

Ascher
a novel

Riordan asked me if I was a friend of Ascher's and so I told him the truth, right there on Broadway, the snow turned gray and filthy as the dirt of the city settled upon it. I despised Konrad Ascher down to his very name, I said. Never has a more grotesque man walked this earth than Konrad Ascher, I said to this Riordan, trailing after me along the street. What more, or less, was there to say about such a deplorable human being as Konrad Ascher had turned out to be, and for that matter, had been his entire life, a man who kept his sorrows to himself while walking the lonely roads that life had offered him? I truly had no cause to vilify Konrad Ascher other than to correct the horrific imbalance that I had endured at the memorial service by speaking these words of truth. Riordan had large, pointy ears and small eyes and something rodent-like in his aspect and demeanor, some grotesque cartilaginous suppleness that would let him slither through the slightest of openings. How a rat could appear in human form was beyond me, and yet, in a moment of astonishing candor, as we approached my very building only a month before, he came forth with a confession extraordinary not merely for its candor but for the verification it provided me of all I had come to hold true about this strangely sinister man. All my life there has been something rat-like about me. I scavenge, I feed off what others throw away, I prey on and try to dominate those who are weak, Riordan said on that particular day, only feet from the building where I lived. Put aside for the moment the characteristics of a rat. The point is only that it was Riordan himself who was making this revelation for me to hold onto for all time. Ascher's friends and so-called loved ones

meant well in their lying way at the memorial service, of course. No one should expect too much honesty from the unenlightened. His hideous ex-wife Velma was there, but mercifully, she for the most part *shut it*, and you won't have to search too deeply to understand why, as the words of others in their eulogies were sufficient cause to keep her in a noisily blubbing state throughout. One can only imagine the dissolving spectacle we would have been treated to should she have offered her own ridiculous and ultimately self-serving words. Everyone there knew what they were not saying, that Velma, with her booze-bloated face and body, was nothing more than a scheming whore, out for the money Ascher pretended not to have but in fact had amassed, given that it was his sole purpose in living. How laughable that Ascher could have touted a sack like her as anything more than the puddle head she was. The trouble started with Pastor Flink. Truly I cannot be sure that is even his name or his correct title. I have no idea what a Methodist is. All my life the fine points of what a faith such as this embraces and repudiates has been lost on me. All I know is that Protestants are like that in their endless distinctions, the Lutherans going one way and the Moravians another and the Presbyterians with something up their ass that drives them to believe they are better than the rest. Pastor Flink wanted to be a good man, and showed himself in the apparel of such goodness with the fifty-pound vestment that he wore. A man of bland appearance, he could fit in any room without giving offense, the whole point of his life being to give no offense. He said as much, confessing that his sole purpose in life was to forego the truth in favor of numbing affability. Because he had been born in a house where people made things and where construction was the key to good living and words were such as *foundation* and *mortar* and *beam* and *joint* were regularly heard from his father, and the houses that his

father built were good houses and the people who came to live in them flourished, with many family gatherings around the fire and warm apple cider to sip on a cold winter's night and the smell of the children's freshly washed hair a source of delight to those who had the privilege to hold them near. This, of course, was before filthy Truman Capote, the little butterball sodomite, became an affliction on the land with his monstrous nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, which I had the good fortune to read when I was just eighteen and riding a bus back north from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I had gone to send Sean to his death in Vietnam. No one who has ever walked this earth had a larger head than Sean's. No one exemplified the phrase *depraved indifference to human life* more than Sean, expiring his mother in the effort of childbirth just so he could live and walk the streets with his gigantic head thrown back bellowing Frank Sinatra songs, like that hideous "A Foggy Day in London Town," his own demise brought on by a sudden and unfortunate yearning to *go over there and kill me some of those guerrillas*, as he put it, and surely spelling the word, should he be called upon to record such a barbaric and peculiarly American sentiment, in such a way as to summon images of the primates found in Africa than the small and seething men of Southeast Asia armed for his annihilation. I was not monstrous at the service marking his demise. I had kind words for his family remnants. I have always had the greatest respect for the Irish such as Sean and his ilk represented, for with his mother gone they still managed to place plastic slipcovers over their prized sofa, so it could live another day without the blemishes the careless with their sticky sodas and greasy pomme frites eaten without so much as a plate can cause to the emblems of our success. Ascher, to my knowledge, did not know Sean, and even if he had, you can be sure he would never stoop to contemplate Sean's existence. Ascher was

an intellectual for whom lesser individuals did not truly exist. He would have regarded Sean as a *ruffian* of the hoi polloi. . As for Pastor Flink, he had not even a clue as to the more recently deceased by saying of Ascher that he had been a good man. Our presence in the dismal, dilapidated room was testimony to Ascher's goodness and our love for him, Pastor Flink asserted. Then, as if he could say no more, and without the slightest prompting, he began to sing. All four verses of "Amazing Grace" he sang, leaving us no choice but to pick up our hymnals and sing along. People with fine singing voices take pride in their instruments, and that is how it should be, though it became clear to me, in the hideousness of the hour, that the tenor behind me was singing not for Ascher. Ascher had been left far behind. The man was singing only to be heard. The whole bunch of them had no other purpose, and so it was for me to hold my silence and not so much as even pick up the hymnal. And as I stood there, it was as if I were now naked and had given up all pretense of social conformity, as if, that is, I had become just like pathetic Ascher himself, Ascher who doddered up and down Broadway in that grotesquely feeble manner of his, the very same Ascher who was a complete affliction on the restaurants of New York City. You had only to go to any such restaurant and there he would be, alone and completely without merit even as in his head he held a riot of ideas as to his own importance, no matter how he tried to conceal it under what he tried to pass off as self-deprecating humor. The truth about Ascher? He wanted only one thing, and that was the thing he already had. Ascher lived and died for money, never for ideas, and having this money, all he cared about was to keep you in the dark as to the true source of his happiness. No one possessed a more revolting style of dress than Ascher, who wore, day after day, the same pair of khakis, soiled and ludicrously baggy in the seat. I didn't sing a

single note, not one. The bunch of them could bellow all they wanted, they could do arabesques in the air with their ridiculous notes, but I remained stalwart in pursuit of my truth. I bowed my head and closed my eyes, seeking the private place where I go every day and in spite of myself was moved to tears not for abominable Ascher but for myself. Why would I possibly care about Ascher, dead for a month by now, when I could indulge my own sweet sorrow? Had anything been remotely affected because Ascher's hideous body was no longer visible on the earth? Had the subways stopped or the buses broken down in grief? I thought, in the preposterous way that only song or the cheapest sentiment can bring to consciousness, of one of my sisters in particular, so vile when she walked upon the earth, but now recollected with sweetened memory, so distorting can a wretched song like "Amazing Grace" be on the proper workings of the mind. In those few moments was I seized with the thought that singing should become a way of life, as drinking, before it was taken away from me, had become a way of life, because I saw that the man who sings is the man who deludes himself, capable of wrapping his sister in tender memory when she possesses in reality all the charm of a toothache. For a short time I was bereft. I kept seeing Vera not as she was, vicious and cruel and smilingly unforgiving, but as we were when children and didn't know any better than to accept each other as brother and sister. I saw in those few moments familial warmth and all I was missing by not having that in my life. I saw the apartment I existed in alone, the table I sat and ate my meals at alone, the trips I took alone, and the bed I slept in alone. If my sister Vera has been laughing at me for a long time, it is only because I allowed her to. Right there in my bedroom do I have a photo that captures her at the high point of her laughter, laughter so derisive and mocking that one has no choice but to flee the room if

he has any regard for himself. In this room have I slept with her staring down at me with jeering contempt and here is the perfidious “Amazing Grace” taking me fleetingly to a place I cannot go and must not go if I value my existence. The afflictions of a man are multiple, and when Pastor Klint was literally dragged from center stage so the service could continue, another toad, also completely forgettable, showed himself and one could know right away that he was kin to Ascher’s ex-wife, so caught up in her preposterous and fully unconvincing grief, the two of them sharing the same grotesquely blubbering technique. Not an ounce of shame for this travesty they were inflicting on one and all. A hydroelectric plant he could have powered with those tears, and all this for Ascher, who had no relationship whatsoever with the tired old hymn “Amazing Grace” or the Methodist church or any church, for that matter, so beholden to no one but the god of money was the filthy filthy one. Where Ascher got the nerve to walk the planet no one can say, but here was Bob Muhl, weeping Bob Muhl, in a state of total asininity assaulting us, who had never done a single thing to this stump of a man, with his obviously rehearsed stories about the kindness and goodness of Ascher. Ascher did this and Ascher did that, Ascher brought him to New York City to see Madison Square Garden. This reference to a cheap outing was meant to endear us to Ascher? Had I myself not gone to Madison Square Garden countless times in my youth? Should I get an Academy Award for accompanying myself, my father being unable to find the time for me? Should I be eulogized for the hundreds of bad food I had eaten at that world-famous site, rotten beef on a bun handled by uncouth men with their unspeakably dirty hands? I ask nothing of the world. Nothing. Spare me your Academy Awards and spare me as well your tears. Spare me the notion that this fool Ascher could have liked the bigger fool

Muhl in the least. Ascher had no concern for Muhl. His only concern was for appearance, and so, when he married the hideous Velma, how would it look to the world if it saw Ascher, now a stepfather as well as a *husband*, was indifferent to the inherited *lump* he had to consider his stepson? How could such a thing be expected to look? Would he not be assailed until his countenance was unrecognizable should he show his true colors and completely ignore the dull child now so revoltingly in his midst, a child who, if the truth be told, looked to be eight going on fifty, so boringly middle-aged were his features even then. And those boat shows at the Coliseum he took his stepson to. Ascher, of course, had no intention of buying a boat, no matter how many such shows he took the deplorable Bob Muhl to see. Ascher's only relationship was to the pavement he walked and the buildings he was not a part of, as with so many of us doomed to wander the streets of New York City. You see us every day, of course, going about like imbeciles with our little bags and minds of self-importance. Though water is all around us, we have no relationship with the city's rivers or the ocean ready to sink us under its slime. A landlubber Ascher surely was, yet he showed no shame in abusing Bob Muhl with tales of his wartime adventures on the high seas as a lowly signal man in the Canadian navy. Of all the telltale signs of Ascher's innate perfidy, none was greater than his indifference to place. Once his family fled from Nazi Germany, there was country after country for him to wander through before coming to New York City. Switzerland, France. England. Wherever he went, his business was always the same, to just amble along the streets of these great cities, read a few newspapers, and find restaurants to sit in and torment people with his wretched aloneness. Truly I might have been content to leave Ascher to himself had he not provoked me to the breaking point by his presence. Too much had not gone

my way on one particular day. My thinking was along this line. Surely there must be someone in this universe I could meet, a woman, yes, a woman, with a well-developed chest and teeth sparkling white and full lips and all the rest, surely such a woman existed, and it was only for me to sit in one of New York City's restaurants and discover her presence, but no, I had no sooner entered Veggie Palace and ordered my seitan stew than there he came, from the men's room, to take the table right across from me, completely unkempt in his appearance, his eyebrows in need of a trim and tufts of stomach-turning hair protruding from both his nose and ears. It was not for me to conceal my disgust. There wasn't the slightest attempt to cover it up with a greeting of fake cheer. I simply glared at him so there could be no mistaking the depth of my loathing for the fact of his presence. He is fortunate that my better self held me in check from killing him on the very spot for the crime, quite simply, of extinguishing all hope. Ascher was saying to me, you may go where you will, you may entertain the greatest fantasy of who you are and what you truly have to give, but in the end I, Ascher, will always be waiting for you. His presence was a devastating blow, and testimony to one thing above all—people who have no place to go sit alone in restaurants. The damned sit alone in restaurants. The incorrigibly alone sit alone in restaurants. I had only one reason for attending Ascher's memorial service, and it was simply this: I had nowhere else to go. Nowhere, nowhere, nowhere. I had become filthy, filthy Ascher, with his filthy khaki pants and all the rest. A memorial service is where you go when your only mail is bills and the only phone messages are for bogus trips to Florida and your e-mail messages are for "super savings" on Viagra. You go to a memorial service when it is the only scheduled event of the day and when the pile of manuscripts, unpublished and unpublishable, grows larger and

larger. You go when the majority of people walking this planet are so repulsive you cannot bear to touch them and the rest in their youthful beauty will not consent to be touched by you. You go when your Saturday nights are spent listening to *Prairie Home Companion* as you chop vegetables and say to yourself *I cannot stand the breathy voice of Garrison Keillor one second more* even as you do tolerate it for one second more. Your doorman Enver, imprisoned for centuries in an Albanian slave labor camp, and who too is here now to shed tears and wax sentimental over the deplorable Ascher, he too knows that your life has not amounted to *a hill of beans*. He too sees you come home every Saturday night with your bag of prepared foods and your gallon bottle of water. You go to a memorial service for the hideous Ascher when your Saturday nights, to your horror, are spent watching fifties doo-wop on Public TV, retreads from another century in the splendor of their fat and illness-ridden middle age blitzing you with the songs of your departed youth, and you suddenly realize that there are hundreds and thousands and millions of similar souls in the same situation as you, sitting alone in the dark with their bags of popcorn watching this tormenting show, and you realize further that the show is only on the air because the producers know that we are here in the dark waiting for it. They have discussed us with our waiting ways, with our popcorn, with our Garrison Keillor preliminary to the sounds of doo-wap twisting the night away with our arthritic hips and knee replacement legs. They know us with our osteoporosis-afflicted spines and arthritic joints. . They are counting on us to be mentally dancing in the blackness of our bedroom nights. Ascher brought this problem on me. He brought on the spectacle of the lonely nights and invisible days, those incessant sightings of the ubiquitous Ascher are entirely responsible for this condition I now find myself in. The whole world, for that

matter, can thank Ascher for introducing us to this problem. On and on Bob Muhl went with his completely forgettable reminiscences about Ascher. You could tell he was trying to milk that line about *Madison Square Garden when it was still square* by its very repetition simply because he had nothing else to say. Nothing. Never was there ever a single thing to say about Ascher except to offer one's complete and full contempt for the ineffectual figure he made tottering along the sidewalks of New York City. Did toad-faced Bob Muhl mention Broadway shows or World Series baseball games or even ice skating in Central Park? No. Of course not. For the simple reason that Ascher would not spring for such activities. Outings on the cheap—that was all Ascher was capable of. Did Bob Muhl tell you where the man lived, that he occupied a room in another man's house, that he couldn't even fork over the rent for his own apartment? And where was this rental but in a dreary town in New Jersey, a state he chose not at random but because it had the lowest income tax of *all the states in the union*? Did Bob Muhl mention any dinners at the home of this wretched Ascher? No, because Ascher didn't want you in his home, such as it was. Why else would he have placed a river between you and him? The well-meaning but completely deluded Bob Muhl had mistaken a few crumbs thrown his way for love, and now, in the minutes given to him, there was no stopping him from celebrating Ascher's marriage to the hideous Velma, still off in the corner with a shredding tissue stuffed up against her gaping nostrils. And he didn't stop at the marriage. Ascher's value was not diminished in the least when the marriage was dissolved, a circumstance forced upon poor Ascher by the chronic inebriation of the blubbering Velma, whose tears were truly only a cover for her joy at having Ascher's pot of gold fall to her, along with the unlimited number of drunks the deceased one's moolah could

provide. And it was safe to assume that neither the bawling Velma nor her son, with his gauche display of crocodile tears, would even have been present at this so-called memorial service, where they were making a full spectacle of themselves, had Ascher stiffed them in his will. You can be assured that their vulgar display of lachrymosity was simply clear evidence that *they got the goods and knew it* because that is the level on which obscenely greedy children operate. The vile clowns would have called the police on Ascher, they would have had his useless corpse exhumed in a futile attempt to punish him more severely than they had in life with their distorted sense of love had he mocked them with such dismissal. The only hope I could hold out that they had gotten their just deserts was that possibly, just possibly, he had *told them one thing and done another*, for do you suppose a filthy old fool such as Ascher could easily part with his life's purpose? Who was to say he hadn't left his wad to no one? Whatever may have been in Ascher's depleted mind, nothing could stop Bob Muhl from carrying on about his love for Ascher whether he was married to his mother or not, Bob Muhl having a love for Ascher that defied such categories. "*Ascher remained a part of our family*," Bob Muhl declared, and not a single voice rose in protest against such blatant asininity. The worst of the bunch, a man who bordered on the criminally insane in terms of his oedipal identifications, was Jeb Wilkes, who, in the tradition of his murderous forebear, had shown even more ambition in seeking to assassinate every father in the land. The man, even as an octogenarian, was a complete and utter sissy, so deeply tied to Momma in all his manifestations was he. For many years now had I been observing the lunatic Jeb Wilkes, so well-spoken, so well thought of, by one and all, not a single one of them noting what was only too obvious: *he spoke of his mother but never his father*, and even after her

death, oozing uxoriousness for his *dearly beloved wife*. That such lunatics should be allowed to live, I thought, assessing the criminal Jeb Wilkes in *everything but deed*. That such a grotesque figure should be allowed in a church while maintaining the guise of sanity and respectability, I thought further. Not one single person, including the terminally innocuous Pastor Flink, able to grasp the enormity of Jeb Wilkes's crime, the simple fact being that Short Stuff had assassinated God himself. And why? Why would the itty bitty little one do such a thing as that? The answer was a simple one. His father had been hard on him. It is the angle of every sissy in the world to say such a thing and use it as a cause for womb fever, the most craven worship of women and studied indifference to the men who embrace God that the world has ever seen. This is not a new development. It has been going on for Jeb Wilkes's entire life, ever since he was brought into this world in a rural area of Georgia. Jeb Wilkes was not born hardscrabble. His father was a lawyer, a proper man within the community who wanted a proper son who would follow behind him and listen to his every word. Instead he got Jeb Wilkes, willfully ignoring of his mother's husband, *which was all he would allow his father to be*, so determined was he to have no paternal authority over him that the word *father* could suggest. Has anyone ever really cared to look at the slanting eyes of Jeb Wilkes, who year after year simply refuses to die, unlike the grotesque Ascher, who at least had the decency to finally leave the stage when the very thought of him became increasingly intolerable? Jeb Wilkes has the eyes of a lynx, the appearance of someone who has escaped the punishment he so richly merits, given the fact of his father's death that resulted from his only son's brutal and uncompromising dismissal. There is only one reason why Jeb Wilkes and his ilk reject me. It is simply this: *they recognize me as God and so have no*

choice but to hate me. Jeb Wilkes has no god. He is his god. His facts are his god. The books he endlessly searches through are his god. Jeb Wilkes's mind is his god. And so he has no god at all. Should it come as a surprise then that Jeb Wilkes tried to fill the gloomy room of the Methodist church, with its water-stained walls and faded rugs and oppressively heavy furnishings, *with a learned eulogy, a fact-filled eulogy, a eulogy crammed with data and no spirit?* Why are such cretins allowed to walk the earth, one might well ask, as they seek to tally up the grains of sand? What kind of community can one hope to achieve with such deadness? And yet the Jeb Wilkeses of the world do very well in the community department, for the simple reason that they vastly outnumber the men and women of spirit. The lethal one stood before us knowing that his supporters were legion and that they had assumed permanent positions in the bookstores and libraries of our vast country. Jeb Wilkes was only remaining faithful to his obligation to stay within the smallness of his existence in rehashing some old war story of the completely cowardly Ascher quivering not so much from the cold as from fear out there in the Atlantic in a warship of the Royal Canadian navy. And as if that was not enough, Jeb Wilkes had to make a feeble attempt to trace the forgettable life of Ascher back to Berlin and throw in the words *Weimar Republic*. The smile of satisfaction it brought to even mention those two words. On and on he went about the doomed Weimar Republic, while polluting the air with words such as *putsch*. From Jeb Wilkes's peculiar angle did we have to hear about the allegedly distinguished family Ascher was born into. Physicists. Chemists. *Leading lights of academia*. In this way did the hateful Jeb Wilkes speak, and of whom but a man he didn't truly know any more than any of them knew Ascher, this complete ignorance of the true identity of Ascher no deterrent to peddling

such tripe so long as it allowed Jeb Wilkes to bask in the assumed power of his researched facts and not once, amid all this poison gas, alluding to the central fact that Ascher was a man lost in the weeds for his whole life. Members of Ascher's family received the Nobel Prize, Jeb Wilkes said, smacking his lips in a revolting way after uttering the words *Nobel Prize*, as if to say these words somehow elevated him to the very summit of existence. Never had the world seen anyone in the fever of pride that Jeb Wilkes manifested in saying the words *Nobel Prize*. Alcoholism had laid Jeb Wilkes low. On all the continents of the world could he be found in a state of total inebriation, lost to achievement, lost to his beloved learning and steady accumulation of fact and with absolute certainty remaining blind to the one essential and abiding fact, that in slaying his father he had slain himself. Is it any wonder that a man so ludicrous should call himself the friend of someone so hopeless as the deceased and completely forgettable Ascher? And yet Jeb Wilkes had a quality of endurance, showing amazing staying power and even *valor* in the theater of war he experienced firsthand. Jeb Wilkes participated in the Battle of the Bulge, the *pounding artillery* rendering him partially deaf. Because he was a Southerner, he fought with a special ferocity and dealt with the Germans in his path with dispatch, but he could not shake his whiskey nature and the abiding thirst the war only interrupted. For decades he was compelled to wander, hiring out on tramp steamers that took his aching heart across all the oceans of the world, which he could only stare out upon with all the aspirations of his soul unaided by his broken will. There are photos of Jeb Wilkes in a watch cap and stripped to only his shorts in faraway ports, but there are no photos of Jeb Wilkes wearing the academic robes he so dearly sought or munching on the facts that he strove to accumulate and slowly feed to his patricide mind. Someone will

say to me, but what right do you have to speak in such a vile way of these people? Is it not God's will that we cultivate an attitude of patience and tolerance and love, yes, love, for our fellow creatures, seeing that we are all dying, one day at a time? While all that may be true, it is of far greater importance that we speak the truth as we see it. People are not so fragile as we may believe. Soulless sorts such as Jeb Wilkes can suffer no permanent injury from mere words, as they are dead in life to begin with. All this time a monster from the depths was observing with a silence now and then compromised by bouts of laughter that shook the church to its very foundations. Her name was Debra Klupp and she had come to New York City from Texas, her favorite saying being *Don't mess with Texas*. She too professed to know Ascher, though even more than he was she hopelessly and utterly alone. She had come here from that wretched state to take, as she put it, *the job of a lifetime*, and because she had been standing in the rain with no companion in sight at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, the consummate picture of the lonely, unwanted woman while all around her were young parents with their wonder-eyed children, she had gotten the opportunity to meet the contemptible Ascher who, afflicted with the European compulsion toward what passes as good manners, retrieved the umbrella some lout had knocked from her hand. So grateful was she for his kindness that she insisted on taking him to a coffee bar for a treat that would be *on her*. Debra Klupp was a woman who laughed easily, if loudly, and Ascher could not know her dark side, or what the deeper significance of her arrival in New York could mean, that the seemingly jolly Debra Klupp was, to the organization that now employed her, what the president was to the country he was ruling with a repressive hand. No one could know the tendencies of Debra Klupp better than I could, for the simple reason that I had the

misfortune of working for the same organization and reporting directly to her. I knew she was trouble from the moment of her introduction when she laughed while struggling to pronounce my name. The laugh was not a nervous laugh or even a remotely apologetic laugh, but a laugh of complete disrespect, that is, she was laughing at the name itself, mocking the name, telling me that a barbarian had arrived not only in New York City but at the helm of our department. It was a flash of insight the years since have only confirmed over and over again. The department had been presented with a woman without standards, and in the matter of my name, it may be that Ascher took his cue from her, for it was not lost on me when I visited Ascher in the retirement home, where he had been sent following the amputation of his right leg, that Ascher himself, notwithstanding his European breeding and refinement, was not above a certain mockery in regard to my heritage, if not my name itself, as when he said to the grasping Velma, by this time smelling his demise, “Did you know that our friend here is Armenian?” as if nothing else about me was worth noting as much as this fact, guaranteed as it was in his smugly superior mind to focus her attention on me as someone, if not peculiar, beyond the range of the normal. Even with part of his leg gone, and his circumstances in the retirement home precarious, Ascher could still find a way to reveal himself as slyly supercilious, and for the repellent Velma to receive his attitude with delight. Have I introduced you to Ascher as Jewish? Have I placed that at the top of everything or anything there was to say about him, as he so clearly did in presenting me to the besotted Velma on that day of my visit? Ascher’s sense of superiority derived from his European heritage, while the barbarian Debra, who knew nothing of Europe or culture in general, laughed because my name, as it was given to her, and which she saw on the nameplate on my cubicle wall,

was simply not American in her estimation, that is, it did not have the sound of an American name as she assumed her own one-syllable surname to be. An American name, though she wouldn't come out and say it, was a simple name and certainly not one that had more than two consecutive consonants, as mine happened to have. There was something clearly wrong, un-American, about any name with three such consonants. Such was the unspoken pronouncement I so clearly heard. Debra Klupp believed in simplicity but she also believed in having fun. Her first statement to the department was that the workplace should be fun, and that if we were not having fun, then perhaps we were in the wrong job. This was the attitude she brought. Not a wait-and-see attitude. Not an attitude of patiently trying to understand the work culture she was now a part of, but just this imbecilic assertion that we should fly about the corridors with faces full of good cheer, as you might find first thing in the morning on the face of the checkout person at your local supermarket before the day took its toll on his or her disposition. Often such mindless good cheer, driven by peculiarly American optimism, is unbearably sad, as the exemplar standing before you with the shining face is subsisting in a minimum wage service job with zero benefits and with no prospects for advancement. Ascher, who himself had once been in the employ of the org., understood the deficit morality, the mindless lunacy, that she advanced, and yet it was within his character to look the other way or place her within the long view that his European origins had instilled in him, namely, that she was someone who would pass from the scene as everyone did. . Debra Klupp, in her loneliness, spoke of Ascher as a kind and gentle soul who offered her endless support. It was typical of everyone present that they would eulogize someone so peripheral to their lives, and it is a testament to their insensitivity that not one of them felt

