

The Ghost Sonata

Allegro, ma non troppo

ONE

The reason that Bill Bachmann, with two *nns*, found himself one bright October afternoon, in spite of his plans to make no plans, looking down at the skyline of New York, weird now, empty now, without the twin towers of the World Trade Center, buildings he had never liked and whose absence he was now seeing for the first time – it had been that long, he only now realized, as the plane circled over Kennedy, since he had been “home” – was that, on his return from the local market only one week ago he had found a letter in his mail-box.

He had gone to Switzerland, years back, for the air, to breathe again, as he put it, to be free of that woman, as he still called her, to get away, as best he could, from the disaster, the long chain of disasters, that always seemed to overtake and envelop him, wherever he turned, whenever that woman appeared in his life. He had taken advantage of his father’s Swiss passport and his own consequent dual nationality to install himself, temporarily, he had thought, one summer, and with no plans for the future, and no problems with the authorities, in the mountains, near Brig, in the German-speaking part of what is known to the German speakers of Switzerland as the Wallis, and to the French as the Valais. He had felt then that as a holder of a Swiss passport he should try once in his life at least to overcome his aversion to mountains. He had failed. But he had met, by chance, in the little *Gasthaus* where he was staying, another American, an English teacher, and had learned, through him, of a small job, not much more than a few hours a week, as a music teacher in Aarau. He had applied as an *Auslandschweizer* – it was amazing how, in German, there was a single word to sum up, with no questions asked, what in English would have been a difficult concept to explain: a Swiss citizen living abroad, male – and had been offered six hours of teaching at the Alte Kantonsschule, his first monthly salary ever as a “teacher” of music. He had not seen himself, up to that point in his life, as a teacher at all, but as a musician – although more to avoid military service than to pursue further studies he had moved from one institution of “higher” learning to another until he was twenty-six, and had, somewhat against his will, obtained, and as if by chance, historical chance, a socially acceptable way of avoiding the war in Vietnam, a doctorate in musicology, of all things – a composer: that was how he had wished to see himself, a person who, in Europe, was going to place, and hopefully keep, his name in circulation, professionally, by giving organ concerts at churches in the summer for the local tourists and, in the winter, offering piano recitals at the small concert halls, beautiful late baroque and nineteenth-century buildings scattered all over the continent, while making a name for himself.

Nothing had worked out as planned. He had no idea how to present himself or his music: he knew no one in the business, and the people he knew of did not respond to his letters requesting help. He and his new boss, the school principal, soon disagreed about almost everything when they spoke at all. He soon discovered that he hated marching to the time of music lessons: half-an-hour per pupil, and then out he or she would go, replaced by a completely different human being; and although he liked some of his students as people, and although a few, a rare few, were not only motivated but talented, in most cases, he had to

admit, people came to him only to satisfy the state music requirement, and even half-an-hour, short as it was, seemed far too much to give them of what he still considered his precious time. He had left the school and moved to Zurich, accepting a position at an evening school teaching English as a foreign language, mostly to office workers. This was more like the kind of “position” he had been used to in the States: a “day job”, even if at night, that left him free, during the day, to do what he wanted, at least in theory, and what he wanted was to compose music. In New York, after an unhappy run through what momentarily had looked like a “promising” career in an office, it had been driving for the United Parcel Service. At least in Aarau and in Zurich he had not had to wear a uniform, not even a suit or a sports jacket. The Swiss, to his surprise, and in spite of their reputation, turned out to be far more informal than the Americans in their dress code.

Once upon a time, in New York, in the hope of making them some money, he had begun an opera, based on *Frankenstein*. It had been awful, he now thought, laced with musical echoes of Schönberg’s *Moses und Aron*, with Stravinsky’s *Rites* pounding underneath the score in the bed springs, when it should have had the dark undercurrents and reminiscences of *Lulu*, of *Woyzeck*, even of *Carmen*, and if anything from Stravinsky then *The Rake’s Progress*, and he had soon abandoned the project for a sonata, saving only a few melodic lines from the original, and creating his own monster in its place, a spectral reflection of Mozart striding into Beethoven only to be attacked by Brahms, a phantom of the opera brought back to life as a classical misfit only to die again. He had gone back to the sonata after their break-up, but had failed to reconcile the competing voices. The melodic line, the divisive play of theme and counter-theme, the battle, really, measured out in given tacts, counted, calculated and controlled, had somehow not been able to survive the chaos, the opening to chaos, that their love had become. He couldn’t keep the themes apart. They kept breaking down, into each other, destroying the very oppositions the structure was meant to establish. He had tried one last time, once she had left him and the City for Chicago and graduate school, but nothing had come of it all but dirty sheets.

Even before he had opened the letter he had recognized her script, printed more than scrawled, though it had been years since he had last seen her, sitting on the stoop of the New York apartment building he had once called his, and, one week later, had read her broken-off and ostensibly final words, wishing him well in his new life. It was a short letter, this time, unlike the last, inexcusably short, he thought, after so many years, and more of a note than a letter, informing him that she was getting married and asking him if he would be interested in seeing her first. It was the combination that puzzled him, that had puzzled him then, in his Zurich apartment, reading the letter for the first time, and still puzzled him, watching the earth come up to him, the lack of any apparent logical connection. What was she doing? What did she want? Did her “husband-to-be” know about the letter? Had he encouraged her to write – a way of clearing the slates before marriage began? Or was she doing it behind the man’s back for whatever reason or reasons she found important, too important to share, violating their intimacy even before it had officially begun?

There were so many gaps still in what he continued to call “their story”, even after all the years in which nothing had happened. It was part of the story, now, the not understanding, the not happening. She had refused to analyze herself, refused, at least in his presence, to share

with him the way she saw herself, so that he could not see her, not even now, after all these years, as she saw herself, and thus could not see how she might have deviated from what she wanted or had wanted to be. In the absence of anything like a common narrative, in the refusal, on her part, to share anything like a possible ideal of behavior, a portrait of the person that she wished to be, something that might, in some way, have shaped her freedom of action, limited her to a “character”, growing out of herself, and so not free of herself but free within herself, he had had to come up with the patterns himself, even, in a sense, to make her up.

The conversations that he continued to have with her, in his mind, even years later, much too late for them to have done a bit of good for either one of them, had left him not altogether sure if what he remembered now of their life together was what had happened or what he had imagined himself. They had developed a life of their own, these details, they had a plot and a logic, and there was actually a kind of development in the story: ground covered, understandings reached, acceptances achieved, as in certain dreams he continued to have, where the story-line developed its own subterranean pattern, independent of his will, his intervening conscious mind, and where anything like intervention or control on his part – any attempt to steer or shape events – was met with resistance, even with refusal. He would usually wake up at such points, exacerbated, as after a false note in music, by an interruption of the interior logic, and fall back to sleep only by letting the dream continue, and with no intervention on his part.

His own father had been a flagrant philanderer, although the odd thing, for Bill, was that it had been his mother who initially had descended in scale for him as a child, as if, having been betrayed, she was, or had been, in some way, responsible for her own betrayal, guilty of the situation, as it were, as if there were something insufficient in her, some lack, that had made his father, her husband, turn to other women. It would take a while, a long while, measured in terms of the days and nights of adolescence, before he would be able to realign the balances and see his father more as the agent of destruction, and his mother less as the cause than the recipient, if not the victim, of an act, or a series of acts, that, whatever else could be said of it, or them, had certainly not been a part of their unspoken marriage contract.

