewide ban on interracial marriages—a felony punishable by imprisonment for as many as five years. On January 6, 1959, the Lovings pleaded guilty to the charge and were sentenced to one year in the state penitentiary; however, the trial judge, Leon Bazile, suspended the sentence for a period of twenty-five years on the condition that the Lovings leave the state and not return; it was his opinion that almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay, and red, and that he placed them on separate continents, and that but for the interference with this arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages as theirs to take place. Who he thought was responsible for the interference he was describing the Honorable Judge Bazile neglected to mention, but the fact that God separated the races, he wrote in his decision, showed that he did not intend for the races to mix.

After their convictions, the Lovings took up residence in the District of Columbia, and from there—because Mildred missed the feeling of grass beneath her feet, and Richard missed drag racing the car he co-owned with his friends Percy Fortune and Raymond Green—on November 6, 1963, they filed a motion in the state trial court to vacate the judgment and set aside their sentence on the ground that the statutes they had violated were facially repugnant to the Fourteenth Amendment. The motion not having been decided by October 28, 1964, the Lovings instituted a class action in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, requesting that a three-judge

panel be convened to declare the Virginia anti-miscegenation statutes unconstitutional, and to enjoin state officials from enforcing their convictions; the state trial judge summarily denied the motion to vacate the sentences, and so the Lovings perfected an appeal to Virginia's highest appellate court without delay. On February 11, 1965, the three-judge District Court continued the case, allowing the Lovings to present their constitutional claims to the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Virginia, where it was found that the conditions of the Lovings' suspended sentence were unreasonable, but that nevertheless, as the United States Supreme Court had put it in Maynard v. Hill in 1888, *marriage, as it creates the most important relation in life, and as has more to do with the morals and civilization of a people than any other institution, has always been subject to the control of the Legislature*, thereby remanding their case to the court in which it was originally tried so that the Lovings could be re-sentenced.

None of which did I know in June of 2011, when my wife and I were married in Manhattan at City Hall. On that day, the day of the summer solstice, we had known each other for only a little under a year, a period in which we had spent not much more time together than apart, and during

which, furthermore, whenever we were together, we remained committed to the idea that we were engaged in nothing more than a summer lark, casual even by the standards of summer larks, as weightless as the fog that glowed above the city skyline that we sometimes stood on my roof to see, and ever more certain to gradually dissolve the further we moved into autumn, into winter and spring. I've spent a lot of time since then trying to reconstruct my thoughts at the moment that she first appeared, in cut-offs and a tank-top, sometime in the late afternoon, looking for a job but betraying none of the desperation she would later admit to, holding her resume before her in both hands, a scene from which a series of frames remains immediate to my memory even now: not only the frayed daisy dukes or her bare shoulders, or the slight imprecision in her movements that would come to obsess me later on, but the screwed-together determination with which she strode through the door and directly into the middle of the dining room—as she would go on to do every time we entered a restaurant together for many months thereafter, always leaving me and the hostess to watch her go and to wait for her retreat—and then the air of slightly wounded pride she assumed upon being turned away by the irascible manager Didier, as she marched back out the door without having cast even a glance in my direction; I've spent a lot of time since then, that is, trying to trace my admiration for her to that moment, because it seems impossible to me that my heart didn't swell then to see her come into my life the way it does now to think of her coming into my life, though of course in all probability my thoughts, like most of the thoughts I had in that period and if I'm honest in this one, were somewhat less noble, if not utterly debased and revolting.

Still, when I think of that period now, as each evening stretches further into night than the last, as the sun hangs longer in the sky quite as though this fifth return to the day of our wedding were a matter of cosmic anticipation—when I think of the period between our meeting and our getting married, as I often do now and especially late at night when my wife is asleep and I'm at my most poetical, it's difficult not to succumb to a very strange and particular sort of pain, the sort of

pain there may well be a word for in German, or in Icelandic, having to do with the impossibility of spending time with these two young people who appear in so many of our photos but who seem nevertheless like strangers to me; the impossibility of spending time in their company not for the purpose of passing down wisdom or advice or warnings of trouble to come so much as simply to be enriched by their brightness and wholeness, though of course brightness and wholeness are only the illusions that arise from the very ache they cause, as my wife pointed out only the other day, not more than a week after I'd returned to Paris after my first two semesters in Virginia, when I tried to describe this and other feelings to her while we strolled aimlessly back and forth across the Seine, which had swelled its banks and risen higher than it had since before the First World War, bringing a hush over the city that likewise seemed to pertain to the passage of time.

This part of Paris was the province of tourists, who were stunned and disoriented by the rising water, by this slight distortion of the familiar world; everywhere you looked they teetered over their feet, under the destabilizing influence, it seemed, of a certain nervy ardor, hitching their pants up over their hipbones, as if they'd all left their belts in the airport; and in the circumstances it was strange to walk among them, to be confronted with their distrait, mammalian scratching, to stand with them at the rails and watch tame little eddies of the current drift downstream. Our conversation turned on the idea, as my wife put it, that to the same extent that the present is attainable only because its future is *un*known to us, the past is *un*attainable for the precise reason that its future is *known*. Which is to say that though we'd begun by discussing how we might celebrate our anniversary on such a severely attenuated budget, we soon found ourselves talking about that original year, the year we met and got married, the first lifelong commitment either of us had ever made, and, accordingly, the first time either of us had in any meaningful way understood our lives as delimited by eventual death. Imagine, she said, you could interrupt us on the night we met, you could pull us aside to say we'd be married by the first day of the following summer—what would

either of us have made of *that*? We agreed it was almost unthinkable that—having spoken to her only briefly during a second visit she made to the restaurant where I worked, and considering that I routinely found myself cowed by the prospect of contacting even women who had given me their phone numbers with the clearly stated expectation that I would call—it was unthinkable that on a night off I would take the train across Brooklyn to get her number from the resume she'd left, and that I would dial it that very minute from the bar, to my own astonishment and to the astonishment of my co-workers looking on, who knew me as hapless and shy and catatonically irresolute. And what's more, she said, getting to her favorite part of the story, that she would agree to see me, would suggest we meet that very night, either at a party that I planned to attend, or a party she planned to attend, or at any of the places she or I might visit along the way; and it was on this occasion, as the night wore on and our signals continued to cross, that I became familiar with what I came to think of as her house style: her insistence on sending her erratically punctuated text messages in all caps, as if to convey an ongoing baseline of enthusiasm and disquiet she'd felt since arriving in New York—at the thrill of being young, of being abroad, and alone, of being broke and unemployed and a little bit afraid—a baseline to which no further typographical emphasis could be added, even when it developed that we were about to pass within a few feet of each other, riding trains in opposite directions on the Williamsburg Bridge, and even hours later, when we finally found ourselves within striking distance and she sent me the name of a bar, the worst of the many dives within a six-block radius of my house, where when I arrived, having missed last call, she invited me to share her drink, the drink that like all her drinks that evening had been paid for by her date, a nice man named Rob, to whom she introduced me cheerfully before thanking him for a lovely time and taking me by the hand back into the street.

It felt good to tell ourselves this story; contained in the telling there was a certain provisional hope—contained in any effort to preserve the fleeting moments in which we search for a reflection of our whole lives. But whether in spite of this hope or because of it, a palpable disturbance hung in the air between us; it may even have been fair to say that the disturbance was the hope itself. I wondered at what point that year the suggestion that we'd soon be married would have ceased to sound fanciful or deranged. Was it possible, my wife asked, that that point had never arrived? And at that, walking by the river, a memory came to me that I hadn't revisited in quite some time. How wonderful it must have been, I said, to be walking through the streets with you toward my apartment in the cool hour or so before daybreak, to be speaking loudly, staggering theatrically, laughing at nothing in particular, giddy in anticipation of each other's bodies, and nowhere to be for days on end; I could remember catching our reflection from time to time in the dark storefronts we went past, and now it occurred to me to wonder, I said, to what extent we were pretending, to what extent was it possible ever to be so present. Because we were on my very block—and this was the memory that had come to me—we were on my very block, within view of the plants in my living room window, when in the dark street ahead of us a girl went down on her bicycle with sickening clarity, as if an invisible fist had come down on top of her. When we rushed up to help her to her feet she was bleeding heavily from her chin; more blood than they would have let her donate had already stained her face and arms and the white front of her shirt, her bare legs, and the pavement at her feet. After a moment of staggering her eyes stopped rolling in her head, and having taken in the sight of her

blood, and its meaning, she began to shriek and thrash about, not in pain or shock but as if she thought that we were responsible for her fall, and wished her further harm, a development that, in the injustice of it, as thrilled as I was for the opportunity to take manly charge of a crisis, bewildered me to the point of paralysis.

Only a few weeks later, my wife said, this same girl, still braless, her chin bandaged and presumably tightly stitched, came into the restaurant where my wife had found work, looking into my wife's face as she recited her order without giving the faintest sign of recognition, having evidently been so drunk as not to remember anything about that first encounter; somehow, in connection with the strange innocence this girl seemed to enjoy with respect to those events, my wife found herself wondering how much of her blood, when she'd finally come into the care of medical professionals, had needed to be replaced. We had learned that her name was Virginia—a coincidence that only occurs to me now, the meaning of which eludes me. That night, the night of her fall, it had taken the better part of an hour to get Virginia on her way: not least because she didn't have health insurance, she had refused to move from her perch on the curb—which she'd taken up only after exhausting herself with a rather ineffective access of violence she'd directed at us both—before her roommate, a nursing student whom we had considerable difficulty contacting, arrived to collect her. The roommate did arrive finally, and Virginia, holding under one arm the roll of paper towel my wife had sent me up to my apartment to fetch, and with her other hand holding a thick wad of that paper towel to her face, let him lead her away; the two of them and the limping bike soon disappeared around the corner at the end of the block, leaving my wife and me in stunned silence to watch them go. The several thick pools of blood she'd left behind soaked into the pavement even as we stood there; and even after the street sweeper had come and gone the following Tuesday, the faint traces of these stains remained, I studied them from my living room window, from which they looked like continents on the map of an unfamiliar world. And I now

believe that it was standing there at my window, I told my wife by the river, it was standing there with a cup of coffee at my window, where in those days some of my finest contemplating took place, that my present admiration for her began to form. In view of the grace and firmness with which she'd brought the situation under control, with which she'd made this flailing, braless white girl calm, where I had succeeded only in making her more frightened than she already was, it was clear to me, I said to my wife, that the feckless lightheartedness that had carried us through that night was in my veins, whereas she was coursing with stronger stuff.

This disequilibrium in our relationship, which I'd been experiencing as a distinct internal pressure at least since the week of the heatwave, had during the month of my wife's emails from Macedonia built into a swallowed panic, as it became inescapable that a decision I'd made without hesitation—to move to Virginia and spend two years of my thirties studying, as I could imagine my wife putting it, how to make up stories in my little brain, leaving her behind in France with the euro in decline and her own career just getting off the ground, and leaving her, furthermore, setting aside whatever meager comfort my presence might have afforded, without access to my iffy genetic material, while each period of fertility that passed her by renewed her fear of a childless future—as it became inescapable that this decision, to say nothing of the entire enterprise of writing and reading fiction, was extravagantly fatuous and misguided. The sting of which conclusion was compounded, as one might imagine, by a conclusion that followed from it: that for quite a while longer than I'd realized I'd been actively resisting the life I was meanwhile committing myself to live. It wouldn't be too much to say, for example, that even in the months before the heatwave, a certain passive aggression underlay the enthusiasm I developed for reading case law, not only the opinions of the Warren Court—in whose soaring rhetoric the sustaining illusion of human progress could be so easily nurtured—but also decisions and dissents and transcripts of oral arguments dating as far back as the early nineteenth century, many of which, in their intertextuality, in their authoritative clarity of

thought, and by their impact in the nation's culture and in the lives of the nation's citizens, dazzled and exhilarated me in a way that fiction never had. That so many of these decisions, too, expounded upon ideas about what was and wasn't natural to marriage and procreation—an area in which I welcomed whatever instruction I could find—and did so with livelier and nimbler imagination than fiction could almost ever be hoped to do, further added to the urgency I felt in reading them as that spring and summer wore on and I counted down the days until I was to move to Virginia. All of which to say that well before the case of Obergefell v. Hodges was decided by a Roberts court divided five to four, I had become fascinated with the case of Mildred and Richard Loving, decided by the Warren Court nine-zip, and had become convinced that Mildred and Richard Loving were a pair of humans upon whose essential substance and virtue an entire system of faith in humanity could be based. Even as I formed these thoughts, however, a sinking feeling came upon me, when I began reading into the legal basis for the Lovings' conviction—Virginia's 1924 Racial Integrity Act, legislation that originated in an initiative of the Charlottesville chapter of the American Anglo-Saxon Club to classify all residents of the state as either *White* or *colored*, and grew into a comprehensive statutory schema aiming, according to a bulletin put out by the Virginia Board of Health, to *correct a condition which only the more thoughtful people of Virginia know the existence of*: *that in the State there are some 10,000 to 20,000, and possibly more, near white people who are known to contain an intermixture of colored blood, in some cases to a slight extent it is true, but still enough to prevent them from being white, a white person hereafter to be defined as a person with not even the slightest trace of the blood of another race, with the exception of people with one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian, who might possibly be descended from Pocahontas*—and though I don't want to make too much of it, the reality of my own situation became plain: that I would have to convince my wife to join me in a place where less than fifty years before it would have been a felony for us to live as man and wife, and where even to this day, as I would soon learn,

it wasn't hard to find people who would admit, without even really needing to be pressed, that the very mention of miscegenation could put them off their lunch.