Debra Klupp's oppressive weight or so much as glimpsed her hidden menace as did I, for she had managed to position herself as the inexorable future, just as the majority party, *which captured the White House* shortly after her arrival, positioned itself as the *inevitable instrument of the nation's will*. Debra Klupp, with the departed Ascher as her mentor, virtually taunted the staff for, collectively speaking, its dour and sullen manner. "Why aren't you friends with each other more than you are? Why don't you go to lunch together?" She didn't know that within a year most of the org. would come to loathe her and rue the day she had ever been hired. "She doesn't tell the truth," Harriet Maner, one of our most distinguished *program specialists*, had to say of Debra Klupp, a defect that I myself perceived when she took me off an assignment and then offered an implausible reason, saying it was the sponsor herself who insisted I have no further part to play in the project. And when staff to whom the project had been passed came to her and said, "Please, Debra Krupp, let us give some of this to him," even then did she direct the flow of the work related even tangentially to the project away from me and insist on being Debra Klupp, Miss Devious, from the hideous state of Texas, and to manufacture lies as part of her ongoing campaign of denial that she was shifting me away from the center of org. power by ending my relationship to these vitally important *program specialists* and their esteemed leader, Harriet Maner. Ascher should never have been allowed to pick up Debra Klupp's umbrella at that miserable parade, seeing that it inevitably led to her presence at the memorial service, where we were subject to her laughter, which tested the fragile walls of the falling-down Methodist church. And when I go deeper still, I am driven to say the fault was not with Debra Klupp at all but was in fact all mine for ever provoking her in the first place. If I am to be honest, something had gotten into me that

led me in the period preceding her arrival to begin feeling my oats, for Miss Carboni (never Ms.), who had been our director at the time of my hire many years before, had passed away, which was the only way that Miss Carboni would ever ever leave the org., so devoted to her work had she become. Miss Carboni *was* the department. She placed steaming portions of work on her table while allowing us to go famished, and flew about the org. in a cape, her energy being in inverse proportion to her tiny size. Miss Carboni commanded great respect and ran a tight ship, but when she *perished from the earth*, then could I begin to feel my *oats*. Some inner strength led me to deal in a hands-on way with the affairs of the department. It was an interregnum of sorts, Miss Carboni gone, Debra Klupp not yet arrived, and the legendary political operative Felicia Cushing up from Washington to help the org “think out of the box” rather than “we do things this way because we have always done things this way.” Ascher whispered that she was afflicted with *the vapors*, but I was not unhappy with the approach of the new regime, particularly when the implicit promise of empowerment was there, and though Felicia Cushing was pushing fifty, her beauty was still apparent and had me under its spell. A new CEO had been named to give direction to our org. A woman with polished speaking skills, she challenged us to step *boldly into the future* and criss-crossed the country sharing this vision that burned so deeply within her that together, together we could *build that barn* and celebrate our success in endeavors such as this to make our country great once again and revitalize our moral fiber. Felicity Fowler Jennings believed in the power of personal initiative and the sin of sloth. Because we had defeated communism abroad it was for us to now defeat its moderated form within—the welfare state and those running wild through the streets of New York City and all the great cities of America, the *plethora* (her

word) of *babies born to unwed mothers* in parking lots and in crack hotels and the squalor of the *public bathrooms of McDonalds at closing time*. *The American way of life*—over and over she said these words. Finally, Jeb Wilkes reached the end, though we had to endure the unseemly sight of him weeping not for Ascher but for his dear but departed wife. Even his most ardent fans were relieved when, mercifully, he returned to his seat, so another personal favorite of the community, Lucinda Blakely, of Hawthorne Road in coastal Maine, could stand before us. Lucinda was another who bore close scrutiny. A warm exterior she might present, but her insides were flinty, not soft, and though she was married, you saw, if you cared to only look, the condition of depravity in which Jeb Wilkes existed when he saw her standing before us, for the sight of her compelled his hands to fly together just at the level of his chin in an attitude not of love. “I *adore*, I *revere* Lucinda Blakely. She means the world to me.” Times without number Jeb Wilkes said as much to me with a wounding smile that said “I, Jeb Wilkes, love, adore, revere Lucinda Blakely but do not love, adore, revere you and do not even like or see you.” I have never liked Lucinda Blakely. I have no reason to like Lucinda Blakely, for once again I have gone where others do not care to go in discerning the true tendencies of her depriving soul. Was I the one to say, or was it Lucinda Blakely who said, *I have not spoken with my father in over seventeen years?* Did I boast of slaying my father with such neglect, or was it the revered Lucinda Blakely, who like octogenarian Jeb Wilkes can only talk about her mother, her beloved mother, her sainted mother? Lucinda Blakely is a star. Wherever she goes she carries her little appointment book with her. In the course of an evening someone will approach her and she will nod and get out this appointment book and make a careful entry, which can only mean that once again she has been booked

to speak at some event and she will give her laugh, her mean little laugh, more like a cackle, rubbing in the wound that she has inflicted, that the community has conspired with her to inflict, for all my life the Lucinda Blakelys have been invited to go where I am never invited to go, since third grade this has been happening. Was I invited to the parties of my classmates? Would they see fit to have me into their homes? I was not chosen. If you are not chosen in third grade, you will never be chosen. That is simply the way it is. People of so-called quality know whom they want and whom they do not want, and nothing can change that. A code gets established. The name Lucinda gets established. Methodist gets established. Blakely clearly gets established. The state of Maine, and all it stands for, gets established. The Lucinda Blakelys of the world have the confidence to know that sooner or later they will be chosen, that their address books will be coming out, for people will be requesting their company. The truth is simple. I hated Lucinda Blakely and Jeb Wilkes and all the rest of them because they were better than me. What can be more satisfying than the simple honesty of saying *they were better than me*? It is so freeing to say what I haven't said for years, what I have lied and covered up about, seeking to deceive you endlessly. I am stupid. I am a stupid man. Tests have proven that I am stupid. From grade school on these tests showed me to be stupid. One after another of them—stupid, stupid, stupid. And so what did Mr. Stupid do. Mr Stupid went and got himself an appearance. That is what Mr. Stupid did. He started living more and more in his image so you wouldn't know about his colossal stupidity. Hello, Mr. Stupid, is that you, agonizing over every word before you allow it out of your tight, fearful mouth? Hello, Mr. Stupid, is that you looking so very serious, with your fretful brow, while you pretend to read a book, appearing this way only because you know eyes are upon you and

you must cover up the monstrous stupidity that does not even allow you to absorb the words before you on the page? Ascher was the first, and in fact the only one, to see this stupidity when he said, as only Ascher could, *He is reading without any comprehension whatsoever*. And so Ascher unmasked me as an actor and nothing more, and that he delivered his observation in a low-key, offhand manner, *as if the point were hardly even worth mentioning*, only added to the devastating effect. Ascher owned me after that. I could have killed Ascher for possessing this insight. I could have sent him and the wheelchair he was confined to in his last stages into traffic or down a steep hill, but these possibilities never crossed my mind. Why? Because I have a horror of brutality. I have never hurt anyone seriously in my life, unless we are to talk about my brother Luke and he is not here with us, he did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to the decrepit Ascher as Luke fell dead two years ago, fell dead while all the rest of us were privileged to remain among the living. Luke would be the first to tell you about my violence. He would tell you about the milk bottle I struck him with when we were children, the *Borden's* milk bottle with the paper wrap over the mouth, the kind of milk bottle delivered by an actual *milk man* such as you could not hope to see today, a milk man who left these milk bottles at your very door, a milk man who actually wore white, as all milk men are supposed to do while driving their little milk trucks. You cannot get milk today, not real milk, you can only get the leukemia milk of poisoned cows. Luke didn't know this. He didn't know anything about taking care of himself. That is why he died. Not because I hit him with a milk bottle when we were only children, my mother, who also is not here, saying, *Have you lost your mind? What ails you that you could do such a thing?* Luke bleeding from the impact the bottle made with his skull. Did I smash him over the

head with the bottle? I did no such thing. As children we were always in the alleyway. The alleyway was where you went when you were a child. It was where you could have your field of play. Billy Campbell lived next door. He had an apartment that was inviolate and in which he had set up the biggest railroad we could ever hope to see. All the children in our neighborhood had apartments that were inviolate where they played with their railroad sets bigger than the surface of the moon. *All my life I have wanted to get to Billy Campbell's apartment and see his train set, simply gorge my eyes on that train set. I cannot imagine him without that train set. That would be too painful to bear.* I hit Luke for the simple reason that he hit me square in the back with a rock, and then he laughed when I fell in agony. Was retaliation not to come for such an act? Was I spiritually accomplished at such a young age that I could *turn the other cheek*? And so, when I could, I let fly with the bottle and it sailed in a perfect arc over an abandoned refrigerator, behind which he had taken shelter, and that it struck his head can only be said to have been an accident of justice. Lucinda Blakely knew about Luke. She had known about him for a long time, for the simple reason that I had told her. It didn't open Lucinda Blakely's heart to hear any of this. Nothing I said had the slightest meaning for Lucinda Blakely even as she retained every utterance. The only thing that mattered to Lucinda Blakely was the sound of her own voice. Lucinda Blakely slept with every man of power who ever walked the universe. Lucinda Blakely would step over the body of her own mother to get to the men of power. Fame. Recognition. All that the world had to offer Lucinda Blakely wanted. Lucinda Blakely had trashed her whole life. From the back of a car she had thrown beer cans out the window in all fifty states and had passed out completely sozzled in the same number of states. Her drunkenness was legendary. All of them were drunks.

Liars, thieves, cheats, whores. The whole lousy bunch of them. Only now they were sober and making these hideous noises that they passed off as eulogies to the dear departed hapless Ascher, who defied his German Jewish origins by becoming a sot himself. Drunks are like that. If they're not in the gutter, they have to have their asses in the clouds, and Lucinda Blakely was no different. Lucinda Blakely wanted to be a spiritual star. She tried to radiate that star quality. Something about the way she moved her hands as she spoke, and the carefully chosen words, and the tone of voice she adopted that feigned a warmth more than what she actually felt, because truly her only concern was that you would think well of her and that she would surpass everyone with the words she delivered, all the while trying to project an air of spontaneity, as if she were speaking off the cuff when in truth she had labored for days over this little *tribute*, reading it aloud in the privacy of her apartment and polishing her little turns of phrase while at the same time striving to make them sound natural. Such was the level of her artifice that she could render it invisible, my only recourse being to stare at the great Lucinda Blakely with an expression that said very clearly *I knew what was what* with her, as despicable Ascher would stare at me, and so she had no choice but to bounce off me like a ball rebounding off a wall. Everything a person could want to know about Lucinda Blakely was revealed to me some years ago, when she saw me in the company of the legendary Ramona Skiles, the last woman of any beauty I have shared a bed with. An audible groan escaped the lips of Lucinda Blakely when she saw me with Ramona. She was crushed that I was with someone young and of significant beauty. Her spiritual veneer fell away on the spot, exposing to plain view her insane jealousy. In an instant she would have traded the self she was, with all her spiritual nonsense, for the power of Ramona's beauty. Lucinda

Blakely had been a whore, and now she was a flirt, and it became clear to her in that moment that no man in his right mind would give her so much as a passing glance. That the world has to suffer such impostors, going here and there with their impostor ways. For all practical purposes Ramona Skiles destroyed Lucinda Blakeley. Ramona Skiles possessed that kind of beauty. When you are from Michigan and you are blond it is entirely possible that you will possess that kind of destructive beauty, and if Ramona Skiles destroyed Lucinda Blakely, who deserved to be destroyed, given the level of her spiritual asininity, then who was to say Ramona Skiles shouldn't have destroyed me as well, the whorish nature of Ramona Skiles being completely bottomless. I met Ramona Skiles when I was forty-six, a time of life when men are dying but do not quite know it. Ramona Skiles walked along the street wearing fishnet stockings and a short skirt and a blouse that revealed her great divide. She appeared blowing bubbles and told me her whole life story over dinner in a Polish restaurant. She had a boyfriend who flew coast to coast and to the ends of the earth as well in commercial jetliners and military cargo planes and so was a man of substance in Ramona Skiles's eyes. For that reason she wouldn't be seeing me in the way that I might have hoped. I was to understand that this was nothing personal but just the way that things had to be, given the fact that marriage was in the cards and a baby, too, a precious asset to a woman whose biological clock was ticking. But you don't forget a woman with a mouth like hers and a chest like hers and long thin legs like hers. I had my own situation at the time, one that Lucinda Blakely knew about full well. Many times she had heard about Celeste, my wife from whom I was painfully separated. Many times she had dared me to talk against Celeste, though I never had. Let me be clear about something. No one has ever been a bigger whore than I

was for a good part of my life, and yet in my years with Celeste I had been entirely monogamous (a word that always sounds to discerning ears completely gross) and even in the separation she imposed on me (*I don't want you here. Go! Go!*) I was only an approximation of the sexual man I had been within the marriage vow. Try as I might, what I was looking for was not out there, at least not for me. I went on a date to a movie and the woman I was with sang, *she sang*, along with the soundtrack, sang in the most hideous off-key voice, so that we were escorted from the movie theater. I had dinner with a woman who, in the middle of devouring her swordfish, became irate on learning that I was *separated* and not divorced. *If I had known you were married, I never would have gone out with you*, she said, as she kept eating her swordfish from the polluted sea. A ridiculous woman such as one finds in these ridiculous times, a woman who at age forty-one had never been married or even so much as had a relationship with a man. *But that doesn't mean I don't want one, you bastard*, she said, *spraying flecks of swordfish all over me*. Or the woman, Matilda Phlinx, who tried to burn down my apartment when I would not go out with her a second time. Does the list need expansion? Do you need documented proof of the sometime criminality of the unwanted? But Ramona Skiles did not disappear from my life, and it crushed the heart of Lucinda Blakely to see her with me. It was simply this: a man forever flying the skies of America and the world does not a likely partner for the marriage bed make, not when there are afflictions in his soul that make the air alone, the boundless sky, his true lover. Why? Because Ramona Skiles lived on the ground tormented by a desperate need for marriage and a family. *You never take another woman's husband*, Ramona Skiles had read in *Cosmopolitan*. *Sisterhood is powerful*, Ramona Skiles had also read in the great *Cosmopolitan*. But what kind of

defense can a saying have against the consuming action of love? Within a month we were in bed. Entire weekends spent this way. My bed. Her bed. *Schwinging. Doing the nasty.* Ramona Skiles had names for our activity. Lucinda Blakely knows all this. She knows about the endless days of fucking, days when Ramona and I could not so much as get out of bed as if stuck to each other, the nights when apart we talked dirty to each other on the phone. She knows too the pain visited me over how to tell Celeste and the Oiseau, our marriage counselor, that a change had come over me, that I could no longer bear to sleep with Celeste, who had asked only months before to resume our sexual involvement with once-a-week visits to my apartment. All this Lucinda Blakely knew, in the way an insensate object can grab hold of your life story and never shed a tear. She knew and continues to know that though it was Celeste who asked for the separation, I could not bear to tell her about Ramona Skiles for fear of hurting her. Lucinda knows this. She knows that the secret was destroying me and that I had no choice but to confess to Celeste with the Oiseau as my witness what the situation on the ground truly was. She knows that for weeks thereafter Celeste did not speak with me, though in front of the Oiseau she seemed to take the matter graciously. All of this Lucinda knows, but gives me nothing, never entering me in her little book. I began to live and die for Ramona Skiles, happiness for me being the company she provided. It did not seem possible that such a woman had chosen me. Ascher the filthy one knew from the vantage point of his age what was awaiting me even as I boarded the Metro-North train for Dobbs Ferry, where Ramona Skiles lived, a trip that for me with the passage of time becomes only more holy, if happiness without limit can be said to be such a thing. The truth was it was not every day that I heard from Ramona Skiles. There were days when she was taken up with other

things. The airplane pilot would come back down to earth and they would resume their endless discussion of the marriage vow and how baby would make three. Ramona Skiles could not admit that she did not want to have a baby. No whore can admit to such maternal indifference. My marriage, my baby. With such talk she filled the air and would call me up to Dobbs Ferry and the enormous apartment where she lived. The apartment had casement windows looking out on the Hudson River. In this apartment she had lived with her ex-husband, the owner of no less than five homes in five different states. Her ex had proposed to her on his knees. Like the true whore that she was, she took pity on the fool even as she took possession of his means. But he had the last laugh. He left her, he simply left her. Not only was Ramona Skiles a whore but she was also a drunk. A wine rack covered one entire wall of the apartment and bottles in enormous quantities were continually arriving even as the empties were carted away. Ramona Skiles had been blazingly honest, in the way that whores can be. "You must understand that you are marrying a complete whore," Ramona Skiles had said to her suitor and future husband, but even so, he could not refuse the package she presented to him, so powerful was the draw of her cleavage and her thin, extra-long *Illinois legs*. No one had legs like Ramona Skiles. They made you fall down unto your death. You spent your life on your knees kissing them and all that they led up to. No one had the right to the kind of power over your senses that Ramona Skiles possessed. And yet Ramona Skiles had always been brutally open about the things that afflicted her. She told her suitors one and all that she was a booze hound and that her only true love was the bottle. Such candor she had been showing since age sixteen when the illness began to grip her. But they had not listened. No one can listen when in the presence of such legs. Ascher knew this. The floozy turned

saint Lucinda Blakely knew this. They had been around the block. They knew what legs could do. They knew what it was to be within range of Ramona Skiles's scent. In spite of her bounty Ramona Skiles had not understood sex until her husband left. Only then did she understand the words *masturbating frenzy* and experience what it was to *tear a man's clothes off*. And it was in the fertility of that passion that I arrived so that even as we were discussing *the airplane pilot and the pending marriage vow and baby makes three and the contingency factors that had to be resolved before such a momentous step could possibly be taken and the role I was to play in her future life of marital bliss* was the unregenerate whore Ramona Skiles spreading her legs as we sat on the sofa and placing her hand on my crotch on a Saturday at three in the afternoon. Everything about that halcyon (yes, *halcyon*) day do I remember, memory becoming ever more disproportionate to my experience, Ascher being the filthy one I tortured with these carnal voyages, these romps in the fields of flesh of Ramona Skiles. I remember thinking, *When has a woman of beauty ever picked me up at a train station? When? When?* As Ramona Skiles waited for me in her BMW. I remember her short shorts. I remember the Tudor building where she lived and the almost un-lived in quality of the apartment and the formal dining table where no one sat, no children, no husband, no Ramona either, a table that was just there in its bareness with a set of chairs around it to accentuate the singleness of her life. The truth was that I was afraid of Ramona Skiles while sharing the sofa with her on that sun-filled day. I was afraid of her sexual explosiveness. Ascher knew this. He knew every detail of my fear. He knew that I was safe with Ramona Skiles so long as we were kissing in public places, where we were circumscribed by the bounds of decency from going any further. But here in her apartment, where she said, "I am wide open," simply said those

words as she spread her legs and touched me on my crotch, was I faced with the simple fear that I would not be able to satisfy Ramona Skiles, that I would not, in the parlance of the simply grotesque, be able to *get it up*. Every situation has its heart of the matter, and here I was faced with the intuition of my possible impotence, *foreplay then becoming a promise on which I could not deliver*. Ascher heard everything detestable about me. He knew it was not beyond me to put a good motive on a bad one, to impose morality, or in its absence, a grotesque *prudence*, as a cover for dysfunction, as I surely did in saying to Ramona Skiles, as she sought to unzip my fly and *get at the goods* that perhaps, given the situation, we should exercise caution and take things slow. How was I to know that the sunlight, the second chance at youth, in which I now lived thanks to Ramona Skiles was in fact only part of my dying? Filthy Ascher knew it and said not a thing. The fact was that there had been no performance problems with Celeste, who literally knew how to handle me so that penetration was possible. Through all the years of my marriage to Celeste this had been the case. Celeste allowed me to feel like a man, never mind the complete shame of such a statement, for what could possibly be more revolting than a man standing up and declaring himself to be a man. It is an abnormality beyond belief to speak in such a way, and yet I have done so. With Celeste, I could feel powerful in bed, as she had things that held her back *in that arena*. Celeste was grateful for what I gave to her sexually. Her ex-husband had left her for a man, *a man*. Celeste was willing to be patient, but my sense of Ramona Skiles was that she was a racehorse, a perception she confirmed when she said flatly, *I just like to go*. Ramona Skiles made no bones about it. Fucking was everything, and foreplay was but a brief buildup to that expedition. Ramona Skiles was from the Midwest, where everybody fucks and where the word *issues* has not

been heard. And yet I could not fuck Ramona Skiles, I could not engage her in her beloved *schwiving*. Can you imagine what a thirty-four-year-old woman with long legs and ample bust looks like naked with her bush glowing? Ramona Skiles feigned a patience she didn't have, and was content to masturbate me in the shower that first evening my ineptitude was on display. I cannot tell you what was in the mind of Ramona Skiles, but for me, the experience of impotence was devastating. *If I could not possess Ramona Skiles, I could lose her.* Because Ramona Skiles was a woman who was wide open. She said as much. Ascher never forgave me for my involvement with Ramona Skiles. Ascher was ineptitude itself when it came to women. He used all the tricks of an old man—endless blandishment, *selflessness that had no object but the ultimate goal of their bodies—but to no avail.* There he was, night after night, alone in the restaurants of New York City, making a public spectacle of himself. No one beyond a certain age should be allowed to eat in public. Who wants to sit in a restaurant and have to witness those such as Ascher struggling with his food? Everyone saw right through Ascher when he lied through his bad teeth about his vaunted relationship with the grotesque Velma. Liar, liar, people were heard to shout at the deluded Ascher right out on Broadway. Ramona Skiles destroyed me. The thought of her seemed to be in every cell of my being. Ascher knew this. The saintly witch Lucinda Blakely knew this. They charted the progress of my demise even as I mocked their solitary ways. You cannot build a life upon the quicksand of a whore. This truth never occurred to me, so blinded was I by Ramona Skiles's burning bush and willing mouth and the breasts she fed me. Her involvement with the airplane pilot didn't mean a thing to me. If anything, I was grateful for the airplane pilot and Ramona Skiles's incessant talk of their carefully planned and now scheduled wedding

vow. Even as we carried on in bed and talked filth over the phone when we could not be together did she also talk about the airplane pilot. “You know I love the airplane pilot. You know I am fully devoted to the airplane pilot. You know he is my complete future,” Ramona Skiles would exclaim. “The airplane pilot has me seeking the certification of experts that my womb is good to go for the performance of conception.” On and on she would go in this manner. The airplane pilot had been a great power in the life of Ramona Skiles. He had been able to ease her fear of flying where others had completely failed. “And now I’m flying with you and it is tearing me apart,” Ramona Skiles said, vehemently insisting that nothing should come between her and the airplane pilot. In my own way I cared about the airplane pilot. I felt tenderly toward him, as if he were a child, a beautiful child, a well-meaning and purposeful child with his great airplane flying skill. There was something American about the airplane pilot, something all-American about the airplane pilot. The airplane pilot was what made America great, I often thought. Ramona Skiles and the airplane pilot together were what made America great, I often thought. I never wanted anything to come between Ramona Skiles and the airplane pilot. Nothing, absolutely nothing, should come between them. Voluminously did I share these things with Ascher, always at times when he was nowhere near food so I wouldn’t have to bolt from his presence. I will tell you something. There came a day when I left Ramona Skiles, when, in fact, I had no choice but to leave Ramona Skiles. That day came sooner than you might think. Within a year of our involvement, my situation with Ramona Skiles had become intolerable to me. All day and all night would I think of Ramona Skiles. All day and all night would I check for messages from Ramona Skiles, but Ramona Skiles had become busy. She was working harder than ever with the airplane pilot to take those

final steps toward the marriage vow. Ramona Skiles and the airplane pilot owed it to each other to see what they had. Ramona Skiles had an *investment* in the airplane pilot and she had to do everything to ensure that *it paid off*, for the airplane pilot was not so very ordinary. In fact, he was quite extraordinary in the way that a man needs to be. The airplane pilot had substantial earning power and a bright future. He was not some middle-level office worker with a desk job. The airplane pilot flew the skies, and he flew them with power and authority. Ramona Skiles had taken my measure in this area. Ascher knew full well that Ramona Skiles had literally taken my measure, showing up at my place of work to see for herself that I didn't have a corner office or an office at all but a cubicle, *a cubicle*, and went so far as to whip out a tape measure to determine the cubic space in order to, as she said, "*guesstimate*" my salary. *A wedding vow requires a salary of substance. You fall short, far short. You must remain forever in the category of lover,*" Ramona Skiles said to me, in a blaze of candor. "All work is honorable," Ascher said to me, when I called him in shame that Ramona Skiles had seen me as I was in the workplace. Ascher was there for me with those words. He supported me as a father should and as no father of mine ever had. It is for me to say only this—my best times with Ascher were when we were on the phone and I could temporarily forget how loathsome he was to me in the full glory of his decrepit flesh. A pattern of unavailability began to assert itself. An evening of pleasure was paid for with a month of pain. Only that much could she fit me in on a monthly basis. I was now the one wide open while she was orchestrating her life for *bigger things*. When I protested, she said she was doing what she could, but my bei

ng began to fill with a depressive loneliness that I could not ignore. One day it happened that Ramona Skiles saw me with another woman, a sight that filled her with rage. The woman meant nothing to me, nothing. She only made me miss Ramona Skiles more, but Ramona Skiles was beside herself. *How dare you do such a thing to me? I have sacrificed to make this relationship work and all you do is betray me?* When I told Ramona Skiles that I was starved for her company, she could only answer me in the language of fire, saying *I give you my entire body to devour and you go off with another? Do you imagine that what is good for the gander is not good for the goose as well?* I made the mistake of laughing over what I considered to be her preposterousness. It was the kind of laughter I was capable of, Ascher well knew, laughter that was a substitute for the anger I should have felt, but that is the nature of men such as me, who don't truly know the ground on which they stand, men for whom fathers have been absent all their lives, leaving them at the mercy of women for whom at all costs they must be perfect. Ascher knew that my father had been absent, as he knew that my father had been an Armenian. Ascher knew everything there was to know about being Armenian and the complete hopelessness of a condition such as Armenian-ness. Ascher knew an Armenian is to justice as a cry is unto the deaf. He knew the absolute futility of being an Armenian. Armenians have no voice. Armenians run burning through the desert until they drop. Armenians live with hatchets in their heads until they drop. Armenians have needles stuck into their eyes and their ears until they drop. All this Ascher knew, from the vantage point of his own vaunted ethnicity. There was nothing Ascher didn't know just as there was nothing Ascher cared to do except doddle around and evoke horror in the public at large by his constant drooling. Ascher was a torment. He made the words *human being*

sound dirty. *And yet Ascher was the only living soul on the planet to whom I could talk.* Ascher knew this and took advantage by showing supreme indifference. All Ascher ever did was count money in his head even as he pretended to be listening. It is not good for me to talk about Ascher. I get stuck on Ascher and I want to kill Ascher with the words I hurl. Yes, I would like to stone Ascher completely to death, as my father, my Armenian father, wanted to stone me to death. All Armenians are good for is stoning. Scratch an Armenian and you will find a stoner. No Armenian has ever found a stone he didn't like. Armenians love stones. Their apartments, their houses, their garages, their vaults, are full of stones. *I will stone you unto death.* These words are on the lips of all Armenians. Their training is extensive and rigorous in the matter of stoning. They go to school for stoning. They read manuals on stoning. The constitution of the republic of current-day Armenia has whole passages about stoning. To go against an Armenian is to get stoned. Ascher knew all this. He knew he could expect to be reviled by me. It was a chance he was willing to take. For this reason I say that no one has ever loved me as Ascher loved me. The complete whore Ramona Skiles did not love me. Was that love that she had me diddle her bottom even as the airplane pilot was due any minute at her apartment with his sainted mother? "I need you to warm me up for him. I need you to go where he will never go. I need you to understand my *depths*," the ludicrous Ramona Skiles would say. But Ascher's love could never mean anything to me. No man's love could possibly mean the slightest thing to me. The very idea of such love is abhorrent to me. It is for me to still recoil from the words my high school coach, Mr. Sadowski, spoke upon my graduation. *"I would be proud to have a son such as you,"* he said, before departing, fleeing the scene of the commencement ceremony. That he could say that and leave me there with such

words and the image of his tear-streaked face. Could he know the crushing weight of such a tearful confession? Could he know the ruthless dissemination of his words throughout my system and what a lake of shame they formed for me to plunge into? And yet can I tell you that I love Mr. Sadowski and will always love him and have gone to great lengths to find him and tell him I love him though he is nowhere to be found and to this day I know I remain deeply unworthy of his love, as Ascher, who knew everything, surely knew. To my knowledge my father never stoned anyone. My mother forbade my father to stone anyone. She put her foot down when it came to my father bringing a single stone into our cramped and unbelievably messy apartment. “There will be no stoning in this apartment, Norair,” my mother said, with full firmness when he threatened to do that very thing to my oldest sister as the ultimate penalty for her *sassing* him. No one sasses an Armenian man without at least one stone to the head. Ascher himself was never one to hurl a stone. Not one did he hurl at Ramona Skiles, not even when I described to him the treachery of her intentions. Ascher was not a model of forbearance but of grotesque indifference and when I could not bear Ramona Skiles’s threat to see men other than the airplane pilot and soon after told me a drug-addled man from her company wanted to take her out on his boat and she had accepted, there was nothing for me to do but warn her that actions had consequences, to which she said, “Yes, they do, they most certainly do.” I was scorched by these words that had her own peculiar fire on them. All my life I have been disappearing on people. It is with savage glee that I disappear. Nothing has ever given me greater happiness than to absent myself from people’s company and make them suffer the loss. Even greater is my joy when no explanation is given. Inflicting guilt is one of life’s great pleasures. Few things could ever be more satisfying. One night I