It must have been that, he thought, that had paralyzed him in his initial relations with women, that had, in a way, made him easy prey: the balance of power, of terror, really, had been displaced. He had not been afraid, he had told himself, of being hurt; he had been sure, in the egotism of youth, that he could bear almost anything; what he had been afraid of was hurting another person the way he had seen his mother hurt, and the only way to avoid causing pain to someone else – of putting a woman in his mother’s role, is what it came down to – was to stay out of “the game” until he understood “the rules” a little better. But there were no rules. That was what he had learned. He had assumed that all he had to do, in love, was to love, and love openly, verbally, faithfully, and love would take care of itself – take care of him, in other words, not to mention the woman in question. What he had not realized, then, what he saw now, looking out of the window of the circling plane at the absence of the twin towers, was how much he had made his early vows, private as they were, private, as close to a form of soliloquy as possible, under the shadow, the long shadow, of his parents: he had simply not imagined, as a young man starting out in life, that a woman, the woman he had chosen, and if not chosen among the Graces in an open competition then at the least not rejected from the

moment that she had entered his life, might move into his father's position in the game, and leave him, to his astonishment, in his mother's role.

He yawned. It had been an uneventful flight, except for the occasional and inexplicable kicks against the back of his seat by the boy behind him, traveling alone, blue sky all the way from Zurich, and a window seat from which he had watched Switzerland and then France disappear, followed by Great Britain, Ireland, Iceland and Greenland, the floating icebergs, before the New World appeared, Newfoundland, the rugged isolated rocks and woods of eastern Canada, the coast of Maine, the elbow and forearm of Cape Cod, lonely Nantucket, clustered Connecticut, and then the harbor of New York, the miniature skyline down below small as a paperweight, and only now that they were descending did he feel the fatigue of the flight, of the containment, of a day in which, strictly speaking, nothing had happened and yet everything had changed. No wonder, he saw, looking down at his watch: it was late, almost time to get ready for bed, at least for his friends in Europe.

He re-set the dials to local time, fastened his seat-belt, as told, and prepared for landing.

TWO

It was on this spot, it had been on this spot, it must have been on this very spot of pocked concrete that she had said those words, those terrible words, that now, so many years later, struck him as ridiculous:

“I’ve done *it* with somebody else.”

It was the word “it” that had floated so strangely then, without referent, that floated so strangely, still. Somehow he had known what it meant, there in the evening rush-hour traffic, with most of his belongings on his back, and his sheets of music – a summer's work – in his suitcase. She had not met him at the airport. That was the first sign that something had gone wrong. He had taken the bus to the Terminal, where, once again, he had failed to find her. He had sensed before his leaving for Europe a fatigue on her part, an exhaustion, even a confusion, a disappointment not only with their own shared life, but with himself, with her time with him. She had somehow not realized what it meant, he thought, now, much later, much too late, looking back, to live with a composer, or a man who had thought of himself as a composer then, a person who spent his best hours, the best hours of the day, of their life, behind a closed door. That was what it meant, what it must have meant, for her, to be bound to an artist: a closed door, when there was a door, and, when not, a bowed head, and no room of her own. There was not much else she could have gotten out of it: certainly no money, and, as to the work, all he could do was to hum what he had composed if, at the end of a day, he was satisfied with what he had done, and most of the time he was not.

He had gone to Europe to spend the summer alone in divided Berlin, studying composition in a program sponsored by the Berliner Philharmoniker, while she had taken a job as a secretary in an office in Manhattan – she had wanted to work, she had said, encouraging him to go, when he hesitated, insisting she would be fine without him, and warning him not to turn down for sentimental reasons what she had called the experience of a lifetime.

He had not seen her at the Terminal until he was going out, and she in, through the double glass doors. They had met on the outside, after an awkward game of mirrors and transparent, insubstantial images, and had kissed, but not in any of the ways he had imagined kissing her in her absence, so many times, night after night, lying on his narrow dormitory bed in Berlin, and it was in the eyes, the eyes that he had kept with him, like a dark light, all summer long, that he saw something he had never before seen there: saw that something had gone wrong, terribly wrong; and when they parted from the kiss, a simple kiss of greeting rather than of longing or of passion, a kiss of betrayal, he would later tell himself, a Judas kiss, with something of the assembly line in it, she had half turned away, as if, he would later say, she did not want comparisons. When she turned back the eyes were there, even darker, more opaque. Shame, he would say later, much too late: he had never seen such shame in the eyes of another human being.

“*It?*” he had repeated, once they were beyond the Terminal.

In response she had said nothing.

“I think we had better take a cab.”

He could not remember, standing there in the street, now, looking at the iron curb and the pot-holes in the street, he could not remember anything of the buildings, not a single name or number, that had stood there then, with them, mute witnesses to the mute scene; there was not even a color or a blur in his mind; and so he had no way of knowing, now, of comparing, if what was around him at the moment had been there that strange and fatal day. What he would remember, forever after, once the scene had ended and could be recalled, voluntarily or involuntarily, was lying on the bed, their bed, in the now monstrous apartment, looking at the ceiling, and feeling physically ill. Somehow the transition had been obliterated and he had no image of the cab ride home, of the arrival, the ascent through the owner's living room, the acknowledgement of the existence of other people, landlord, landlady, children – how horrible under such circumstances to see children – on the way into their own apartment, or what he had taken to be their apartment, their closed and violated space. She was talking, giving him details that he did not want and that he could not stop her from giving, and he was lying there, flat on his back, without strength, afraid that he was going to be sick. Then his eyes were closed but the voice kept on coming, and he could not tell, from her voice, lying there alone on the double bed, what she herself was feeling. He could only sense a kind of shock, on her part, that he was there, at how he was reacting, laid low, literally, by her, laid low by what she had done and failed to do, that summer, a shock of recognition, a shock out of recognition, as if, among all the scenes that she had imagined, this was the one that she had not foreseen, the actual one, the one that she was trying, now, as fast as she could speak, as fast as possible, to turn into a memory, one more memory, a detail, one more detail, one more story among other stories, all to be dropped off into the past, through the mail-box slot of the closed, the lived-through, the obliterated.

THREE

He took a cab down to the East Village. He wanted to see his old apartment building, the one he had done his best to live in after their break-up. The street was clean now, he saw, emerging from the taxi, and handing the driver an ample tip, the garbage now bagged in transparent skins so that the local scavengers would see at a glance that there was nothing of value inside and leave the garbage intact, though the trash cans on the sidewalk still remained chained together in family groups for their own protection.

It had looked like a war zone, the old neighborhood, in his time. It was not only the craters in the streets, the pot-holes, the gaps in the buildings, the vacant lots, the squatted brownstones without window panes, only plastic bags, if that, or simply nothing, in the frames in place of the glass, and at night the lights on in what he would have taken earlier as the uninhabitable, the void of human life, spoiled suburban offspring that he was, oil-drums ablaze in the darkness, a few bums cooking whatever they had found, sitting on the rubble in front of some demolished façade, not yet generalized and gentrified into the more polite, politically correct and uncountable noun, *the homeless*, individual human beings stripped of number, of plurality, of even the possibility of being individual, of being counted for something, as something, even of being held to account.