A further addition, in other words, to the long and growing list of complaints I had about the life I'd chosen for myself, and the choice I had inflicted upon my wife, the cumulative effect of which list was an inability, despite my lifelong, pathological commitment to being liked, to comport myself in a likeable manner. In solitude I developed a kind of barometric alertness, and sat at my window when the sky grew dark to watch the sudden downpours, or the hailstones bouncing on the deck, a heartstopping bolt of lightening above the treeline, whose beauty, for only the split second before it disappeared, made me feel artistic and grand. Always wheeling in the sky when it was clear, meanwhile, atop towering, invisible thermal columns, were great black vultures in search of carrion: I'd watch them in the afternoons, then in the evenings I'd watch the bats come out, who followed altogether different forces through the air, and mornings after being up all night my chaotic dreams would be interrupted by a tinny, hectoring voice on the outdoor PA at the elementary school down the street, a voice that, in the contrast it created with the myriad voices of unseen birds, although in all probability it was merely summoning the children inside for homeroom, never failed to create the illusion in my sleep-fogged mind that I'd awoken to a state of emergency the nature of which I could not know. In class I kept my cap pulled low and avoided making even momentary eye contact with anyone by taking copious, illegible notes, notes that I knew to be worthless even as the urgency I felt to record them increased. In rare instances of interlocution, at department functions that were mandatory or otherwise inescapable, I would find myself powerless to listen to what was being said to me, powerless to respond, powerless to give even the outward signals that I was listening to what was being said while I waited for my turn to speak—powerless, that is, to interlocute, unless I'd had two or more drinks in which case I would interlocute intensely and fervently, in the sense that I would listen with utmost vigilance, chewing the dead skin on the heel of my thumb, for the smallest

opportunity to say something loud and funny and sophisticated, all the while taking great pains to appear to be taking great pains to empty my voice of even the faintest hint of condescension, with the intention of cultivating an impression in my interlocutor that I occupied some higher ground from which to condescend. I'm not sure how I developed the understanding that most evenings, and on the weekends, we all relished the opportunity to retire to the isolation of our separate lives, to test the limits of self-abuse, to watch trashy television and look at the sky and make up stories in our little brains; but I came to realize that, no, in fact my classmates made plans several nights a week and on the weekend to drink and chat and otherwise take pleasure in each other's company, plans in which for reasons that should be obvious they did not care to include me, and the existence of which they likely went to considerable lengths to keep me from discovering. For this and other reasons, when I finally got a car at the beginning of September, I made it my habit, every Thursday evening, to make the seven-hour drive to Brooklyn, where I'd stay for the weekend on an air mattress in my brother and his fiancé's living room, and I'd spend the days reading Supreme Court materials on their expansive terrace, and I'd spend the evenings visiting old favorite bars—each of which for some reason was always playing Steely Dan—with friends from the restaurant business, to whom I'd complain about all of this, the music, the vultures, my classmates, the biblical storms, bitterly and tirelessly, and to whom I'd excuse my seeming powerlessness to cease interlocuting by rather puppy-doggishly invoking the inordinate amount of time I'd been spending alone.

Sundays I'd hit the road after dinner, driving back the way I came, which is to say west into Pennsylvania, and then south down I-81 into the Blue Ridge Mountains, until I reached 64, running east out of the Shenandoah Valley and across the Rockfish Gap in the small hours of the morning, where without fail I would hit a wall of fog so dense that I would often pull off the road and get out of the car to feel it rolling past me, following the same northerly course as the rivers and streams of that region; and from that moment, resuming my place at the wheel, I'd begin to count down the

days until I could leave again, all the time forming a fantasy in which I didn't return at all, but stayed in New York, went back to bartending, saved a critical mass of cash to bring back with me to Paris, where I'd get a nice French job with an ironclad contract, thirty-five hour weeks, scheduled raises, paternity leave, five weeks of vacation—a fantasy that would grow all the more vivid as the week wore on, until I found myself driving north again and it began to seem almost real to me, so that when after dinner on the first Thursday in October I left for my brother and Jacob's wedding, I'd packed for weeks rather than days, and then upon further consideration had loaded fifteen boxes of books into my car as well, wondering what would become of the rest of my belongings if I simply left them in my apartment and never returned.

This entire sequence—along with the underlying feeling that my ambition to become a writer and the long series of poor and irreversible decisions I'd made in service of that ambition were the result of character defects I'd always counted among my best qualities—I found myself describing time and again in précis the day of Pete and Jacob's wedding, in conversation with, for example, a white-haired man in a studded black-leather jacket on the steps of the Friends' Seminary on Fifteenth Street, where the ceremony was held, with my twelve-year-old sister Emma and Jacob's broad-shouldered brother in the taxi across the Williamsburg Bridge, and with anyone who would listen on Pete and Jacob's terrace—a terrace at least fifty percent larger than the three-bedroom apartment itself, where we gathered for the reception—refining my delivery with each telling, embellishing or omitting certain details in order to emphasize what I saw as a certain comic futility, all with no other

hope than to get a laugh, and to thereby perfect a perspective from which it all seemed inconsequential to the longer narrative of my life; not only did I fail in each instance to get a laugh, however, but seldom did I elicit more than a blank stare, or, worse still, an earnest but vaguely condescending expression of sympathy, so that by the time I'd performed the latest version of the whole shtick for Pete's boss, Marisa, I was utterly bewildered when she responded not by blinking wordlessly or assuring me that everything was bound to work out for the best, but rather by fixing me with a thoughtful expression, and then asking me very matter-of-factly whether my wife and I planned to have children.

It struck me immediately that she'd asked in quite a different spirit than, for example, a nosy aunt of mine had at a cousin's wedding some years before, the question in that case having been attached to a large, implicit matrix of values and expectations, whereas in the present case it seemed to emerge from something more urgent, and sincere. Naturally I told Marisa that we hadn't discussed it, or that rather we'd decided it was a discussion best left to a later date, a time that our lives might be more stable and settled. But I could feel how bashful I'd become, I felt myself avoiding her eyes, fidgeting, and because Marisa had a reputation for her powers of perception, I knew, without either of us needing to say anything further, that I'd revealed a great deal more to her about my life than I'd intended to. As if I were teetering on the deck of a ship, Marisa reached out and held my arm; and never letting it go, she let her voice drop into a more intimate register, in order to tell me about the earlier years of her own marriage to the man we could both see standing near the edge of the terrace, looking out over the public housing project across the street.

For her own part, she began, she'd never had any interest in having children, in starting a *family*; on the contrary, as she'd moved into her thirties and one by one her friends from college and from law school became pregnant, she developed a certain reflexive contempt for the entire enterprise, the fatal germ-cell of society. She'd already given up too much of herself, and too much

of her freedom, to marriage, she felt, and the thought of circumscribing her life further still made her dizzy. At the time, her own career as a film scout was just beginning, and her husband was working for Legal Aid in Queens, where the idealism he'd been known for in his twenties was undergoing a serious stress test. It had been this idealism, she said, that had first attracted her to him when they'd met in Cambridge; she had never doubted that it was sincere, and yet she found it almost impossible to relate to in even the most theoretical way; in fact, it wasn't until it began to waver that she understood just how authentic it was to his character. For someone who'd been taught since before he could read that the worst of his country's sins belonged to the past, she said, for someone who cherished that notion, working for Legal Aid in New York City, as maybe I could imagine, was something like—as he was fond of saying now—getting an enema with a fire hose: in his dealings with the police department, with the district attorney's office, with the public defenders whose daily burden it was his job to relieve, in his dealings with the municipal government and even with his own colleagues, it became clear to him almost immediately that the entire democratic project depended upon its systems being staffed by humans of only the highest quality, when in fact these systems tended to be dominated by humans of exceptionally low quality, whether because such systems attracted such people or because they created them or because in the larger human population humans of exceptionally low quality were in such ready supply, he couldn't have said. Maybe you've read, she went on, a piece that appeared last year in the New Yorker, describing the ordeal of Kalief Browder, who, charged with stealing a backpack at the age of sixteen, was held on Rikers Island in solitary confinement for years, where he was often savagely beaten by guards for as little as, for example, trying to kill himself, and where he was repeatedly offered reduced sentences of fifteen to twenty years to plead guilty and forego his sixth amendment right to a fair and speedy trial, which he made clear he would not do. When finally, in the absence of any compelling evidence, the charges against him were dropped and he was released, the psychic damage that had been done

to him was beyond repairing: just this past June, Marisa said, he hanged himself in his parents' home with his bed sheets, exactly as he'd tried and failed to do so many times at Rikers.

Needless to say that although Browder's case was an egregious one, it was not even remotely atypical of the criminal justice system in New York, or in the nation at large, except in that he refused to plead guilty to a crime he didn't commit, which few people in his position would dare to do. Marisa had released my arm by now, and was standing with her own arms folded across her chest against the cold. *Justice*, in the circumstances, she paused to add, isn't easy to say with a straight face. In her husband's time at Legal Aid, which began before Kalief Browder was even born, he sat before young men in situations like Browder's daily, and tried to sell them on the shameless fiction that justice could be done on their behalf, which they could only have perceived as an open insult to their intelligence; and each night when he came home, as his anger evolved into despondency, he became more and more impossible to live with, became maudlin in his despair almost to the point of self-aggrandizement, and he began to lose weight, to forget to trim his fingernails, to call in sick to work, to become intensely fixated on absurd hobbies, like making pickles that were too sour to eat, which filled the shelves in their small kitchen. When, having smoked a prodigious amount of pot one night in Brooklyn, he was mugged at knifepoint by three black men not far from the terrace upon which Marisa and I were now standing in the gathering dark, he made the mistake of calling the police, hoping he might retrieve the wallet he'd lost, which had belonged to his grandfather. The officers who responded to the scene, Marisa said, insisted that he ride along for what they termed *canvassing*, which turned out to entail driving at a crawl through each of the housing projects in the area—including, in all probability, the housing project he still stood looking over from the edge of the terrace—as the officer in the passenger seat shined the cruiser's spotlight into the faces of each of the black men they passed on the sidewalk, maintaining along with his partner a running commentary that would have made Mark Fuhrman blush, a dialogue her husband would have

recorded had he not lost his voice recorder in the satchel that had been stolen from him. It was, she said, on the plastic bench in the back of the cruiser in search of the wallet his grandfather had carried all his life, and watching as one face after another squinted into the harsh spot, and contorted in deeply-rooted anger, or fear, that he perceived history as a long series of reproductions of the very same conditions that had existed since first walled cities began to appear in Sumer, in Egypt, and in the Indus Valley, conditions that would only become more ineradicable as the human race continued to reproduce itself with ever greater success.