screamed into Ascher's hairy ear via the telephone, "I want out. I cannot take this anymore." So it was that I left my life with Ramona Skiles, almost a year from the day that we had met. I removed every trace of her from my life, burying the few photographs deep in my drawer where she couldn't get at me. I felt in the grip of some strange power that was providing me with the strength to step away. Now when the phone rang and it was Ramona Skiles, fresh from her boat trip and wondering where I was, I did nothing to keep her on the phone. I was no longer at her beck and call and my anger forced a kind of brevity on me. Ramona Skiles had placed me in an impossible position. If I had stayed with her, there would have been abject humiliation as she experimented with man after man seeking her *marriage vow*. "You must take care of yourself," Ascher said, understanding the black and white choice that I was facing. It was not for nothing that he had been in the Canadian navy and out to sea. Despite his shortcomings, Ascher understood the necessary maneuvers of a man for his own survival. Ascher was an understanding man, and in this period of sustained struggle I could even say I loved him. I had no choice but to love him. Ascher told me to do good things for myself. He said I should get out and avail myself of the cultural opportunities in New York City. One Saturday evening I went to the theater. Although I had a subscription for two, I went alone, unable to find someone I wanted to be with. The play was about the TV quiz show scandals of the 1950s. One stage prop was a giant mounted photograph of a New York City apartment building. As I stared at it an image of Ramona Skiles superimposed itself. She was wearing the summer dress of blue gingham as when I had first met her. Her blond hair was the color of America and her white teeth were the color of America and her figure was the color of America and her radiant spirit was the color of America and

altogether she was the bounty of America that had been calling to me and which I had lost. It was a torment for me to look at the photograph, and yet I could not stop. In the heart of a Saturday night did I stagger home and write and write and came to see that the building represented my childhood and the Armenian father who had born me into the world and the Swedish mother who had born me into the world and the poverty and the deprivation and failure that had been mine in the world and the glitter and the beauty and the warmth of America that Ramona Skiles could possess but I could not possess unless I possessed Ramona Skiles. All this I told Ascher from the vantage point of his years and Lucinda Blakely from the vantage point of her years. To be honest Ramona Skiles may have been a whore but she was an honest whore. Ramona Skiles never so much as took a dime from me and insisted on paying her way at least some of the time, but she had left me no choice but to leave her. No one wants to get run over by the woman he loves. No one wants to be so desperately flattened. And yet I managed to turn this complete defeat by Ramona Skiles into a victory of sorts. I came home and sat in a chair and sighed. I was home. No one wanted me. I didn't have to fear missing one of her calls. I didn't have to fear anything. I could have my life back. I remembered this film from my teenage years called *Darling* and the quiet dignity with which Dirk Bogarde lived after the much younger Julie Christie left him. I had none of the dignity of Dirk Bogarde but I had been left by the blonde Ramona Skiles. I too could be alone now. I too could sit and read. I had been dragged by the wild horse Ramona Skiles through the bramble bush and now I could let go. I could just let go. No more would I have to dress for Ramona Skiles. No more would I have to listen to the ticking of her biological clock. Still, to have been so perfect for the woman and then to have her throw my love right into the street, to hear her

say in effect, “You could never be the man with whom I would take the *marriage vow*. *Never. Never. Never.*” Because the truth was that Ramona Skiles saw me as odd and out of keeping with the mainstream of America and had no choice but to punish me for not wearing the quality of normalcy on my sleeve, as Ascher full well knew. Was Ascher not privy to what she said through my confession of it, as when she spoke these words: “I started off thinking you were Seinfeld but now I have to wonder if you aren’t *Kramer*” because a constitutional requirement of her belief system was that a man to be a man had to be within the range of the airplane pilot and the truly loathsome Seinfeld and never never embrace the autonomy of the wind as Kramer did. With Ascher’s full approval (“Do as you must”) I took out full-page ads in all the major dailies and even unfurled a banner from the top of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, my message being simply this: *Ramona Skiles, you have a pussy like no other that makes me sing in praise of America all the livelong day. You are a McDonalds pussy, a Burger King pussy a cornfields of Kansas pussy, the Chevrolet sign on the highway of my childhood pussy, the moo goo gai pen we ate last summer in Chinatown pussy but now you are there and I am here and gone is gone.* The word *pussy*. All my life I have wanted to say that word without so much as realizing it. My first girlfriend was a pussy. So were all the others, all those who are still alive. Surely it has been established by now that Ramona Skiles was a pussy. My father was a pussy. God himself is a giant pussy. I defy anyone to tell me he or she has not been a pussy at some time in his or her wretched life. Men with beards. Men who are clean-shaven. Men of militaristic *bent*. *Every single philosopher known to man has acknowledged himself to be a pussy, all the artists, singers, dancers.* The fact is that the condition of pussy-ness is lifelong and without cure. Pussy-ness follows us into eternity.

Clearly life is a major struggle to be free of pussy-ness, and yet how few of us grasp that this is so. It is a major effort for me to get beyond Ramona Skiles. To even mention her is to live in her forever given the ache she summoned. Lucinda Blakely, of course, knew this. It gave her great satisfaction to see the pain into which I had been plunged by the rupture with Ramona Skiles. A woman of Lucinda Blakely's age will always identify with pain more than pleasure and have no choice but to resent those men who still linger between a woman's loins. Lucinda Blakely is a queenly whore in her own right, demanding as she does to believe that all men belong to her. That is the credo of a whore, to believe that men exist solely for their pleasure. For a woman to even contemplate such a thought marks her as a whore forever. The fever that we live with can go undetected for a lifetime and then we see and, more importantly, feel it. It is an ache that passes understanding. My sister Vera showed her preposterous face at the memorial service. Nothing unnerves me like the sight of my sister. First she stole my biological father. Not content with that piece of thievery, she methodically set out to steal Ascher from me as well, Ascher who, feckless and grotesque as he was, turned out to be the only true father I have ever had. My sister Vera believes it is her God-given right to steal from me. Thus, Vera is a gigantic pussy on my world scene, a figure of such predatory intention that I have no choice but to flee from her. That all women are born wrathful goes without saying, but when they have the added feature of extreme lachrymosity of the obscenely opportunistic kind Velma so grotesquely displayed, then the combination can prove overpowering. Like Velma, Vera sat there in a chair sniffing and sobbing, where everyone could see her. Tears are their abominable weapon, I thought, glancing at my sister and then recoiling from the sight of her with a snot rag pressed up against her huge

nose. Not an ounce of beauty in our entire tormented family, and not a speck of intelligence either. Just endless manipulation from the likes of her. It was my bad luck that I was having my yearly dinner with Vera when Ascher arrived and was seated at the table next to us. A sensible decision would have been to place some distance between ourselves and the revolting man, particularly when he whipped out a filthy hankie and gave his nose a good blow. But seeing me with a woman, even one as annoying as my sister, I realize now with horrified hindsight, Ascher acknowledged *me*, so greedy was he for contact with a female, any female, for behind the doddering countenance was lewdness itself. “A chief executive officer? Really? A man capable of executive decision? No wonder my brother here looks up to you. He has never had that kind of ability. He has always been the kind to stay at his desk. My mother used to say of the men in our family, ‘They can’t take much stress.’” All this I remember from that ruinous evening, Vera offering one blandishment after another while at the same time degrading my value entirely. Ascher drank thirstily from her poisoned stream of flattery and sat with us in a state of lunatic intoxication. From that time forward he was enthralled by my vicious and scheming sister, whose knife only grows sharper with age. All my life I had to suffer at her hands, as payback for my mother’s love. “Do you know the pain you caused me that I should have to live with the fact that Mother loved you more than any of us? Do you know the torments I have in store for you as the result of this cruel slight? I will take away from you everything that I can. I will stalk you to the ends of the earth. My shadow will give you not the slightest peace.” Many times Vera has delivered to me this message. It is included, with some variation, in her every Christmas card. And yet, for all this fear, tension, and outright animosity, I keep a photograph of her in my bedroom. Day and night

she stares down at me from the bookshelf on which the photograph sits. Actually, it is a triptych of photographs, one of baby, one of hubby holding baby aloft, and one of Vera and baby. Nowhere is a frown to be seen in any of the three photographs. Smiles smiles smiles. That is the face Vera presents to the world. No evidence of the cruel words she hurls or the right she has given herself to bury hatchets in my head. Ascher knew all this. He knew of her treachery long before he met her and yet received my reports of her abuse with complete indifference, and after the disastrous dinner had only this to say: "You deserve everything you get from your sister. You should kiss the ground on which she walks. Your sister is the paradise from which you have ejected yourself. She is powerful and you must come out of hiding and acknowledge her power." In this way was Ascher in the grand tradition of my father, on whom Vera called when we were children sharing the same room in our family's apartment. "Daddy, Daddy, please please come. He's bothering me," Vera called out, when I showed only the slightest bad temper toward her. Many are the times I recounted this scene to Ascher, explaining to him patiently what it meant that my father sided with Vera automatically and threatened my annihilation if I offered so much as a peep. Many times I shared with Ascher a description of the expression of vindictive triumph and gloating on Vera's face as he left the room and how my father turned a deaf ear to my pleas for fairness. For my whole life all I wanted was to be heard by my father, I would say to the yawning Ascher. And now I hear a voice saying I have no business talking about others in this way, no business whatsoever. Vera would be the first to tell you so. The voice says that they will be waiting for me, perhaps in the shadow of so-called death, and that I will have to pay some kind of penalty for having gone against them with words. All these words are meant to do are put distance between

me and others, I tell myself, and am I really to believe that an incident that occurred at such an early age should still reverberate in my consciousness? Is it not pathetic to be clinging so to the past and is it not simply a cover for the fact that I have no life whatsoever now to speak of, that if it weren't for my job and the minimal workplace socialization that occurs there, I would have no place to go? Do I not go on and on like this because in fact there is complete emptiness in my life? Have I not been the one to laugh and laugh at others for their so-called developmental problems? Have I not taken to task grown men who hang on to the diminutives of boyhood and adolescence, the Bobbys and Johnnys and Donnies and all the rest? Have I not dismissed them as boys afraid to grow up? Vera did grow up. She had a baby, a baby who is now in college. She had a husband who is still her husband. She had a career that is still a career. I am a man with two—*two*—divorces, no career, and piles of unpublished manuscripts, all of which Vera looks at in her laughing way from the triptych on the bookshelf. Vera has her own home while I live in a rent-regulated apartment I come closer to being evicted from year by year. Why can I not accept the fact that my only purpose in life is either to pull people down to my level or blame them for where I am? Ascher, of course, told me just that very thing. "You are your own worst enemy," Ascher said, refusing thereafter to hear even the smallest complaint about Vera and in fact extolling her virtues, saying of her that she was the *finest and brightest woman he had ever been privileged to meet* and that she was the only good thing to come out of our relationship. Vera of course would have the last word. She always has the last word. For years now I have been trying to build a bridge back to Vera and for years now I have been failing. It was in Chinatown in the long ago that I came to the awareness of the spiritual problem facing me in regard to Vera, the fact being

that she was succeeding where I was not. I can tell you the exact location where I stood when this spiritual dilemma presented itself to me. Do the words Canal and Bowery have any meaning for you? Do the words *Manhattan Bridge* have any meaning for you? Does the distinct possibility that I have been hiding for all my life have any meaning for you? None of this made the slightest impression on Ascher. Ascher's boredom came right through the line when I so much as touched on the subject of Vera, as if to say that the matter was entirely settled in his mind that I was the picture of pettiness in regard to her. And in fact he said as much. "You are nothing more than a *sore loser* in regard to your sister. She has won and you have lost, and you cannot accept that. If you were a real man you would call her right away and apologize for the torment you have inflicted on her since you were children. That is what real men do. They apologize to their sisters." Ascher, of course, was only playing the role that my father had played in my life in affirming my complete worthlessness in regard to my sister Vera and telling me this in no uncertain terms. And yet I had unfinished business with Vera. Ascher could say whatever he wished, but we were a family steeped in pathology and Vera was a part of it. The extraordinary thing was that Ascher's indifference proved in no way to be a deterrent. If anything, it was a goad for me to pour my whole life story into his unhearing ears. A man such as I am will always seek out those who are indifferent if not actively opposed to him. And of course Ascher, obscene as he was, was in some degree right. No one wants to listen to outright condemnation. Pity, in the form of understanding, is more palatable. And Vera, of course, was to be pitied. No one could possibly have had it harder than Vera. Vera had to grow up with me, after all. Less than two years apart in age, we had to share a room for the first nine years of my life. Add to that the fact that my brother Luke

was in that room and what do you have but a volatile mix. I did not see Vera as we were growing up. She was virtually invisible to me. All I ever heard from her was “Daddy, Daddy, he threatened to *smack* me. He threatened to smack my *face*.” *Smack* was the key verb in her vocabulary in her childhood years. It was a word that meant everything to Vera, a word she treasured, as she treasured *Charlotte’s Web*, a ridiculous book I have never ever in my life so much as read a page of. Reading was not for me as a child. Playing was for me. Comic books were for me. Action comic books. Batman and Robin but mostly Superman. Who can forget what it meant to see the Man of Steel in his tights with Lois Lane in *close proximity*, as Vera was in close proximity to me, though I never saw her, truly never saw her, except for those instances where she was compelled to utter her beloved word *smack*. And if Vera exercised her right to call in the air force, the marines, all for the purpose of annihilating me, who can blame her when she was otherwise defenseless? No one wants to be persecuted, reviled, tormented, and Vera felt all those things. It was too painful to bear having a brother such as me, a brother who threatened to throw her into the incinerator down in the basement. For what purpose would a brother do such a thing, other than to burn her alive? And though no such thing ever happened, she said it did, and who am I to deny the possibility that it could have when she is so adamant. I never want to oppose Vera. I want only to give her what she truly deserves. I want her to have just recompense for all the suffering she has endured on my account. I want her to know what the words *upstanding citizen* mean in regard to me and that I have not forgotten the shame she felt that I should have to be her brother, as when she vowed to deny my very existence the summer I was caught stealing from the canteen at the horrendous Bible camp in the Catskills where my mother deposited us for

the summer. "You will get the fresh air of the country," my mother said. "You will be away from all this city heat," my mother said. She did not tell us we would have maniacs for Christ swarming all over us or that we would be, for week after week, the only children on the camp grounds. Vera had every right to repudiate me that summer. It was her God-given duty to protect her good name. Because there was good and there was evil, and categories had to be assigned for each of us and Vera had the courage, born of necessity, to make those assignments. All of this Ascher understood. Gobs of my childhood I would hurl at him through the telephone, forcing the virtually comatose Ascher to say, with a feeble display of passion but passion nonetheless, "Will it never end? What monstrous developmental problem can be at play here that you can't get beyond it? You are a man in his mid-fifties, if I may remind you," Ascher said. Ascher liked to hide his flashes of peeve and bad temper, but they were there. They were definitely there. Actually, one could safely say that Ascher crackled with hostility. His whole being gave off an attitude of dislike. What kind of soul makes room in his life for money and nothing else? When I consider the totality of it, my behavior vis a vis Ascher was beyond reproach. I give myself high marks for the tact and skill with which I handled this passively difficult man. Not many truly learn the lesson of letting things roll like water off a duck's back as I was compelled to with Ascher. The truth of Vera's life was that she was completely stupid, even more stupid than I could ever hope to be. Not a single test in all of grades one through twelve did she pass. Penmanship and even gym she failed. Whether it was through social promotion or the complete indifference of the school administrators, she was allowed to graduate, but colleges offered an injunction against her ever setting foot on their campuses, so legendary had her stupidity become by

this time. Defenseless against the relentless mockery of the world, she was plunged into a chronic depression that often left her speechless and on the floor. Her childhood was reduced to two things: *Charlotte's Web* and the word "smack" in all its variations. That is the one noteworthy quality of our family, its complete fidelity to failure. We are not those who pretend at failure to make ourselves appear more interesting, when in fact high IQs and wealthy parents and elaborate social connections make such failure impossible. Quite the opposite. We are terminally dumb and irretrievably dull. But Vera caught a break. She finally broke free of *Charlotte's Web* to read another book, one of those novels you read in high school by Theodore Dreiser. She couldn't know her life would change as a result. Vera was smitten by the words she read by Theodore Dreiser, words I have never found since I myself read them in the eleventh grade in the room my mother had given me separate from the apartment where we lived on the *Upper West Side*, words that gave me hope as a junior in high school long before those same words could administer to the depleted soul of my sister Vera, over whom the whole world had been running in its stampede toward success. Those words said simply this: *She was a woman whose intelligence would go undetected by any test yet devised.* With those words did Theodore Dreiser shower his great love on my trampled sister Vera. With those words did he raise her up, seeing that they *resonated* in her soul. With those words was she empowered to *live her dream* and rise to the excellence it was appointed her to have. She has spoken not one word of this to me, and yet I know it to be as true as her aim with the arrows she has slung at me ever since. Now did she have a father and a *lover* of literary repute. Now could she be validated in all her senses that she had a brain worth knowing. Now could she walk the earth with a happy glow. Vera loved Theodore Dreiser as no woman before

or since has ever loved Theodore Dreiser. She earned a doctoral degree from the great Columbia University with a thesis on Theodore Dreiser. She has written no less than a thousand books on Theodore Dreiser. The attic of her country home is filled with unpublished books in the form of love poems to Theodore Dreiser. The two syllables of his last name are syllables of bliss to her that she repeats over and over in times of great stress. And yet no one reads the deplorable Theodore Dreiser anymore. No one over the age of twenty gives a fig for him. Vera went on to great success and I went on to great failure. This has been documented many times. Early on I fell in with neighborhood street boys, driven into their arms by the rebuffs of my classmates, none of whom would have me as their friend beyond the classroom walls. They conferred on me the smell and the distinction of failure and told me to be on my way, that no, I would not be invited to their parties, that in fact I would not even know of their parties. My classmates had secret hand signals they flashed to each other when a party was to be thrown that weekend, hand signals that went completely undetected by me. Ascher knew all this. His hair-clogged ears were filled with these tales, my beloved tales, from childhood. There was a period when I dragged the loathsome Ascher to some of my favorite, truly most beloved, childhood haunts. I took him to the railroad tunnel. What can a childhood be without a railroad tunnel. All my life I have lived with this railroad tunnel as the secret place where the world of manly power and the world of women can mix and I can be a witness to their joining. You could say that pornography has its roots in the railroad tunnel, that a child goes to the railroad tunnel for the titillation it can bring. In any case, I was there, I told Ascher. I told him how much it meant to me to see, far down at a curve in the tunnel, the light of an engine appear on the tunnel's walls before the train appeared in all its

throbbing power and how I saluted that power with rocks flung at the boxcars as they dared to pass the site of my feverish review. I told him of my beloved childhood friend Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and of all the inherent complexity of what it could possibly mean to be a Jerry Jones-Nobleonian in a world that for the most part did not understand what a welfare hotel was or what it could mean to be born of an Estonian mother and a Black G.I. father thrown together as a result of World War II. I told Ascher how it was that Jerry Jones-Nobleonian denied his father, not once or twice or thrice, but for all time. From that place of deep attachment to my childhood did my words rush at and over the beleaguered Ascher as I tried to capture the essence of what it meant to have Jerry Jones-Nobleonian as a friend, seeing that the “Nobleonian” was a complete fiction, that Jerry Jones never had an Estonian father but thought by adopting a surname with the “ian” suffix of my own Armenian name that he could escape the burden of his blackness. Childhood is a burial ground, I told Ascher. It is where the dead, the truly hopeless, go. It is a place with the stench of nostalgia on it, and those who linger in its domain are precisely those who cannot move forward with their lives, who in fact have no lives at all. They sit in chairs waiting to die, I told Ascher, who showed not the slightest interest in what I was saying. What does a German immigrant, a man of distinction, care about Elston Howard, of whom he has never heard.? Did Ascher care that “Ellie” Howard was the part-time catcher, outfielder, and first baseman for the New York Yankees or that he meant enough for Jerry Jones-Nobleonian to bring him up repeatedly, as in *“Ellie Howard’s really good, too, don’t you think?”* Could Ascher even feign an interest in what Jerry J.-N. was truly asking with his question? Could it mean anything to him in the least that Jerry J.-N. was really asking if *he* was good enough, if *Negroes in general* were good

enough, not simply to exist but to play for the vaunted New York Yankees? In retrospect I despise those New York Yankees. What an ugly uniform—white with pinstripes. Every last fan a Catholic. Every last fan white. Every last fan drinking Ballantine ale. Even the babies drank Ballantine ale. What emptiness in a man's soul that he is led to identify with a team. Tear out these identifications. Better yet, understand them and surrender them. It is necessary to hold your feet to the fire. It is necessary to exist on the plane of truth. It is for me to confess that I was to Jerry J.-N. as Ascher was to me, that is, I lived in the alleged superiority of my pedigree and took comfort in the power I had in that moment over Jerry J.-N., for in that moment *I, I*, was the vaunted New York Yankees and could handle his question as I wished. I have never actually answered the question that begs asking whether Jerry J.-N. actually believed his *real father* had been *runned over by a Russian tank* or made up the complete lie as a way of fooling me and everyone else. Ascher lived in a room in a suburb of New Jersey and had no desire to confront the racial issues of our time or to look into his own heart of darkness. All Ascher saw were the financial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, and as for the rest, the country could burn for all he cared. When the market was up he sang "I'm in Heaven." When it was down he sang "Stormy Weather." Ascher was just that way, showing not the slightest interest when I confessed to great remorse that I had never hugged Jerry J.-N. to me and told him I loved him, and that instead I was cavalier and cool in response to his anxious question, willing only to say that Ellie Howard was OK. I will tell you a story. It is a small story but one that must be told nonetheless. I am walking down Broadway. It is early morning and I am in my most purposeful stride, with *gravitas* radiating from my person. A man who means well from the ground of his being but who is not centered in his person

confronts me. He is Black, not a Negro, and he is clearly carrying with him a concern. *What are we going to do about racism?*” he says to me at 7:30 in the morning. He is pressed up against me and tightly wound, adamant in manner and in tone, and so there is nothing to tell him but the truth. *“Let it begin with me,* I say. Ascher didn’t want to hear this story. He rarely wanted to hear any of my stories. Ascher’s purpose in my life—his sole purpose—was to make me feel worthless. He got me within his power and then he toyed with me. To this day I hate Ascher and must revile him for what he did to me. No man has a right to do to another what Ascher did to me through willful ignorance of my existence. A Jew will always feel superior to an Armenian. A Jew will always be superior to an Armenian. So Ascher said. The great reality is that Armenians are not even allowed to exist. By the inexorable laws of karma all Armenians are reincarnated as rats, Ascher said to me. This is a well-known fact, Ascher said to me. For every Armenian who ever lived there must be a minimum of a thousand rats to magnify the loathsomeness of the Armenian race. Whether in human form or as rodents Armenians must always be shunned and held suspect, Ascher also said. Ascher could be counted on never to tire of saying reviling things about the Armenians, taking it as his right to mock the Armenians whenever the opportunity presented itself. “Even to say the word conjures the image of blackness and causes one to feel the cartilaginous nature of these vermin,” Ascher said. “Armenians can always be counted on to remain speechless,” Ascher went on. “Since when have you ever seen a talking rat?” Ascher said, a vicious question he posed to me with what passed for a laugh. Ascher laughing was not a pretty sight, not with that mouth full of decay and the hideous, croaking sound he made. But he insisted on his point nonetheless. “Jews talk and talk and Armenians are bound to perpetual silence,” Ascher

said. To be honest, there isn't a single instance in which Ascher had not shown some form of ill will toward me. The level, the *depth*, of his ingratitude was astonishing. Ascher was a completely dying man in those last few years. He was on a fast track to the grave. There can be no question about it. He had open heart surgery. He suffered bouts of pleurisy. He was afflicted with legendary gout (which never kept him long from any of the restaurants of New York City). He had herpes, and all the while was diabetes ravaging his body, sufficient that months prior to his demise the surgeons at Mount Sinai here in New York City placed him on the chopping block and there it was, his right leg below the knee was history. Did Lucinda Blakely go to visit him? Was she the one to rush there to his side and comfort him? Did she devote even a scintilla of her prayer time to the devastated Ascher, who henceforth would not be able to totter up and down Broadway in his ridiculous and mysteriously ubiquitous way? You and I both know better than to even ask. No, it was for me to grasp the essence of the situation and on a Thanksgiving night, when the city itself wept at its own loneliness, did I cut through the park, facing a wind that bit at my every exposed part, and arrive at his bedside with magazines and flowers, coming to him with the sincerest desire to comfort him in the hour of his need, and to share with him the necessity to make an amend for the treatment of my father from the time of my emergence from the womb until his own dying day and beyond. I told Ascher the truth as he lay there, that my great fear was that my father was waiting somewhere in the beyond and radiating an astonishing singleness of purpose, a full commitment to a death beyond death for me, his second son, for the calumnies I had heaped on him and his tortured Armenian race. Even with tubes in his nose and an IV in his arm and nowhere to go did Ascher attempt to present himself as an absent figure as I told him with great

passion of the strong parallel with my father's surgery given the fact that my father too had diabetes which had led to the gangrenous infection that caused the surgeons to come forth with their implements at the ready. My father was a man who inspired fear more than love, I said to Ascher, there in the semiprivate hospital room where he lay. The walk through Central Park in the late fall air had invigorated me, and it was something to be in a hospital of quality with the supine Ascher. The East Side above One Hundredth Street has always had a strong effect on me. For no reason that I can think of it reminds me of my mother on those rare Sunday evenings when I found myself alone with her. It is quite simple when I think of it. We would take the Number Four bus, whose route ran east and still does along One Hundred Tenth Street before turning south on Fifth Avenue. At that time, of course, the buses had coin boxes into which you deposited your fare and drivers supplied with coin changers should you not have the exact change. The box did something with the coins that I could never understand. It made a noise all its own in moving the coins around and one could only hope it was into an order that would satisfy the driver and all concerned. It was impossible to believe that such noise should simply have been for its own sake. It is a mystery I have never solved, though of course there are ways to get to the bottom of such a thing. It may be that I left those coin boxes just where they needed to be in my mind. Such a thing would not be beyond me. That's how it was when I was in the presence of my mother. Mystery simply abounded. She simply abounded. Ascher knew all this down to the last detail. The fact is that the bus on which I rode with my mother passed that very hospital where Ascher was laid up in his time of pain and trauma. Think of what that means, I said to the devastated Ascher, who even in his fogged state knew that he had lost the ability to totter up and down Broadway as he