There were guns as well. He could remember walking down the street, his street, toward the East River, and seeing men on stoops with revolvers openly displayed in the back pocket of their pants or jeans. They must have been drug dealers. You watched them work the streets, servicing the New Jersey cars, going about their dark exchanges, openly, in daylight, like black marketeers in war-time, casually, confidently, nervously, like the small businessmen that they were, and with a product in demand, and did your best to avoid all eye contact that might sear you, with unforeseeable consequences, into their memory. Occasionally one of the gutter bums would rise into an undercover policeman and there would be a gun battle, a chase, the sound of a siren going off into whatever was left of the silence, and then life would return, as normal, it would go on, as usual, like the people themselves, out there in the streets, having no other choice.

It had been a neighborhood, too, a real neighborhood. His block, his building, had been an oasis of chance for Ukrainian émigrés in the desert of what must have been, for the displaced, the one thing that it had to be: their New World. Nothing less than that. What he caught of it, in his fifth-floor walk-up, in his “railroad” rooms, one room after another, like the cars of economy-class seats on the old transcontinental railway, like the old Atchinson, Topeka and the Santa Fe screaming across the new country, a fifth-floor walk-up with the bathtub in the kitchen and overhead the copper ceiling painted white, embossed, decorative, sturdy, what he got of it, all of it, was the smell of cabbage. It came from every floor, the smell of Ukrainian food, though you hardly saw the people anymore, and when you did, and when you realized how old they were, how old they had become, here in the East Village, so far from their home country, with the number of local native speakers of their language diminishing year by year,

with what remained of their dreams of a new life and their televisions running in the darkness behind the only partly opened door, you wondered how some of them even had the strength to carry their groceries up to their rooms. That became his task, his public service, whenever he went shopping: to ask a neighbor behind the chain attaching door and jam what he or she wanted from the local A&P and to carry it “home”, with a receipt. Not once, in all those portages, had he been invited inside, not once had a personal name been exchanged.

Walking through the East Village in those days had been like walking through a displacement of Europe, of European history, of what remained for and of those refugees of nightmare: German, Polish, Yiddish, Russian, what had not been crushed flat by the rollers of war and poverty was everywhere around you, in the restaurants and bakeries and coffee shops, in the very air itself, in the bird-song of sounds you could not understand but somehow had to admire, and even to love, for the sheer fact of survival.

It was all gone now, the songs, the shops, the restaurants, the Italian pastry spots, replaced by coffee shops and banks and “ethnic” eateries, Mexican and Japanese, mostly, restaurants whose “ethnic” claim had nothing to do with the residents or the history of the East Village, and whose waiters, if not owners, could certainly not afford to live in what had become an “up-scale” neighborhood: no neighborhood at all, in other words, rather a provisional place for young office workers and financially well-maintained students to share an apartment in before the East Village, like the West Village, succumbed to the middle-aged rich. He wondered what had become of the people he had known, not only the unknown Germans, the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Russians and the East European Jews, but the artists, the musicians, the poets and the painters who, in his time, had lived in his building: of Bobbie the painter of portraits of Rilke, nothing but Rilke, one after another, each in a different dominant color, and all done from a single photograph tacked to the easel, of Jean the singer-secretary and John her accountant neighbor two stories up, another dream singer, and their hopeless, horrid nightmare duets reverberating in the interior light shaft where, once, long ago, long before America had become a country and Astor Place the name of a liquor store, there must have been open space, a garden, a field, of mad Marion in her German pre-World War I spiked Bismarck army helmet stalking the streets, shouting and swearing at the injustice of the world. Who could afford it now?

His own building was still standing, still pink, the same awful pink-icing pastry-like façade he had had to live behind all those dark years back. But the basement record shop was gone, replaced by *Going To The Dogs*, a canine beauty parlour, and with iron grill-work over its one window. To the left there had been a home for the handicapped. It had been bought by NYU and turned into a student dormitory. To the right there had been a recording studio next to a vacant lot. Both had given way to a single high-rise apartment building, with a lobby and a doorman and “respectable” tenants: women in fall furs and men in summer suits and ties – a gated community in what had once been a slum!

She had made him feel, she had done her best, or worst, to make him feel, that his *vie en rose*, his belated anagrammatical hymn to a variously embodied eros, his life in the pink, as he had called it, once they had separated, behind the icing of that ridiculous façade, in that apartment with no bathroom and a toilet in the hall, was the beginning of the end, for him, the final fall

of the downwardly mobile into some irredeemable disgrace, far from Berlin and Karajan, far from his parents' suburban home, their ultimate contradiction. For him that apparent slum had remained a marker of something else, one of the acts of courage he liked to point to in his life. After what he had called her "moral breakdown", a phrase she did not like and refused to accept, he had put his dream of becoming a composer on ice and taken an office job in the hope, vain and ridiculous as it would turn out to be, that with a little more money they might be able to establish something like a more solid structure for their love. But the love itself had not come back, not as he had known it, not as he had hoped; and after a difficult year of mutual reproaches and recriminations she had left him for graduate school and he had given up the job, "a good job", people kept telling him, especially people like his parents, his aunts and uncles, all of them ready, it had seemed, to consign him to the devil for the simple preference he had had, then, not to work primarily for money, a job in music publishing – and he had gone out in a burst of glory, or vainglory, in a blaze of honor, or dishonor, depending on your point of view, on where you started from, your principles, in other words, your expectations, if you preferred, what you were willing to accept if you lacked both principles and expectations, for he had found the "profession" commercialized beyond his worst dreams, his most vicious nightmares, and had decided, one day, after being offered a promotion, a "higher" position in a hierarchy of positions, though on the same floor, at the same desk, with the same lack of view (as a late arrival to the staff he had received an interior and windowless office), simply to walk away: away from his job, his office, his salary, away, too, from the Upper West Side apartment that they had shared, away from her traces, from his imaginings, if nothing else, and that, without his pay-check, he could no longer afford – after all this he had had the good luck, the very good luck, and totally unexpected, to get a fifth-floor walk-up in the East Village with twenty-three theatres within a radius of ten-minute strolls, not to mention the art galleries, and at a rent that, even as a new part-time church organist and United Parcels Service driver, complete with brown uniform, he could pay. What difference did it make if the bathtub was in the kitchen or the toilet in the hall?

The last time he had seen her had been on that slum stoop. He had turned the apartment over to Paul, his best friend, and was about to fly off to Switzerland, to take advantage of his dual citizenship, when he found her on his return from the A&P, suitcases at her feet, sitting on the top step, having rung the buzzer and waiting to be let in by someone else. She had gotten the date of his departure wrong, so she said; she thought that he had already left.

FOUR

“What happened to the two of you?”

“Did she never tell you?”

“Yes, she did.”

Miriam put down her glass.

“But I would like to hear your version of the story.”

“I wasn’t there.”

“What she told you, then.”

“I have never told it to anyone.”

“Not even Paul?”

“Especially Paul.”

“Wouldn’t it have helped to talk with him?”

“Helped me or her?”

“Perhaps both of you.”

“He was her friend as well as mine.”

“All the more reason to talk.”

“I did not want to hurt her in his eyes.”

He paused.

“She had done something shameful, in my eyes, and I did not feel right exposing her.”

“Did she tell him what had happened?”

“How could she? Nothing had happened.”

He smiled – or tried to smile.