Marisa paused at this moment to observe the commotion surrounding the arrival of the pizzas—twenty-five pizzas no one had made space for on any of the long folding tables that were situated haphazardly around the terrace: my other younger brother Michael, a former Marine Corps captain, was from behind the stack of pizza boxes that were balanced on his arms trying to take charge, to little effect. Pete and Jacob, stroking their chins, led the retinue of pizza-bearers that included Marisa's husband from one corner of the terrace to another, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each location from various perspectives; when Marisa's husband wandered away with his stack of pizzas—in the attitude of, as Marisa observed, Ferdinand the Bull—the proceeding devolved rapidly into a scene of minor chaos, until finally Jacob's uncle, who like many of the men in Jacob's family was an evangelical minister from Ohio with a deep and commanding voice, stood on his chair and, whistling sharply through his fingers, restored order, though of course no sooner were the pizza boxes arranged, and a line formed, than

the very fine, cold mist of rain that had been forecasted began to fall, sending up a volley of good-natured groans, promptly restoring chaos.

As Marisa and I watched this little drama unfold, I was reminded of something I'd observed the day before, sitting with a cup of coffee on a bench on Roebling Avenue, across from a fenced-in schoolyard blacktop in the near corner of which the recess monitor sat reading a magazine with her whistle gripped in her teeth, the whistle being a technology, as I learned later on Wikipedia, that originated in Ancient Egypt but was made popular in modern times when the British manufacturer Joseph Hudson created a model that could be put to effective use by the police; the recess monitor, I told Marisa, without ever looking up from her Us Weekly, let sound sporadic, piercing blasts of her own Acme whistle against the pleasant cacophony of children's voices, blasts which she then abruptly truncated by, I suppose, covering the mouthpiece of the whistle with the tip of her tongue, leaving the children to flinch very slightly each time, and to wonder what they might be doing wrong; how easily, point being, and how carelessly, I said, we criminalize the very existence of an entire class of people, even in their own minds, so that we needn't ourselves give their existence a moment's thought.

In the scramble to get pizza before it became soggy I lost Marisa, and though I tried all evening to work my way back into her company, in order to hear what her story had to do with having children, I found myself pulled into a succession of conversations each stranger than the last—or, it may be more accurate to say, a succession of conversations that were not themselves so strange but which each made me feel stranger to myself than the last. Inside, having eaten my fill and hoping to warm up, I wandered around in Pete and Jacob's bedroom, picking up and replacing the knickknacks they were always bringing back from antique shops; and when I poked my head into the little office off the bedroom that Jacob used as a studio, I found Marse, the genderfluid young man—as he preferred at the moment to be thought of—I'd been introduced to and spoken

with briefly at the Quaker meeting house, now unlacing his thigh-high Doc Martens, and once again I found myself getting flustered in the way I do in the presence of all beautiful women. It was only his grace that put me at ease, and his body-confidence, a body confidence I could only imagine was exceedingly hard-won, and the blade-edged irony that inflected his voice, which was nevertheless very soft and amiable. I found my eye drawn to the swath of his ribcage that was revealed by his sleeveless Aeon Flux t-shirt, and to the bangles on his wrists, and the light they threw around the room as he spoke. The studio was cramped, each wall lined almost to the ceiling with racks of the analog synthesizers and vintage soundboards Jacob was always buying on eBay, and with the cathode ray video equipment on which he shot the puppet show he'd left his band to create, the rather loveable, hand-stitched, non-human cast of which looked down on us from perches on shelves high overhead. On the back of the door there were posters of the sort that would be found in elementary school classrooms in the seventies and eighties, inspirational quotations and warnings against drugs, as well as advertisements cut out of vintage copies of Ranger Rick. Isn't it funny, Marse said, how so many of the most progressive people in this country—so many of the same people who voted for *change* in 2008—are also the most earnestly nostalgic? Nowhere of course was this more apparent than in Brooklyn: the Edison bulbs, the pompadours and moustache wax, vintage cocktails, barmen in suspenders and shirtsleeves, the bebop in barbershops and synth-pop in nightclubs, to name only a few of what Marse called the *failures of irony* that defined Brooklyn culture, which I suggested could be traced in large part to straight white Americans' devotion to the elusive concept of authenticity, though what troubled him, he said, was the pathological thoughtlessness with which the entire culture of gentrification devoted itself to recreating the world of the past. And it was true, he said, that among other things Jacob considered his program—nominally a children's program in the tradition of Sesame Street—an *experiment in time travel*, as he explained on the website he'd set up for it; as a matter of aesthetic and of technology and methodology, it belonged to the

seventies entirely. But in its approach to its material it was thoroughly forward thinking, Marse went on, and it was the darkness that emerged from this diachronic quality that made the work feel as much like David Lynch as Jim Henson, so that in Jacob's treatment of children's themes like bullying, conformism, depression, imperialism, historical materialism, friendship, and sharing, nowhere to be found was the condescending optimism that children are taught to expect from their entertainment: the lives of his Creatures of Yes, as they were called, weren't easy, theirs was a world of mismatched romance, somatic discomfort, broken or otherwise non-traditional homes, loneliness, cynicism, ignorance, and alienation, from which there was little relief, though Jacob himself, despite everything he had internalized in his evangelical childhood—Marse said, breaking into a big smile—remained a fundamentally optimistic person committed to the Christian ideals of peace and love.

Marse himself, he said, knew a thing or two about feeling two ways at once, about containing conflicted impulses in the same body. That was why he just had to get out of his boots, as much as he adored them; his feet were sore and he wanted to dance. He took me by the hand and led me into the living room, where there was in fact live music happening, albeit not of the sort that could be danced to: in keeping with Jacob's promise that there would not be dancing at his wedding, much of

the party had gathered in the tiny living room for a performance by a thereminist from central New Jersey, Irene, whom Jacob had met in the comments section of a music video on his former band's YouTube page. The outlandish otherworldliness of the instrument's sound, and of Irene's bewitching, in fact quite puppet-like appearance, was enhanced by the light show in blues and violets Jacob was performing in accompaniment; and the final detail, which could not have been planned even by David Lynch, was Jacob's grandfather, an evangelical

minister in his early nineties, whom other relatives had convinced that Pete and Jacob were just good friends. His face was a dense network of burst capillaries and he wore, in addition to his turtleneck and wide-wale corduroys, a white bandaid at a peculiar angle on one side of his enormous nose. Though he remained bolt upright, he was fast asleep, with his mouth hanging open, so that he looked for all the world—as Marse whispered to me—like he was dead, which quite a few people in the crowd, as I looked around at their horrified faces, seemed to believe was the case.

As the night wore as I continued to drift around the terrace, on which now that the rain had stopped my father had built a roaring fire in the chiminea, I directed one conversation after the next back to the bizarre tableau Jacob's grandfather made with Irene and her theremin, which had given me occasion, I kept saying—always looking over my shoulder to see who might be in earshot, not wanting to offend anyone—to reflect upon the gratifying reality that before too long most of the voting populace who supported candidates like Trump or Cruz or Huckabee would be dead and gone; what we had seen, I insisted, was a very tidy representation, bathed in blue and purple light, of the inevitable liberalizing force of time, the killing force of progress, so to speak, a thought that received an enthusiastic response from most of the people I spoke with, who for the most part took it to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek—which is for the most part how I meant it; though on the other hand I had read not long before about how cleanly opposition to gay marriage across the country cut along generational lines, and felt I was on fairly firm ground—until finally I put it to my childhood friend Carson, who had shared the apartment on Havemeyer with my wife, my brother, Jacob and me for a number of years; it had been Carson who had decorated our living room with white quinceañera balloons and ribbons from the dollar store downstairs, in his capacity as de facto best man at my own wedding, an event he attended dressed exactly as he was now: in Timberlands, a Redsox cap, and a red-plaid flannel shirt the sleeves of which he rolled up over his meaty forearms. He appreciated my irreverence, he said, laughing dutifully, and my poor taste, but on the other hand,

growing serious now, scratching his thick blonde beard as he often did when he was expressing a conviction, he said he thought it was misguided to think that was all it would take: the dearest seat I have on earth, he said, quoting what I wasn't sure, is the grassy seat by my parents' grave.

We were sitting by the fire now, and Pete had joined us. It felt good to be together, to look back over the feckless years we'd spent together, which had begun, it amazed us to say, even before Pete's twentieth birthday. Whether it was Pete or I who asked Carson to retell, for our benefit and for the benefit of the cluster of people who had begun to pull up chairs to get warm, a story of his that either of us could have recited by heart, I couldn't say. But it struck me as a bracing measure of how much we'd all changed since I'd first heard it that in its present telling Carson was almost unrecognizable to me. As always he began with the preface that the events he was about to describe predated the movie Catfish by five years. He was living in Boston at the time, in a large house on Linden Avenue that he shared with five other guys, who between them went to three different universities. And though 88 Linden, as they called themselves, wasn't exactly Animal House, he said, nor was it really the most reflective or sensitive bunch; they shared a subscription to Brazzers, if it would give us any idea, and on their refrigerator was a season-long scorecard for sock hockey, which they played in the unused dining room on Sunday nights. It was in the fall of the second year that they lived together that Carson made a MySpace account under the name Sara Hope, to which he attached a collection of photographs of a girl we had gone to high school with, a cheerleader whom the boys in our graduating class had held in high esteem. He created a constellation of Sara's interests, which, he said, required very little imagination: she liked Maroon 5, Damian Rice, and Smashing Pumpkins, and the movies Groundhog Day and Space Jam, for example, and made various cutie-pie references to marijuana. Little by little, as the days grew shorter and colder in the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, he began to *make connections* with other college students in the Boston area, and particularly students of Northeastern, where she had listed herself as a

member of the class of 2008. By the time the house on Linden had emptied out for the holidays, Sara had a network several hundred people strong; that was when, one by one over the course of about two weeks, she began to connect with Carson's housemates.

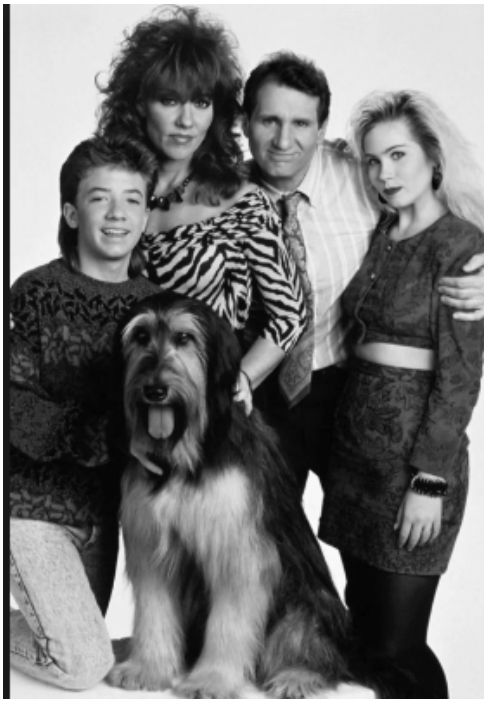
Carson paused to drink and I took the opportunity to explain to the small audience that had gathered around him that at the age of nine, he'd once snuck over to our friend Linc's house when he knew the whole family would be out, in order to eat all of the marshmallows out of a box of Lucky Charms, simply because he loved the thought of poor Linc's face at breakfast when he found himself with a bowlful of what amounted to misshapen Cheerios. Linc was the perfect target for that sort of prank, Carson added, belching into his fist, because he felt things really deeply but lacked the critical vocabulary or emotional sophistication to process and sort them; there was always something priceless about his reaction. The same was true of my housemates, he said: when we all came back from Christmas break the energy in the house shifted immediately, as it emerged that they'd all become friends with this incredibly pretty girl who was *actually a cheerleader*. They were ecstatic to discover that so many of her interests overlapped with their own: among other things she shared Morgan's love of Space Jam, and Hammer's love of Soundgarden, and like Anand she was a Communications major who had worked at the BestBuy in her hometown; it was Gil who, emboldened by their shared lactose intolerance—though if we're to be honest, Carson said, his chances with her were the poorest—sent her a message to introduce himself. This first point of direct contact, Carson said, freed Sara up to contact the rest of the house; each night, one of them would report that she had messaged him, and even those she'd already been in touch with would be helpless to conceal their envy, though on the other hand, they welcomed any development that would more deeply involve her in their social world.