had in times past. I was here with my mother and you were not and now we are here and she is not, I said to my longtime friend Ascher, whose eyes that night were speaking a language all their own and yet universal in the fear and antipathy they expressed. And yet there was in those same eyes the look of a lost and searching child. It was in this context that I began to speak to Ascher about the need to accept the fact that God is fundamental to our being and that he cannot be arrived at through words or knowledge, though he can be accessed through *knowing*, the kind of knowing that my mother practiced in the little church where she saw fit to *worship*. My mother had the power of God in her life. It was there for her to experience in a way that Ascher would never have understood but that Kierkegaard diagnosed in exposing the defiance that is at the root of unbelief, a defiance completely obvious, at least to me, in the pathologically oedipal nature of the fact-sated but spiritless Jeb Wilkes but more hidden behind the seemingly amiable countenance of the ridiculous and money-obsessed Ascher. On that Thanksgiving night was death calling, as if a shadow just outside the door, a fact that all the implements and diagnostic tools of the great Mount Sinai Hospital could no longer arrest, retard, impede, and that the scales of calculation were dropping from our eyes so we could see the truth of darkness and the light beyond. It is of course lovingkindness to sit with the afflicted in their Garden of Gethsemane and remain silent amid their cries for help with their unbelief. The truth is that I had no idea who Ascher was and never did except that he must remain an ear into which to pour my remembered experience as it applied to my own father, lying in the old pavilion of St. Luke's Hospital in Morningside Heights on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, his own right leg amputated at the knee and myself a teenager badgered by my mother to go visit him. *It will mean so much to him*, my mother said, speaking to the

point of my resistance, my denial, my antipathy to what I saw as his superfluous presence in my life, because, as I explained to the viciously distracted Ascher on that Thanksgiving night in the hospital, isn't that the way of life, to understand that *if we can spot it then we've got it*, that it takes an oedipally driven man to know an oedipally driven man, and that my life, from a certain perspective, has been about applying a corrective to this tendency in myself so that I am not forever in the pussy-fied domain of women, not forever selling out my own sex for the love of a woman, the scent of a woman, the womanliness of a woman. I confessed everything to Ascher on that Thanksgiving night, that I had slandered my father over the length and breadth of Manhattan, telling everyone who would listen as well as those who stopped up their ears or tried to flee of the monstrous shortcomings of my father in regard to me. I told Ascher how it had started, that at age three I made a conscious decision that my father was not my father, that I was of my mother born and that the things of the Armenians did not pertain to me. Their hair did not pertain to me. Their sorrow did not pertain to me. Their deracination and displacement did not belong to me. And most of all, *responsibility* for them did not pertain to me. If my father with his trauma did not exist, then I did not have to care for him. I had only to care for the things of America. I was an American boy. My father could not place his old world, his culture, his loss upon me. I would simply refuse to accept it. So I told Ascher, filthy filthy Ascher, on this night of his extended tribulation. Ascher heard about the feeble and futile attempts to inculcate me with an awareness of my father's past, the owner of the bookstore where I was employed one summer as a teenager handing me a copy of *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, by the mercifully dead Franz Werfel, and how I cast a cold eye on both the owner for his presumptuousness and on the

book itself. No one has ever practiced a vengeance such as mine, I said to the unfortunate Ascher, on that dark Thanksgiving night, when families were sitting around the dinner table and we, Ascher and myself, were about the different and solitary business with which we were engaged. I told Ascher in no uncertain terms that Krishnamurti had gotten it entirely right, that ethnicity was not only insufferable but extremely dangerous, and that federalism was the only way to go if we did not want to be about the business of burning down each other's villages. Ascher listened neither thoughtfully nor respectfully, remaining present, as usual, in body only. But persistence is a virtue I can claim and, that being so, I overrode Ascher's sly contempt with the truth I was claiming for my own. I told him of a story that had occurred long after my father's death, by which time I had come to nourish myself on the notion that I was at war with the patriarchs. At my father's funeral, I had of course behaved disgracefully. I had shown up drunk and scornful of any tearful displays of grief and sorrow as being fully in the realm of the histrionic and a standard ploy of women in particular to draw attention to themselves. *I had won and he had lost. I was now supreme in all the universe. This is the mental inheritance of all sons who say they are of their mothers born but have no father to speak of.* My complete drunkenness, as Ascher well knew, came to an end at age thirty, and I found myself in the legendary B. Altman's seeking to buy a pair of pants. All men, when they emerge from sustained drunkenness, are in need of a new pair of pants, and I was no exception. I had only a department store charge card. It was all the authorities would allow me, given my negligent attitude toward creditors and my life. Ascher, of course, had spent even more years of his life ossified than I had, so he knew completely whereof I spoke in regard to drinking. I am a tall man. You should know that about me. The salesman expressed this

simple awareness when, looking from my charge card to me in my full dimension, he said, with quiet lethality, “You are rather tall for an Armenian, are you not? I myself am a Turk.” The salesman was *not* tall—for a Turk or an American. He was short and plump and wore an orange rug on his head. Only in the category of insolence and insinuation did he soar. In that moment, as I have told Ascher thousands and thousands of times, did *ancient enmity* surface, the thought that violence leading possibly to murder was not really beyond me. Though no action was taken, it was the beginning of a turning point in regard to my father, an attempt to embrace who he was. My father was remote, I said to Ascher. Even in a crowd of people he was alone. He saw things I have not seen. He saw desert marches. He saw women raped and murdered. He saw a nation of Turks and Kurds descend on the poor Armenians. He saw knives in the skulls of children. He saw people hanged and disemboweled. He saw enmity at a fever pitch. He ran from it, escaped from it, lived through it. He put on a suit and learned to speak French and got an education at the Sorbonne over it. He joined other Armenian émigrés in the cafés of Nice and Marseilles and Paris and became a dandy over it. He learned the mental process of disassociation without having a name for it over it. He came to America and worked in the shoe factories of Boston over it. He became a Republican over it. He met my mother over it. He became a cashier over it. He said to my mother I don’t know what would have happened to me if I had not met you over it. He startled the dinner table with his eruptions over it. He said we have lost everything, everything do you realize this? and had no memory of what he had just said over it. He was with us without being with us so we didn’t exist over it. He walked the streets of Manhattan alone and without ambition over it. Without my mother we would have been out in the street over it. He got religion

and wept to God over it. And he lived in his anger *don't make me get up I just don't know what I will do if you make me*, his hand becoming a lethal instrument, over it. He turned to Billy Graham and Oral Roberts and A. A. Allen and all the Bible ministries of America and got washed in the blood and received the annealing ointment over it. There is nothing I can tell you about my father that Ascher didn't already know, all the scorn, all the anger, all the repudiation, all the seeming betrayal. Talking to Ascher was talking to my father, with this difference. I had learned early on that I must never talk to my father. My father was not a man to come to with the trials and tribulations of daily living. My father had become monstrous in his appetite for the things of God as he once had been monstrous for the things of life. Ascher lived in his intellect, not his emotions, and his intellect told him money equaled happiness and extreme thrift that went toward the preservation of his *capital* meant the insurance of happiness. Ascher had been rendered virtually silent by the fact of this happiness. "Are you happy, Ascher? Ascher, I would have to say that I have never seen you looking happier," I said to him on this Thanksgiving night of extreme darkness in the great Mount Sinai Hospital. When he did not respond I began to read to him from his beloved newspapers. I read to him stock quotes and gave him the most current information I had about the Dow Jones average. I filled him in on the temperature-humidity index and then gave him a briefing on world news, the machinations of the diabolical and insane Pakistanis, who had been caught red-handed packing nuclear devices into pastries meant for export. This precious and in some way holy communion I had established at the bedside of the traumatized Ascher was soon interrupted by the master of histrionics herself, Ms. Blubber Face, Ms. Woman of the Thousand Tears and Then a Thousand More, Ms. Snot Rag, Ms. Scheming Devious

Whore, Ms. Poor Benighted Troll. The sight of me was enough to dry her tears and set her flushed, boozy face tembling with hate. Velma had no reason to hate me. I had given her no probable cause. Never had I said one disapproving word to this obnoxious, scheming woman. On the contrary, my manner with her was extremely courteous the few times we had met. If anything, it was Velma, in concert with the slyly cutting Ascher, who took every opportunity to humiliate me, focusing solely on the Armenian aspect of my being, as when she would say, "So tell me how it feels to be an Armenian? Do you feel hunted? Do you feel stalked? Do you feel oppressively hairy? I've heard that about the Armenians, that they are the world's greatest consumers of razor blades, that in fact some are forced to spend their days and nights shaving just so they can be presentable, much as a rat needs to keep gnawing so its teeth do not grow too long and cause it to starve." Always her vicious ways were set up by Ascher, who could be counted on to segue the conversation in that direction with his completely uncalled-for reminder to Velma that she was, after all, in the presence of an Armenian, as if he himself could think of nothing else to say about me. Even now, with Ascher supposedly incapacitated, could a sense of their insulting collaboration be detected. The look of scorn and even rage he had directed my way when I alone was in his presence seeking to raise the spirits of this most moribund of men, spiritually speaking, now gave way to a sly smile of complicity with the inebriated one that not even his substantial pain could deprive him of. The need for superiority has been established through all the ages. It afflicts men and women alike, and if Ascher and blotto-face Velma were exemplars of this base but all too human tradition, I cannot truly exempt myself, as I was at pains to share with Ascher that night before the sobbing Velma showed up with her lachrymose road show. The fact is that when a

message is important, it can and will get spoken. It will shout itself through glass and steel and poured concrete and all the obstructions man can devise. Basically, I told Ascher on that night, as I had so many times in the past, the nature of man's relationship to woman, that it is nothing less than a sore affliction, a bondage, and his just deserts for killing his father in the first place. Since I met my teenage sweetheart (the term, the term) on that spring night in 1962, and kissed her ("And Then He Kissed Me"), and followed it up with beer bought at the Ta-Kome Deli on 115th Street and Broadway, where "The Duke of Earl" played loud and proud on the radio, and drank it down with the sly and never effervescent Jerry Jones-Nobleonian in the lower depths of Riverside Park. The bluebell of happiness needed to rise and rise; internal forces dictated that I not only preserve the high from the night before but go higher still (yes, Sly and the Family Stone, I do want you to take me higher, as I later said). Ascher heard all this, heard my reports on the status of male-female relations. He heard of the long and winding road of tortured wanting, needing, not wanting but afraid to say I did not want for fear that I would die or she would die if I said I didn't not want anymore, this being the kind of wanting not wanting that tormented me with the advent of this Jane Thayer into my life. He heard all the approximations of fury and outright fury that I brought to the occasion of this teenage affliction. He listened in the apathetic way that only one such as Ascher could to my precise description of the monstrous obsession Jane Thayer became in my mind, such that when La Rochefoucauld's maxim came to my awareness in the tenth grade and the French aphorist slew me by saying, "Whom one has loved once, one cannot love a second time," what was I to do but die and die and die, for by now Jane Thayer and I were fornicating in the fields of wicked delight and drawing on that reserve of pleasure

that marriage had in store for us. These were not small things that Ascher was called upon to take in. Ascher was being summoned to step up to the plate, a metaphor that would have been lost upon his German consciousness, absorbed as it was with Goethe and Schiller and all the poets and musicians of the Black Forest or wherever they had their roots in Teutonic soil. Ascher, of course, was no more of a German than I was. He was a Jew hanging out in a foreign environment as my father was an Armenian among the long, sharpened knives of the militant Turks. People such as Ascher who have existed in an atmosphere of sustained ill will and diabolical bloodlust have no choice but to adopt the pose of diffidence and tottering innocuousness. It is not for such souls to go boldly against others in either word or action. They must bottle up. They must conceal. Their perpetual thought is to stay out of harm's way. You are never to see what is in their minds. You are not privileged to know the vileness and hatred that are in their hearts. They themselves are hardly privileged to know such things. All that counts for people like Ascher is the money, the money, but the money is never enough, the security it can afford is never enough, the room he lived in could never be made dark enough to shut out the exposing and obliterating light. Where is the absolute black I so deeply crave? Ascher was heard to weep in his solitary man's room, as with lights off, he backed up the curtains and drapes with blankets over the windows and stopped up the cracks in the door and even himself wore a sleep mask as he negotiated the dangers of the room with a cane. The clock radio unplugged. Any instrument that glowed in the dark unplugged so he could re-experience the black hole whence he had come. There is nothing to do for people like Ascher but to pity them and to comfort them with our presence, as was the case on this Thanksgiving night where I regaled the virtually comatose man and his

pathologically antisocial ex-wife Velma with tales of my adolescence, in a stunning act of generosity making a gift of my life to them so they could have it, as we say in America, as an open book. And so they heard of the pain in my heart when I encountered the pitiless La Rochefoucauld, who did more to destroy me with that one sentence than all the great works of literature combined. I was a nobody in a private school with a predominantly Jewish enrollment, I told the miserable Ascher. I had no scholarship. I had a compassion-ship. The principal, an old woman who tucked her tissues up the sleeve of her white blouse, took pity on my mother, so careworn, so Old World, so burdened, with her rough hands and gabardine skirt and at a loss what to do with her second son, who had only recently been pitched out the snooty Episcopal school whose pity I no longer needed and which I went against with rolls of toilet paper flung from the second floor boys' bathroom at the nuns walking double file in their penguin garb on the street below. I explained to Ascher that childhood is a long-playing record with deep grooves in it to which the adult who has no children of his own must constantly return. To Ascher's deep credit, he kept his eyes open as I spoke, and even serenaded my intermittent silences with his fixed gaze, thus adding to my resolve not to flag under the dictate to show every nook and cranny of my life as it truly was. A German can appreciate thoroughness, and maybe a German Jew is even more likely to reach the very pinnacle of thoroughness and exactitude. It is not for me to say. It is not for me to venture into racial/ethnic waters and to be swept up with the mad power of the currents such exploration can unleash. It is only for me to knock heads together in the benign environment of federalism so we are not marching with torches in the night. Fellowship with other human beings is a privilege, and we should always strive to bring our best, knowing that at any moment it could end.

With this in mind, I maximized the opportunity, carefully mapping out the odyssey of pain into which I had entered, the responsibility I could not endure once the sex relationship was entered into, as if I had led Jane Thayer into a life of sin and now no one else would ever want her and she would have to live alone and die alone. Because the thought of marriage at such a young age, I explained to Ascher, seemed sad and confining and would only serve to render me prematurely old. All my life I have felt compromised by the thought of marriage and even more by the act of marriage, which I have entered into twice, as Ascher well knew. My first marriage, to Sarah Van Dine, coupled me with a woman who was destined to wear wads of tissue in her ears to block out her cruel mockery of dults and feral children. You take as your starting point that the woman is much too good for you and will find you completely worthless once she gets to know you and end by wanting to be free of the weight of her. Sarah was my infection to the eye after Jane Thayer left me the summer following high school. Jane Thayer did me a favor by leaving me. She did for me what I could not do for myself. She went off to Mexico City to spend a couple of weeks with her cousin and wound up staying. Every aspect of this wretched phase of my life was in Ascher's memory bank, should he care to draw on it. He knew of my lamentable performance the last two years of high school, the emotional difficulties brought on by La Rouchefoucould that caused me to begin playing hooky and ultimately to withdraw from school altogether when the truancy got out of hand. He knew of my breakdown, when every day in the summer of 1964 I cried and cried even while Martha and the Vandellas incessantly sang the song "Heat Wave." He knew of my heartbreaking discovery of the proximity of dreams to reality and how the twain would never meet, including my rejection by the academic palaces of the world.

The respectable people at my school had not wanted me, and so it was for me to hang out with the riff raff from the streets with the circumscribed mentalities that their poverty placed on them. My whole childhood and adolescence spent with kids saying “I’m going to kick your ass” “and “Your mother goes down for wooden nickels” and the simple and carnal imperatives “Suck my dick” and “Kiss my ass” and utterances like “Your Moms” and “No, your Moms” and “I’m going to put a hole in your motherfucking chest” or “I’m going to cave in your chest” or I’m going to do this, I’m going to do that,” spiraling out of control with the language that they spoke in seeking the power they didn’t have. All this the filthy Ascher heard from me without so much as an iota of thanks. And so, by the end of high school I was flattened by a world that didn’t want me in the way that I wanted it. I had thought I would be a star shining brighter than any of the other stars in the firmament. I had thought people would be saying, “Who was that masked man, and where did he go?” Instead I was living at home in a room next door to my family’s apartment and waking early every school-day morning to take the IRT local to Times Square, where I would then catch the Flushing Main Street line way out to Queens and transfer to a bus that would leave me on something called Kissena Boulevard, where I would wander the campus of Queens College with a pain that wouldn’t quit over the loss of Jane Thayer, unable to admit that the pain would be even greater were she in proximity because then I would be forced to admit I was leaving her as much as she was leaving me. And there was the additional pain of a plummeted grade point average those last two years and low scores on entrance exams that nailed my unfitness and inferiority to my face. No Ivy League college. No basketball stardom. “Could you get to the point?” or “Your point will come clear to me soon enough, I am confident,” Ascher might say, but

his general disposition remained one of unshakable silence. He showed no interest in what those long, solitary walks in Riverside Park meant to me at night. If only I had known what I know now, that walking is a form of meditation in itself. If only I'd had such a resource back then to center and strengthen me so I didn't feel so at the mercy of the world, I said to Ascher, but Ascher had no means for understanding. What did filthy Ascher know about a spiritual experience? Ascher could only read about God. He had no direct experience of God. The whole reason Ascher scorned me so was that I had found God while he had been left to pore over ancient texts as the paltry substitute. Ascher was trying to learn about God while I was busy knowing God. Of course when I told Ascher as much he could only bring himself to look at me with *icy reserve* that I should behave as such an abomination on his mind and sight. Ascher had no choice but to hate me, to snub me, to dredge up the dreadful Armenians with their carcasses stinking all the way to Damascus as the Kurds fed on their flesh and gnawed their bones. Ascher's ill will, his covert malice, would have shone through anything he erected, as it clearly did that grotesque vault in which he lived with his *gold bullion*, which we will not even discuss, so pervasive was his acquisitive reach that he had even sought out precious metals. Hatred is a religion unto itself, and Ascher admitted as much. "I pray to my hatred. I worship my hatred. I bow down to the enduring strength of my hatred. I give thanks every day for the fact of your loathsome face that stokes my hatred," Ascher said to me, in a remarkable display of candor shortly before he vacated the physical premises at least of this earth. In so doing Ascher of course acknowledged me as a great gift in his life, as I have been a great gift in the life of all who have known and come to revile me, for what is a man who does not stretch people to the limits of their being? My first ex-wife, Sarah

van Dine, would be the first to testify to the rightness of the course I set her on when I destroyed all the images she would erect to make me something that I was not for the simple reason that I needed her to see me *exactly as I was*, not a romantic, slightly Russian young poet living in a wretched room that only enhanced her idea of me as starving for my art. I had no art and I was not Russian and poetry was where the effete went to make some meaning of the vapors in their heads. When pushed toward a cliff, a person has to say who he is, has to acknowledge that he is a “poli-sci” (where is the science there, may I ask you?) major flunking out of college, has to admit he is hooked on speed, has to admit that he is failing in all areas of his life and that he is chronically worried that he will wind up on the street. No one should ever be allowed to assault us with an image, but America is an image gone wild, I said to Ascher. We are a nation drunk on our own concept of goodness, I said to Ascher. We have become good for nothing more than waving our “We’re number one” fingers in the air, I said to Ascher. We demand to be pampered well into the grave, I said to the stonefaced Ascher. But there are people out there we have traduced who are waiting for us in the night and *in the daylight hours*. Many among them have gone beyond the gnashing of teeth and now manifest a smile that continues in spite of wretched circumstance—poverty, bad teeth, malfunctioning bowels. I can’t be eliminated, their smile says. I’m stronger than you and tougher than you and will last into the eternity that has been assigned to me and carve my initials into your perishing flesh and laugh and laugh in your face as your expiration date arrives. It is the smile you see in the subway car and on the darkened street at night as you hurry home to your warm apartment with your expensive groceries. None of this made the slightest impression on Ascher. My scenario of lurking darkness did not leave

him quaking. He had more immediate concerns, namely, his lost mobility and what it could possibly mean for him to have such a restriction. Suddenly I began to cry. I could not help myself. Through my tears I tried to convey my extreme skittishness as a child and how happy I was on those half-day Fridays when the school closed early and I was free to put away my books and just roam in the park. My happiest times are when I am alone and my servitude to women was but the sort of unhappy development that follows of necessity from puberty, I said to Ascher. I told him of the bondage that I had emerged from to Jane Thayer only to fall victim to the same problem with Sarah Van Dine. I told him how she dominated me and how I had no design for living but only her as the thing of value in my life. It was terrain I had been over many times, perhaps a thousand, I realized, as I led him to understand how she was one of the stages I had to pass through on my liberation journey and how, from where I now stood, it all made sense, sufficient that I too could contemplate the migratory passage of my soul. A man's eyes can wound you. There should be no doubt of that, and Ascher knew how to use his to devastating effect, so that when I left him and the hateful Velma, I had no choice but to sit alone in Central Park in disregard of the dark and the cold and the threat to my personal safety. Kurds and Turks rode up to me on powerful horses and told me every detail of the slaughter of my father's family back in Turkey. "Not a trace of them did we leave. The slate is wiped clean of Armenians," they assured me. I thanked them for the briefing and sent them on their way. The fact was that I was not ready for their truth. I had no way to assimilate it, for if I did, the verdict would be rendered that I had left my father in a calumniated state as I had left Ascher and his loathsome Velma in a calumniated state. I had shown scorn and mockery where I should have shown compassion if not pity. "I will

show compassion if not pity when I please,” I said, returning to the bedridden Ascher the very next night. “I cannot let myself be taken over by the concerns of old people. My whole childhood was about the concerns of old people,” I also said to the bedridden Ascher. “I won’t have that anymore. One gets lost in the concerns of old people. One gets annihilated in the concerns of old people. One can have no childhood of his own in the concerns of old people. One gets to carry only the old rugged cross when one is alive in the concerns of old people. Old people must vanish from the earth when they can so the young can live,” I said to the bedridden Ascher, for in truth, I said to the bedridden Ascher, nothing concerns me more than the concerns of old people and nothing concerns me less. I am a man of complete concern and no concern whatsoever, I said to the bedridden Ascher. “You must take me as I am, I said to the bedridden Ascher. You must not allow me to be a window for your own opportunity and I most certainly must not allow it either,” I said to the bedridden Ascher. Ascher proved by his facial response that absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder, though far be it from the crumbling wretch to reveal anything more than a flicker of disgust. Still the signs of his appreciation were in an increased alertness that served as a nice balance to the horror on the face of the besotted Velma, who by now was drinking from a pint of cheap vodka extracted from her purse. “I knew it was tearing you up that I had gone, and so I have returned,” I said to the bedridden Ascher. “I too have had my dark night of the soul,” I said to the bedridden Ascher, describing my experience in Central Park in dramatic terms that he might more readily embrace. I told him I had not been with a woman in years and years and that there was not the remotest possibility that I would ever be with one again. I told him I was a fool for love but that no one I could physically respond to was out there to receive my

love. I told him that if I was hateful toward him it was only because he was like an incriminating mirror and that all he reflected back to me was the image of my own depletion and the further depletion to come. "The world is not made for old people," I said to the bedridden Ascher. "You should hurl yourself off a cliff," I said to the bedridden Ascher. "You are a disgrace insofar as what America stands for and have committed one of the two cardinal sins for which you cannot go to jail in America. You are not poor but you are old. Both merit the punishment of being rendered invisible," I said to the bedridden Ascher. I told him that America was one big campaign to eliminate the old, that thousands and millions of them were stashed away in apartments and rooms never to be visited or seen again. "You're old. Get out of my sight, America screams at its old," I said to the bedridden Ascher. "Be grateful. For once in your life show some gratitude," I shouted at the bedridden Ascher, for never once had I ever heard an ounce of such from the ever acquisitive Ascher, who even on Thanksgiving night could not summon the simple appreciation of the fact that he was not being beaten to death for his oldness or tortured to death for his oldness or hanged or electrocuted or defenestrated or gassed for his oldness. "Are you made a public spectacle of for your oldness, my good friend Ascher? Are you made to stand naked on Broadway in sleet and snow and rain, my good friend Ascher? Are acetylene torches used to burn out your eyes? Are pliers used on your fingernails? Do power drills make air holes in your head where none have been and do power saws liberate your limbs from your body? Do you so much as offer a word of thanks to your miserable God that you are spared such cruelties, my filthy and hoarding friend Ascher? No such thing, my stubborn friend Ascher, as eager in some way for the written word as you are for money. You are too busy reading about God to thank God

directly. Your God is on the next page and the next page and the next page. You do not go within because you have no within. Your *in* is a cylindrical vault, hundreds and thousands of them, one inside the other. They are your God-proof vault, my filthy friend Ascher. My father was worth a hundred times what you could ever be, and he was not even a Jew but an Armenian. Do you know about the Armenians, my filthy friend Ascher? Have vermin ever run past you? In an act of brazenness, have rodents ever raised up and stood dancing in your ridiculous presence? Have you seen them feasting on garbage at night and darting into their holes by day? Then you have seen the Armenians, my good friend Ascher. You have seen the Armenians in all their furtive glory. I know those Armenians, my good friend Ascher. I know many just like them, consigned to garbage cans and sewers and the walls of old buildings. Armenians do not like the light of day. They are creatures of the night, when the sun cannot punish them. Under the cloak of darkness do Armenians go about their business. For over a century have Armenians been afflicting the universe with their skulking presence. My father was an exception. My father was tall and proud. He had no need to skulk, but he did prefer the dark. It was his theater of operation. He entered the apartment in the dark, when all was still and worldly clamor had faded. He arrived with the *New York Times* under his arm so he could always be abreast of *late-breaking developments* as they affected the local, state, national, and international stage. It was important that things be kept under control at all times, as you will understand, Mr. Ascher. It was important that he keep his eye peeled for untoward developments. It was most important that he rule the home with his hand. You did not see his hand in the dark. He did not tell you it was there in the dark. But it was there, Mr. Ascher, it was there. My father came home and read his newspaper in the dark and drank coffee in the dark and

swept the floor in the dark. My father had no use for people except when they were in the dark. In the dark could my father lie down with people and touch people and kiss people and do the things that people do in the dark. Ascher, my father was the dark. He was dark on the inside, Ascher. No one was allowed to see his darkness. His darkness did not even exist for him. He walked with his darkness and he talked with his darkness and called it his own without so much as a conscious thought of his actions. All men who sit alone in the Horn and Hardart automat are sitting in the dark. That is particularly so when the automat is in proximity to Pennsylvania Station with the trains of power close at hand. My father loved the railroad stations of New York City. He could sit in the darkness of the tunnels for hours and hours with his much loved coffees. How he loved to drink coffee as the trains rushed past. How he loved to feel their power so it was his power. But the train's power was not my father's power. My father's power was his hand. All this I explained with patience and care to the bedridden Ascher. There was really no reason to discuss my father at all with Ascher. My father was not some treasure to which I needed to cling or some archeological treasure I needed to explore. What, after all, was to be found when I turned my thoughts to my father but the bones and skulls of deceased Armenians and the victims' muffled cry sounding through the ages from some dusty, trampled town that has been wiped clean of all trace of their existence? Who wants to hang out with the rats of the earth when he can be an American and in so doing forfeit the need for all history? Ascher of course understood this. He had sufficient fortitude that he lacked the need to make a personal drama of the misfortunes of his own people. Yes, six million had been killed, and many were there who had noised it about that they had been killed. Books had been written and plays produced and movies made and released so that

the thing was documented and alive in the consciousness of all but the most ardent anti-Semites. It had all been taken care of for Ascher. There was no need for Ascher to press on about the matter. The events had been spoken for and about. This Ascher said without saying a word. This Ascher said with the scientific bearing of his mind and the stoic nature of his character, for behind the asinine smile was a man of complete and self-reliant strength who had nothing but scorn for the weak and feeble. Just shut up and bear it, his manner and his bearing suggested. He all but said this to the physically challenged on the streets of Broadway. And if they didn't conform to his wishes, he all but willed them to be disposed of down manholes, wheelchairs and walkers and all, or crushed by the relentless Broadway buses. Ascher was not nice. His smile only fooled you into thinking he was nice. Even bedridden he was not nice. With his leg gone, the world had a chance to see how very nice the bedridden Ascher truly was. The architect Smathers Billingsley spoke next at the memorial service of the mercifully departed Ascher. Since first setting eyes on the architect Smathers Billingsley I have been afraid of him. The architect Smathers Billingsley elicits a deep dread in me whenever it is I happen to see him. The architect Smathers Billingsley is a powerful magnet drawing people to him. Everyone loves the architect Smathers Billingsley . Smathers Billingsley commands the attention of the sun and sky, the stars and moon. Smathers Billingsley commands the tides to speak in his favor and has become a marvel of his own understanding. No one can say anything in the presence of the architect Smathers Billingsley . All must fall down and weep before him. Lucinda Blakely becomes frantic in her lunar landscape at even the mention of the name Smathers Billingsley . When Smathers Billingsley sits in a restaurant, all other restaurants come to join him. When Smathers Billingsley walks down