“Nothing had happened. It meant nothing. That was her story, at least to me, the absence of one.

“No, she never told him the one thing that might have helped him to help her when she asked him for his advice about what she should do with her life. And she kept asking. She kept it back. But when Paul was dying, he asked me – I believe it was the day I took him to the

hospital – he asked me what had happened between the two of us. It was the only time he had ever asked, and I told him, in a single sentence, and he answered, in a single sentence as well: ‘I thought it must have been something like that.’”

“‘Something like that!’”

They were sitting in Miriam’s apartment on the Upper West Side, a bottle of white wine between them on the low chrome-and-glass coffee table, a Saint Véran, something he had bought for her as a little thank-you present for agreeing, and on rather short notice, to host him. They had been classmates in New York, all of them, years ago, when she and Paul had been a loosely linked couple before Paul had discovered that he was gay, and they had kept in touch, he and Miriam, off and on, over the years, more off than on, until Paul’s illness had brought them together again. Miriam had been chosen by Paul to be his primary care agent, and Miriam had done her best to keep the two of them, Bill and Allegra, from running into each other those last months of Paul’s life by coordinating hospital visits. Paul had been the most brilliant of their group, majoring in classics, but he had abandoned his teaching job at Smith and with the job a career teaching literature without language, as he put it, once he had come into a small family inheritance, smaller than he had hoped, as it turned out, and devoted what would be the last years of his life to doing volunteer work for an AIDS organization. It was Miriam who had gone on to become the most successful of them, at least professionally: she was now a full professor of psychology.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Tell me what you know first.”

“About that horrible summer?”

“About everything.”

“She told me she was lonely. You had gone away. She was lonely, and she found someone who, she thought, could help her to overcome her loneliness.”

There was a pause while Miriam looked him over to see how he was taking what she had said.

“Someone who wouldn’t even let her spend the night.”

“Is that all she said?”

“That’s all I remember.”

“Where did this talk take place?”

“At the gym.”

“The gym?”

“Two aging women trying to keep their bodies from disintegrating altogether.”

“Was there anything like regret in her voice?”

“No, she was matter-of-fact.”

“I wonder why she turned to you.”

“That’s something I can’t know.”

“And that was everything?”

“Everything she said.”

“There was another man.”

“That she didn’t tell me.”

“One she invited to spend a week with her in our apartment – an old high school friend – and then apparently sent packing after a couple of days.”

“She only spoke of one man.”

“Typical of her to offer up as everything only part of the story, and, in an apparent revelation, to conceal exactly what she was pretending to reveal.”

“Tell me the story from your point of view.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I wasn’t there.”

“What you know, then.”

“What she told me?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?” he said, pausing to look at her in the diminishing light.

“But that’s nothing.”

FIVE

“We had agreed, before that summer, that I would accompany her the next year to Chicago and be the money-maker, though Lord knows what I would have done out there, become a teacher, I suppose, while she worked towards a doctorate. Only I refused to go with her after that summer.

“Infidelity was not a quality I was looking for in a partner. That was what I told her. A stupid remark, I know. I knew it even then. But the situation had made me stupid. The trust had been broken, the innocence. And that does not come back easily.”

“But that wasn’t the end of the relationship.”

“No, she kept coming back to see me.”

He paused, and looked at the window.

“Why I don’t know.”

“Perhaps she didn’t know herself.”

“I certainly didn’t. Every time I tried to talk with her of what I thought a relationship should be, or should have been, of what I still wanted a relationship to be, she would accuse me of being what she called ‘a Puritan’ – whatever that might mean. A Puritan! How could I have been a Puritan, trying to live with her as I was? If I had been a Puritan, I would have damned her to hell and been done with it.

“But I didn’t damn her to hell. I stayed with her in that horrible and beautiful apartment for one year and tried to work everything out. And that was hell. As much of hell as I hope to see. Paradise had been lost, and work was what we had to do, the old story, and with no world before us to speak of, no earth at least, unless you count the Park in its cage as earth.

“Well, we visited the zoo. I was an animal out there myself, that’s how I felt, an unsuccessful animal looking at the real thing.

“You can’t imagine what the world looks like from a Manhattan office if you’ve never worked in an office. At least I couldn’t. Perhaps that’s what drove her to it. Perhaps she simply couldn’t stand the view. Who knows? Who knows what she saw or felt when she was alone? She never said. She wasn’t much of a talker in those days. And she wasn’t used to the office, she wasn’t used to work, no more than I was, then....

“No, I wasn’t a Puritan. I was angry, hurt, humiliated – and humiliated and hurt by my anger, by my humiliation, too.

“The thing about paradise is that you don’t know you are in it when you’re in it. It’s the not knowing that makes it paradise, as much of paradise as we’re going to have on this earth. But you don’t think about it.

“You don’t think about it until it’s lost and then – you know how it is. It’s only paradise lost that we can love, because it’s lost and we can see it, finally, framed, like a box of butterflies after a summer holiday, safe and separate and hanging on the wall, while we try to go on with the mess of life....

“No, I wasn’t a Puritan, I fought it out. But I wanted – what did I want? A sense of right and wrong to be re-established. A moral dimension. I suppose that’s what it was. Something I could build a life on, something I could share with someone else, and come home to, even raise children by. An apology, at the very least....”

“Only that?”

“What else would you want?”

“As good an explanation as she gave herself.”

He turned the words over in the growing darkness.

“I doubt she gave herself an explanation. There was nothing to explain. Not by her logic. Nothing had happened. It meant nothing.”

“What you wanted was to be convinced that she loved you....”

He stopped on that and looked away, at the wall, and then at the window.

The darkness was deepening outside. At the same time, the lights could be seen coming on in the windows of the apartments, one by one, irregularly, without pattern.

“This wonderful New York dark – how beautiful it is.”

He looked at the reflection of the room in the window: the table, the lamp, the bookcase, the painting on the wall, the two of them.

“Isn’t that what we all want? Some proof that something special can exist. She kept insisting that nothing had happened. *It meant nothing*. And the more she insisted that nothing had happened, the more nothing happened, the more nothing had to happen, between us. I came to feel that, as a person, as a particular person, with my own feelings, whatever they were – and I wasn’t sure what they were at all – with my own story, ridiculous as it was, nothing could happen, nothing would happen, because what I felt and thought were of no significance, not in her eyes. And if what I felt and thought were of no significance, I did not exist, I could not exist, I would never exist. Not in her eyes, and not in mine, either, as long as I was with her. I was of no significance whatsoever.”

“You were the love of her life.”

“Nonsense!”

“I know you were.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“It’s not what she said. It’s what others have said.”

“What others?”

She looked at him coldly, almost clinically, as if trying to judge whether he could take the answer to his own question.

“Friends of mine. Lovers of hers. It’s what she told them. Which they later told me. Even at the most intimate of moments, when you would least expect it, she would think of you and cry out something you had said. As a form of quotation.”

“A form of quotation?”

“The highest form of compliment.”

“You’re making it worse by laughing.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying not to laugh. “I really am sorry.”

SIX

“What we ended up having was something like a series of discussions on the nature of an event. Philosophical discussions, though of a rather primitive sort, given the feelings involved. Her position was that nothing had happened. That was it, in a nutshell: nothing. Nothing had happened. It meant nothing. Well, that lack of meaning meant something to me....