It didn't take long for Sara to become the animating force behind the entire communal life in the Linden house, as his roommates' private flirtations with her intensified, until each of them was

in daily contact with her. He hadn't quite expected how reverent the discourse around her would become, Carson said; from time to time, as if they'd remembered themselves, they would make vulgar speculations about her anatomy, but when they did it always felt half-hearted and pro forma, and before long they would revert to the touchingly mawkish dreaminess that had, without any of them quite realizing it, seriously cut into the time they usually spent getting stoned and tinkering with their fantasy football lineups and playing GTA. I can remember—Carson told us, looking into the fire—the excitement that came over them as a group when they learned the name of her dorm, and the stunned silence that fell among them when, crowded around Morgan's laptop at the kitchen table, they typed the address into MapQuest and learned that it was only a few stops away on the T. I was amazed at how isolated I began to feel in the house, he said, not only because I was alone with the knowledge that they were all being had, but because they believed themselves to have access, through Sara, to a higher plane of feeling, access that wasn't available to me because I didn't have a MySpace account, a belief that in a certain way I began to share. But neither had he expected to assume, even as he was excluded from the house's communal life, the role of private confidante in the lives of each of his housemates independently. He could remember, for example, a conversation he'd had with Hammer, who had gotten in the habit of touching up his chinstrap daily: they'd been in the supermarket, and Hammer kept taking random items off the shelves and examining them in his hands—a stalk of rhubarb, a pasta turner; there were just *so many things,* he'd said ardently, that he'd never even known existed: the whole world felt new. He was having trouble, he told Carson, imagining the moment that he first saw her in person, after having spent so much time poring over the few photos of her that were available on her profile; he was having trouble imagining the physical facts of her, in relation to the images he knew by heart. To imagine how her skin would feel, how her hair would smell, was beyond him. Carson had to understand, he'd gone on: never in his life had a woman of this caliber *stepped to him*—to me, Hammer! he'd said—and he felt sincerely

that, come what may, he was learning a lot in the process, about himself, and about what it meant to be a man.

It was late February when things began to escalate precipitously. The housemates had begun planning a huge party for the sole purpose of inviting Sara Hope, so that when they met her for the first time it would be on their home turf, in their element, so to speak, where they'd be least inhibited, having agreed that above all it was crucial that they *just be themselves*. Having anticipated something like this, however, Carson brought another MySpace account he'd created into play: Leon



Tavarra, Sara Hope's volatile, on-again-off-again boyfriend who went to community college. Leon, whose photos Carson claimed to have found in Google Images using the search term *strong greek*, had dark, intense eyes, and close-cropped hair, and a chinstrap that made Hammer's chinstrap look like a pantystrap; and in many of his photos he was shirtless, revealing both an obsessive attention to his physique and a startling number of animal tattoos in various states of completion. All to say he made the housemates nervous even before he began sending them messages that featured menacing emoticons, though Carson could remember a line of reasoning that concluded with the hopeful speculation that maybe he was *just Italian*. When, however, Leon warned the Linden house that, because they so often referred to themselves collectively in public forums by their exact address, he knew exactly where to find them—which is exactly what he would do if he found out they had any more contact with Sara—they began to discuss cancelling the party altogether.

Naturally Sara contacted them almost right away, to say that she was sorry for Leon's behavior, that beneath his admittedly very troubled surface he was basically a decent guy and that she didn't think he was dangerous. She hoped they would have their party but that they would forgive her if she lay low, in order to deal with some personal matters the nature of which they might be able to imagine; for a while it would be best if they just left her alone. A period of furious debate therefore ensued, in which however, the opinion inevitably prevailed that any argument for inaction—respecting her wishes, giving her space, admitting that in fact they didn't know her all that well and should perhaps mind their business—was a smokescreen for the shirking of their manly duty to protect her; still, the possibility had to be considered that Leon might well belong to a more violent, less forgiving world than they themselves did—was there anyone among them, after all, who had not seen Training Day? Hammer, to his credit, had some boys he could call, boys who would be there for him no matter what, but Hammer's boys notwithstanding the debate proceeded in circles throughout the course of the next week, by the end of which it was too late to cancel their party anyway.

During all of this, they developed a strange impatience with Carson, with his innocence of these events: the triviality of his everyday concerns annoyed them, they'd come to regard him as a fundamentally unserious person. Though he'd always been one of the stronger personalities in the house, they couldn't remember why they liked him. At moments of high drama, he would walk into the room with the electric bill, and call for a house-meeting about cutting costs. He would leave notes in the kitchen claiming that someone had finished his grapefruit juice and not replaced it, and then he would march into their individual rooms—where they lay in the dark imagining, he supposed, scenarios in which Sara Hope would have the opportunity to witness their bravery—he would march into their rooms and ask them whether they'd read the note he'd left in the kitchen about his grapefruit juice, and whether they had anything to say about it. They had resolved, finally,

to send Sara a carefully worded note, to say they didn't think anyone had the right to tell her what to do, and that if she chose to come to their party, at which there would be a keg of Sam Adams and a terrific amount of nachos, she would be safe there, and further, that if there was any other way they could be of service, they were available for that as well.

On the night of the party, because his housemates were acting so squirrelly, Carson found that the female attention that would normally have been divided among them as hosts fell to him exclusively, and without much trouble he met a girl whom he quite liked, and with whom he retired to his room before the party was halfway over. He talked to her about a sense he'd had for quite some time that the life he was living was not his own, that the feelings he felt were not his feelings, that even in describing this to her he felt as if her were speaking in someone else's voice, which she said she thought she understood; she herself often felt that there was a secret side of her that she could never share with anyone, as if the person she thought of as herself was in fact two people or more, each in conflict with the rest. Yes, Carson said to her, he told us on the terrace: that was it exactly. That her name turned out to be Sarah absolutely floored him; he felt somehow reaffirmed in his commitment to seeing his prank through to its conclusion, and after she'd fallen asleep, as the party continued on the floors below, he crept down the hall and into each of his housemates' rooms, and emptied the contents of their dressers onto their beds; back in his own room, he wrote to them as Leon, to the effect that Leon had come to their party incognito, that he'd walked among them, that he'd watched them from afar and could see the fear in their eyes and could smell it as they walked past; and that if they doubted it they could check their bedrooms, see if he hadn't learned quite a lot about them while they went around pretending to be all right.

Among the people who had gathered to listen to this story I saw Marisa, whose face was lit by the fire, whose expression I couldn't read, as well as Marse, who had clearly concluded that Carson was a sociopath. Carson explained that because Hammer was selling pot out of his room,

and because Anand maintained an ample stash of coke, they were reluctant to involve the police. Over the next few weeks, the housemates became almost as obsessed with Leon as they were with Sara. It was decided among them, on the basis of what evidence Carson didn't care to venture, that he was South American, and it galled them to find that he shared a lot of Sara's interests as well: the thought of Leon and Sara watching Space Jam together made Morgan feel ill, and it seemed unlikely, they could all agree, that his appreciation of Jeff Buckley was sincere. For a week or so, Sara dropped off the radar, causing them all a terrific amount of distress. Carson had gotten in the habit of spending two or three nights a week at Sarah's house, which turned out to be only two doors down, and sometimes in the morning he would come home to find the housemates gathered silently in the kitchen, drinking his grapefruit juice, numb with concern. What's so special about this girl, he would sometimes ask, and speaking for all of them Gil, who slept with his socks on, would say they didn't expect him to understand, seeming to intend some slight to Neighbor Sarah, as they called her, of whom Carson was growing fonder every day.

By this point, Carson said, I was beginning to feel I'd created a trap for myself, that I would be forced to maintain the secret identities of Sara Hope and Leon Tavarra indefinitely, to live in the space where the fiction of their world intersected with the reality of my own, and more and more I found myself at the point of confessing the entire plot to Neighbor Sarah, only to reconsider at the last moment when I imagined how it would sound to her. Again, he resolved that the only way out of the mess he'd created was to bring things to the point of crisis he'd envisioned from the very start, at the precise moment he'd planned. Unprovoked, Leon began firing off antagonizing messages, in which he accused them all of messing with Sara's head, turning her against him. In the dead of night, Carson often found himself committing minor acts of vandalism and theft against his own house, smashing the mailbox, egging the porch, stealing and hiding the PlayStation from the living room. It was mid-March, but there was still snow on the ground, in which he created

footprints leading to the kitchen window, where he created handprints, and evidence of a nose pressed against the glass. Standing alone in the dark street during the hours before dawn, he told us, I knew that I had crossed some threshold, and I began to wonder if there was a difference between insane behavior and insanity itself.

When, near the end of March, Sara reached out to Morgan to say that she could really use a friend, the housemates leapt into action. Immediately they began to plan another party, a blowout even bigger than their last. At the supermarket with Hammer gathering materials for nachos, Carson could see that the end was in sight, and he warned himself against letting his guard down at this, the crucial moment. I just want to hold her, he remembered Hammer saying, weighing an enormous orange block of cheese in his hands, and to tell her that everything is going to be all right.

Because they all agreed there was strength in numbers, they decided that even if it would distort the preferred ratio of males to females, they would all feel better about things if they invited Hammer's boys. Leon knew they were having a party, had been taunting them all week, but it was too late to back down now, in Sara's hour of need. When the night arrived, and the house began to fill with sweaty bodies, the housemates remained tethered to Gil's computer, on the lookout for messages from Sara, who had written earlier in the evening to say she was having dinner with her cousin nearby, after which they would both proceed to the 88 Linden directly. She had made a definitive break from Leon, she said, and tonight she just wanted to get wild, to let her hair down, to feel young and carefree in a way she hadn't for ages, except in glimmers, she added, when she was talking to the housemates on MySpace.

There had, meanwhile, been no word from Leon, and—though there was a minor crisis when it transpired that Hammer's boys had finished the nachos, despite Gil's specific instructions to leave some for Sara—spirits were generally so high that no one noticed how often Carson had been slipping away to his room, where he had two computers running on his bed; when a message arrived

from Sara saying that she and her cousin were waiting for the check, the housemates' pitched excitement began to froth over. For the occasion Morgan had shaved his chest, and now in his giddiness he couldn't stop scratching. Hammer kept dropping to the floor and doing bursts of pushups, and asking Carson if his triceps looked great, which admittedly they did.

As the wait for her dragged on, however, their spirits sagged, they became surly, made caustic remarks about each other's appearances and personal odors. They'd entered a period of grim silence when, after nearly two hours, another message arrived, this one not from Sara but from Leon. Leon knew what they'd done, he said, he'd gained access to Sara's MySpace account and knew about the messages she'd been sending them behind his back, knew what they'd said about him, knew she planned on coming to their party; they'd been warned, he said, and the time for playing games was through. He was around the corner, he told them, with a group of friends, and unless the housemates preferred to be savagely beaten inside their own home, they should be out in front of their house in no more than five minutes.

In five minutes the housemates, together with Hammer's boys and a few neighbors, were in the street with bats, with lacrosse sticks, with empty wine bottles, with the plastic hockey sticks they used for their games on Sunday nights. Their eyes were wide and all of the color had gone out of their lips. They stood beneath the streetlamps turning one way and another, not knowing from which direction the attack would come. Once again, they fell silent, and when they spoke, it was in whispers, as if their adversaries might be hiding in the bushes, waiting for an opportune moment to strike. It felt to Carson like a very long time before one of them noticed that the mailbox, which they'd yet to replace, was open, and that there was something inside. It was a note from Leon, addressing them as bitches and instructing them to check Sara's profile now, see if they still felt tough.

Sara! someone breathed: what have we done? With no further thought for their own safety, all of them rushed inside, and waited for the page to load on Gil's Dell.