Broadway, all the other avenues and remotest streets coalesce to join him. Dogs follow his every step and cease their barking ways. The moon falls in love and the sun burns in shame that he has eclipsed its brightness. The universe revolves around Smathers Billingsley and he remains buoyant upon the waters of the earth. Ascher knew how terrifying it could be for me to have to share a space with Smathers Billingsley. Ascher heard from me the humiliating spectacle of an entire room flocking to Smathers Billingsley only to leave me exposed in my aloneness. Ascher knew that in one year alone Smathers Billingsley was invited to 700 parties while I was invited to none. Ascher knew that Smathers Billingsley had an IQ off the charts while mine was only average. Ascher knew that Smathers Billingsley had a foot-long penis while... All this I told Ascher. The pain of the discrepancy between our lives was so great that I had no choice but to tell Ascher. What Ascher knew was that Smathers Billingsley had destroyed my marriage. Who else could I go to with the destruction of my marriage but to Ascher, who knew that Smathers Billingsley looked on me with incredulity whenever I told him that once upon a time I had had a marriage, too, not simply a marriage on paper but a marriage in which I actually lived with a woman, slept with a woman, talked with a woman, took car rides with a woman, spent weekends in the country with a woman, shared my dreams with a woman, bought garter belts and teddies for a woman, fought with a woman, directed verbal tirades at a woman, did all the things a man of my nature does with a woman. Ascher knew very well who this woman was and that she had a name and that I spoke of her with strong conviction while allowing him to say not a word against her lest he wished upon himself the punishment of death. Ascher knew that I had met this woman while in the last years of my marriage to Sarah Van Dine and that she

completed me in no way that any other woman had ever completed me. Ascher knew her name to be Celeste, as he knew her to come from a legendary publishing family of great culture and wealth. All this Ascher knew while also knowing the path of the marriage, by now old news to all but those who haven't heard it, and even to them it would be old news, given the fact that the world has moved on since the time that incest brought turmoil to my marriage, that is, since recovered memories of abuse brought turmoil to my marriage. The world has moved on from recovered memories. The world has no further need to hear about recovered memories and the appropriating stance a father takes with his daughter, visiting with her in the dark of night and making her all his in the dark of night. The world has heard all this before. How much can the world take of recovered memories? No, the world says, enough! The world no more wants to hear about recovered memories than one wants to wear an old pair of glasses. Nor does the world want to hear about the strength that this woman drew upon to pull her through these recovered memories. The world does not have to go to that place of recovered memories. The world refuses to be a victim of those with recovered memories. The world says get a grip to all those with recovered memories so we can move on to where the world would have us be. The world knows better than any of us how to get such a grip and to assign recovered memories to their proper place so moving on can be effected. Ascher knew about recovered memories. Ascher was very skillful in hearing about recovered memories. Ascher and the world worked in tandem to make me feel ashamed that I should ever contemplate discussing further the matter of recovered memories. Recovered memories are the faded pants in the back of your closet, the world says. Recovered memories is the wall calendar in your studio turned to August 1990, the world says. The

world is not patient with those who do not move on beyond the time of recovered memories. There are corroborating memos from all over the world that recovered memories are not the way to go. Even now is the world warning that the penalties will be severe for those who hang onto recovered memories. Ascher and Smathers Billingsley both knew about recovered memories but had moved on from recovered memories, having never been personally involved with recovered memories. They frankly had no time for recovered memories, as recovered memories can take up so much time. Celeste was the name of the woman involved with recovered memories. Celeste was the name of my wife. Celeste, as in, yes, *Celestial*. The truth is that Ascher hated my bond with Celeste. He hated that someone such as I could achieve union with a woman and harbored ill will toward me in regard to this marriage. Ascher wanted our marriage to founder on the rocks as his marriage had foundered. He wanted me to live separate and apart from Celeste as he lived separate and apart from the dreadful Velma. It was right there in his tone and in his face whenever I mentioned Celeste. *Live apart. Founder.* Never has a face expressed a will for these things to happen in my life more starkly than Ascher's face expressed these things. Never has a tone of voice so clearly told the truth about a person. Every day I reported to Ascher on my activities. In the interest of thoroughness, I told him of my adventures with Celeste. I told Ascher that Celeste and I coupled in the morning and the night and that sometimes, when I couldn't stand the sexual torment, that she made emergency trips to my workplace so coupling could take place in a spacious closet that we had designated for these noontime couplings. To ensure that my life was an open book to the hapless Ascher, I told him of the garments that Celeste wore and the provocative way in which she shed them. I told him of the sounds

she made and the words of encouragement she whispered in my ear with her hot breath. I told him what the sound of fire was exactly like, from the whoosh of flame and its incendiary height to the calm of smoldering ash. Of course, Ascher wanted to know and needed to know. Though he did not say so, Ascher could not get enough of every salacious detail, particularly of my workday trysts with my own wife. If it was ever to come down to a choice between salacious detail and a crushed spirit, Ascher always always opted for the former. Ascher could not help himself. His life was so barren, void of even the hint of interesting flesh and so overrun with his bloated coffers and his bloated ex-wife Velma, that he had no choice but to beg me for salacious detail, which of course he did with only the signals that Ascher could emit, low-frequency vibrations that only the most sensitive systems could hope to be attuned to. In sharing my life with Ascher, my appetite for sharing with Ascher grew. The mark of this progression was a departure from fact to fiction so monstrous tales of carnality became the norm. I told him of multiple couplings, simultaneous couplings, in which my wife took part. To tell the truth, I could not tell where the truth ended and the lie began. All I can safely say is that Ascher never refused my calls and always always stayed on the line. The crushing of a man's spirit must be the sole purpose of a man's life. A man can have no other purpose than to destroy his fellow man unto death. That is what it means to be oedipally driven Jebediah Wilkes, and that was, alas, what it meant to be oedipally driven me as well. But unlike the completely absurd and vicious Jeb Wilkes, who always drove with his lights off, I drove with my lights on, so to speak, so to speak. I shone those lights into the cowed, bewildered, demoralized face of Ascher and I cried, I cannot tell you how much I cried, that I had vanquished my father all over again. "I love you, Ascher. Don't die on

me. Don't ever die on me. Whatever it takes, you must allow me to go on killing you but if you ever so much as think of dying, then I will be driven to really kill you. Do you understand, my cretinous gelded Ascher, my eunuch Ascher, my Ascher who has a pizzle where he should have a pozzle?" And Ascher listened. He truly listened. That is one thing you can say about Ascher. Ascher had the ability to listen. He had perfected listening to a fine art. They don't make listeners like Ascher anymore. Nowadays, the world is full of talk, just filthy, absurd, incessant talk. And it could not be said to be his European heritage that made Ascher such a listener. When has a German ever had the ability to listen? A German has no ability at all except to triumph so it is you who will have to listen. The art of listening is one that few are blessed with, but Ascher was surely among those chosen, even if he practiced this gift indifferently and cruelly. Ascher, of course, even then was seeking to justify his life and make it more than it was. Though I had not yet met poor, pitiful Velma, there were frequent allusions on his part to this *supremely satisfying* relationship he was enjoying with his ex-wife. Of course she drank, Ascher said, and thus he could not live with her, Ascher at one point in his life having been inebriated, sozzled, blotto, stinko drunk on all the continents of the globe but now holding to the *path of sobriety*. "Alcohol glows in the dark. I cannot have it in my home," Ascher said, in defense of leaving sad-sack Velma. A liar must always invent the truth, I said to the shocked Ascher. I told Ascher he had left Velma not because his sobriety was imperiled but because she had too much bloat in her face and body and warned him never again to insult me with such a falsification of motive. But nothing could stop Ascher. Not even death has truly stopped Ascher. From somewhere in the universe he is still peddling his asinine falsehood about Velma and the sanctity of their

union even as she luxuriates in this inherited treasure he bequeathed to her. This unswerving commitment to illusion served Ascher well. It allowed Ascher to comfort himself that he had a life when in fact he lived in a preposterous void and solely in relationship to his money. All this I told Ascher, who in his stoic manner, offered no comment, Ascher's signature style never allowing him to rain down direct fire on those who stood up to him but in more cowardly fashion would he fire assassination bullets from all the fired-up chambers of his mind, bullets that struck morning, noon, and night and in all the months of the year. The relationship I had with Celeste was a relationship, I said to the deluded Ascher. Fucking was relationship, I said to Ascher. Tits and cunt and a glorious ass were relationship, I said to this Ascher. I told Ascher that we fucked to all hours of the night, so that we were both exhausted but strangely invigorated come the morning. I told him of the line we crossed over when I discovered a mild slap of her glorious glorious ass, an ass you were completely powerless over, excited her to no end so that she was asking for more, and how from there we went to whips and the sodomite kingdom of the dominator. All these things I told Ascher, applying the broad and vibrant strokes of my reality brush so he could have a picture of what it meant to have a life in hand. "Are you fucking your fatso ex-wife Velma? Are you boffing her big-time and all the time?" I asked the ludicrous Ascher. Always in such instances Ascher relied on silence as the most effective response, as if to say that such effrontery was not worth the expenditure of words while more revealingly not hanging up the phone. Sometimes I kept him on the line for hours with details of my love life and even took to the habit of having him listen in as we went at our bedroom coupling. Once again I have to report that Ascher was faithful to the mission I had assigned him, in line with the dutiful nature of his

German heritage. In the morning I had only to shout, "Wake up, you old fool," and Ascher would be startled awake, having fallen asleep somewhere during the night with the receiver still by his ear. The sole purpose of people in this human existence, I said to the sleep-befogged Ascher, is to torture each other sufficiently that we have no choice but to seek our God, *call him her it what you will*. These words I spoke to Ascher while having a morning go at my wife. "The human farce," I shouted to this same Ascher, "is simply this: if that English wit speaks of fox hunting as the unspeakable in full pursuit of the inedible, then romantic love must be the unspeakable in full pursuit of the unavailable. Die of your own laughter, my own filthy friend Ascher. Roll on the floor laughing until you have the heart attack that is your due." All this I said to Ascher, whether then or later I cannot recall, but once again flashing the generosity that marked all my communications with the stingy and withholding one. We receive only insofar as we give, and what I gave to Ascher clearly overwhelmed him into the speechlessness for which he became known. Progression being what it is, we sometimes dragged Ascher right into our very bedroom so we could carry on before his eyes. The thing is that he offered no resistance but was passive all the way. Ascher was a man blown about by the wind. He had only his beloved money in which to stay rooted. And of course Celeste had her money as well. And by a stroke of good fortune I was there to share in the money of that marriage, to have a second home by the money of that marriage and a car to drive by the money of that marriage and a SoHo loft to live in by the money of that marriage and European vacations by the money of that marriage. Every day I was aware of how much money I had and reported to Ascher on my good fortune. I had been a thief and a whore and even a ne'er do well and here I was rolling in the dough, I said to the ever-patient and

totally insane Ascher. I had even been a virulent if suppressed anti-Semite and here I was married to a Jew in Celeste, I said to the very Jewish if very German Ascher himself.

“Actually,” I said, “I hate everyone so I can avoid loving anyone,” I said to the listening Ascher. “There is no point to loving anyone. Everyone dies,” I said to the listening Ascher, thus giving myself reason to reverse course and profess my love for every soul who walked the earth precisely because they were perishable. “I will even love you provided you promise to die,” I said to the listening Ascher. “Can you promise me that?” I said to the listening Ascher, but he offered no response. Even so did I take the chance and try to love Ascher. “I am loving you, Ascher. I am loving you. I am seeing you as God’s perfect child,” I would say to the ever-listening Ascher, and yet never once did he thank me for my loving heart and generosity of spirit. The Aschers of the world are all alike. They take and take and never give. There was no point to my life with Celeste, no point whatsoever. I was happier than I had ever been, but that does not give life a point. That does not give life anything but this so-called happiness. No Armenian should ever be allowed to marry a Jew. Surely such a thing is written in the scriptures somewhere. Surely it is. No Armenian should be allowed to marry anyone. Armenians, like rats, should only be allowed out at night. Armenians have been sleeping for far too long to be allowed out in the day. The light would only burn their eyes. For nearly the last century have Armenians been asleep, and in virtual servitude for centuries before that. The world has long forgotten the Armenians. The Armenians never existed in the first place. My father understood this. “We do not exist. We do not exist,” he would suddenly exclaim. But my father did exist. He existed in the lobby of our building where he would suddenly appear. He existed on the city streets with the cigars he smoked when it was our

understanding that he never smoked. My father renounced Armenia. My father renounced himself. My father went where the still waters flowed. My father wore an overcoat. My father had hair. My father had a legendary hand of enormous proportions. My father walked alone. My father was alone in a crowd. My father was alone in bed. My father was alone at the dinner table and he was alone when he watched the faith healer Oral Roberts on the TV. My father said Oral Roberts was the greatest man who ever lived, even greater than Billy Graham. My father believed in the power of Oral Roberts. My father believed in the power of the written word. My father believed in Grand Central Station and Penn Station and the Port Authority Bus Terminal and the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. My father believed in the name Eisenhower and the name Nixon and the name Jesus and the name Republican *of thee I sing*. My father believed in Broadway. My father believed in the Automat. My father believed in coffee by the gallon and cherry cheese Danishes and Robert Hall suits (“when the prices go up up up and the values go down down down Robert Hall’s in season we’ll give you the reasons”). My father sat in the distances I could not reach. He walked in the distances I could not reach. He was always turning a corner away from me *and I was turning a corner away from him*. “Are you an Armenian? What is that to be an Armenian?” People said to me when I was a child. “I am an American. I am a Swedish American,” I said to them. I turned on my mother’s Swedish light. I made it grow bright within me. I banished all the darkness Armenia could ever bring. Ascher knew this. He knew this through the force of my repetitions, but at each telling he wiped the blackboard clean so not a trace of what I had said was left. I had nothing Ascher wanted to retain. I had nothing that he was even tempted to possess. He told me this with his silence over and over and yet I went back to

him. There was a smallness to my life with Celeste. I couldn't see it then. God laughs. God mocks. He is as variable as the substance of which we are made. He takes you from where you were and places you elsewhere. He eradicates whole kingdoms as if they never so much as existed. He took me away from Celeste and the SoHo loft and the country house and the cars I had been allowed to drive in the time that I had been with her. From all of that he took me away. Ascher knew of the profound alteration in my purpose and made it clear none of it impacted on him whatsoever, as Ascher took no responsibility for the memory of my father. That was for me to do, he made clear. He didn't want to know that my father worked at Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, that he came home late at night when everyone was asleep with his pockets full of matches from the restaurant. He didn't want to know that my father was temperamental and quit many jobs but that his bosses always took him back because they felt he was *a good man*. He didn't want to know that my father cried in my mother's arms or that she was his refuge from the storm or that everywhere my father walked he walked with his uprooted roots dangling. He didn't want to know that my father had not reached the corner down the block from where we lived before he had struck my brother Luke for being loud. He didn't want to know the torture it was to be in the presence of my father or how my mother said my father had a fine mind but absolutely no ambition. "The Jews have ambition. Lord, do they have ambition. Look what they have done. Look," my mother said, and what was there but to look at what the Jews had done, the Jews who were our doctors and our teachers and our dentists and our accountants and even our God insofar as Jesus was a Jew. "Do you want to know who owns New York?" my mother said. "The Jews own New York. See the quiet in the streets on a Jewish holiday. See the quiet in the

air. The air is completely quiet on a Jewish holiday,” my mother said. None of this did Ascher want to know, Ascher having a supreme detachment from the concerns of this world. My father’s insulin needle sitting in the sterilizer in the bathroom; his little shelf of religious literature from A. A. Allen and Oral Roberts and Morris Cerullo and all the other Bible thumpers for the Christ Jesus; his huge Armenian nose; his “don’t make me get up; I just don’t know what I might do” threat; his protracted absences that disturbed my mother no end; the skimpy bikini bottom my brother Luke reported him to wear in the steam bath at Coney Island; the way my mother kept him separate from us for fear of his violence; his outburst that in the old country a sister of mine “would be stoned to death” for threatening to sic the police on her father—all of this gone in and out of Ascher’s hairy ear so he could focus on the accumulation of *l’argent* in his coffers. And yet if anyone was to know about Celeste and me, who could deserve to know more than feeble Ascher, who had been through so much with the vaunted but truly reeking Velma? I had reasoned correctly that it would take a man of certain complexity to understand what it was to go through the things Celeste and I had gone through. There is no point to talking about relationship with people who have never been in relationship and such people number in the millions. The island of Manhattan is truly the worst. On this particular island there are no more than several left alive who have experienced this thing called relationship. “A true relationship requires mutual sharing of the honest kind,” I said to the benighted Ascher. “You have never entered into that kind of relationship with me,” I said to the withholding Ascher. “Nor did you ever enter into that kind of relationship with the grotesque Velma,” I said to Ascher. “People who have even approximated the level of relationship to which I refer are precious few, and for now you will simply have to do.

Consider yourself fortunate that I am in your life at all,” I said to the fading Ascher. “All you are good for is tottering around up and down Broadway. That is all you have ever been good for. You should die instantly,” I said to the impassive Ascher. “How many trucks and buses and cars there are in New York City? Thousands and thousands of them,” I said, to the ceaselessly distracted Ascher in pointing out that not one had taken it upon itself to run over Ascher, to flatten Ascher, to end his pointless wandering on this earth. What could I do but seize upon such a stay of elimination to tell Ascher a simple truth, which was that I inwardly considered myself his superior because I could cohabit with a woman and he could not? At the same time I let Ascher know that I had not singled him out alone for a place beneath me but most of Manhattan as well. “People are only pretending to want relationships. They are merely responding to ads and movies that they see,” I said to the eternally silent Ascher. “Virtually the entire island sits in the dark alone eating popcorn and watching TV,” I went on to the long-suffering Ascher. “It is only a matter of time before a well-placed bomb wipes out the entire island so the world can forget about us in the way that you have forgotten about me,” I said to the filthy Konrad Ascher. “Because the world ultimately has no more interest in New York City than you have in me,” I said to the increasingly filthy Konrad Ascher. “New York City has willed itself not to be forgotten but it will be forgotten,” I said to the now dozing Konrad Ascher. “Nothing can stand in the way of such forgetting. Forgetting is the recourse of every human being. It is an inalienable right. I never wanted anyone to forget me,” I said to Ascher. “The whole point of my life was never to be forgotten,” I said to Ascher. From early childhood on I was desperate to ensure that I was not forgotten. My mother was the beginning of not forgetting that ended in complete forgetting-ness. Every

last thing I did not to be forgotten by my mother I told to Konrad Ascher, and yet not on threat of extermination would he tell you that I climbed to the top of street lamps for my mother or jumped off roofs for my mother or took baths in my own blood for my mother or that I set my hair on fire for my mother. The only thing that existed for Ascher beyond his money was the silence in which he luxuriated. I am a Buddhist who seeks to be remembered. Desperation has driven me to Buddhism, I said to Ascher. I would kill myself without Buddhism, I said to Ascher. Buddhism has taught me that it is OK to find human beings such as Ascher repulsive in the extreme, I said to Ascher. “Ascher, your profound ugliness is a primary cause of my spiritual development,” I said to Ascher. “There is nothing to do but flee into the arms of God at the sight of such ugliness,” I said to Ascher. From an early age the body grows progressively more ugly, I explained to Ascher. That is why the old must be perished from the earth, I said to Ascher. The sight of them is simply too disturbing, though it is never so simple. Now are there women approaching middle age with nose hair and green teeth and hair as dull as a worn carpet. Now do they come with their thickening hips and their skin gone slack and the sheen of their years upon them. Younger and younger are those who incite this revulsion in me, I said to Ascher. We must all be grateful to the Buddha for expressing his horror at the sight of sleeping courtesans in his father’s palace—courtesans passed out with their faces slathered in drool and with their teeth set to continual gnashing and their faces agonized masks of distortion. The Buddha had no choice but to find a way out and now we, increasingly, have a need to find a way out. What else can the advent of AIDS be but the necessity to find a way out? Even as we pretend to be connecting we are not connecting, I said to Ascher. The computer and the cell phone are means of disconnection, I said to

Ascher. We offer lip service to connection, while the only thing that truly calls to us is our popcorn and our TV on which we watch the movies that are now old, I said to Ascher. We are finding ways to stay away from each other's bodies even as we say we want each other's bodies, I said to Ascher. Popcorn and old movies are saving more lives than all the medical institutions in the country combined, I said to Ascher. Once you are alone you get a reputation for being alone. You develop the odor of aloneness. This man smells like a man alone, people begin to say. You give off the vibration of aloneness as well. The word *alone* becomes attached to your very being. Ascher knew this but allowed me to come to this understanding all on my own. There was a woman in the lobby of my building. I would revile her to Ascher, as I reviled Ascher to everyone who would stand for it. "She is old. At her preposterous age she is a coquette," I said to Ascher. "She stands in my path as I am trying to make forward progress through the lobby and out into the world," I said to Ascher. "She stalls me, just as my mother was forever stalling me. Is it right—can it ever be right—that the old of the world dare to stall such as I when there is a world to rush out into? All my life I have been rushing out into the world past the old women who would stall me. I have had to severely upbraid and discipline and *punish* the stalling women who have forever been in my path to the world that waits and waits and waits upon me." Ascher heard the words I spoke. He heard every last word of them. And yet nothing I said stopped the coquette. Bristling with impatience did not stop the coquette. Fake left, go right did not stop the coquette. Pointing upward at the ceiling to distract her while I slipped away did not stop the coquette. Running back up the stairs did nothing to stop the coquette. The coquette had no memory by which my evasions could work on her to abandon her stalling ways. "I am here for the long run," the coquette said

to me. Seizing my wrists, the coquette said “I have no place to go,” her face now filled with anger. *I have no place to go*, the coquette said, for the truth of what she said had struck me only the moment before she spoke the truth only an aging coquette can speak, in that instant flashing the depth that the coquette will too often pretend not to possess. This too I shared in minute detail with the completely useless Ascher. “In that moment my heart broke open,” I said to the preposterous Ascher, though in fact I amended the statement to say that once again my heart had broken open, that in truth my heart had been breaking open for my entire life, if only in the incremental way that it could. I offered Ascher the profound truth that all my life lobbies and the women who frequent them have had a hold on me, that it was only yesterday that Naomi, a sister of mine dead for many years, stood in the lobby of the building where my family lived making a spectacle of herself. Naomi was singing, or more accurately, she was trying to sing. Already my sister, only barely in her twenties, had been reduced, as life reduces everyone, only with her it was so much faster. It was Thorazine fast and Dexedrine fast and all the pharmaceuticals the doctors could muster fast for her avid consumption. My sister Naomi made the mistake, the fatal mistake, of thinking she was more interesting than she was. The psychiatrists she saw said exactly that to her. “Naomi,” they said, “you are far more interesting than you think you are,” each and every one of them said to her. It is easy and completely dangerous for people to think they are more interesting than they are. In that way they put themselves outside and above the processes that others are obliged to go through. “I am far too interesting for that,” they say, the exact words my sister Naomi offered when it was suggested she might consider actually studying music and taking voice lessons if she truly wanted to become a singer. But my sister Naomi had

seen Judy Garland on the TV and on the movie screen in the full flower of her singing voice, the words soaring from a mouth and throat designed for singing, and Naomi said, “I can sing like Judy Garland and I can get myself to look like Judy Garland. I can do the one and I can do the other,” my sister Naomi said, and so all the things she knew Judy Garland to do--Judy Garland who had a name that belonged to America as my sister Naomi had a name that belonged only to oblivion—my sister Naomi sought to do. My sister Naomi sang the songs Judy Garland sang. She sang them on Broadway and she sang them on the window ledges from which she threatened to leap and she sang them in the lobby of our building. My sister Naomi sang without knowing the lyrics, as they were not an obstacle to the kind of singing my sister Naomi did. Even sound itself was not a criterion. My sister Naomi was singing if she said she was singing. She had only to mouth the words for you to know she was singing. And of course she would be medicated on those pills of hers when she was singing, and drunk when she was singing, and it was in the course of one of these singing bouts in the lobby of our building that I took a stand. I was at an age when such a stand had to be taken because nowhere was there anyone else taking a stand. My mother wasn't taking a stand. My father wasn't taking a stand. None of my other siblings so much as took a stand. So what was it for me, at the age of eight to do but take my own stand to restore decency and civility where none was present. Ascher knew to the last detail the stand I took right there in the lobby. Many times he has heard me recall my warnings to my sister Naomi to leave that lobby immediately and to leave the building as well so I could have a childhood free of her drugs and her drinking and her singing. Ascher knew of my lifelong battle to maintain order and civility and the terrain of the hypocrite I increasingly entered into as my life reached the dissolute

proportions of my now dead sister Naomi. Ascher knew that as my life progressed my understanding of lobbies and the simple meaning they had to people grew and grew. Ascher knew, if only to forget, that it struck me one day in regard to the coquette—struck me a blow that had all the epiphany bells ringing—*that the coquette was not in the lobby to stall me please quit stalling me I beg you to stop stalling me but because she was lonely and had no place else to go*. He knew that my heart opened to the coquette in that moment as it opened after the fact to my dead sister Naomi and her performances in a lobby from my very long time ago because Naomi had no place else to go either. Ascher knew what it was to have an Armenian father who had vacated his own mind. He knew what it was to have a mother who was a savior to the world because she had not been able to save her father. He knew what it was to have sisters who jumped off bridges and sisters who died in single-room occupancy hotels. He knew all of that and forgot all of that as soon as he knew it so he could go back to the things on which his mind needed to more truly dwell. And of course he knew the odor of aloneness, the unbelievable stench of aloneness, that began to attach to me so that people on entire city blocks vacated the premises when I arrived so as to drive me more deeply into this aloneness. He knew that my whole family had the gift of aloneness and that it was the only gift we ever ever had, the gift of no one ever wanting to be near us, no one ever inviting us to parties or to dinner or to any of the things that supposedly make life worthwhile. Ascher knew what the Albanian doorman who *had spent his formative years in servitude* breaking the rocks of Albania into smaller and smaller pieces and dining weekly on rock soup and having his cavities filled with rock and his ears filled with rock also knew, this strange and intrusive Albanian who spent his work days in the company of the coquette. The Albanian