“Something had happened, finally, in my life. In hers, too, I imagine. Certainly in ours. I saw her differently, for one thing. That was something. That was, in its own way, everything....

“She told me that she had been lonely. Well, of course. Who doesn’t get lonely? She told me that she had thought I wasn’t ‘husband material’. ‘*Husband material!*’ What kind of wife material was she? And then, afterwards, and in my absence she discovered that I was. I was ‘husband material’ after all! Cut from the cloth of adultery, I suppose. She even told me that she had wanted to get rid of me, once and forever, while I was off in Berlin. She had spoken to her mother about all my defects and received her mother’s approbation for her behavior! Only afterwards she had realized that she loved me more than ever....

“*More than ever!* The yard-stick once again....

“I could have taken a messy arrangement,” he went on, quietly, after a pause, savoring the bouquet of the wine, in the deepening darkness.

“I had grown up in a messy environment. It was what I was used to. It was why I wanted something clean and orderly for myself, I suppose. I knew enough of mess. More than enough. But I could have dealt with it, I’m convinced of that, I could have lived with it – lived in it and through it – as long as it was acknowledged. I had been well trained. Brought up to it, and through it, raised for it, in a way. That was the problem. It was as if nothing had happened, you see. There was nothing to deal with, to live with, to feel, finally, to work your way through, even to talk about. Oh, I got the details, all right, and it wasn’t the details I wanted. The details simply made everything more difficult. They took the imagination out of it, the breath, the air. What I wanted – there wasn’t much else that I could want – what I wanted, finally, what I still wanted, what there was left for me to want, was to find out what I felt about everything, and what I thought about those feelings. I didn’t know, you see. I discovered what I should have known but had never really seen before, not in myself, at least, that I had been raised to think it impolite, unnatural, in a way – I don’t quite know what the word is – an affront to the better conventions, you know, the conventions of the so-called better people, to show my feelings. And my upbringing had been quite successful, I’m sorry to say. So there it was: not only not to show any feelings but not to have anything to show.

“And I was in rags, you know. I was not a pretty picture, you can imagine. I had nothing to show. Nothing to show for myself. Not a pretty picture, at all.

“Later she spoke of ‘rights’. My ‘rights’, they were my ‘rights’ she spoke of, not hers. It turned out that I had no ‘rights’. They no longer existed.

“‘You have no right....’ ‘You no longer have any right to....’

“As if she were some sort of dictator re-writing the constitution of her little world as she went along in order to right herself, to keep herself from falling into the infinite abyss of the consequences of her own actions....

“As if love had anything to do with ‘rights’....”

“I had better turn on the lights, now. I can’t see you at all.”

“Oh, I’m not the point. I’m not the point, at all. And the New York night is so beautiful. A thousand points of light, a million, more. What a wonderful view.”

“Isn’t that better?”

“No, it blurs the other – the outer – lights. But I can see you. That will be my consolation.”

“It is a very poor consolation.”

“Not at all.”

She smiled at him.

“Didn’t she ever ask you to forgive her?”

“Forgive her! How? She had done nothing wrong! Don’t you see?”

He looked out the window and saw a patch of black – the absence of light – that must have been the Hudson River flowing.

“Nothing had happened. It meant nothing. There was nothing to forgive.”

Suddenly, he burst out into an enormous laugh.

“The most important event in my life – and I wasn’t even present!”

SEVEN

He had made a luncheon reservation for two at the New York Bar and Grill. It was a relatively new restaurant, on East 11th, just off Fifth Avenue, a restaurant that had not existed in their time and that therefore could be seen as “neutral” territory and yet not out of touch with their own culinary geography, a combination of French and California cuisine, according to its description of itself, words that could be translated to mean something like the best of local ingredients, suitable for the season (it was autumn: he saw pumpkins, gourds, mushrooms, game, New England apples), and served with long-simmering sauces. It was a good restaurant. Miriam had introduced him to it on one of his many trips “home”, when there had still been something like a feeling of “home”. He had made the reservation from Europe and by telephone, preferring the immediacy of a human voice, even if unknown, to the visual anonymity of an e-mail acknowledged later. He had made the reservation without consulting her. For all her apparent independence, he imagined that she still expected the man to make the reservation, hail the cab, and, as often as not, to pick up the tab and fork over the fare.

He had slept badly. He had expected to have trouble sleeping and had done his best to solve the problem in advance: a light meal, not too much wine, good as the wine had been, a lot of water, and an early lying in. But he had lain awake most of the night, thinking of her and their life together, trying not to think of her, having imaginary conversations with her nonetheless, in spite of his wishes, and somehow coming out the loser no matter what he did. He could hear the traffic humming down below, constantly humming, as he had not the previous night. The lights of the city bothered him as they had not bothered him before, coating the walls of the shutterless guest room where he was staying with a cream, almost beige, glow, as if he were inside some kind of vanilla mousse, and when he had finally despaired of sleeping at all (and of looking like a wreck the next day, even more of a wreck, he imagined, than the one that life had made of him), he must have fallen asleep, for he woke to discover that he had been dreaming of work again. It was such a boring dream, like almost all of his work dreams, full of realistic and irrelevant details, and he could see no connection whatsoever between what he was waking to and what he had awakened from. It was eight-thirty.

Miriam was not up, at least she was not in the kitchen or the dining room. He washed quietly, no shower, shaved and brushed his teeth, then, after changing, left the apartment, took the elevator down to the ground floor, and walked over to Broadway, where he wanted to treat himself to an old memory, still beloved, an “American breakfast”.

He had put on his black linen suit for the occasion, with black socks and shoes, and an anthracite gray shirt: stylish as he had meant to be, he looked like someone taking part in a funeral, he thought, as he caught sight of himself in the coffee shop mirror, and not at all like the other people seated inside the little rectangle of interior space at 108th Street and Broadway. He ordered bacon and sunny-side-up eggs with hash browns – the hash browns were the real treat, even if the price had tripled from what he remembered having last paid: two sunny-side-up eggs with bacon and hash browns, orange juice and coffee.

He thought of buying a copy of *The New York Times* from the vending machine in the far angle of the coffee shop, then thought better of it, under the circumstances, and decided that it would be more interesting simply to look out the window at the people passing by.

What did he want? Why was he doing this? To put the scene behind him, as a possibility, to draw even by destroying it, not to refuse what was her last request, after all, her first and possibly last request, her invitation to talk at last after so many years, and then to hold the refusal against himself all the rest of his life? He was not sure. To see what she looked like? Well, partly that. But it was more than that: to see what she was like, what she had become, how she had “turned out”, as she might have said, what she had made of herself, in other words, and, more, what life had made of her. He knew that she had failed to find a job in Egyptology after completing her studies at the Oriental Institute in Chicago and that she had gone to work for some government agency in Washington, doing something altogether unrelated to her field. What she looked like now he knew, more or less, at least in a photograph. She had sent him a snapshot of herself in her letter – and with her name prefaced with her doctor title on the return address label – thanking him for what he had done for Paul as Paul was dying, so that he could see how she “had worn”, as she put it. She had not “worn” that much, it seemed, unlike himself, he thought, but what struck him most in the photograph, and what had angered him, once again, and terribly, was that she had sent him a picture of herself in which her body – neck, shoulders and breasts – was – were – partly blocked out by the large, expansive arm gesture of a man who, she announced in her note, was her “husband-to-be”. In purporting to thank him she was taking over herself the gesture that in an older more familiar society had once belonged to the bride’s mother: announcing to the former suitor the up-and-coming marriage of the daughter and hence her future inaccessibility. It had angered him terribly, not so much the shock, the surprise, of the unexpected image: the new and perhaps final phallus-bearer, his replacement, in a sense, long as it had taken, delayed as it had been, his ultimate successor; but the fact that she had combined purposes, the purported “thank you” and the actual “get lost”, two-for-the-price-of-one. It was so much “like her” to get the most she could from a situation, to turn everything, in a way, into a bargain, into her own profit, and he was both pleased to see that she had not changed and horribly disappointed: pleased because it justified his having given up on her and disappointed because he had hoped, against all hope, that she would change, would have learned something from what he still saw as the most horrible, the most disappointing and painful, experience of his life.