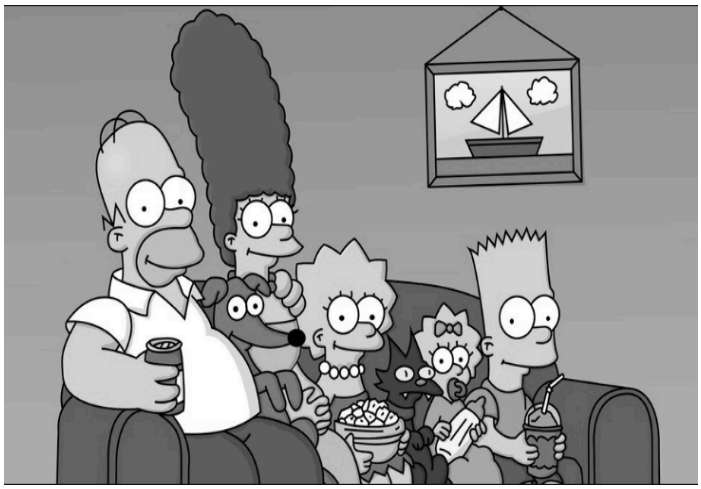
Sara Hope's profile picture was now a picture of Carson, in his cap and red-plaid shirt, unsmiling, holding a sign. A long moment passed before anyone even moved. So wait, someone said quietly, are you Leon? He's everyone, someone answered, more quietly still. They were all still holding their weapons. Carson stood at the edge of the room, remaining completely motionless, with his gaze fixed on the floor at his feet, wishing he could disappear. He could feel, he said, the turmoil that was unfolding within each of his housemates. A sob went up, he thought from Morgan, and then was immediately stifled. Neighbor Sarah, he noticed from the corner of his eye, quietly withdrew from the room. By now it was after midnight, a new month had begun. In the photo, the sign Carson held said April Fools.

In the course of Carson's telling this story, the terrace had somewhat cleared, as people began to move inside to the living room and kitchen, or to say goodnight and be on their way. But someone had come around passing out fleece blankets, and so the small audience around the fire had remained, and had listened in rapt silence until the climactic moment, which they met with an appreciative gasp, beginning, then, in their excitement, to chatter, as if they'd seen a play. There seemed to be a general agreement that Carson was unwell, that it was not only sociopathic to have treated people like this but also a bizarre way for him to have spent his time. But to my surprise and I think to Carson's, no one expressed full-throated outrage; rather, overwhelmingly, they admitted to a kind of grudging admiration, the kind of grudging admiration that isn't even really grudging—there was a lot of smiling and shaking of heads, and it was suggested that *prank* was not nearly strong enough a word for what he'd done, that it could be called an elaborate form of sadism, but that on the other hand it might be better described as a work of art. The fire by now had died down, and Marse squatted beside it to add a pair of logs, holding his hair back and bringing his face close to act

as bellows. Naturally, Carson said when someone asked him, over the years I've thought a lot about it, and finally I've given up, trying to understand what kind of person I must have been to have gone to such lengths to humiliate the people I called my friends, to humiliate them and, if you'll forgive the phrase, to break their hearts. The hostility you must have felt toward them, someone said, would have to have been enormous; and Carson agreed, but he said that he couldn't remember feeling any hostility toward them at all, and that when he thought of them now he felt nothing but affection, along with a healthy dose of remorse.

One thing that has become clear to me, however, he went on, scratching his beard, is that I myself was somewhat damaged by the entire ordeal. The noise of the city seemed to reach us once again, and some of the small crowd got up to get new drinks, or to pick over what remained of the pizzas. Marisa stayed in her seat, her knees pulled up to her chin beneath a blanket, and, not having spoken or so much as moved for as long as she'd sat there, now produced a cigarette and asked if anyone had a light. With no disrespect to my parents' divorce, Carson said, cupping a small flame before Marisa's face, I don't think any other experience than the one I've just described has played so great a role in the difficulty I've had in my adult life making any kind of romantic commitment, insofar as no other experience has made it quite so clear to me how dehumanizing love can be in its approach to its objects. I can't overstate how insipid Sara Hope was as she was known to my housemates; in no interaction with them was she more than a vacuous reflection of their selves, and so as their reverence for her increased—as, for example, they gradually refused to speak of her using their accustomed vocabulary of debasement, out of what they would have termed respect—she quite clearly became something less than human in their minds: a construct, let's say, of their vanity. There was a murmur of agreement, and Marse said that Hammer's professed difficulty imagining what it would feel like to see her in person struck him as an apt expression of an exchange that had taken place in his mind: of a person for the hope that her reciprocation of his love would put to rest

whatever doubts Hammer entertained about his worth. Yes, Carson said. And because of course she didn't exist as a human or as anything else beyond a MySpace account that I controlled, it was left to me to suffer the alienating effects of this exchange on her behalf. Each of the Linden housemates is married now, he said, to women not much different from Sara Hope; and I've even been to a few of their weddings, weddings for the cost of which you could make a down payment on a brownstone in Crown Heights, and at each of which, as I watched them smearing cake on each other's faces, I felt



certain that neither the bride nor the groom was even the least bit interested in the other as a person, so much as each was interested in affirming and increasing their value in their own minds and in the world. It seems to me that so many of the couples I see around me fit this description, a feeling that has paralyzed me, over the years, in my own romantic pursuits, and has convinced me, as I had occasion to reflect at the ceremony we all witnessed today, that the more narrowly we define marriage for ourselves as individuals, the more irreversibly we'll perpetuate on a national scale the pettiness and isolation upon which this prank of mine turned.

At a mechanical level Carson had told this story exactly as I remembered him telling it many times, I said to Marisa later, as the last of the guests were filing out, and it wasn't until I'd heard these final reflections, which were new to me, that I realized that what had transformed the experience of listening to it was a certain personal urgency, as if it were in the hope that he could redeem himself that he'd told it at all. That happens at weddings, Marisa said: people tend to lay it on the line. At her own wedding, she said, an extravagant, precious affair of the sort Carson had described, her father,

who spoke a very charming English he had learned in Cambodia, gave a toast that reached the same conclusion that Carson had: that it was marriage, or more broadly family, that transmitted the collective consciousness of a culture through time—though it had taken her a long time to understand that this was what he'd meant.

Momentarily, we were interrupted as my mother, father, and twelve-year old sister came over to say goodnight; and I was surprised to find how sorry I was to see them go, to find how keenly I wanted this night not to end. It had begun to rain again; we were inside by the window, watching as on the terrace my brother Michael and Marisa's husband, holding empty pizza boxes over their heads for shelter, oversaw a group of drunk people rolling out cheap fake turf upon which to set up the small collection of borrowed tents that Pete and Jacob's friends from out of town would be spending the night in. It was not long after her husband quit his job with Legal Aid, Marisa went on, that she discovered herself to be pregnant. Until that moment, the extent to which she had internalized her husband's despair had escaped her notice: only now that this internal pressure was relieved, as her body began to make room for the child that would grow inside it, did she realize how joyless she had become, how automatically she'd been performing her daily functions at home and at work. Some of the bleakest films that had gone into production that year had been adapted from manuscripts and treatments she had tagged for development when they'd come across her desk, movies in which children were separated from their parents, in which parents lost their children, Holocaust movies, cancer movies, addiction movies, abortion movies, movies about the deaths of pets. In the smallest observations of her surroundings, she said, she found support for the conclusion that the world was, for lack of a better term, an evil place: she could remember getting on the subway and finding the pole warm and damp from strangers' hands, or having to sit through a commercial for cat food, and feeling ashamed to be human. Maybe I remembered, she said, what Calvino wrote about the inferno: that the inferno isn't the world to come, but rather it's the world

we live in every day, that we create simply by being together. I said that in fact I did remember, we were to discuss Invisible Cities in class the following week. She'd read this passage early in her pregnancy, and it stayed with her, she told me: the two strategies Calvino offers to escape suffering in the infernal city of the living, she quoted, were either to become such a part of it that it becomes invisible to you, or else to learn, by constant vigilance and apprehension, to actively seek and recognize what, in the midst of the inferno, is not inferno, and to make it endure, and to give it space. And as ridiculous as it sounds to me now, she said, my pregnancy, for all the anxiety that attended it, appeared to me as an opportunity to do exactly that: to create a small space for goodness to endure, a space that at any rate my body was already creating of its own accord. I thought about the people my husband dealt with in his work—the police, the prison guards, the careerist prosecutors, Republicans of every description—and it occurred to me: whatever I did, these people would be going forth to multiply until the end of time; one generation after the next, they would inherit the earth.

So she became a devoted mother, and a doting and attentive wife; it became her foremost ambition that everyone in her home feel safe and loved. This had been a very easy adjustment to make, easier than anyone who knew her would have guessed; and in her work, too, she recalibrated her perspective: in keeping with her understanding of Calvino, she had made it her business to facilitate good-feeling in the world, in the form of delightful comedies that she associated in her mind with the plays she'd loved in college, plays like Pygmalion and The Tempest and Private Lives. But now as she looked back over her career, she could see that she had achieved the opposite of her aim, that almost without exception the *feel-good* movies that had been the result of her work not only belonged to the inferno but were expressly designed to disguise it, as could be guessed merely by looking at their uniformly vulgar and oversaturated color palates; they were movies characterized not only by an absence of historical perspective, but by shadowless light and general lack of texture, by

quippy, anodyne dialogue, and almost always by a wedding, or the promise of a wedding, or at minimum an unambiguous valorization of the same kind of bourgeois companionship that sold teddy bears and Volkswagens, complicated in this iteration only just enough to seem like art.

Through the window we could hear the wind blowing against the buildings, and the frustration and hilarity in the voices of the people setting up their tents. Marisa, who had special dispensation to smoke indoors, lit another cigarette, running her finger around the rim of the bowl she was using as an ashtray. I liked to see her smoke, the way it defied the severe and exacting persona she was known to present to the world. The difficulty is, she continued, that once you begin to see the world this way, almost everything begins to look like a document of your own complacency—if you're not burning it down, she said, you're propping it up. For example, she had gotten her hands on a film script, not long before the Obergefell decision was handed down, that told the story of the Lovings, Richard and Mildred. In her Fourteenth Amendment class she had of course studied this case in detail, and knew that even irrespective of their name it was a story readymade for film: the Lovings were not recruited, as the plaintiffs in landmark cases like Lawrence v. Texas would later be, by an activist legal organization; nor did they break a law deliberately in order to establish standing to challenge that law in court, as Estelle Griswold of the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut had done a few years before. Neither Richard nor Mildred was especially civic minded, they had little interest in revolution or reform. Rather, they loved each other, and their children, and their home, where they sincerely wished to return. By 1963, the Lovings had already been arrested once for violating the terms of their parole when they'd returned to Central Point for Easter Sunday; and so that year Mildred, at the suggestion of her cousin Alex Byrd, who lived nearby in DC and who had grown tired of her complaining, wrote in her fine hand a letter to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, seeking his advice. It wasn't within the power of his office, Mr. Kennedy explained, to intercede directly on her behalf, but he thought she might do well to

contact the American Civil Liberties Union, which she promptly did, explaining that while she understood and accepted that she and her husband could never live in Virginia again, she would like at the very least to be permitted to return from time to time so that her children could visit their grandparents without having to see their mother and father hauled off to jail.

Marisa admired the filmmaker who had been hired to write and direct the film, she said, and she had no doubt that it would come out well. But of course the trouble with narrative art forms was how effectively they cleansed their audiences of the same emotions they incited in them, so that even the most subversive stories became self-defeating. A movie about social injustice could be expected to move white moviegoers, for example, only to the extent that it inflated their self-regard, when the more appropriate response to the injustices portrayed would have been to smash every windshield on the block. What's more, she felt that at a subtextual level, in the context of an Obergefell decision that relied so heavily on Loving for precedent, a feature film about Loving v. Virginia would inevitably portray the Civil Rights Movement, the tenure of the Warren Court, the entire countercultural revolution of the sixties, as a final messianic disruption in the course of history the effects of which were now complete. As much as the two cases resembled each other, Marisa pointed out, Loving was decided by a unanimous bench, whereas Obergefell was decided only five-to-four; this could hardly be called progress, and the collective effect of the dissenting opinions—such as Roberts' infuriatingly sound assertion that the court had just committed as egregious an act of judicial overreach as it had since Dred Scott—formed a logical basis for a dissent in the Loving decision as well.

By now her son was in the throes of puberty, Marisa said, and existed in a state of perpetual anger and shame and general misery—which it pained her to witness, but on the other hand she had trouble explaining to him what other moral response than anger, shame, or misery there could be to his world, middle school, where so many of society's worst tendencies were to be found writ small;

this, she said, was what the space she'd created for the non-infernal had inevitably come to. Among the arguments against miscegenation, and against same-sex marriage, presented to the Supreme Court, was the argument that the children such unnatural partnerships produced had an exceptionally hard time navigating the prevailing biases of the larger world—an argument that amounts to a hateful legitimation of bigotry in many ways, and not least in that it failed to demand that the bigots themselves make the inverse consideration on behalf of their spawn. But on the other hand, she said, breathing smoke, she had begun to wonder if such an argument didn't succeed, in a way, in diagnosing an intractable state of human affairs in which to be unhappy was a matter of good faith.