doorman knew, as Ascher knew, the moment in time when the first inkling of aloneness starts, when suddenly you are aware of the hundreds and thousands upon thousands of old stashed away in their apartments and rooms and the young—those infected with the virulence of youngness—offer you their seat on the subway or you begin to ponder the term *senior citizen*. Ascher, in collaboration with the Albanian doorman, knew all of this. Together they knew what it meant to have a phone that rings progressively less and less until it never rings. My neighbors knew as well, of course. They had noses that picked up the smell of entrenched aloneness so that wives could say to their husbands “He is alone” or at some point no longer found it necessary to communicate this fact with words when only a glance of understanding would suffice. And of course there was complacency and self-satisfaction in these looks they gave each other, as if my aloneness was not a reproach to them for their ongoing matrimonial state but a validation of the union they had effected. “He shuts the door on himself alone. He eats his dinner alone. He lies down on his mattress with alone. With increasingly filthy videos hidden in his underwear drawer does he make love alone. He walks the streets of Broadway alone and rides this elevator up and down all alone. It is years now since he has had a woman to his apartment, so deeply has the stamp of aloneness been applied to him.” There was a time when these women who have their husbands among them would say to me that they had among their *circle of friends* women who had been deprived by circumstances that do not bear mentioning of the husbands that they themselves had had among them and that these women without husbands among them had a lack that could not be denied and that was calling out for remedy, and would I oblige by stepping forward as a candidate to replace one of the husbands who was no longer among them so they too could have a husband

among them? Because what woman wanted to find herself in a circle of women who all had their husbands among them when she herself did not have a husband with whom to be among such women? And so it was that the women who had husbands among them would approach me on behalf of those women who did not have husbands among them. Ascher knew of the approaches of these women. He knew my cooperative if reluctant nature and of the *dates* I went on with these women whose husbands were no longer among them. He knew, because I was very clear and detailed on the matter, of the presentation that I made to these women and how I discarded their questions about my assets—*I have no assets. My asset is the wind, which I find so very friendly*—in favor of a talk on dying and how necessary it is to die and die and die so we can ultimately live. Ascher knew how one date never led to a second date, as he knew that over time these women who had the husbands among them also stopped seeing me insofar as my marital prospects were concerned, which meant they stopped seeing me altogether. Women have every right not to see a man among them who is not marriageable. And so Ascher was aware of this increasing invisibility. He was in touch with the Albanian doorman Enver and from afar saw me in my apartment on a Saturday night washing dishes as I listened to the breathy voice of Garrison Keillor who, through the constancy of his vision, had managed to extend his Saturday night radio tyranny into multiple decades. It is not right that I should be listening to Garrison Keillor, I thought, knowing that Ascher was there to hear my thought even as the thought occurred. A whole world out there, and all I can do is listen to Garrison Keillor, I thought. Because by this time in my life the Albanian doorman was seeing a lot of me on a Saturday night with my bags of groceries and the gallon bottle of water I carried separately. Ascher saw what it was for me to turn fifty and

begin the routine of going to bed early so I could awake early and have some time before work to set aside for meditation. By this time I needed an hour each morning for this meditation as a way of conditioning myself to live so I could be in contact with the God of my understanding as He manifested within me. And there was a peculiar intensity that marked my days and made me cross swords with people at work and live an octave above my range in the energy I was bringing. And on the pages I set aside for filling I began to write a prose that flew off the tracks and yet just kept going as if there were no tracks at all on which to keep this prose that sought to reach within itself for the thing it was trying to say, and maybe there was nothing to say but to say it anyway as the words had come to be, as some poet said, a means of existence, the words themselves keeping me alive so I could say the thing I needed to say without knowing how to say it. An ecstatic prose rushed onto the page, the words dancing in the spaces allotted to them, every day five hundred of these words would come and accumulate as my days would accumulate and the months and the years and yes, I thought I was doing something extraordinary, doing something that had never been done before, in writing a fifteen hundred page novel that had flown off the tracks while staying on the tracks and written it at a pitch that could be called sustained intensity or enduring intensity or intensity that would not or could not flag. Ascher felt no need to ask me what the novel was about. As far as he was concerned, the novel was about nothing, as everything I did was really about nothing. As far as Ascher was concerned, I was writing on air with the tip of my wet finger, and possibly he was right, though I would have told you over the course of the four years I invested in the novel that I had found the writers' express lane that was zooming me past all the stalled traffic in the direction of profound truth. Is it real? I would say. Is it a dream? Have I

entered the territory of the truly delusional? But the truth was that I would pick up individual pages or sections of the novel and be amazed. It was writing such as I had never seen before—endless sentences leading to other endless sentences and driven by a relentless intensity. It was a novel that laughed at pain and suffering even as it described it, a novel that showed the narrator to be somewhat beyond the pale as he chronicled his college life dominated by an obsessive relationship with a girl *from the other side of the tracks*, a girl whose culture and wealth drew him to her, a girl who fled to Boston to attend art school and gain some distance from him but from whom he could not stay away. It was about terrible love, the love that binds and blisters and does not give a person a moment to himself for fear that she has or will go off with someone else even as he goes off with *someone else* in anticipation of the possibility that herself will go off with someone else. It was about crossing the line into physical abuse and becoming repellent in his own eyes and how she fell more and more in love with her genius boyfriend at the art school they both attended and was driven to say that the narrator had nothing but nothing that she wanted, that she had plumbed his depths and found him lacking in the essentials—intelligence, common sense, a general level of manliness—that a young woman requires to feel proud of her companion. For my fiftieth birthday I did nothing. I got up early. I prayed. I meditated. The inner transformation that always occurs when I do those things occurred on that day as well. God hadn't abandoned me because I had turned fifty. He hadn't said I was out to pasture. "Ascher, I am fifty. I am fifty," I shouted into his answering machine on a day he chose to be completely incommunicado. "Turning fifty will order your priorities," I said into the phone to the unavailable Ascher on that day. It was turning fifty that required me to adopt an old man's routine of early to

bed, early to rise, I told Ascher, though I would never totter up and down Broadway as Ascher had, I told Ascher. I had seen my father tottering up and down Broadway when I was young, I told Ascher. I had seen him with a cane and with a walker. And I had seen him with the wheelchair he slipped into so easily, I said to the answering machine of incommunicado Ascher. "My father embraced the wheelchair," I told incommunicado Ascher. "My father embraced the amputation of his limbs," I told incommunicado Ascher. "My father did not want to be here anymore," I told incommunicado Ascher. "My father was a tired man," I told incommunicado Ascher. "He had found his refuge in the arms of my mother," I told incommunicado Ascher. "He had stunned himself with the depth of his love for my mother," I told and told and told incommunicado Ascher. "My mother was my father's awakening into the life of the spirit. My mother was my father's rock. My mother was his salvation. My mother had swam the cold waters of the Atlantic to arrive here on the shores of America from the farm in Sweden where her father had died of the drink so my father could be in her arms. My father came to this country with rocks in his head and rocks in his heart. My father had no heart. My father had no head. He had only the instability of his own mind with which to witness the world and the severity of his temperament with which to deal with it. My father..." and there the indifference of incommunicado Ascher caused me to momentarily stop. The world is a wall of indifference, I said to incommunicado Ascher. The world knows how to silence those such as me. It has been silencing us down through the ages until we are once again able to speak up, thus requiring the next silencing to come our way. The world has always known what we now know, that silence is silencing and has always been silencing. The mute are only those who have experienced silencing through the ages. They have come

back with the power of silence in their eyes. The silencing have always known how to effect their silencing ways. They have known to go to the high place where you must call and await their response. They have known to make you think about them and how they are thinking about you. The silencing are formidable in the powers they have assigned to themselves. The agent to whom I delivered my novel was a silencer. For days and weeks and months I lived in the ecstasy of her imagined response, and when it didn't come, my expectation only increased that the affirming answer soon to arrive would shed me of the mantle of the silence that failure had imposed upon me so I would be able to speak not from the place of silence but from pride in all I had done. "I have written a novel. I have delivered it to an agent," I said to the enduringly silent Ascher, the same words I spoke to the wind and the walls of my apartment, the same words I offered with my last breath of consciousness before falling off to sleep. "All life is a falling off into sleep," I said to the silent Ascher. "It is the place we search for to lie down and sleep," I also said to the silent Ascher. Ascher was there for me when the silencing agent came forth from her silence to silence me. He was there to embrace me with his silence when I said that the agent had said no and nothing more than no and that the no that broke her silence was in the shape of a bullet that hit its intended target. A person has much dying to do. It's nothing more complicated than that. My life has been one giant effort to remove the obscurity in which I live even as I do what is possible to secure it, I said to the silent Ascher. A person with my last name has to live in obscurity, I said to the filthy, filthy Ascher. A person with my name has permanent outsider status. He is not taken seriously. It is less than nothing to be an Armenian. Everyone who is anyone knows this. You are forgotten as soon as you are seen if you are an Armenian. You cannot be Armenian and say your name with a straight

face. You crumple. You are destroyed. America is ruled by people with shaved names. Always has it been this way, and always will it remain. I tied myself to a man I said I didn't want when I kept my last name, I told Ascher. I secured him to me as a ball and chain so I would be held back, I told the silent Ascher. People lie out of every facet of their filthy faces when they deny the shame of a last name such as mine, with jarring consonants sticking spikily out of it. It is easy for Jethro Morrison and Abner Sumner and Carruthers Gault and Mercedes Springbrook and Pegler Gantly and Thruston Marmaduke and Kingsley Biddingsly and Celwina Duckworth and Fiona Fidely and Bruce George and Bruce Bruce and Lennon Cannon and Ashley Skippering to say I am not bleeding and to pooh pooh my concerns, but the fact remains my first boss told me to change my name, I said to the silent Ascher. My first boss wouldn't insist, he said, but he was strongly in favor of such a change. "Your name will hold you back," he said. "It weighs too much. It is well over one hundred pounds and reeks of forgotten history. All a person sees is burnt villages and flattened people when you say your name. It is jam-packed with consonants that are enough to break a person's teeth. Those consonants have no give in them. You must free yourself. You must adopt a persona. You must learn how to glide in the currents of America. You must stop holding on and let go absolutely," my first boss said to me. I told Ascher how it was that I consented, given the fact that my boss was my boss and a man of power who had himself effected the change he was promoting so he could leave behind his Russian Jewish origins for the name "Brick," as in "Bob Brick." "How easy things became for me with my new identity," Bob Brick said to me. "How easy they will become for you. Now go forth throughout the company and spread the good word as to how I have unencumbered you. *Go forth. Do it now. Share*

with them this miracle that has taken place,” Bob Brick said. And so I called to all those who had the names that were not names, the names they had picked out of the air or inherited through their own pedigree. I went to those with the one-syllable names and two-syllable names and the ones with the consonants kept under control so the images of burnt villages and flattened people and rodents and hair and more hair would not be summoned into their midst. I called to them throughout the office where they were busy about the accrual of their own success, informing Maude Mayberry and Irene Iris and Judith Jeter and Simone Natalia and Penelope Glazier and Simeon Dreckler and Avis Gault and Lemoyne Carducci and Balthazar Glenfoch and Abigail Peachum and Strangewaters Lewicki and Cadmium Glone and Midnight Hollow and Buckley Bucknell and Travis Slick and Corliss Abernathy and Sobriety Chatter and Swirly Waters *re* the immediate extinction of one name, with its dark, hirsute nature, for the Swedish blondness and fairness of my mother’s maiden name. I told them that it had been a dream of mine since childhood to visit Stockholm and to be standing on a cold Sunday night under a clear sky and now that I had a job it was closer to becoming a reality. These things they heard me say, having come forward, singly and in pairs, from their busy days to inquire as to the true meaning of this proclamation of my new identity. Ascher knew it was hard for me to stand my ground. Ascher knew my drinking was entering an even more serious phase in this period, that at age twenty-eight I was stopping off after work at the liquor supermarket on Astor Place to buy big bottles of Rhinee wine or May wine or whatever wine was on sale, which I would take home and drink throughout the evening and into the night until I passed out. He knew the level of hysteria that gripped me and how frightening it was to emerge into the mainstream work world after ruining a family

business by slyly appropriating income from it for my own use, money that was now fast running out. He knew what it was to want to pour myself between the covers of a book as a way of redeeming myself for the life I had led. All the events preceding my employment with the publishing company Ascher was aware of, including that the daily use of speed and enormous quantities of alcohol had caused me to lose my mind and required a doctor's care and heavy medications to keep me from being institutionalized. I told Ascher about the law school acceptance that I had struggled to gain and of the bus trip from the Port Authority bus terminal in New York City to Newark, New Jersey, where I was to begin my course of study at the law school in the fall of 1971. He knew in detail how a feeling of joy dispelled the dread of beginning this new chapter of my life and I suddenly saw myself in a new light, not as a thief stealing money out of the renting office of the building my mother managed but as a budding lawyer of whom my mother and my girlfriend could be proud. Ascher also knew the phobic condition that came over me while standing across the street from the law school building. Ascher knew I felt unfit to join those other students. He knew that in some way I also felt better than them by virtue of a calling to put words on paper and be away from the grueling affairs of the world. He knew the path I took: the loft where I lived with my girlfriend; the bars and whoring and trying to write; my arrival at the publishing company as a lowly temp, where I had no choice but to stay if I did not wish to return to the loneliness of cab driving, as I had been doing for the six months preceding; the baggage of a father who would return me to the Armenians, whom the world had shunned as he himself had shunned them. Ascher knew that no one respectable ever spoke about the Armenians, no one had any reason to speak about a people so eradicated, so solved in terms of their living problem

that they no longer existed except as an overwhelming and final blackness that required no comment whatsoever. Ascher, being a Jew as well as a German, knew the techniques of pulverization. He knew when it was a people had won and a people had lost, and there could be no question but that the Armenians had completely lost and that there existed a quota of how many times one could even say the word *Armenian* without being severely punished. These things Ascher knew and took complete delight in. It will always be a matter of extreme satisfaction when one's brother is exterminated by a ruthless father and you, the other brother, are spared. That you are spared is proof positive of your own worth and the corresponding iniquity of your perished brother, *who has only gotten everything that he so richly deserved*. Ascher could ignore me because history had ignored me and because *I had ignored me*. Turn the page, the world said. Move on, the world, said. *Forget about the things that never existed in the first place*, the world said. And so Bob Brick, brilliant Bob Brick, esteemable Bob Brick, high adaptability Bob Brick, also knew, for Bob Brick had vanquished not only his Russian last name but his Russian first name as well so he could shed the weight of the past and live in the lightness of his new being, for a party was going on and it was an American party and if it howled with its own loneliness you could not hear it amid the sparkling white teeth and the overwhelming cleavage and the long thin legs and the packages radiant with color, for to be at such a banquet that was the relinquishment of deprivation and not to fully partake with your teeth sunk deeply in the savored flesh was not to be participatory in the democracy where you had found yourself but to live in the false and insane rapture of your compulsion toward denial of *all that life affirmed* and to prove that you were in bed with death even in life and had always chosen

the former to be your lover. To hold onto an Old World name was to ride sleepily in the carriage of death along dirt roads through forests primeval in the land of the oppressive patriarch when what America was calling you to do was *swing, baby, swing*, and Bob Brick was swinging swinging in the American way that Americans swing with no mind to his septuagenarian status. Bob Brick was making war in the American way on his own age, attacking it with facelifts and tucks and powders and creams and the priceless *eau de jeunesse* he imported from secret spas. Bob Brick wore pink suspenders and red shoes. He came to work with his hair on fire. He spoke only to the young. He would not purge his being of the more than plenty that he needed. To the last detail did Ascher understand this about Bob Brick, who signed up androgynous poets and fur-clad ladies with the writing bug. He assaulted my senses with the names he put under contract. They came into the office and did fire dances to keep him young, existing behind closed doors with them for days as well as hours. They gave from their youth so he too could be young and the deal was satisfying to all parties concerned. And if once or twice they scorched me —“What’s the matter? Can’t find a better job?”—what was one to say, for they were in life in the driving way that they played and I was apart from life in accord with the way that I looked. With no other motive than to make me more presentable did Bob Brick instruct me to present my new identity. From all corners of the floor did the men and women of the org come to be assured that the note I had circulated saying I would be relinquishing the name I had been given for the name I had assumed in collaboration with the eternally young and color-splashed septuagenarian Bob Brick was completely facetious. Ascher understood that these were the faces of the truly young and the truly engaged who had a lock-step plan for their own growth, the people with whom I was

supposed to be contemporary but with whom I was not contemporary in terms of the drive they had and the drive that I myself possessed. And because I had truly not anticipated their presence, I did not know what to say, and was pushed back into that place of shame and confusion but also anger, because the answer I had to give them was to say that no, it was not a joke but the process of simplification that circumstance called for. And when they voiced indignation that the septuagenarian Bob Brick had gone against my heritage with what they called his colossal arrogance, I was left speechless and could only plead with them inwardly to go away and stop making a problem where there was none and to stop seeing what it hadn't even occurred to me to see, that the septuagenarian Bob Brick had crossed a line into territory that was personal and sensitive, even if he was drawing on his experience in shaving his own Russian patronymic. "You are better than me. You must go away now before I get very angry," I said to all of them. And they answered back, "Why would you be angry at us? Why are you not angry at the septuagenarian Bob Brick? Did you stand up to the ancient one, however he might present himself? Did you answer him with words that had concrete in them or did you show him a marshmallow-soft fiber that he could squash underfoot? Tell us please if this situation is of his making or yours? Because if it is his, if it is the full responsibility of the septuagenarian Bob Brick and you have been compelled to undergo this name change under duress, then we will be your constant ally and go against him with the words you would have us speak and with words of our own choosing as well." But of course I could not tell them that the septuagenarian Bob Brick had forced the decision on me. I could not tell them that he broke my spirit with the heavy hand of the patriarch they saw him as. I could only give them the words I was capable of speaking as the truth that had been

given me: “All my life I have been a betrayer of my father. All my life have I fled from his unexplored wealth. All my life have I flown the flag of Sweden, where my mother was born, so I could be wrapped in the comfort of its blue and yellow, and shun the exterminated vermin of Armenia. Is it not sufficient for me that I now try to be fully American so I can have the advantage of sleekness that you yourselves have taken? Must you push me into smoldering ruins and the land of axes in the heads and swords in the bellies of pregnant women? Must you make me hang where I do not choose to go?” And of course they were answering back, as they were always answering back, and in a language stronger than my own in which to do their answering back. “A heritage is a heritage and you should claim it for your own, not shun it as the vile thing it is not. You must cherish your own as we cherish our own. And do not dare to tell us that we have shaved our names as a tactic for the amelioration of our baggage, as you call it. To be an American is to fly upward into the jet stream and not to linger and to loiter in the valley of sorrows of your own making. To be an American is to move forward into the territory of the John Jones’s and Bruce Abbotts and Ebenezer Snouts even as we hold onto the versions of history that have come to us. You are troubled and sick and not one of us, and we revile you for the negation complex from which you operate,” they said in unison. There was no reconciling with their truth. There was only the asylum I sought in my own work even as I became the company laughingstock. All this I told Ascher, who merely yawned as a sated hippo might yawn. For the truth was that the morsels of experience I fed the filthy Ascher were all that kept him alive beyond his consummate greed. I told him of the editorial assistant Erika Reinhart who jumped rope on the company floor and the sign I hung on her office door that a perfect butt such as hers was all I needed to make

my life complete and that this compelling feature of the anatomy was lacking in my marriage partner and would she someday soon fall on the floor and simply *do it* with me behind closed doors? I told him of the delirium that led me to believe, after two days of heavy drinking, that she was on the phone and virtually licking my ear with her tongue and inviting me over, and how I responded by running half-naked through the streets of Manhattan to the address I had scribbled in a drunken fog of ecstasy that alluring Erika wanted me and a half-hour later be knocking on the woman's ground floor door not far from Grand Central Station. He knew what it was for a woman well into middle age with a gold front tooth to open the door and say, "I am your Erika" and how I reeled away from the red-lit parlor into which she invited me. "Have you ever had a thing about trains?" I said to Ascher in this period. "Have you ever imagined yourself writing the great American novel while riding on a flatbed car on a long freight across the plains of Kansas? Have you ever imagined striking out on a hobo existence without doing it?" I told Ascher of other notions like sitting in a room with a bare light bulb in a rundown hotel and eating ravioli out of a can but that, in spite of the increasing desperation with which I drank and the frequency of blackouts, a stupendous thing happened—I fell in love with Celeste. I told him of the marriage trap I had fallen into with Sarah, marriage being my solution to the problems we were having, and how, one evening, I found Celeste's phone number written in pencil on the wall of my little studio and that the number had been there for a couple of years without my even noticing it. Ascher knew that I had met Celeste through a mutual friend and had taken her number but not dared to call her not simply because she was married but because she was out of my league and that now, I did call her and she proposed that I come over. I told Ascher how I had never

been a man of power but how, in the embrace of Celeste, I became that man of power and how that status was given to me on our first evening together when she read the story I had offered to her, the same story I had been writing for the previous five years or so about the Bible camp of my childhood and the girls with full lips with whom I frolicked in the meadow when we no longer could heed the call of the pastor to come to the altar and be washed in the blood of the lamb so we could be rendered white as snow. My whole childhood had been about the blood of the lamb, I told Ascher. My whole childhood was about the disappearing words of the pastors who slapped their Bibles even as they spoke. My whole childhood had been about the Christ Jesus, I told Ascher, in telling him of Celeste, radiant in the high purpose that went with her intelligence, that is, to create an art that could not die but only become a living monument for posterity. I told Ascher that eternity dwelt in the year 1978 even as forces were being marshaled to vanish me from the earth as I had been living in it. I told him it was not the blue moon in August or Bucky Dent in October but alcohol itself that was forcing on me the deeper mysteries of life. I told him what it was to drink with Celeste and smoke dope with Celeste and experience passion with this woman I had not known in this way before and could only have dreamed of knowing in this way before. I told him of the party in the western reaches of Greenwich Village that I went to with Sarah, knowing Celeste would be present, and of the drinks I stopped off at the White Horse Tavern to have beforehand, and how those drinks opened the door to more drinks at the party, where I talked a strange and propositioning language to an attractive woman, something about she and I should sneak away up to the roof, where with only the moon as witness we could remove our duds, and how this communicated desire had the effect of causing her to shun me

with all the disapproval her face could register. I told him of a man named Satyr, his red hair on fire, in proximity to Celeste. Countless were the times I told Ascher this story, as if to race my train down this well-traveled track could yield me a new track when all it did was commit me to old pain and joy commingled and structure me in the quicksand of a vanished time. There are any number of songs that can be sung about a maiden fair. Desperate to keep Celeste from being swept away by Satyr's lewd power, I bolted from the party with both her and Sarah. My last memory was of skipping down a narrow sidewalk in the dark holding both their hands. When I returned to consciousness it was morning and I was lying in a bed not my own with Sarah. I quickly realized the bed belonged to Celeste. If Sarah was to be believed, I had made like a homing pigeon for it, displacing Celeste onto the living room sofa. Ascher knew that I longed to be the radiator I stared at or some other inanimate object so as to be spared the remorse I felt that morning. And yet he also knew that I was not sorry for the experience of Celeste. Ascher knew that my secret to conceal—my drunken evenings with Celeste at her apartment, which aroused increasing suspicion in Sarah—became my secret to unburden myself of and that the miscalculation that ended with the three of us together in Celeste's apartment was no miscalculation at all but part of an hysterical attempt to dislodge the untenable from my existence. Ascher was privileged to know every detail of the disintegration of my *affair* (what endless shame it causes me to use such a word for running drunk and naked from the Bowery loft into the arms of Beloved several nights a week). Ascher knew the indignation and the disgust directed at me by Sarah and my in-laws and Sarah's therapist and my therapist and, finally, by Celeste herself, who put a ban on my evening arrivals. He knew the world was shunning me at the end of my drinking. He knew a

change had to come and did come that allowed me to live in the light and have that light grow brighter. Ascher knew that I got sober and stayed sober and made what living amend I could to Sarah. He knew that she had a mental disability, a proneness to paranoia and rumination, that made her a virtual shut-in. Ascher knew that wadded tissue paper in her ears became a requirement when out in the neighborhood to deter the assassination bullets fired from the mouths of passersby about her *overall worth*. So much of what Ascher knew he quickly forgot, and yet showed no compassion for the futility of my frantic endeavor to spin the narrative of my existence and reel it in tightly through the lens of understanding so I could say *I have been here. I have done this and that. Allow my voice to be heard among the other voices recorded for posterity so you will have a trail to where I am when I am no longer here*. Ascher knew I could not live easily if at all without the limelight, that even in my profound mediocrity the impulse to be a star never left. He knew I attached myself like a fury to the rising star of women who had positioned themselves to enter the ranks of artists supreme. He knew I needed them as they could never need me, as no woman had ever truly needed me, starting with my mother. A mother does not need a son, surely not a son such as I was born to be, meagerly endowed and never in the image of what a man should be. A man such as I will create great fictions about his own necessity in a desperate attempt to conceal the truth that he is expendable and has always existed as average within the ruins of his own mind. And yet, being sober, the voices began to change. *The light is in you and you are in the light*, the holy choir was heard to sing. *The light is in you and will grow brighter still*, the holy choir was also heard to sing. And yet the voice I heard the most, the voice that the filthy one Ascher denied me, is the voice of my father, or if not the voice of my father, the image of my

father *as he was back then*, walking in his walking way and identifying himself with the prosperity of America with the Robert Hall clothes that he wore. Nothing can attach to him as he walks. Walking is for walking, my father say, for cooling the fires in the mind so it does not overheat. All this I told the filthy Ascher, how when my father walked he did not talk or suffer any of the encumbrances that those who walk in a lesser way with no purpose attached can walk. My father was walking. He was walking with himself and with his fire, and he if he was talking, he was talking to his fire as his fire so often talked to him, and he was saying, "Fire, we are not going to be fire today. We are going to hold the heat of your fire in abeyance. Fire, you will not cause me to be aggravated [irritated]today. Fire, I will be in my great nation state of being today." In this way did my father walk and silently talk within himself, having no need of a world that had seen nothing and wanted to know nothing. There was no use in talking to people of the world who knew nothing and who had seen nothing when the nothing my father knew was everything. Because when you were walking unencumbered you were walking with God and God was walking with you. I told Ascher how my father came to me ever so slowly after I put down the drink, and though Ascher never truly listened, in telling him I was of course telling myself, and now my father does come to me walking, saying that to walk is to make of the city an open space in which to experience adventure and possibility. It is a sea change to see my father not in the repudiating way that I see the filthy filthy Ascher but as my father, with the weight of my father and the history of my father and the horror of what I have done to my father by shunning his past. It has taken me all these years to miss my father, I say to the indifferent Ascher father even as an image appears of hideous and demented Jeb Wilkes pawing the equally hideous and demented Lucinda Blakely in

the way that the oedipally driven child of the South must paw the demented mother of the North. And I say no more of you, octogenarian Jeb Wilkes, no more, even as octogenarian Jeb Wilkes lingers, keeping me from a fuller vision of my father as he was walking in his Robert Hall clothes. The momentum of my life took me in the direction that it took me. The momentum of my life was not a stream but a fast-moving river, I said to the ever more filthy Ascher, and this momentum made an increasing mockery of my absurdly futile attempts to stop time by capturing the past, for now everything was being rushed downstream into that roaring river of time and time itself was being rushed downstream along with everything stuck within its folds: all the couplings Celeste and I had ever performed washed downstream and the words she spoke about her father not being who I thought he was being rushed downstream; the stories I gave her rushed downstream; her father and his mammoth betrayals rushed downstream; the loft in which we lived and the country house and the car we drove and the European vacations we took and the dinner parties we gave and the movies we saw and the books we read and the things we said that needed to be said because they were so important and the inadequacy I felt in relation to her and the futon I slept on when our fighting increased and the calendar that stopped at August 1990, the month in which she asked for a separation and the pain that exponentially increased in me, all of this was washed downstream as well so that all you could hear was the roar of the roaring river. There is a time in your life when everything gets dusty, I said to Ascher. Your records are dusty. Your futile attempts to capture the past are dusty. The piles of slanderous manuscripts in your apartment are dusty. You are dusty, I said to Ascher, meaning of course that I was dusty. Soon I too will be relegated to the dustbin of history, I raged at Ascher. I am already there and simply do