He wanted to know, he had wanted to know ever since that summer, what it does to a person, inside, to betray their own feelings, their own principles, their own love. Would he see anything now that he had not seen then? Could anything be seen? Was there anything to see, anything at all? What were the principles involved? Were there any principles to speak of? It had seemed to him, once, when young, that there was a horrible line drawn in the sand – the shifting sand – between the faithful and the faithless in love, one side or the other, and that one could not know, simultaneously, both sides, never cross over and back, unchanged, the same. He had finally given up on the relationship, given up on her, on their love, whatever it was to be called, because he had not been able to find anything after that summer on which to base it: whatever it was, it came to nothing. Nothing had happened. Nothing could happen. It

meant nothing. Now after all the years he could see, and admit to seeing, that there had been a different logic at play for them: for her the logic of the series, the one before the one after, the one after the one before; for him the logic of the one and only. After he had collapsed, literally, onto the bed, that night, and felt that, without the bed, he might have fallen further, with no end to the fall, she had looked at him and announced, firmly and quietly: “If anything like this ever happens again, I’m not going to tell anyone about it.” He had had the sense, even then, in the nonsensical abyss he was in and falling deeper into, to reply: “So you’ve already dismissed me, as one in a series, and committed yourself to a lifetime of deception.” She had said nothing back.

What did she want, that was the better question. Why had she suggested that they meet after all these years? With the photograph she had clearly wanted to show him that she was “okay”, a favorite word of hers, once upon a time, in their youth, whatever such a ridiculous expression might have meant, and might still mean, although he thought that a woman, a person, who was really “okay”, assuming there was any meaning in the term, would never have sent such a photograph after all those years in which nothing had passed between them, nothing had happened, not a single card, call or letter. The acknowledgement of his place at Paul’s bedside, those last months of his life, the only acknowledgement he had ever received from her, cursory as that acknowledgement had been, a single sentence, struck him, possibly, as sincere, possibly, even, as a hidden “thank you”, late as it was, for what he had been in her life, once; but what she had added, as an afterthought, again in a single sentence, on her own feelings, struck him even now as the opposite of “sincere”, or at least the opposite of what he himself felt: “With Paul’s death the world has become smaller.” That was what one was supposed to say, and so she had said it. But it was not true, at least not for him. For him, the world had become larger, larger and emptier, since the death of the one man he had ever cared for. The whole letter had consisted of seven sentences, seven sentences for an eternity of silence! That, certainly, was a shrinking. What was there left to say?

He paid the bill, remembering – against his Europeanized habits – to leave the usual tip, plus some: he did not need small change now. Then he walked up to the subway stop at 110th Street. He had some time to kill, and he wanted to look, once again, at a few pictures in the Museum of Modern Art, and he liked the subway.

It was hot, it was noisy, it was crowded, it was dirty, the subway, and it reeked of work and the fatigue of work, of exhaustion – all the negative attributes you could give it: just what he wanted at the moment. Paul used to bring his annotated copy of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* with him on his underground journeys as appropriate reading: the gladiators, the defeated warriors, the exhausted lovers, the panhandlers, the pimps and prostitutes of “modern life”, he found them all again, in front of him, next to him, around him, below the frieze of the absurdly optimistic ads promising new starts and better careers to the tired human beings crowded motionless into the oblong and moving box, seated or standing as the train shook and shimmied and the lights went off and on and off, again and again, making reading – or even looking – impossible in the near and hollowed darkness.

He got out at Columbus Circle and walked the rest of the way down to the museum along the Avenue of the Americas. It was another beautiful fall day – one of those incredibly clear New

York days where the sea winds blow away even the least trace of a cloud, although the temperature dropped as soon as he entered the shadow of the tall buildings, admiring once again, as he did each time, anew, and as if for the first time, the unbelievable blue, high overhead, and floating now in a light not available to the body of a mere pedestrian, a cold visual light: a collage of glass and concrete, color and sun, in which it was impossible to say, with certainty, from so far below, what up there was ground, what was figure, actual surface and reflection, flat plane and refracted light.

He wanted to begin by looking at Cézanne's *Bather*. It was there, but he had to find it first, had, first, to re-adjust himself to the new architecture, to the low entrance ceiling, to the new prices, to the long line of visitors queuing for the Van Gogh exposition, "The Colors of the Night" (he had not even realized that such a show was taking place), before he could plunge into that other familiar and alien blue, that dimension behind the emerging, solitary figure, sky and water at once, that illusion presented as such and as such denied, and right before your eyes, denied and made real, before he found Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* in its new place and saw, once again, the play of mask and face, face and mask, and the curtained-off depth, concealed and revealed at once, revealed, in its concealment, as what it was, the end of perspective, the painter's openly acknowledged secret.

It was twelve o'clock, four minutes after twelve, to be exact, when he looked at his watch. So much for the museum. It was time to go.

He would take a taxi to the restaurant – he wanted to arrive in style.

EIGHT

He saw her, in his mind's eye, as the cab driver did his best to speed down Fifth Avenue – their lunch date was at twelve-thirty, and he did not want to be late – waiting for him in the restaurant, nervous, well-groomed and well-dressed, as always, a master of appearances, her appearances, attentive to the least, the last detail.

She was still attractive. He could see that from the photograph, more attractive than “good-looking”, whatever “good-looking” might mean, though from her point of view, at least, there must not have been much of a difference between the two words. He saw her, with her pugnacious chin, prognathous, he had wanted to say, he realized, with a laugh, but she was pugnacious, with her ample upper body over legs that, frankly, were too slight for their burden. A sandpiper's body, he had told her once, at the beach, one winter, when they had walked the sand together, watching the birds hop on their little stick legs as the waves broke until, in fear of the apparently unending human assault, they had simply flown off; and she had remembered what he had said, what they had seen, all the years later, for, in that short “thank-you” note with the photograph of herself and her “husband-to-be” inside the fold, she had glued a postcard of a solitary sandpiper to the outside of the message. It had outraged him, this sign of her desire to please, and outraged him still, against his better judgment, to be so coupled with another man, in an apparent “thank you”, and to have been given the outside role, the prominent and initial position, though no other was possible for him, effaced on opening the card.