*

I didn't know, I told my wife as we strolled beside the swollen river, weaving through the herds of tourists by Notre Dame, and pausing to examine the strange reliefs that appeared on the bridges and

above the doorways, the death-fraught idylls of Paris through the ages, the two of us standing sometimes even close enough to each other that I could smell her hair—I didn't know, I told her, why Marisa shared all this with me, I didn't know what she thought I would make of it, but I spent the week that followed on Pete and Jacob's terrace, in one of the better of the tents that had been set up there, once the rest of the weekend's guests had cleared out for home; and each night I built a fire that Pete and Jacob would for sometimes join me for a spell in sitting before, enfolding themselves in each other's arms, though mostly I sat alone, staring into the flames, which quite naturally gave me occasion to think over all that Marisa had said. That week I walked the streets compulsively, in widening circles around our former neighborhood, which was already unrecognizable from the time we had lived there a few years before, for all that had opened and closed since. Across the street from the Havemeyer apartment, for example, I told my wife, the coffee shop that had opened the month we moved out had already gone out of business, and a new coffee shop had already opened in its place, one that was more acceptable to the new residents of this neighborhood, as the old one had been more acceptable to us than whatever had gone before. The day I stopped in there, I said, the guy behind the counter, who in so many particulars looked exactly like me, was wearing a shirt that he seemed to have made himself, which across the chest read CHILL, MAN, a sentiment in whose fatuousness, I realized, I could locate the source of my longstanding contempt for Brooklyn baristas—a spiteful, small-minded thought I turned over and over in my mind as I walked over the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan, over the Manhattan Bridge back into Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge back into Manhattan, back over the Williamsburg Bridge again when it got dark. It had occurred to me to ask Marisa before she left, I told my wife, what it was her husband had done for a living in the time since he'd left Legal Aid; she asked if I would believe her if she said that he'd become a divorce attorney; I said that I could easily believe it but that if I wrote it in a story no one else would. I suppose I knew at that moment, I said

to my wife, that my interest in writing fiction was at a definitive end. But then later, I continued, walking over the Brooklyn Bridge into a mild breeze of the sort that often precedes a sudden rainfall, a sensation returned to me that I'd mostly forgotten, a sensation of fullness that Benjamin describes as an anamnestic intoxication, a kind of dissolution of the borders between the interior world of my little brain and exterior world around me, as though, as Benjamin puts it, the city had opened up to me as a landscape, even as it closed around me as a room—a feeling, point being, that the novel I'd spent much of my twenties writing and re-writing had been an elaborate attempt to record. I still had the code for our building on Havemeyer, I said, and so I went in one night and climbed the stairs to the roof, where I guess I hoped to retrieve something more of the time we'd spent there, though I discovered that the view no long looked out over the Manhattan skyline but at a barrier formed along the river's edge on Kent Street by the high-rise condo buildings whose planning and construction had begun before either of us had moved to the neighborhood. All week I'd been getting emails from Virginia, I told my wife, asking where I was and if everything was okay; though I'd answered none of them, I realized by that point that I'd never had any intention of making a sudden break for it, as I kept putting it to myself; of abandoning our things and starting a new, better life, one that would be like our old life with the important difference that I would no longer be obsessed by the phantasmagoric and imperious hope of being a writer of novels.

The following Saturday, therefore, having missed the discussion of Calvino, I drove through a storm and hours of traffic—west into PA, south down 81, back east out of the mountains—to be at another wedding, the wedding of two classmates of mine, an American man and an Irish woman whose decision to marry, like mine and my wife's, was not entirely unrelated to matters of immigration. That morning while I had my coffee I'd come across a piece the bride had published in an Irish magazine, a piece about the women in her family that for the length of the drive, I kept returning to in my mind as rain drummed on the roof. I missed the ceremony at Town Hall, and

arrived late, in a smudged tie, to the bar where the reception was being held, and where I found the bride's parents, the bride's brothers, her many cousins and uncles and aunts, who'd all arrived that day from Ireland, giddy with the thrill of celebrating, and of being gathered together so far from home. As best I could I hovered at the edges of their conversations, wondering, I suppose, what it might be that people talked about when they'd known each other for so long; and why should it have been any surprise to find that they mostly told each other stories they all already knew. They'd already been so proud—I'd been told by a ruddy aunt, Aunt Bree, whose charming habit it was to occasionally chuck her own chin for emphasis as she spoke—they'd all been so proud already, Bree said, to have one writer in the family, and now here they were with two, and certainly as far as Bree was concerned there was plenty of material in the family lore to be shared between them as husband and wife.

It was maybe the effect of this good-feeling that, though I was still somewhat uneasy among my classmates, I found as the night wore on I was nevertheless very happy to be in their company, to look around and see them in their best clothes, picking lint off each other's jackets, straightening each other's collars, steadying themselves on each other's arms—I felt a fondness for them, an admiration for the hope they shared, words to describe which I couldn't find, though I thought I might have better luck the more I drank. To that end the bride and groom had advanced a massive sum of cash against the bar tab, a sum—enough for another Peugot, I told my wife—it soon became clear we wouldn't make it even halfway through if we didn't start taking our duty to do so seriously, as the bride put it, standing on a barstool, in a stirring address to the gathered crowd. Indeed, the bride in her lovely white dress made it difficult not to take this duty seriously, and took it quite seriously herself, periodically ordering more tequila shots than there were mouths available to drink them, and taking it upon herself to drink the balance, a pattern that had been developing for a

few hours when I found myself part of a small, cross-eyed crowd to whom she was explaining, with tremendous poise and authority, why her wedding dress was now inside out.

Having gotten on the outside of so many tequila shots, she said, I went into the women's bathroom and vomited all over the outside of my dress; but because I didn't want to appear in photographs of my wedding day with vomit visible anywhere on my person, I thought it would be better to turn the dress inside out. The inside of my dress, which is now the outside of my dress, is vomit free, especially relative to the outside of my dress, which is now the inside of my dress, and which is absolutely *covered* with vomit.

It was here that she flipped the front of the dress up to illustrate her point. This was Helen, I told my wife on our walk, because later that fall she and Helen had become dear friends—this was Helen, and I don't know why but I was convinced at the time that she was describing a deeply held belief.

The vomit, Helen had said, I told my wife, which until recently was inside me, is now being smushed, by the outside of my dress, which is now the inside, against the surface of my skin, which is for all intents and purposes the outermost extreme of my existence.

Because for Helen, I told my wife, this speech did in fact become a kind of aesthetics—for Helen and for me as well.

The state of me, she'd said in closing to the assembled group: it's all just a bit much.

9 - ON ZADIE

The week that began with Melania Trump's breathtaking observation that a country should be judged by how it treats its citizens also began with an email from my mother's sister, announcing that she and her husband were in Paris, and would love to see me if I had time. By which she seemed to mean if I could take time away from the portfolio of unfinished stories I'd been adding to all summer long, knowing, as she did from my mother, that I had been severely underemployed since I'd gotten back to town late in May. My aunt suggested it would be easiest to meet at Shakespeare and Co., the existence of which I was happy to be reminded of; the plan we arranged, which suited my budget as well as theirs, was to have a coffee at the first picturesque place we came to, and then to spend the afternoon in aimless wandering, in a section of the city that was at least as unfamiliar to me as it was to them. I rode the train to Saint-Michel, and from the bookstore, accordingly, we set out south, into the Latin Quarter, and immediately upon turning the corner we came to an elegant terrace cafe on a wedge of sidewalk, which was entirely empty apart from, unmistakably, sitting alone with a stack of notebooks in the shade, Zadie Smith, the author.

My aunt and uncle didn't seem to recognize her. They ordered a half-bottle of wine, and I ordered an espresso, and as we began to cover what little common ground we shared—idiosyncrasies, mostly, of my mother's—Ms. Smith sat not more than three meters away, where she could doubtless not help overhearing every word we spoke; it was not long before I was absolutely beside myself with self-awareness, being unable, for my own part, to help overhearing every word we spoke through her ears, a kind of double-consciousness that gave our conversation, which would no doubt have felt somewhat stilted anyway, since none of us had much interest in discussing my mother's idiosyncrasies, the feeling of trying to run underwater, or of being chased in an anxious dream. All of which, it might as well be said, was to be expected; even in the split second it had

taken me to suggest we sit rather than walk right by, I must have known that this was what I was letting myself in for. What I couldn't have anticipated, however, was how satisfying it would be, nonetheless, to sit there in her presence, and to feel myself, perhaps, enter her imagination—an imagination I'd spent so much time exploring, after a fashion, in the pages of her books.

We spent the rest of that day wandering, as planned, and perhaps because it's particularly easy to become lost in that area of Paris, in motion our conversation became more natural: in addition to, for example, the RNC, my grandfather's career in advertising, the flooding of a few weeks prior, and the soldiers in fatigues who patrolled the streets no longer in teams of three but rather, as of the attack in Nice less than a week previous, in teams of four now, we discussed my uncle's work as a test prep tutor in an anti-poverty organization in South Boston, the aim of which was to help disadvantaged students, mostly black and Latino, surmount obstacles to social and economic advancement, as compared with my own part-time work as a tutor preparing mostly white students in wealthy families in Paris for the same tests, the effect of which work being, in essence, a deliberate reinforcement of those same obstacles; in the estimation of my wormy brain, I realized, to have command of a vocabulary for describing these problems, which I couldn't even quite say I did, was as good as working actively to combat them, which was in fact my uncle's full-time job; and further to that, I recognized this failing without any sense of shame, but instead with a strong sense that such a failing was the exact sort of thing I would like to discuss at length not with my aunt and uncle but with Zadie Smith, who of course was by that time long gone.

We walked round and round, continuing to discuss things. Because they knew almost nothing about me, I explained that while my wife lived full-time in Paris where she had her own work, I spent the academic year in Virginia, where I had what amounted to an adjunct position teaching comp; in sympathy with this predicament, they both invoked periods of long distance they had themselves endured—not, they clarified, in their very successful marriage to each other, but in

their catastrophic first marriages, though they hastened to clarify further that it had not been the distance that had led to the ends of those marriages, or at any rate, that it had been a combination of things. We strolled along the river on the Left Bank and on the Right Bank, and on either bank of the Ile de la Cité, and when we finally stopped to rest, it was on a bench in the shade, in the courtyard of the Église de St.-Julien-le-Pauvre, the oldest church in Paris, which was built on the ruins of a still older church in which Gregory of Tours, my uncle told me, stayed in the sixth century on his way through Paris, as he writes in his Historia Francorum, and where he crossed paths with a false prophet whose articles of sorcery the archdeacon had personally cast into the river, and who turned out to be an escaped slave. We were, I noticed, less than fifty meters from the bookshop where we'd begun. When during the formation of the Third Republic—my uncle, who seemed to be knowledgeable about all sorts of things, continued—the church was reassigned to the diocese of the Melkites, which is to say, the Arabized Catholic Church of Turkey and the Levant, many commentators regarded it as a betrayal of the neighborhood's essential character, defined as it was by the Roman Catholic Church's influence in the nearby University of Paris, which was after all how the neighborhood came to be known as Latin in the first place. In the courtyard of the church, now in service as a public park, there were at least two memorials of the Holocaust, including a small glass memorial to French Jewish children who were transported to death camps—and in particular, the memorial specifies, French Jewish children of the fifth arrondissement, and particularly French Jewish children of the fifth arrondissement who never had the opportunity to go to school, whose thirteen names visitors to the park are encouraged to take a moment to read. As my uncle spoke, my aunt was looking through a collection of vintage

postcards she'd discovered in a little shop, and passed one to me that featured the Pont St.-Michel, just downstream of us, during the famous flooding of the river in 1910. Had the flooding of a few weeks previous, she wanted to know, gotten quite so high? It hadn't quite, I said, though it had nonetheless delighted the tourists, who pressed up against the railings along the swollen banks, leaning way out over the water to watch tame little eddies of the current drift downstream.