not know it, I said to the filthy Ascher, the point being that when you are obsolete and useless and facing the prospect of death, the father draws nigh. What does it mean to run from your own history? I said to Ascher. What does it mean to never have embraced your own history? I said to Ascher. What does it mean to be so ashamed and conflicted you cannot go near your own history? I said to Ascher. What does it mean to try to hide out in something you are not so you do not have to be what you are? What does it mean to go through your life with a smirk and an attitude that *my father's history does not apply to me, my father does not apply to me?* What does it mean to have the attitude of the insane Jeb Wilkes and the insane Lucinda Blakely? I said to Ascher. What does it mean to admit yourself only into the circle of those who hate the father, shun the father, pretend the father does not exist? Celeste loathed her father. She made it clear that she loathed her father. "Only men who loathe their fathers are welcome in my house," Celeste said to me, the very same thing Sarah had said to me years before. "Do you swear upon this Bible that you loathe your father and will always loathe your father?" Sarah had said to me. And right then and there did I sign on the dotted line of matriarchal power forever, though truly I had signed on that line in the womb with the smiling intention of exacting vengeance on the father and the mother and all those who had conspired to birth me in the first place. It does not matter. I will live out my days, I said to the fading Ascher. Each day I will put words on paper with the same enthusiasm I have always shown, thinking, this is it, this is it, and a week will pass and the dust will accumulate on those pages as well. It is OK to be a wound covered with a smile. It is OK that my whole life I have hidden behind women. I know that now, I said to Ascher. But I'm not hiding behind women anymore, I said to Ascher, as there are no women left for me to hide behind. They

do not want me and I do not want them. Every woman I am interested in is a lesbian, I said to Ascher. Celeste is a lesbian, I said to Ascher. Every woman who hates her father is a lesbian, I said to Ascher. Every man who hates his father is also a lesbian, I said to Ascher. The world is chock full of lesbians, I said to Ascher. Lesbians have reached the highest levels of government. They are sitting right now in the Oval Office, I said to Ascher. Ascher, you are a complete lesbian, I said to Ascher. It was Sarah herself who gasped to me following that disastrous night at Celeste's, "Don't you see that she is a lesbian?" and of course I saw no such thing. All my life I have been blind to lesbians, and will not go down the road of speculating that my parents might have been lesbians. There are simply some things a person mustn't say, and I must respect that. But no, the truth will out. Do not restrain me when the truth is all I have. My father was a lesbian and my mother was a lesbian. They even told me, you my son must at all costs be a lesbian. So there you have it, my filthy friend, I said to Ascher. I am a man-hating lesbian and have always been a man-hating lesbian and nothing will ever turn me from the course of hating men so as to protect my particular brand of lesbianism, I said to the hideous Ascher. It is all right to be a lesbian. Don't be afraid of your lesbianism. Embrace your lesbianism, I said to the decrepit Ascher, even as he lay in a completely comatose state. Sarah left jobs because her co-workers were whispering cruel and malicious things about her, the same things that store clerks and passersby were whispering. There was nothing for her to do but to get off the streets and withdraw into the loft where we lived. I was drinking and the woman I had married was delusional. And when I got sober my wife was still progressing in her mental disarray. To deny the power of God is to deny reality. You can't read about God. You must experience God. Maybe that is true. Who can say? On my knees I would

ask God this simple question: Do I stay or do I go? I knew the finite resources of my own mind. I knew by now the dinky dimensions in which I was living. I knew I had to step into something bigger. The spiritual impulse is a constant. You will find it in the drink or you will find it in God if you are such as me. That much was clear. A prayer here. A prayer there. Because to try to figure out the matter of my marriage was to simply torment myself. Many times I told Ascher as much, but he would only offer me his predictable silence in return. Then one day Sarah was gone from my life. Simply removed. Not that she vanished into thin air. The removal was not of that kind. It was simply the experience of release I had from within while walking home from work one afternoon. And though the actual circumstance of our parting did not come for another month, our thing had run its course over sixteen years, and now it was over. Ascher knew this story. He knew how from a circumstance where I thought nothing would ever change things in fact did change. Ascher knew that Celeste in her absence had been a source of happiness, a glowing presence within me that neither Sarah nor conscience could take away from me. Celeste had represented my desperate attempt at a new freedom. I had made a mistake with Sarah. I hadn't been honest with her and she hadn't been honest with me. We had been together because I couldn't bear the responsibility of saying goodbye. Years before the opportunity had been there. Ascher knew this as well, that Sarah had called me from Boston, where she was attending art college, and demanded to know whether we would be living together that summer or not. Of course it had been my dream to live with her. Those years she spent in Boston had been a torment to me, living as I did in the terror that she would leave me. But there had been an affair she had with the most brilliant student at the school. "He's a genius, a genius, and you're not a genius,"

she had said. And now that affair was over because it couldn't go any further and she was turning to me. And rather than tell her what was only the truth, that no, something had changed, she had lost the allure that was hers only several years before and that she shouldn't assume that I would want her when her genius lover no longer did, I told her sure, sure, we could do that, we could move in together, the plan was still on. And so I began to live with a woman I couldn't bear to hurt and of course only hurt her more in the years that followed with my frantic and desperate betrayals. Ascher knew the great emphasis I placed upon Sarah and Celeste being artists and how the world of art was a territory for me to hang out in and find my way in. I had never been an artist but had been among these women who were artists, women with hearts and minds tied to their fathers by the resentments they were feeling. Ascher knew that I had to go back to Celeste after Sarah and I separated and that I told Celeste I loved her and imagined growing old with her. Ascher knew the trajectory of the relationship and the whys and wherefores that were so important then but no big news to attach oneself to now. I am only saying he knew the words *incest* and *anorexia*. He knew the words *recovered memories*. He knew the word *survivor*. He knew the words *her endless smile fell away to reveal a billowing anger*. Preceding all that he knew the words *verbal abuse* as my contribution to the marriage. He also knew the words *love* and *devotion* preceding all those other words and the words *heartbreak* and *terror* when I was asked to leave. Ascher knew I had married a woman a cut above me in whose social circle I couldn't comfortably move. He knew what it was to live in the dark light of my own failures in their company. He knew what it was to hear the voice say, *They have won and you have lost and so you cannot be among them*. All these things did the filthy one receive as part of the information package I was obliged to

provide him. He knew what it was like to feel like an interloper and not heed the warning signs. Had Celeste not told me she wanted to avoid any reinvolved with me? Had she not told me that? It doesn't matter. None of it matters. What is the point of describing failure when what I should be doing is talking about success, I said to Ascher. Things went well. There was happiness, the kind that made me leap in the air in disbelief. A country home. European vacations. Release from any concerns about money. We did swell. But my anger was not under control. I began to resent Celeste because she could devote whole days to her art while I had to hold a job. I resented her for having a gallery while I had no outlets for my stories. I would pick on her, and then be ashamed of behaving in such a way with someone of her quality, but after a while it became the norm. I took her down even as I was lifting her up. Her young daughter Alicia was there as a witness. Years later, during my long separation from Celeste, Alicia and I saw a film called *A Boy's Life*. It was like seeing a version of my life with Celeste and Alicia on the screen, with me in the role of the hateful, hated, and abusing stepfather. When I wondered out loud to Ascher what poor Alicia could have been thinking during the film, he of course said nothing. I have no more marriages in me, I said to Ascher. I am whole and complete as I am, I said to Ascher during my separation from Celeste, or maybe it was after. It does not matter. Women have only one function in a man's life, and that is to cause him so much pain that he will have no choice but to find God. If Ascher understood this, he gave no acknowledgment. To talk to a father figure is to talk to the wind, and maybe that is just as well. Fathers have never known anything. That is why they are fathers. A father has always been someone to be shunned by civilized society. "Uh oh, here comes another father," people say, and then hastily cross the street. Fathers don't

walk right and they don't talk right. There will come a day when there are no more fathers. They will simply cease to exist. We will become our own fathers. That is what any true religion has always pointed its believers toward. In my father's house there are many mansions, Jesus says. Or in my father's mansion there are many houses. It truly doesn't matter. What matters is that we have not seen Jesus's father. In those mansions or houses Jesus's father has been lying deceased, for Jesus walked alone with crowds behind him, Jesus could not abide anyone before him. This is a well-known fact we overlook about Jesus at our peril. It is everyone's wish to be the last person standing on this planet even as we cling to each other. This too was information I passed on to the comatose Ascher, who had no mind for anything but his own comfort. And so Celeste slipped from my grasp and Alicia slipped from my grasp as everything but my own will has slipped from my grasp and I was left within the contours of my own aloneness. The breath is everything. It will never leave you lonely but it will leave you alone. When you focus on your breath you focus on your Self. You are changed. This In Athens and Piraeus and Naxos and in Rome and Florence and Venice and Paris and Provence and London and Prague and Copenhagen and Oslo and Bergen and Stockholm did I follow my breath and set up repudiating centers around me so that women could not get near. There were some who seemed significant on first sight but who lost that significance when we stepped out. They were women of the afflicted kind, women who sang along with the soundtrack of *Carlito's Way* and women who reviled children and women who blew swordfish out their noses on finding that I was separated but not divorced. They were women who set their hair on fire with tales of their own misfortune and they were women so crippled by abuse that they could barely come to the dinner table for a whiff of the soup they couldn't bring

themselves to eat. Such a one was Ramona Skiles, as I had already told Ascher many times. She had the light of her own peculiar love within her, a love with its roots in childhood and the father who had *visited* her. She had proclaimed alcohol to be her number one at an early age, and so, when suitors of the most earnest kind knelt before her, she laughed in their collective faces while guzzling her wine. All this I had gone over with Ascher but now felt compelled to revisit in the light of where I currently was. The truth is that memory becomes a kind of feast. We snack on this, we snack on that, and as the living of life grows smaller the memory of the life we lived grows larger, and all I had of Ramona Skiles was a cafeteria of recollections, and so it was for me to put these morsels upon the tray I held in my hand and take them to my table for slow consumption. Ramona Skiles deposited me into old age, I said to Ascher. She had a CIA boyfriend who roamed the earth doing CIA mischief and with whom she was working out the logistics of a baby so they could both be fulfilled and secure the happiness they were seeking. Frankly, there had never been even the remotest possibility that Ramona Skiles would marry the CIA agent and have his baby, and yet she went on for all the hours of the day about the glorious baby they would someday have or else would plunge into a deep fret that damage had been done to her womb and she would not be able to conceive. The very idea of a baby was a weight, an imposition that she could not easily abide. Ramona Skiles was not born to have babies. She was born to empty bottles of wine and then to open other bottles of wine and drain those as well. "I was a complete lush," Ramona Skiles said. "There was no wine I could ever possibly resist," Ramona Skiles said. "Wine was my one and only passion. It made me sing out the open window with my clothes off and skate equally naked on frozen ponds. It led me to lift my skirt and sing the 'Hallelujah

Chorus' on busy thoroughfares and mimic men in business suits in their office suites. It made me taunt the very emblems of power that place a man so squarely within his dominion." But then she would speak in earthier tones, I said to Ascher. "I want you down at my office this minute. I want you cooking in my kitchen. I want you to get those juices flowing in my pot. Understood?" The complete lexicon of her lasciviousness I repeated to Ascher, including her frequent imperative that I "Cop her cooz." I told Ascher the sound of heaven was the call from her to come and visit. Whatever meager plan I might have had got swept aside and within thirty minutes I was flying through the concourse of Grand Central Station to the Metro North. The deep pull of womanhood is eternal, I said to Ascher, and only made more poignant by the masculine rails of solitude along which the train sped. Somehow, I said to Ascher, there were echoes of earlier journeys. All my life trains have had a significance that goes beyond explanation, I said to Ascher. There is a part of me that would like to sit on the railroad tracks and drink myself to death, I said to Ascher. Railroad tracks exist in a way no highway can ever exist, I said to Ascher. The call of the railroad is a call that is made forever and forever, and when that railroad runs against the banks of a river then where is the power to resist? I wanted Ramona Skiles to call me away from the life I knew as Celeste had called me away from the life I had known. The poverty of my life was that I hadn't been called away from the life I knew, I said to Ascher. Over and over all I ever lived was the life I knew, and then Ramona Skiles would come and call me out of the life I knew, I said to Ascher. I loved Ramona Skiles, I said to Ascher. It may have been a profane love, but it was love, I said to Ascher. But Ramona Skiles did not love me in the way that I loved her, I said to Ascher. A shift occurred in the thinking of Ramona Skiles. She and the CIA

agent could not go forward into wedded bliss. She had had it with the CIA agent. He could rot in a foreign jail, for all she cared. The CIA agent had dawdled long enough. The CIA agent never had any intention of marrying her, Ramona Skiles said, and for that he would pay and pay and pay. By this time Ramona Skiles was calling me once a month if she called me at all, and in my desperation I had made myself available to see another woman, a fact which enraged the already enraged Ramona Skiles when she forced me to confess. Ascher knew that I pleaded for the understanding of Ramona Skiles, saying I had been growing so horribly depressed waiting for her phone calls that came so seldom that I had no choice but to see other women, even if the experience of being with these women and comparing them with Ramona Skiles only left me feeling lonelier and sadder than if I had simply continued to sit by the phone waiting for it to ring and for her, Ramona Skiles, to be on the line. Ramona Skiles showed not an ounce of compassion or understanding, as Ascher very well knew. It didn't matter in the least to Ramona Skiles that by this time my life had been swept clear of everything but her so I could be free in the event she called and that even the smallest demand on my time placed me in the most serious and debilitating pain, as it had to be weighed against the possibility that she might call and summon me to her. The fact was that I had allowed Ramona Skiles to do whatever she wanted with me so *I could do whatever I wanted to her*. The fact was that I was afraid to lose Ramona Skiles. *In order to keep Ramona Skiles, I had to be perfect for her*, I told Ascher. I could not get angry with Ramona Skiles, I could not protest loudly to her, I could not do any of those things with Ramona Skiles. I had to be kind and endlessly patient and even godlike with Ramona Skiles. I had to be all the things I had never been first with Sarah and then with Celeste. And yet none of that mattered, I said to Ascher,

who persisted in his state of stunning inattention. All of that was swept aside when she said to me, “A man with a boat is coming for me. He will be arriving here shortly, and he will appear in nautical whites that befit his manly proportions. His hair will proclaim its blondness and his sun-soaked skin will glow a beckoning brown. As to his teeth, they will be a radiant white. As for his prowess, he will know a jib from a mainsail and claim in his resume the seven seas. His words will speak of potency and his bulge will be of a kind you don’t possess.” Ascher knew of my famous ultimatum to Ramona Skiles. “Actions have consequences. Actions have results,” I said right then and there to Ramona Skiles. What Ascher did with my famous words was a disgrace, dismissing them even as I offered them to his hideously hairy ears. The mind of a man such as Ascher is not worth fathoming. In the travail that followed he was of no help whatsoever, and it was just as well. If we are to find God, it is often on our own. Ascher’s purpose in life was to fail me. He had no other purpose. “I will fail this man in all ways conceivable,” Ascher is alleged to have said many many times regarding his intentions toward me. I have always assumed a higher posture in regard to Ascher. I am someone able to see the big picture and forgive people their foibles. It is not that people want to be pathetic. It is that they are pathetic. Ascher was in the front ranks of the pathetic, nickel and dime-ing his way through life while accumulating vast sums with a balanced stock portfolio. I told Ascher the truth, that I loved the life that Ramona Skiles had birthed me into. Ascher, I am dying, I screamed out to Ascher from the phone booths of New York City after releasing from Ramona Skiles. Ascher, I have let go of America itself. I have let go of the cornfields of Kansas, trains in the night, the Chevrolet sign overlooking the parkway road of my childhood, movies in Technicolor, the chorus line of America in action. I am dying to

men assuming their positions on battlements with crossbows in their hair and guns behind their ears. I am dying to penis enlargement and the separated vision of what life should be. I am dying to panties and brassieres and the whispered words of Ramona Skiles between the sheets. I am dying to the name Ramona Skiles. I am releasing from all of her I ever held onto, and I am doing so with savage delight in the disappearance of everything about her I ever held dear. I am alone now in movie theaters and on the streets of New York City. All this I told Ascher. I had nothing to do but go home and sit in my chair now that this radical surgery had been performed. How relieved we are when it is over to just sit and read a book without the hope or the expectation of the phone ringing, I said to Ascher. How much longing the soul has for the quiet places. To not have to dress for someone, to not have to perform for someone. The madness of sex has gone away, I said to Ascher. It has left and I am here, I said to Ascher. Ascher, I am behind a closed door and no one can see me, I said to Ascher. Ascher, I have taken an exercise mat and placed it just inside my front door, where I am lying now. Ascher, a party is going on at my neighbors' place and has spilled out into the hallway. Conviviality is in the air. Laughter and gay talk abound. I am close to where the partygoers are and yet they cannot see me. How delicious to be close and yet so far apart. My whole life I have wanted to live alone, Ascher. Ascher, you know this is only the truth. I have told you many times, times beyond counting, of the woman, Miss Riedel, who lived in the apartment next door as I was growing up. I have told you she was a singer and of the glorious notes she sang as part of her vocal training, and how my mother went against her sound strong in the night with a shoe she banged on the wall to silence her. My mother could not stand the sound of Miss Riedel's voice in the night, Miss Riedel's worldly voice. At all costs did

my mother have to silence the singing Miss Riedel in the full flower of her *worldliness*. My mother came from the land of Bibles, Ascher. There were always a thousand Bibles in her midst. My mother lived with the rocks of ancient Palestine and Judea. My mother was back there even as she was here. My mother could not have known how much I longed for the cleanliness of Miss Riedel's apartment and most of all the solitariness of it. All my life I have been in love with solitude. It is only that I have been a long time finding it. When I reached age forty-two and separated from Celeste, I began the process of claiming this solitude. All of these developments I carefully explained to Ascher. Ramona Skiles was my last fling at youth. She delivered me into another place when she stepped out with the boat man. Everyone needs a Ramona Skiles in his life, a woman to burn him out so completely on sex and the whole maya of attraction so he can be alone with his books and the failure that his life has been. A man needs peace. Ramona Skiles meant Dire Straits and U-2, but a man sooner or later needs Schubert or Bach. He needs to stop dressing for women and thinking about women. He needs a quiet place where he can go. How many were the times I spoke with passion of the events of my life to the unresponsive Ascher. And then Celeste came back into my life. She had never really left. She was now living the life of a divorced female artist in a bedroom community ten minutes from the city, the Hudson River serving as her moat. If the neighbors discussed her, she tried not to hear. There were couples with families. They had windows and porches from which to look out at her, but Celeste had the intelligence and the money to structure her own life and was driven by her own propensities. All this I described in great detail to the impassive Ascher. At this point she transcended fact and fiction in my life to stand as some great reality that neither geographical considerations nor marital

rupture could remove. We had a growing communication that was all very strange and wonderful, though of course to relate this development to Ascher was only to invite the condescension and superciliousness he reeked of and have him offer his own grotesque thing with the predatory and revulsion-inducing Velma as the model for what my relationship with Celeste could become, confirming once again that the earth had no choice but to be rid of this man. Celeste had not been happy with the country property where for some years we had spent our weekends. In fact, she had hated the country house. The house was associated in her mind with her ex-husband Peter. The purchase of the property had been his idea, and of course it had been bought with her money. Peter was a genius. He called himself that. With Celeste's financial support, he gave up a career as a fashion designer to devote himself to his art. I would disparage Peter to Celeste. It was my right to disparage him as it was to disparage everyone sooner or later. Disparagement is in the blood. It is an advocacy of the self above all others. Peter spent Celeste's money freely, even after leaving her to live some blocks away in lower Manhattan with his male lover. By contrast I could do no wrong. After all, I had a job and was self-supporting. The whole story so completely tiresome. Everything about me was tiresome: my lies, my self-justification, my white knight propensities. After a while my thing with Celeste ran its course. Everything runs its course. Everything conspires to have us ultimately sitting alone in a chair and borrowing old movies from the library for our Saturday night entertainment. All of this was explained in painstaking detail to Ascher. Some years later, after Ramona Skiles dropped the CIA agent and took up with the boat man, I stared at the small coin box on the shelf inside my door. It gave me great satisfaction to drop my extra change in that coin box. How much I longed to save and

save, I thought, standing inside the door and staring at the coin box. How wonderful it would be to someday have a giant nest egg. But I had not been allowed to save in the years of my marriage to Celeste. Celeste had forbidden me to save. Although my anger got a lot of notice, there were times when I was frightened of her. With the Oiseau, she could sometimes be inflexible, and even broke off our sessions with her when the Oiseau said things that displeased her. Celeste didn't regard the Oiseau as a neutral party. Many times have I spoken to the supercilious Ascher of how Celeste came to see the Oiseau as my ally and someone intent on keeping her in a marriage she no longer wanted. Often Celeste would say that she only came to the sessions for my sake and because she found the Oiseau interesting but certainly not because she, Celeste, had any regard for our marriage. In fact she had only married because it was something I wanted and expected. The entire marriage had been a dismal failure, according to Celeste. When the Oiseau asked us to assess the marriage on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most positive assessment, Celeste could not assign a number. "There is no number for blackness," Celeste said. "The whole marriage was his doing. I couldn't breathe. Not for one second would he let me breathe." Upon close questioning by the Oiseau, Celeste had conceded that there were five minutes one Sunday afternoon on the drive back from the country when she had felt we were on an equal footing in the marriage, but otherwise it had been a complete disaster from the start. Ascher knew all this but said nothing. It was always Ascher's way to say nothing. Though I responded to Celeste in these sessions with salvo after salvo of word fury, it was with complete futility that I sought to alter the new direction of her life. Celeste was saying no more to being a tablet on which feeble men could write whatever aspirations they chose to write. She was saying death to all fathers

in the land and abroad and to the word *patriarchy* itself. She was saying no to the crushed center with which she had lived since childhood and no to the man who had crushed it in the first place. Celeste saw the Oiseau as trying to keep her in the marriage when her entire focus was on liberation from the men reviling her, abusing her, draining her, obliterating her. In Celeste's mind the Oiseau was the agent of male power, an intermediary whose one objective was to maintain the status quo. About all of this I gave Ascher a strict accounting, including virtual transcripts of our marriage counseling sessions. By now my feelings about the marriage had changed. After several years of separation, I was no longer eager to return to life under one roof with Celeste. I thought we could go on with the separation year by year. In that way would I maintain the financial security so important to me and yet also have my freedom to explore possibilities with other women. What more could a man ask for than that? Ascher knew my routine. I would go to an ATM and withdraw money on the card I jointly held with Celeste. Dividends from her investments poured into the account, and if the amount was high, a sense of well-being would come over me. On the other hand, if the account was low in funds, I would be gripped by a sense of fear. Everything would grow dark, even on the sunniest day, and it would be as when I was a child living in terror that my family would soon be on the street, as my mother predicted. Then one morning, in the midst of one such withdrawal, another and very different feeling came over me. The green phosphors on the screen showed an unusually high amount in the account but failed to summon that warm sense of security. I imagined myself wearing an enormously padded jacket, unnecessary insulation given the warm temperature but also oppressive insulation from life. By now Celeste and I had discontinued our sessions with the Oiseau, following

my involvement with Ramona Skiles, with whom I had since broken. And then one evening I went to the wedding of Smathers Billingsley, All my life I have hated the Smathers Billingsleys of this world. It would be more accurate to say I have always feared Smathers Billingsley, not because he considered Jeb Wilkes a friend and showed up for his memorial service, but because Smathers Billingsley has been given a stamp of approval—an altogether mysterious happening—that draws people toward him. No one has the power to resist Smathers Billingsley. One has only to look at the revolting Jeb Wilkes to see the power of Smathersly. Jeb Wilkes in the presence of Smathers is reduced, in his dotage, to a fawning fool, all smiles and warmth toward Smathers as he never is toward me. Jeb Wilkes holds Smathers in the highest regard. “Smathers is everything I would look for in a son. He is kind and caring. I cannot see Smathers Billingsley without seeing a white picket fence.” And that was it, of course. Smathers Billingsley was the all-American boy. He was love itself to those who knew him. People felt good around Smathers. They wanted to tell him things. They went away feeling that he cared about them. How many were the times I came to completely useless Ascher with my tearful tale of chatting with Smathers only to have someone interrupt and invite Smathers to a party, as if I were not even present or worth a glance. So yes, Ascher knew the degree of my pain. He knew how it was for me to return home that same evening stricken without so much as receiving one phone call or not be able to count even one person as a real friend and to feel unloved and unlovely by comparison with Smathers Billingsley. And of course Ascher prided himself on offering nothing to help me through this pain. My whole life story had I given to Ascher, going back to third grade and my first encounter with social failure. Becky Rodgers, with the same red hair as Smathers (it

has since been established that they were cousins and that she shared with him intimate details of that time) held a party, to which she invited Norman Norman and Billy Billy and Thaddeus Tiles and Carla Courtway and Constance Givens and Monica Ashley and Jennifer Judith and all those from the class whose names made sense in the American way they were asked to do while staying away from the consonantal onslaught of names such as mine. Unchosen. Loser. Reject. All those names applied. And so it was that I came to understand that there is a natural selection process and that people see with an eye that gives them the ability to make a decision over and above the words you say or the things you do. And so whatever they were seeing in Smathers—whatever flattering mirror he held up to them or innate quality he possessed that they admired or wished to steal for themselves—they were not seeing in me. He was someone cut from the right cloth and I was not. He was nautical white on a sun-kissed sailboat and I was olive drab in an ugly urban parking lot. I felt happy for Smathers that a wedding was part of his prospects and that nuptial vows would be made, the groom dashing in a tux and the bride resplendent in her gown of white. The wedding was in Riverdale, and I took an express bus up from the city. En route I had an epiphany. There is nothing else to call it when in fact it was just so. All this I told the filthy one, in obedience to my nature to confess all, if only to the void which he increasingly represented. I suddenly imagined myself as the owner of a car service with only one car, of which I was the driver. But then I bought two and three cars, for which I hired additional drivers. And soon there were more cars and more drivers and an office with a secretary and a bookkeeper and insurance and tax matters to take care of and all the paperwork and details that go with owning a business. A sense of my own power rose in me. I saw myself giving orders and hiring and firing. I

found myself wearing a leather jacket and attracting women to me through a newfound understanding of money and its relationship to sex. A certain vulgarity that I had always shunned now entered my personality. I heard myself making lewd and coarse remarks and saw a stogie in my mouth. I experienced the car service taking up more and more of my time until it became my life. And so, in those few moments, I understood why it was I had been content to work for others and never felt the need to establish my own business. I saw that it was a thing that would take me over, as the building that my mother and her sister managed and had once owned took them over so they could have no life apart from it. I remembered the endless lines of tenants queued up in the lobby to pay their rent or request their “post” (many from India and Pakistan) or to complain that the “fridge” was not working or the mattress had popped a spring. I remembered my mother scrambling in the night to get a plumber to fix a burst pipe that had resulted in water cascading from one floor to the next. I remembered a building that was managing us rather us managing it. And then I remembered my father, my poor traumatized father, and the suits he wore for his little job at a downtown restaurant, where he took money from strangers and placed it in the cash register and gave them change from that same cash register and at the end of the day could leave the restaurant knowing he was free for the evening to sit in the Automat and drink his coffees and read his newspapers before going to places of worship arranged in garages and the like where the sober men and women who embraced the Christ Jesus gathered to worship. I wore a Brooks Brothers suit, which I had purchased the year I had moved in with Celeste. I had always gotten by with jackets and slacks, but the purchase of the suit made me feel that I was taking a step forward with my life, so I carefully explained to Ascher. And so, some weekday mornings I would ride the