She was attractive. It was, in a sense, what had laid her low and brought her down. She attracted men, awful men, he thought, the worst sort, though given his position in the matter his necessary bias invalidated whatever his judgment might offer, destroyed it completely, in fact. She had once asked Paul what he saw when he looked at her. They had been in their first apartment, and Paul, he recalled, had been standing in front of the fireplace, a fireplace which no longer worked, which had not worked for years, with his right elbow on the mantle. It was a mistake to ask Paul a question, any question, if you did not want a serious answer, an honest answer, as she was to learn, and he had looked at her, seriously, honestly, from his fireplace perch, and then announced: “The desire to please.”

That had not pleased her, not at all, though she had said nothing, only smiled; but she never forgot those words; and, later, after that horrible summer, after all the quarrels, when he had brought back the expression in one of his attempts to get at a cause, a motive, a psychological pattern, something beyond the single sentence, “I was lonely”, he had said – and he would soon be sorry for it, he was sorry for it even now – that the easiest way for a woman to please a man, if that was all she wanted, was to sleep with him.

That, too, had not pleased her. Later she had taken to telling him about her lovers at the Oriental Institute, as if to contradict the insight, to disprove the theory, at least in one instance, by displeasing him. It had more than displeased him. It had made him jealous, and jealousy

was humiliating, debilitating, degrading – everything she must have wanted for him, everything to help her make him unworthy of the love from which she still must have needed to free herself.

“I’m an easy lay,” she had said, in her only attempt at self-definition, once they had stopped seeing each other. “For everyone but you.”

“So I’m still special”, was all he had replied.

All of this passed through his consciousness as the cab wormed and worked its way down the stalled Avenue, and, at the same time, looking at the vague buildings from the back seat over the driver’s shoulder, he thought of how much he must have failed her, failed her in some unspoken way, some way he did not and could not understand, not without her help, for her to have acted as she had, and he realized, there in the traffic, stuttering from one jam to another, that what he would like to say now was that he had loved her as much as it had been possible, for him, then, young and ignorant as he had been, to love anyone; to tell her that he had thought of her almost every day, had even gone on speaking to her, if not with her, having long imaginary and intricate conversations in scenes he kept inventing and remembering, as if they were real, since the moment he had left her on that abandoned slum stoop as he set off to Europe for a vacation that would become a life.

It was not love as it had been when they were young, possessive, dispossessed, of their own time, but something that floated now above everything, a feeling of tenderness, not without bitterness, but all the more real for that, and all the more tender, too, a floating free where the forgiving and the forgiven were related, turns on the one wheel, a continual spinning, humming perpetually. That was a part of it, a part of what he would like to say, what he hoped he would be able to say, if she would let him, partially, at least. He had often told her that he loved her when they were young. He had often tried to speak of love. She had been the reticent one. Once she had responded to his questioning of her reticence by saying that men loved women more than women loved men, everyone knew that: they had to, they could not have children. Now she had reached the age when she could not. Had that changed anything? Had that made love possible for her, at last, an equal love, a love between equals? After that summer he had tried, again, to tell her how much he still wanted to love her, how much more, he had made a point of it, just in case – in spite of everything – he had been too reticent himself, too ridiculously reticent, without his knowledge, the strong and silent type dragged out of some bad family film of strong and silent men and getting his tragic, ridiculous, comical comeuppance. But it was too late. She had said: “Love me? You don’t even like me.”

“I don’t know who you are. That is the problem.”

“You’ve never understood women.”

“You are the only woman in my life. If I don’t understand women, it’s because you haven’t allowed me to understand you. You haven’t shown me how you understand yourself. How you see yourself in time.”

A Barnes and Noble bookstore was floating past.

“And at any rate there’s no such thing as ‘women’ as an intellectual category. There are only individual people, each one different.”

The cab stopped abruptly.

He looked out the window and realized that the journey was over: he had reached his destination.

He paid the driver and added, as always with cab drivers, an ample tip.

He could see through the window, through the double glass doors, too, as he pushed them aside, that she was not there: it was a disappointment and a relief at once; and, once inside the restaurant, with its elegantly clothed and laid tables, all but one of which were occupied, a look, as the *maitre d’* asked for his name, a fast look first, then slow and circumspect, around the room, confirmed his first impression.

He was alone in the crowd.

“Bill Bachmann is the name. With two *nns*. I have a reservation for two.”

It sounded absurd, somehow, the one name, the two *nns*, the expression “a reservation for two”.

“From Switzerland?”

“I’m a bit late. I’m sorry.”

“You had a long way to travel,” the *maitre d’* said, with a smile.

It sounded like a long-rehearsed and often-used joke. He added:

“You speak English almost without an accent.”

“I should. I’m an American.”

“No offense.”

The *maitre d’* turned to a passing waiter.

“Fred, show Mr. Bachmann to his table.”

The guest from Switzerland followed.

“Would you like a drink, sir, while you wait?”

“No, no thank you,” he replied, sitting down in the chair at the round table where he would have a view of the door opening, of her as she hurried in.

“We have an excellent house cocktail.”

He wondered what she would be wearing.

“Or a glass of white wine?”

“No, thank you. I’m going to wait.”

NINE

Miriam was sitting at the dining room table, her back to the Per Kirkeby painting – a green landscape-like scrawl and scroll of color, her pride of ornament in the otherwise conservatively though elegantly furnished apartment – reading *The New York Times* when the doorbell rang.

It was the beginning of the economic collapse: the large brokerage houses had fallen, the banks were failing, one more famous than another, threatening to pull down not only firm after firm but the whole financial system and with it the entire country. The result of corporate greed, said the editorialists, the result of bad loans, said the analysts, of irresponsible behavior on the part of the borrowers, said the bankers, of sub-prime mortgages farmed out as collateral from one bank to another, until nothing was left of local lending, of the personal, in a system grown so diffusely fantastic that it was not possible anymore even to speak of a system. No one, it appeared, could understand what was going on. The papers were full of the talk of bail-outs: bail-outs for the banks, bail-outs for the homeowners who risked foreclosure, bail-outs for the manufacturing sector, though who would ultimately pay for the bail-outs was still up in the air; and the President had put forward a plan that some of his fellow party members were calling the end of the free market, the end of capitalism, and the introduction – by a so-called conservative! – of “socialism”. Socialism, said his critics, for the rich.

She put down the paper, folding it neatly, but before she could rise to see who was at the door Bill came into the room. He had wanted to warn her that he was coming “home” early. She looked at the expression on his face, looked *for* it, rather than at it, but was not sure what to make of what she saw.

“She did not come,” he said, at last.

“I know.”

“How can you know?”

“She called.”

“When?”

“At twelve-thirty.”

“So she didn’t want to talk to me.”

“She said she would write.”

“She won’t. Writing was always one of the things that came between us.”

He sat down at the table opposite the other woman and looked at the painting.

“It really is a lovely picture,” he said, looking not only at the painting but at the woman in the landscape of abstract color. It was as if she were swimming in an overgrown pool that was at the same time a forest and the reflection of a forest in water.

“Did she say why?”

“She said I would understand.”

“*You?*”

”Yes, I.”

“Do you?”

“No. Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“How, then, should I?”

“The past is past.”

“The past is past,” he repeated, with something like a shake of his head, up and down at first, then side to side.

“That’s what it must be,” she added, gently.

“But that’s exactly what it isn’t. The past is present, and the present is what we carry with us into the future. It’s where we draw our shape from, our hope, our longing, our responsibility, too, our ability to make commitments, to live, even to love. Especially to love.”

“You needn’t argue with me. I agree with you.”