In the days that followed, I found myself inventing reasons to return to the Latin Quarter, not so much hoping to run into Ms. Smith again as taking pleasure in the idea that there were traces of her nearby. I wandered around alone, with my head full of high-flown thoughts that I addressed to her, an act of imagination that it satisfied me to think she would understand. Without being able to say quite why, I felt certain that no other writer, though there were certainly writers whose work meant more to me than hers did, could have so acutely increased my sense of the romance of living in Paris, simply by appearing before me there. Later, in describing the scene at the café to my mother in a series of text messages, I gave emphasis to the moment my aunt referred to a future in which I was a famous writer, as relatives of mine often do in connection with the fact that I've reached my thirties without making any progress in the direction of a professional life; my response, in the present case, I told my mother, was to say that unfortunately there was no such thing as a famous writer, at which point I was supposed to have paused, to make sure I had Ms. Smith's attention, before admitting that there were of course a few notable exceptions. This anecdote was not only an egregious wholesale falsehood, but also entirely beside the point, the proportions the encounter had taken in my mind having little to do, as I saw it, with fame. To have glimpsed Jonathan Franzen, or Salman Rushdie, for example, I doubt would have impressed me at all. And in fact, in the past, I had crossed paths with Deborah Eisenberg in the street near the Luxembourg Gardens, and come face to face with Richard Ford in a doorway in Montparnasse, and though at one time or another I'd idolized both of them, in neither case did I feel anything beyond the

uncanny sensation of recognizing them from their author photos. At an exhibit in the Pompidou, likewise, I once saw Agnes Varda, a present idol of mine, and because the work both she and I had come to see was playful and intense in precisely the way her own best films are, it struck me as merely natural to find her there, although I was impressed by how small she was. As I walked through the gallery of St.-Andre, I watched the tourists picking over the postcard shops, and settling into their chairs at the very cafes the photographs on the postcards they bought featured, and taking photographs of themselves there; and I perceived how near these people came, in this sequence, to realizing an image that had filled them all their lives with a longing for, essentially, a moment of abiding peace; it was inconceivable to me that this ideal they held in their minds included patrols of soldiers in teams of four, or even three, or even that the presence of such patrols served as an assurance, as it was purportedly intended to do, that we were safe here, rather than as an insidious reminder of just the opposite: that we were vulnerable everywhere to attack by an enemy who was essentially invisible, and that we required protection that only a powerful government could provide. On the internet, I discovered that Ms. Smith had in fact given a talk at Shakespeare and Co. a few days previous to my having spotted her, and had remarked that it had become necessary of late for literature to intervene in the culture of our day. Whether she was thinking, when she spoke those words, of Don DeLillo, who has said about his own work that it concerns the problem of living in dangerous times, I couldn't say. But I was thinking of DeLillo now, still only a week since a man in Nice had driven his truck through more than a mile of crowd beside the beach, the aftermath of which had been documented in a horrific video my wife and I had watched quite by accident in bed within an hour of its being filmed, because it was DeLillo who had also said, long ago, that in such a culture as our own, reduced as it is to blur and glut, the only meaningful act is the act of terror; and it was DeLillo who long before that, furthermore, had been hired as a junior copywriter, as my aunt claimed within Zadie Smith's hearing, at Ogilvy, Benson & Mather—a firm that traffics heavily in

blur and glut to this day—by my grandfather, a young creative director at the time with a reputation for spotting talent.

My thoughts therefore soon became rather tangled. Or to put it another way, the result of my encounter with Ms. Smith was a kind of sensory and cognitive intensification, a feeling I associated with emerging from a movie theater into the bright day, or with looking out the window of a plane as it descends toward its destination—a feeling I've never been quite sure whether to think of as lucidity or mystification, though it occurs to me now it may be better described as a state of psychic leisure. It may be more to the point, anyway, to say that in Paris I'd been spending too much time alone. My wife, on whose affection, and on whose brightness and frankness, I'd always been hopelessly dependent, had begun a career in film casting that was going so swimmingly well that I'd become dependent on her income too, and which seemed to be progressing from one success to the next in inverse relation to her respect for me, and to her patience with my own career as a writer, a career that for years had sat dead in the water. This may be why I was so little able to resist the spell that had come over me as I made my unsteady way through her native city, which of course I would soon once again be leaving, and where a vast matrix of invisible phenomena and relations seemed to amount to a single, total social fact that I could catch glimpses of in the volume of Fanon I'd been carrying around with me but that Ms. Smith could hold in her head entire—it being the writer's work, as she had written somewhere, to form connections where the lazy eye sees only chasms of difference. It was the following day, or maybe the day after that, that on the Pont Saint-Michel I stood for a time listening to a pair of children in heated debate over whether the water in the river they were looking out over flowed into the sea, or in from it, each invoking his respective teacher as the final authority, so that, although one of them was certainly right and the other certainly wrong, there was no hope of the question ever being settled. Both boys were of apparent Arabic descent; to have guessed their origins were North African would have been a safe

bet. Not far from where they stood, I would have liked the opportunity to point out to Ms. Smith, there was a plaque commemorating the 1961 murder of some two hundred supporters of the Front de Libération Nationale, who had taken to the streets in peaceful protest of the curfew applied to *all Algerian Muslim workers, French Muslims, and French Muslims of Algeria*, by the then-prefect of police, Maurice Papon. The population of Algerian Muslims then living in Paris—about a hundred and eighty thousand—lived in fact not in Paris but overwhelmingly in the shantytowns that surrounded it, which the government had erected in the period between World Wars to accommodate an influx of Algerian men, who by cunning manipulation of immigration policy had been funneled there to augment the diminished labor force, with the stated expectation that when the work of rebuilding the country was complete these Algerian men would return from whence they came, rather than send for their wives and children to join them. For the Algerians who marched in three giant columns from the systemically enforced obscurity of these banlieus toward the center of the city, it must have felt like something of a triumph to discover that they were tens of thousands strong; contained in any exchange of glances there would have been the hope that they, French citizens, after all, would finally become impossible to ignore. Papon, who had been awarded his second Legion of Honor only a few months previous, would later be convicted of crimes against humanity for his cooperation with the Schutzstaffel during the Occupation in administering the transport of Jews to death camps—including in all probability the thirteen named in the memorial I'd just seen by the church—but never, in his lifetime, held to account for his instructions that protesters in violation of his eight-thirty curfew be beaten, tortured, and shot, and then summarily dumped into the Seine over the side of the Pont Saint-Michel, among other bridges both upstream and down-, either alive with their hands tied to ensure their drowning, or already dead and stripped of any papers or belongings that could be used to identify their bodies when they washed up on the banks, as they inevitably continued to do for many days thereafter. The entire affair proved to be a matter

of such indifference in the general public conscience that the government's massive and clumsy attempt to cover it up would be allowed to stand unchallenged for the rest of the century. The plaque, installed in 2001 on the fortieth anniversary of the events of that week, reads in full, *A la memoire des nombreux Algeriens tués lors de la sanglante répression de la manifestation pacifique du 17 octobre 1961*, and is the closest the French government has ever come to acknowledging its role in the massacre, which, though it must be said that it doesn't come very close to acknowledging the French government's role in the massacre at all, nonetheless enraged many commentators and politicians at the time, because it seemed to them to support terrorism, to promote civil unrest, and above all to encourage disrespect for the police.

The boys who stood there beside me arguing which way the river flowed were not likely to come into conflict over the details of these events; the massacre is not taught in schools. What they'd learned about it from their parents or grandparents, meanwhile, was likely to confirm a shared intuition that if their own small bodies washed up on the banks of the Seine they could expect to wait forty years before anyone heard anything about it. I'd heard about it only from my father-in-law, an Algerian Jew who moved to France from Morocco—where his parents had fled during World War II as the policies of Vichy France crept closer and closer to their daily lives in Oran—and who celebrated his thirteenth birthday in the banlieus of Paris the week of the massacre. Even now, he told me, when he brought the events of that week up in certain company, he often found himself met with blank, dismissive stares, and this was because, he explained, it's so difficult for anyone as extensively educated in French history as most white people are in France to imagine there's anything of importance they don't already know. On the bridge, tourists from Asia, the U.S., and elsewhere in Europe gave a wide berth to the two boys, who had worked themselves by this point into a chuffing rage, and who had left behind the question of the river for the more pressing matter of which of them, and which of their teachers, could be described using a word in French

whose meaning I didn't know but guessed from context clues was somewhere in the ballpark of dipshit, or even fuckboy. Their wild gesticulating had soon achieved a tortured grace, and it was only a matter of time, it seemed to me, before they came to blows. Everywhere you look, I remembered my uncle saying at the cafe—his moustache damp with wine, his fanny-pack riding up past his bellybutton, and whether within Ms. Smith's hearing or after she'd left I couldn't recall—everywhere you look and see an unbridgeable chasm of difference you'll find a misunderstanding that can be traced back to everyone's earliest days in school.

To which I'd very pompously added, either because Ms. Smith was still there to hear or because I was already locked into a habit of imagining she was there to hear, that for example the introduction of religious teachings into a secular system of education, for the purpose of consolidating the support of the rural poor, key aspect of the Grand Old Party's strategy since Nixon which had finally yielded Donald Trump, was also crucial to Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ascendancy in Turkey, where, furthermore, I said, since the attempted coup d'état a week before, nearly forty-thousand teachers had been suspended or fired—more than any other sector—and academics of all sorts had been forbidden to leave the country. Whether the boys came to blows or not I didn't stay to find out, because I find trying to understand rapid exchanges of French exhausting, and because I'd gotten tired of watching the two of them, and of thinking about them, and wanted nothing so much as to continue wandering, to see what else I could think about, especially in connection with Ms. Smith.

But that night, I had drinks with my friend Aysegul, a writer from Istanbul, and her husband Maks, a professor of applied mathematics from Riga whose hilarious anecdotes from everyday life he often related as if he were proving a theorem, and I described the scene to them much as I've described it here. Where was my wife, they wanted to know, as people often do when I finally finish speaking, why was it that they never saw her anymore? She was working, I said; she was always

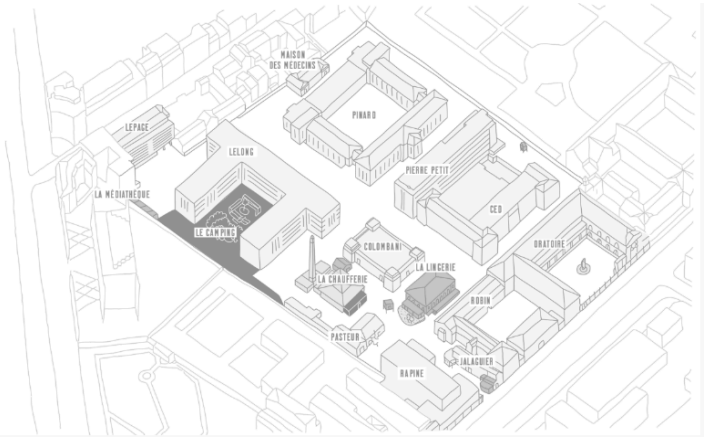
working, or doing things related to her work, or related to securing future work, even work that conflicted with her longer term goal of opening more space in French film for actors of color—an

ambition many of her colleagues openly ridiculed—for fear that if more than a week or two elapsed between gigs she'd be unable to pay her own rent in Paris, to say nothing of making contributions to my rent in Virginia, and to payments against the massive debt we'd incurred flying back and forth. For the moment, I explained, she kept getting calls for jobs, and so would not be spending August and September in Virginia with me as planned; although we had tentative plans that she would visit me in October, we'd agreed that if she got another call for another job, she would have to stay and take it, and therefore, I said, when I left the following week, it wouldn't be certain when we'd see each other again. Because I could see that my distress was making them irritable, I changed the subject to a draft of an essay Aysegul had written, which I had read in envy a few days before, about the disappearance of an asylum seeker at whose hearings she had been serving as an interpreter, and whom she had been teaching French on a weekly basis for the better part of a year. His asylum case had fallen to pieces when it emerged that he was what the officials handling his file called an imposter, which he was, Aysegul said, in the sense that the bombed-out Afghan village he was from had turned out to be in Pakistan. We were in a place called Les Grands Voisins, the grounds of the defunct hospital Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, which, after it had been vacated but before it could be got ready for sale and development, had been squatted by a gang of industrious hippies, who over the past year had put every wing of every building, as well as various outbuildings and associated office space, to use in hippie enterprises, none of which smelled quite

the way you would expect. There were campsites available for twenty-two euros per night, which included a tent, access to a shower and toilet, wi-fi, a pedal-operated washing machine, and a free coffee and croissant per camper each morning. There was a thrift store, a bar, a restaurant, a canteen, numerous studio galleries, workshops, office space for monthly rent, another restaurant, another bar, various plots for urban farming, urban beekeeping, urban husbandry, beer that could be won by answering trivia questions that cost a euro to hear, a Russian steam bath, Shiatsu massage, open-air barbering, endless picnic tables, yoga of all sorts, craft, dance, music, and language lessons of all sorts, parking for caravans, an ice cream truck that had been converted into a Balkan history center, hundreds of places to sit both in the shade and in the sun, which in Paris even in late July doesn't set until after ten, and all of which left plenty of room for, in the whole of the two main buildings, actual squatters, which is to say people squatting of necessity, many of whom were indeed asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, to name only a few, the upkeep of whose quarters all this hippie stuff was meant to support, and who themselves led many of the more popular workshops, which were subscribed through the end of the summer. That day in fact there was a Syrian culture festival, organized and run by the hospital's Syrian residents, and a Syrian DJ was making beats for a series of men, presumably also Syrian, as well as a few women, who rapped in Arabic, whether from prepared texts or by the seats of their pants I couldn't have said, but it gave me a terrific feeling to observe how well the sound of Arabic in all its natural percussiveness lent itself to the form, as compared with French for example, which was so difficult to rhythmically isolate into discrete units of meaning. All of which, the entire scene, I thought Zadie Smith, whose brothers are rappers in English, would appreciate for the way it transformed the White-Savior Industrial Complex into an actual complex where to partake of an idea of oneself as a White Savior it was unavoidable not only to do so in the context of undeniably privileged material consumption, and not only to sincerely interact with and learn about foreign cultures, but also to submit to a

hierarchy in which the members of those cultures held all of the cultural currency, and even occupied a position of authority—which is to say, it was unavoidable to enter into a relationship with those people of the precise sort a pupil enters with his teacher.

What's more, I found myself saying aloud to Maks and Aysegul—and here I did in fact find myself looking around the courtyard half-expecting to find her—Ms. Smith was bound to appreciate the entire scene for the fact that many of the people who were here spending money, a great many of whom, it must be said, were not white, had quite possibly been born in this very hospital. In order to make up for having interrupted Aysegul—who'd been saying that since the attempted coup the week before and in light of the subsequent purges, she'd been having a hard time focusing on her essay, or on really much of anything at all, beyond reading whatever reports she could find as events unfolded, and fretting over her emails to and from her father, a public intellectual and committed democrat many of whose closest friends and colleagues had been indefinitely suspended from teaching as well as barred from leaving the country—I launched into a lengthy account of the fascination with Ms. Smith that had resulted from my having crossed paths with her a few days before. How to explain, I asked the two of them, the importance I'd attached to this event? Maks suggested that it was possible that I had formed an understanding of Ms. Smith's physical elegance as an expression of her essential decency, and by extension of the essential decency of writers in general, whose ranks he assumed I still hoped to join. Ignoring the note of derision with which he'd referred to my own writing, I wondered to what extent he realized that the same could be said of Aysegul, to what extent he had this answer ready because of the time



he'd spent thinking of his wife's own physical elegance and essential decency, but I said only that I found it distasteful to connect a woman's achievements with her appearance—a partial truth at best—even in the case of the admittedly very local achievement of being admired by me. Was it not possible then, said Aysegul, that my fixation on Ms. Smith was related to certain superficial commonalities she shared with my own wife, an experience of the world they share that was beyond my reach, such as the fact of their both being descended from Caribbean slaves on their mothers' sides, their both harboring a profound attachment to the working-class immigrant districts in which they'd been raised, their both having expended considerable energy in understanding and articulating the internal pressures that afflict mixed-race children in mixed-race homes, their both having weathered this pressure, throughout their lives, with astonishing grace and equanimity? No, I said, I didn't think that was it at all. Maks and Aysegul's glasses had been empty for some time and I wondered if I should give them an opening to take their leave of me, which I couldn't have blamed them for wanting to do as soon as they could. A large line was forming for merguez, and when the smell of it reached us it occurred to me that I couldn't think of the last time I'd had anything to eat. A small flock of sheep went past, it was hard to tell who was leading them. Aysegul began a story the point of which was the lengths her landlady would go to exempt Aysegul from her vertiginous thoughts on Muslims, to exempt her from even being Muslim, when it would have been far easier to say what she had to say to someone else. I lapsed into silence, thinking now not of where Zadie Smith might be, but where my wife might be, and why we never saw her any more—whether it might not be related to my ongoing commitment to, as she had once put it, making up stories in my little brain. A young man walked by in a t-shirt that bore the image of Donald Trump, which the three of us each saw at the same time, exchanging confounded expressions but making no remark. He must have been Spanish, or maybe Italian, and whether he was aware of the disconnect between whatever levels of irony he intended by wearing such a shirt in this place and the palpable effect his

wearing the shirt was having on people around him wasn't clear. He was grotesquely pimpled, wedging his merguez sandwich into his mouth and tearing it apart with his teeth. Maks had begun describing misadventures from his commute, all of which involved funny intercultural moments whose accrued meaning was that a network of chasmic differences made the ideal of a pluralistic society seem laughably farfetched. On the beaches in places like Nice, I'd read somewhere that day, women had been banned from wearing what were called burquinis, on the very French premise that this protected women's rights, when of course what was really being protected was the right of non-Muslim beachgoers not to be confronted with expressions of Muslim culture. All week in Cleveland, Donald Trump had been rising in the polls on the strength of his continued assurance that he would keep his constituents safe, that they were victims of aggression from every side, from within the border and without, that contempt for education was a badge of authenticity and even patriotism, that, above all, all lives mattered, by which he meant roughly that only theirs did, especially if they were police. I prefer the stairs to the escalator, Maks was saying when my attention returned to the present moment, for the following reasons: one, I find the stairs are often less crowded; two, the risks associated with taking the stairs as compared with taking the escalator are less likely to be fatal; and three, whether I'm going up or down, I like to proceed under my own steam. In the present circumstance, however, he went on, on the stairs there was a squad of soldiers making their tense rounds, in confrontation with a squad of metro employees who wanted to check their tickets, which caused… but I didn't catch the rest, I was thinking about how insufferable I'd been all evening, and making plans to be less insufferable the next time I saw them—which as dull as they were I hoped would be soon—chiefly by being a better listener and spending less time absorbed by the incessant chatter of my own brain. The sky, at last, had begun to grow dark. Maks and Aysegul, their glasses still empty, stole occasional glances at my own glass, which, if they were in a pessimistic frame of mind, they must have seen as half-full. I wondered what would become of the kid in the Trump

shirt, in a cosmic sense, and for that matter what would become of the sheep, also in that sense. If it's true that we're living in dangerous times, I said to myself then, because I still believed that Zadie Smith could hear my thoughts, it's worth asking: dangerous for whom? When I got home my wife was already asleep, and because I knew that in the morning she would rise and go before I woke up, I sat by the edge of the bed and watched her for a time, and felt certain that she was dreaming. The lightness of her breathing, the openness of her face, the warmth of her body, crowded everything else inside me out. In her sleep, as I settled into bed, she registered my presence, and threw her arm around me, held me close to her, would not let go, and so for a long time I lay awake, feeling myself on the brink of collapse.

*

Was it yesterday, or the day before that I packed my bags? Because I couldn't stand to be alone in the house with them, I went out one last time to wander, taking the train into the center of the city, walking along the river, past the bookshop, and coming finally into the wedge of park that adjoined the Eglise de St.-Julien-le-Pauvre, from which the wedge of sidewalk where I'd sat in the presence of Zadie Smith could be seen. Among other Juliens, the church is named for Julien l'Hospitalier, a former nobleman whose life Gustave Flaubert reinvented as fiction, who really did, together with his wife, take a vow of poverty, and whose good works included the ferrying of sick and indigent wanderers across the river, putting them up in the hospice he'd set up on the far side, as he is pictured doing in a thirteenth century bas-relief that can still be found above the doorway of a cabaret theater around the corner from the church that bears his name—a service the Pont St.-Michel, among others along the Seine, ultimately rendered obsolete. Beside the church,

which is preserved in an advanced state of decay, I found a tourist taking a photograph of a sign; as I stood reading the sign she'd photographed, which turned out to forbid urination on the church walls—though it did provide the address of the nearest public toilet—I heard the sound, from an open window, of voices joined in singing the familiar American slave spiritual, Down By the Riverside, which in its baptismal imagery connects sleep, and dreams of peace, with the crossing of the River Jordan to the Promised Land. This was the first number in a performance by a Congolese gospel choir, the Legend Singers, which had just gotten underway, and though I didn't recognize the songs that followed, they were without exception slower than the one they'd started with, and exceedingly beautiful—expressions of the same profound sorrow that became the basis for the blues. I stood listening there beneath the window for a long time, watching a little boy no more than three years old kicking a rubber ball around the courtyard, while a woman in hijab who I assumed to be his mother sat nearby reading Beloved in translation. This boy and his ball became the small element of chaos that connected the various strangers seated on benches and in the grass all around,

who were all eventually called upon to return the ball whenever it came their way, which they did in all good nature. It was at this moment that a moment returned to me from an interview Zadie Smith had given on the Charlie Rose show more than a decade before, in which her voice brimmed over with emotion in expressing, as an article of faith, her belief that the writing and reading of fiction were, as she put it, a great good in the world, a premise I myself had without quite realizing it come to seriously doubt.

This morning, after another sleepless night I rose, well before dawn, and ordered a cab to the airport. I didn't want to wake my wife, whose first day on still another job would begin a few hours later, but I couldn't help pressing my lips to her forehead, to her cheeks, very lightly to the lids of her eyes. Only once the cab was waiting for me in the street, and I'd hoisted my bags onto my shoulders, and left my key by the door, did I hear her footfall behind me. My love? she said, and I turned, and she sprinkled me with water from the tap—a farewell ritual, I realized, that came to her, by way of her grandmother, from Algeria. My love, she said again, and I turned to her, to be sprinkled with water once more. We repeated this sequence a third and final time, and then, finally, we said that we loved each other, and I went down.

And now in the window seat at the rear of my plane, where I've spent most of my flight collecting disjointed notes under the heading On Zadie, at last I've put my pencil down to look out over the landscape of Quebec and New Brunswick, where, between me and the Saint Lawrence estuary, a seemingly endless series of lakes and the network of rivers and streams that connect them are at times difficult to distinguish from the shadows the clouds cast on the earth. And of course the clouds themselves fascinate me, in the way they hang motionless in empty space—one in particular, a long, straight, and seemingly endless stripe, which just moments ago passed within wing-distance of my plane, and was of course, I realized, the contrail of another plane, which must have passed this way not too long before—how startling it was to see such a vivid demonstration of the traces of other lives I've so often suspected my own course through the world of intersecting. At length my thoughts returned to the flood my aunt had asked me about: a few weeks before I spotted Ms. Smith in Paris, following a period of heavy rain, the Seine had swelled its banks, risen higher than it had since 1910—it had been a passing reference to this recent flood that had been the cause of the disagreement between the two boys on the bridge: where had all that water gone, where had it come from in the first place. It was true that it was dizzying to think of it that way: to think that all the

water on the planet formed a single, zero-sum system that with the application of enough brainpower could be kept track of. As the water rose, the prime minister admitted that it would be a long time before things returned to normal. The president visited the Louvre, for a photo-op with the art handlers who'd begun preemptively to move things to higher floors. Together, that same week, they announced the extension of the emergency suspension of civil liberties that had been in effect since the attacks of November, which among other things gave police the right to stop and search anyone they chose, under any circumstances. As the water reached its highest point, my wife and I walked along beside it, and I watched her smile at how ordinary life had become suspended, how a hush pervaded even in the densest crowds, how the gray sky brought the world close. She peered into each of the quiet faces that passed her, and when I saw how each one renewed an expression on her own face that hung between delight and mischief, I knew that without her to crowd the things inside me out, I would be irredeemably lost. I watched her turn, on the Pont St.-Michel, where an old man, though he could not himself have remembered, was pointing out to her how much higher the water had risen a century before; she turned to me, and waved, and then a month passed, the water receded, no one knew to where, and I began my descent.