“To love, honor, and obey – aren’t those the words?”

He changed the tone, stripping it of mockery.

“She must have been afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of the past. What else? Of the strength of the past. Of whatever is there, presence or absence. She must not have had the strength.”

“Or the inclination.”

“The nerve.”

“How do you feel?”

“At the present moment? Oh, the past is still alive in me. And it was quite a good meal, thank you. *Soupe aux champignons noirs* followed by *caille farcie aux raisins*, served with *pomme dauphine*, and a *tarte au citron* for dessert, the whole thing washed down with a bottle of Zinfandel from Oregon. I don’t see any point in buying European wine here in America when I can try out American wines that I can’t get over there.”

“I meant something else.”

“So did I, I suppose. I am devastated,” he went on, after a pause, “though less for myself than for her, if you can believe that. I had hoped she would find the courage, finally, to pick up the thread. I had hoped, finally, that courage, in fact, would have nothing to do with it, that continuity would simply take over and let us go on. I was wrong, of course, wrong once again – about everything.

“Of course, it’s possible that there is a very simple explanation for everything this time, that her husband-to-be simply said no, that he gave her the kind of rule I refused to give her that terrible summer, and that she gave in, gratefully gave in, feeling loved through prohibition. Perhaps she even gave in thinking of me, thinking of what I should have done and so rewriting the past, correcting it, giving it an ideal shape, offering life a kind of lesson, so to speak, a lesson before the inspectors, in the presence of the principal himself.

“Though it could also have been a simple matter of revenge, of making me look like a fool after I had made her look like one, in her own eyes, if I’m the one responsible for how she looked, once, to herself, after what she had done.

“Yes, devastated is the word, though perhaps not in the way you might think, not at any rate in the way I might have thought, if you had asked me even yesterday what I would feel today. I don’t know, that is the story, isn’t it, and it’s not much of a story, when you get right down to it. What we understand, finally, if ‘finally’ is the word, is that we do not understand, we can not understand, not everything, and what we are going to feel about that we don’t know.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said to Miriam, after another, longer pause, “as if I were on the edge of death, and only because I’ve tried to be honest about what I feel and don’t feel. About what I think.

“She will not tell me, at any rate, not if she is still ‘true to character’, as our teachers used to say. She won’t know herself. I have never known a person with less access to her feelings. I suppose that was part of her charm, finally. It turned everything into a guessing game.

“Tell me,” he went on, changing tones, his voice stumbling over the difficulty of the words:

“Does she love this husband-to-be?”

“No,” Miriam said, quickly, too quickly, it seemed to him.

He looked at her, at her eyes, to draw out what she meant.

“Not passionately. Not romantically.”

Then, as if she had gone too far, she added, slowly, gently, as if to erase at least a part of what had been said:

“He’s a nice man and seems to care for her.”

“I’ve seen his picture. She sent it to me.”

“He’s not an educated man. What you and I would call an educated man.”

“So she can dominate him ‘culturally’ – at parties, I suppose.”

“He seems to have some understanding of her.”

“More than I, at any rate, though that is not saying very much. At least an understanding that she can accept and live with. That is what you need, if you don’t want to be strict with yourself. A comforting fiction.”

He paused again, looking at the roof-tops floating in the reflections of the room anchored in the window pane.

“How did they meet?”

“She put an ad in the newspaper. Looking for companionship.”

“I see,” he said, with something like a smile, turning the words round, as if to look at them from the other side.

“Companionship,” he repeated, letting the word hang between them.

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing that she said.”

“What would you say, Miriam, if I were to say that, all things considered, she is a real bitch?”

“I would ask you if, under the circumstances, that were the thing to say.”

“Not at all, it is not the thing to say, and I would not say it lightly. I have never said it, lightly or not, I have never even considered saying it, not even to myself, until this moment. But I like the way it sounds. I like the way it feels in my mouth. I like the way it makes me feel. It feels almost like a liberation.”

He paused as if to savor the last possibility.

“But that would be wrong, of course. You are right,” he added. “There can be no liberation. Not for me. Perhaps even less for her.”

“Not even now?”

“She did not know what love was to be in her life.”

“She must still be confused about you, twisted, in some way.”

“Perhaps we are saying the same thing.”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Yes, and then I will be going. I am going to visit my cousins up in New England. You mustn’t think of me as being alone. I have a large family. The old brook has not run dry yet. They tend to think of me as being a kind of mystery man, all in all, I think some of the younger ones have even begun to doubt the reality of my existence, they tend to think of me as a kind of rumor, so I have to show up, from time to time, just to show them that the extraordinary is ordinary, after all. I actually like them very much – well, most of them – there are a few I would rather send a postcard to instead of visit, that is, if the stamps aren’t too expensive. We haven’t seen each other for a couple of years, now, since the last funeral, and I haven’t seen a New England fall for more time than I would like to admit. So I’m in for some real fireworks.”

Miriam got up to make a pot of espresso, her back turned to him, her body framed by the window in the adjacent kitchen, a frame in which the New York roof-tops made a stick-like arrangement of hieroglyphs, not unlike the illegible scratches in the landscape of a Paul Klee.

Then he saw the headlines in the paper neatly folded on the table.

“Have you lost a lot of money in the crisis?”

“Yes, I have. And you?”

“I haven’t much to lose. But don’t worry. I’m going to have a good trip, now, a whole week in the country, and then I shall go back to work.

“Oh, Miriam,” he went on, trying to keep the emotion out of it. “I wish I knew the secret. I wish I had known the secret from the beginning. It seems to me you can not love if you haven’t already loved, loved and lost, and learned what it is to lose, to suffer, and to cherish the other as unique, as the one and only person that she, or he, is; only then – you see how impossible the logic is – you are not able to love the other person as the one and only, there is already one behind you, a kind of ghost, like a shadow you can’t get rid of, your own shadow, without which you would not and could not be yourself, would not even have a body to call your own.”

He could hear the coffee boiling.

“Well, I suppose I was booked to make a mistake,” he said, once she had taken the pot off the burner. “I’ve been away too long. I know nothing about women, it would seem. That’s her opinion. At least it was, once. Once upon a time, at any rate. What I was looking for was some kind of forgetting, I suppose – hardly a noble aim, is it? Forgiving and forgetting, simultaneously. I must have hurt her in some way I do not understand, can not understand, now, without her help, without her side of the story, hurt her at least as much as she hurt me. That would have been the lesson for the day....

“We were so free, then, or so we thought, so free because we weren’t free at all – free of freedom – if that makes any sense, free to love, or not to love, to live, free even to betray the

other, I suppose, and not to realize it was betrayal. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe I was the one who made too much of it. Made it a betrayal by making so much of it. And so betrayed our love, the freedom of our love....

“But what do I know? Don't look at me like that, Miriam. As if I were going to my own funeral. I might not have seen, I might not have conquered, but I came. I showed up. I was ready, for anything, and the readiness, you remember, is all.”

“You could stay here,” Miriam said, “stay here and do whatever you want, re-establish a relationship, speak to her on the telephone, if nothing else.”

“No, thank you,” he replied, with a slight bow of his head, acknowledging with that gesture the implications of whatever suggestion Miriam might have been making. “No, that's all there is, the story is over, even if nothing happened, really happened, I was there, and that's something, finally. That really is something.

“Now let's forget comparisons and talk as if we were talking about something else.”