subway to work in this Brooks Brothers suit. But the battleship gray color and the cut were less than flattering. *Look at you, the voice said. Just look at you. Just like your overdressed father.* Because what was a man who sat idle most of the day in a small cubicle doing wearing a Brooks Brothers suit? And so I would store the suit away in the closet for long period of times, taking it out for only those occasions that seemed to require it. I had showed up for my City Hall wedding in this suit and the reception that evening in this same suit. As Ascher knew, the wedding had taken place at the Municipal Building down at Battery Park, a building as gray as my suit, in a sterile room where an official of the Marriage Bureau conducted the plain civil ceremony with only Alicia, Celeste's daughter, and Celeste's friend Maude present. The shame of my life, the poverty of my life, that I had no one to call on for this event, no one I could call a friend. Marriage was the dull gray of that particular suit. Celeste had her own notions of what a marriage could mean. She wore a thick gold wedding band to commemorate her entrance into slavery. So she said some years later. I told Ascher everything I knew of the Smathers Billingsly event. I reported faithfully to him about it. Smathers and his bride took their nuptial vows in an old Episcopal church in Riverdale. When the pastor said "for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health," I was moved to tears, remembering the wedding ring that now lay under the base of the lamp on my dresser. Ascher knew that I saw a telltale sign of selfishness burning in the bride, who stood hours later in her preposterous gown crying that she wanted the party never to end. It is in such moments that we know a marriage is fated for ruin, that incompatibility and treachery will raise their heads and that the matrimonial premises will be vacated by the bride before too many moons have passed. We know that the dress and the vows and the rings and the

songs of sentimental power will perish in the fires of the night and that a dress of white cannot conceal a corroded soul and that bodies that seek to join while minds are far apart cannot but fail of their purpose. The bride was a party girl with an intellect that would avail her little given the shallow purposes of her life. Smathers Billingsly wanted a wife, but Cookly Ashton wanted fame. Newlyweds are a great gift, I said to Ascher. They offer the opportunity for the divorced or chronically single to witness their unraveling. And all that was to happen. Before the night was out Cookly had smooched half the room. Picture a man seated at the dinner table some days later with a napkin tucked into the neck of his shirt and a fork upright in his hand. "Honey, where are those chops? Honey, those chops coming? I got me my tabasco sauce and worcester sauce and I'm salivating just thinking of them." But there are no chops and there is no wife. Tall, lanky Cookly has fled out the back door and into the arms of her poet lover, with whom she has been secretly engaged in rhythmic pelvic thrusts. But that was all in the future. For that one night, not even my gray flannel Brooks Brothers suit could keep me from the dance floor where I fake-boogied, that is, did the kind of dancing that involves wild gyrations and bizarre facial expressions but very little actual footwork. I danced with the young and old and under the spell of the music entered the lunatic state of believing I was a salsa king and Mr. Mambo Man. "That is the difference between a Smathers Billingsley and me," I said to Ascher, pointing out how Smathers had gone about planning and rehearsing when all I could do was arrange a City Hall wedding. Nothing succeeds like failure, I shouted to Ascher. Nothing, nothing, nothing. The failure of my marriage was the greatest blessing of my life, I said to Ascher. Sooner or later we all cherish the sidelines, I said to Ascher. Sooner or later we are led to say, Better you than me, I said to Ascher, this in regard to the

wedding knot that Smathers Billingsley and Cookly Ashton had tied. under the cold and watchful eye of the Episcopal church, for both Smathers and Cookly were of that faith and thoroughly Anglo-Saxon in their roots. It is for everyone the whole world over to be Anglo-Saxon or to wish they were. The Anglo-Saxon is the gold standard of humanity, and to have a syllable such as “ly” falling at the end of your name is like a golden curl of hair falling over the forehead of a lovely child. All this I also said to Ascher. To be an Episcopalian is to make an offering to the world of your intelligence and sense of order and propriety. It is to know the nuance of every word and the weight of responsibility to do well for those who cannot do well for themselves. To be an Episcopalian is to educate and to instruct. The whole world remains ignorant of the agony the Episcopalian community suffers doing the service their conscience and their God require them to do without so much as a single word of thanks. No one understood the circumstance of the Episcopalians better than I while attending the wedding of Smathers Billingsley and Cookly Ashton, which I poured into the ears of the uninterested Ascher but also took upon myself to report to Celeste as well, the truth being that despite our separation, Celeste was my best friend. The fact was that Celeste was my only friend. My whole life has been a complete failure in the realm of friendship. Even the smallest event that involves people becomes newsworthy in a life such as mine. And so I told Celeste of the event’s location in Riverdale and of its proximity to the house in which she had lived as a child. I tried to describe the elegance of the catered affair and what it meant to have a small African-American singer in a tux sing “Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?” If I am to be honest, the report was less than comprehensive, leaving out a woman with a mesmerizing cleavage I fake-danced with and the infatuation with her that consumed me

until, to my horror, I realized she was married and her husband was standing in the shadows of her love with a meat cleaver in his hand. I said to Ascher that I had every reason to believe my report might have yielded a friendlier response from Celeste had the event not been a wedding reception and situated in Riverdale. Possibly negative associations with our marriage and her childhood overwhelmed her, I said to Ascher. Conceivably, the spark that ignited her fury, I further said to Ascher, was my expression of regret that I had not asked her to be present with me at the event. The firepower she released was effective and contained. She hit the bunker in which I had been hiding and blew it to smithereens. “This can’t go on. I want a divorce. Do you hear me? Enough is enough.” Her words were a lash across my face, I said to Ascher. In my own way I had been devoted and good and a positive force in her life. She had been a drinker and a smoker, and now she was neither. Early on in our relationship she had said, “You expect me to be a real person.” She hadn’t been a real person. She had been hidden. She gave people what they wanted, relying on flattery, while secretly fearing and resenting them. I had forced her out of that mode. “Stop with the modality of the eternal female hype machine,” I said, making this into an official slogan that I placed on the walls of the loft. I was ruthless in extinguishing the very thing I craved—the words “wonderful” and “terrific” and the words “You’re great” and the words “I’m amazed at the things you can do.” All these things she had said in the white SoHo loft, from which the men of commerce had gone away, replaced by the flashy young in their tight clothes and with their faces full of sex. SoHo. The name brings me back to the days of my childhood when it was for my aunt to dispatch me in a cab to those cobblestone streets for bathroom tiles. To mention SoHo is to make of me a child in the sun with the streets of New York City

my playground and all the shopowners my fathers giving me their gruff good cheer in the happiness of their profitable days, the war gone and they remaining to build America to the strength it needed to achieve so prosperity could be had by all in Flatbush and Coney Island and on Court and Montague and President Streets and on the Grand Concourse and Mosholu Parkway and on every street that intersected with every other street on the great island of Manhattan. I had come to Celeste bearing the gift of my sober being. I had provided a fresh direction for her life. I had cleaned up her loft. I had driven her car. I had spent time at her country place. But I had also failed to give her daughter driving lessons because I was too busy writing my novel and trying to become famous. I had railed at her and behaved as if a baby was owed to me when it was clear that fame was intent on eluding me. I was mean and competitive with her when she met with success or the possibility of success. Ascher knew all this. His spitefulness was without end, and his indifference was simply a passive way of expressing it. I faithfully reported to him that Celeste's lawyer arranged for a fist to emerge from the mailbox when I opened it some days later. The fist drove the wind from me with a surprise blow to the stomach. The letter contained the rock-hard prose of the lawyerly mind. It drove me into the cold place and said there I must stay. It said as I came into Celeste's life, so would I leave it. You will get zilch, nada, bupkus, amigo buddy, the letter said. You will do a vaminoso muchacho from her life, amigo buddy. It had the force of sanction and authority and weighed a minimum of three thousand pounds, so many were the recognizable names from the world at large: Samuel J. Gruding III, former Supreme Court justice; Appleton Appleby, former chief counsel to the President of the United States of America; Winthrop Winthroplly, former Attorney General of the United States of America; Leicester

Cannolly, former Solicitor General of the United States of America. I dragged the letter to my apartment and left it on the floor, where I also lay, curled in the fetal position. All this I described to Ascher in gripping detail. Why had it never occurred to me that Celeste would offer such a brutal rendition of justice? How could she say she wanted us to start over in a relationship of equality and yet leave me with so little means for my own survival while for herself there was the ongoing accumulation of abundance? Such a line of traumatized inquiry did I set before Ascher, and he heard me not. Toward nightfall, with the apartment in darkness, I raised myself off the floor with the power I had remaining and journeyed into the outer darkness, mitigated by streetlights, of the city that I loved. I walked north along Broadway, crossing the Rubicon that Ninety-sixth Street represented as my march on uptown Manhattan began in earnest. The darkness grew darker, I remarked to Ascher, on crossing that particular intersection, as it always did, the quality of light being a failing thing and failure and death and the realm of old sorrow being the perennial song in that narrow corridor. I saw my grade-school friend Jerry Jones-Nobleonian dead in an SRO with gangrene in both legs. I saw Jimmy Riley with his manic laughter thrown off the roof of a tenement on One Hundred Ninth Street for trying to beat the dealer. I saw Skinny Lonergan whose teeth were rotted out of his head by age fifteen. I saw my brother Luke standing in his sorrow acre on the corner drinking from a pint of wine with a crash helmet on his head. I saw the goods of his infatuation—the cars and motorcycles and pile of cameras and the stereo components he was endlessly adjusting in pursuit of the right sound. I saw him in possession of everything but the ability to live. I came within blocks of the building where I had been born and raised and saw that its grimy mass still rose above the earth and that the hand-painted verse from the

Gospels my aunt had commissioned—For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life—was now barely legible. I saw my oldest sister Hannah parked in front of the refrigerator in the small hours of the night eating all the stinky cheeses my father kept in a crumpled brown bag. I saw my older sister Naomi floating dead in the East River, into which she had been thrown by her fellow inmates at Manhattan State Hospital. I saw my sister Rachel laid out on a slab in the Bellevue Hospital mortuary. I heard my mother say, “Wine is a mocker. Strong drink is raging.” I heard my father say, “Will you make me to get up?” I heard my father say, “In the old country you would be stoned for saying such a thing.” I heard my sister Rachel say, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” I saw rats totter and bats fly from their hiding places and cry out their loneliness. I saw the forlorn state of the Mission soda bottle of my youth. I saw water pistols that had grown opaque and tops that had not spun in years and baseball cards from a time no one would deal with and a past that had fleetingly been before proclaiming that it was forevermore. I saw the singular occasion of my youth that had been spent in worry and developing bad teeth. Mostly I saw my life as it had been to that moment and what it could be now. I saw how desperate I had been to flee that family I had been born into. I saw repudiating factors that consigned me to a belief that they were not good enough for me. My father could not possibly have been good enough for me, born as he was of a race whose babies are born with long hairs covering their entire body. My mother, may my soul perish for saying otherwise, was good enough but her man’s shoes were not good enough and the rubber stockings she wore for the varicose veins she suffered from were not good enough and her advanced age when I was born was not good enough and my sisters Naomi and

Rachel, for all the dying they did before they died, were not good enough and my older brother Luke, who stood on the street corner drinking from a pint of wine with his shirt hanging out was not good enough and my sister Vera in her tallness and lankiness was not good enough and I never told you the simple truth, dear God, that I was not good enough. I never told you how weak and feeble I felt and of the words that others assigned to me, *squarehead* and *boxhead* and *underweight*. I never told you of my low intelligence or the weight of my social failure or what it meant to have a body already in ruins or what it meant to stand in the middle of a room with no one to talk to. I never told you of my need to cover it all up with the stuff of adornment and that what I didn't have in myself I would have to access through others. There is a reason why a man marries up in America, my filthy Ascher. There is a reason why the WASP princess or the Jewish princess is the one he must have. There is a reason why he must take the families of his wives unto himself because his own just will not do. Oh, Ascher, where did you yourself access such filthiness and yet find the means to remain on the planet for so long before we could be so mercifully rid of you? Do you know the stench you caused among decent people, for whom it took a supreme effort of will not to bolt the room in the presence of your unbelievable decrepitude? And so I had come to that place of seeing, as I stared at the building, that my shame about them was simply shame about myself and that my attempts to distinguish myself as someone separate and apart from them had been in vain. I had not proven myself better, more American, more anything. "I am a filthy one too," I said to the filthy one himself. "Ascher, I am even filthier than you," I said to the filthy Ascher. I told Ascher what a doctor had said to me years before when I expressed concern about my drinking in the aftermath of Naomi's death. As background, I had told the

doctor that my parents went to church and my siblings went to the bar. “How far does the apple fall from the tree?” the doctor had said, which I understood to mean I could accept religion into my life, as my parents had done, or perish in a sea of booze, but it does not matter what I meant or he meant on that long-ago day. All that mattered now, standing before the building, was that my running was over and that I would henceforth be of the street as my family had been of the street and hold my nose at the smelliness of my own Armenian-ness while enduring it. Ascher, I come from a family in ruins and I am a ruin myself, I said to Ascher on that night, not crying but stunned to see that the arc of my life, of any life, is to return to what we have fled in a state of wonder that our best efforts failed to remove us. It is to know the peace of surrender, if only temporarily. Celeste didn't want me. She had never wanted me. No woman had ever wanted me. I was an unwanted man doomed to aloneness. That was the truth of my life. But how could she have been so supremely harsh in setting her law firm of Chauncyly Butlerly Briggsly and Beardly upon me in the way she had, so that a fist came from the mailbox with a blow to the stomach, driving all the wind from me? All this I shared with the unhearing Ascher, and saw that all men have heard me not as never have I existed among men but only been apart from them. I saw further the judgmental, fulminating tendencies that had driven me to this place of separateness and saw, even in seeing these things, that I would not be able to stop and that I would have to love myself even if I could not always love others. That night, which happened to be New Year's Eve, I danced with a stranger. I had seen her some years before in a white wool sweater and fallen in love. We danced in the Synod House of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. All the priests had fled, and now I was there among other revelers dancing to songs sung by a man with red hair and a big head. I

had seen him before but I couldn't say where. It's possible that in another lifetime he had been a high plains drifter or a wounded vet from the Civil War. Whatever, he had been in the thick of his own experience but was now putting that aside to sing his songs. In the domain of failure he was as a singer. His harsh voice was an affliction. But within the crowd that had gathered, he had a star status. He had his red hair and his bulk and his spirit, and that was more than enough. And it was New Year's Eve, and so the need for merriment was real. In a quiet moment the woman told me she was separated from her alcoholic husband, who had beaten her and their child. and that she was at a low ebb. And yes, along with her beauty there was, you could see, a spiritual sag in her face. The world is too ridiculous, I said to Ascher, in relating that the woman and I made it through "Auld Lang Syne" together before parting. Ascher was kept fully informed about the events that followed, starting with an emergency meeting with the Oiseau. Only a few times during the four-year period of marriage counseling sessions had I seen the Oiseau without Celeste, such visits occurring because Celeste had taken exception to things the Oiseau had said and in retaliation refused to meet with her. And though I had met without Celeste on those occasions, it was with the sense that she was still in the loop, notwithstanding her angry protest. As I sat with the Oiseau now, things were quite different. Celeste had taken a decisive action. She had filed for divorce, and the terms, by my way of seeing things, were severe. It was one thing for her to remove herself from me physically, through the separation and then her flight to New Jersey. Now she was removing herself from me financially. "That is unfortunate. I would have recommended a mediation process," the Oiseau said. She explained that such a person would have determined a settlement on the basis of our respective assets and other considerations. Now it was too

late for such mediation. The Oiseau suggested I strongly consider retaining a lawyer. But a lawyer would be expensive and a legal battle would be just that, a battle. The risk of further emotional injury and scarring seemed real if I set out on such a course. And couldn't such a dispute carry on for months or even a year? What would happen to the peace of mind I by now almost took for granted? Wouldn't the conflict, if perpetuated, keep me in a state of ongoing resentment? And was there something spiritually unwise about retaining a lawyer in the first place? How could I do such a thing to this woman I professed to love? "She has a lawyer, and evidently a very powerful one," the Oiseau said. The Oiseau's words hurt. They plunged me into a dark, miserable, frigid hole. Her simple statement of fact challenged everything I had come to believe about Celeste and me, namely, that we were on a path of increasing oneness. Maybe we weren't one. Maybe this was all some fancy of mine. I had warned Celeste that if she continued on her course without any room for compromise, she ran the risk of losing me forever. In reply, she said she was open to any proposal I might make. A man can be called greedy if he pursues money, but can he be called the same if he pursues love? I said to Ascher, following my session with the Oiseau, and though he heard me not, I, *I*, did not hear me not. A solution arose from the God place within me that dissolved this fractured state and returned me to the union of bliss with Celeste that had become the mightiest purpose in my life, and without which I could know no rest. It was not a solution of abnegation or self-denial. It was not a solution that repudiated the services and the comfort that money can bring. It was simply a solution that dissolved the inequity of the settlement that would have been imposed. Celeste's financial assets were inviolate, but there was the money of the marriage as it was drawn on by the two of us in the joint checking account, and so I went

to Celeste with the proposal that we halve the balance between us, a solution that would allow me to have some savings to draw on. Otherwise I would be leaving the marriage with simply my paycheck. Celeste was amenable, and so in short order some funds went into an account that I set up. Celeste was tired. She had a right to be tired. Men had interfered in her life since infancy. Her father had abused her. Her first ex-husband had been more than she could bear. Why should she not create a new life with a bridge and a river between her and all those from her past who wanted to come near and be able to say, "*Now am I safe. Now am I alone*"? Why shouldn't she have a formidable lawyer to protect all that was hers from the predations of the wild, the reckless, and the greedy? For too long had men been after her for *the one thing or the other*, so large had they appeared in their plundering ways in the night and in the daylight hours. For too long had she been rendered invisible, her safety sacrificed to their needs. With these funds I promptly invested in mutual funds so I too could someday have a portfolio of plenty on which to rely. I too would have the opportunity to watch my investments grow with the years. Soon I began to live in the terms value and balanced and growth and midcap and international and hybrid and small cap and large cap and *the fund number of the fund you wish to invest in* and Vanguard and Fidelity and T. Rowe Price and Janus and Dreyfus and Dodge & Cox and all the financial fortitude of America. And then it was for me to go to her law firm, where, on the thirty-ninth floor of a Sixth Avenue office tower, I was met by Salston Asterly, the lawyer responsible for Celeste's family's estate. Formidably corporate in a pinstriped blue suit and heavy, expensive shoes he took me into his spacious office, which offered a view down of Sixth Avenue. The firm had moved from its previous offices on Park Avenue, a fact that troubled me. Did this relocation signal

some decline in the firm's fortunes? If that was so, then could that signal a decline in America itself, because the structure must hold and where would we be if it didn't? I meant this sincerely, as I told Ascher. Always I have rooted for that of which I am not even a part, I said to Ascher. The New York Yankees, the Brooklyn Dodgers, Don Drysdale, Mickey Mantle, Sandy Koufax, the UCLA Bruins, Bill Walton, Bobby Bonds. All my life I have bought into this America of winners, I said to Ascher. A winner must never be a loser, I said to Ascher. A loser must always be a loser, I said to Ascher. There is no crossing the line from one to the other. It is an abnormality upon the structure of our genes, I said to Ascher. A man must know his place in America, I said to Ascher, pointing out to him that I have always known my place and shown I know my place by being completely deferential to excellence when it is in the room with me. And so it was with Salston Asterly. I knew the side of the tracks he had been born on, and I knew his pedigree. I knew he had been born in the great state of Connecticut and educated at the great Yale University and that he then *polished off* a law degree at Harvard University, the summit of the educational ladder. And knowing that I had come from a place very different and that I could never exceed him nor must I try, I had only one goal, which was to make him respect if not like me. Yes, I would have a fool for a client. Yes, I would enter his domain without legal representation, but it was important that this man I did not know hear my side of the story and all I had done for as well as to Celeste and the punishment I myself had absorbed. And so I told him who the real offending male had been, for whom I was simply a proxy. Salston Asterly heard from me what it had been like to live with her blowtorch anger and hear her scream that I and my stepdaughter were sucking her blood. Altogether it was a strange conversation to be having in the office of

my wife's lawyer, and it became even stranger when he shared with me that a relationship he struck up with a woman shortly after his divorce had recently foundered. The woman behaved in much the same way as Celeste, and that left him to wonder if possibly she hadn't been the victim of a similar sort of abuse. Shared pain was the only bridge that we could build to each other, and two hours went by as if they were two minutes. There were bits of his speech that caused me to take notice. *She turned left and I turned right*, he said, to assure me he had not been seeking to exploit his professional relationship with this client before love burst on the scene and she placed him in her power. The words he spoke in that regard were fatiguing words, the words of the protesting innocent, the words of the professional man protecting himself from any accusation of behavior untoward or the like. They were the words of a man who knew his guilt but not whence it came and how to conceal it so it did not smell so very bad. How many were the men in pinstriped suits in corporate suites speaking thusly. The fact was that Salston Asterly had not risen above the sense of his own failure. He told how on a dime this woman, this flower of the South who went by the name Morganita Boggs, began to torment him and shred any sense of self he had struggled to put together. Like many women of the South, she excelled in horseback riding. She could mount and dismount and jump tall fences from a standing position on her steed. She even had the power to make her horse whinny and neigh upon command and come suspiciously close to a sardonic smile with the showing of its teeth, and had other attitudes of puissance to display that would belie her diminutive frame. *She mocked me mercilessly. She set the whole horseback riding community to laughing at the sight of me in breeches*, Salston said. From the time of my arrival, Salston had been seeking to bond with me, saying as I stepped off the elevator that we looked to

be about the same age, a statement requiring me to exercise forgiveness, for to see Salston was to die of fatigue at all that life could do, I remarked to Ascher. He had that pale, tired skin of the middle-aged man whose only consolation is that he probably will not die in the poorhouse. He had separated from his wife, causing him to lose the affection of his children, and had set himself up in a sublet not far from the office where we now sat. He did not have to tell me any more, but he did, acknowledging that he was reliant on mood-altering medications and that the fork in the road had showed itself to him as to all men and he had chosen to go down the path of aloneness while harboring lunatic fantasies of a triumphant sex life. Salston was not the first man to be wandering about in the weeds in his business suit. The entire interaction with Salston I related to Ascher and what it meant for me to try to be understood by Salston even as he was seeking to be understood by me. "The firm has passed me over," Salston said. "They really don't want me anymore. They would be quite relieved were I to jump out a window and end it all. I am seldom asked to appear in court anymore. The more presentable members of the firm are given that responsibility. I am in this hellish trap that leads me to understand that death is my only possible refuge." Salston Asterly had raised himself up from nothing. His mother had been a mainline Philadelphia debutante but fell from grace when it was found that she engaged in prostitution as a sport. "I will be partaking of a neighbor's fare," she would suddenly announce, as we were gathered around the fire in our country home. My father would have just returned from a satisfying afternoon of fly fishing and, of course, I had come along as part of the bonding experience. We had stopped off to give our catch to the good people who ran the community shelter, so those less fortunate could enjoy a meal of striped bass. And now he

was sitting in his robe and slippers reading Adam Smith and John Locke, when my mother spoke those words, 'I will be partaking of a neighbor's fare,' and was out the door before he could ask what she could possibly mean. Throughout my childhood and into adolescence she would make these disappearances from the domestic scene, whether we were in Fairfield County, Connecticut, or a luxury apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And while it is an awful thing to have to acknowledge, my mother would return smelling of sex. It would be in the glow of her eyes and of her skin. It would just be everywhere. And one day, the toll her infidelity took upon my father showed itself to be complete. He plummeted from the roof of our apartment complex and that was that, though of course it was never completely that as life continued to unfold. Life is barbaric. It is simply that some of us find civilized forms for the expression of this barbarism. We are either doing or being done unto. Even the most withdrawn and passive of us have a role in the playing out of iniquity. The entanglements are inevitably complex." In this way did Salston speak to me, until I thought I would go mad from this display of confessional speech. Soon I couldn't help but wonder if he was seeking for me to plummet from a window as his father had done, but the ordeal ended when, mercifully, he was intruded upon by an assistant and had no choice but to give up his day to something more than this lengthy unburdening of himself to me. I left the law firm of Salston Asterly in a state beyond agitation, my feelings about what had transpired and the unbearable intimacy established with Celeste's lawyer out of my reach. It would be days before I could understand any of it. In my shirt pocket was the card he had pressed upon me as he encouraged me to call him for a lunch date. Not once since that day have I picked up the phone and called Salston Asterly. The day will likely not come that I will

ever do so. I had given Salston Asterly a complete victory by signing on the dotted line before plunging into a gabfest. The notion of a follow-up visit with Salston was preposterous. He was a high-income lawyer with a fancy firm; I was a middle-level functionary in a not-for-profit org. No, best to leave things where they were. If we met again our differences would be painfully obvious to both of us. You couldn't build anything on a personal story such as I had related to him. Once told, there was nothing left to say. I had no other gifts to give. Ascher knew that the purpose of my life was to accumulate some little experience and throw it out there and then disappear all over again. Ascher knew there were precious few people who wanted anything from me and that their numbers would grow even fewer with time. And what other possible reason could I have for hating Ascher, reviling Ascher, and burning him repeatedly on the stake of judgment if not for the fact that Ascher showed me the face of aloneness, the smell and texture of aloneness, to slowly realize that no one—no one—is coming for you, that she or he will not appear around the next corner or around any corner. Such evidence of your fate must be vanquished from the face of the earth. America is at war with the old and the infirm and has a plan for them. There are only two real crimes in America, I said to Ascher. Poverty you have avoided, I said to Ascher, but you are guilty as charged of the crime of being old, and for this you must be studiously ignored. And of course he heard me not. Let the record show that throughout this time I was going abroad. "I will be going abroad now," I said to one and all. Going abroad meant stepping beyond the routines of my life and depending on my own inner resources to see me through. These trips began in the first year of my separation from Celeste. On each trip I fell in love, though with women who shunned me. I went only to the major cities of Europe and

Scandinavia—Rome, Athens, Dublin, Paris, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo. I would show everyone what an independent world traveler I was. Every page of my passport would be stamped. And I would do it all alone, so as not to compromise myself. I kept track of every penny I spent and stayed in youth hostels. I was not young but there I was among the young and pretending the disparity in our ages did not matter. I ate my dinner in parks and on forlorn streets and was in bed by 10 p.m. so I could wake at four in the morning and have the public shower to myself. I meditated three times a day. I told myself that I was not in a relationship because I did not want a relationship. I told myself that what I had with Celeste was enough even as I looked hungrily at other women. As I struggled with the pain of a ruptured marriage, I also experienced a new freedom. I became as an observant child set loose in the world. I saw people holding hands and kissing, but courtship and expressions of love did not incite envy in me. I told myself that I was “all one,” alone in the best sense of the word. I had died to a life in the bottle and now I had died to the dream of marriage, and in those two deaths there was also the birth of this new and happy self. And yet fear would find me, and I would lie moaning in a fetal position on a dorm bed in the hostel as I would in the long ago in the cabin bed longing for Mommy to come fetch me home from Bible camp. I was most prey to those fears when newly arrived at my destination and jet-lagged. There is value in depression, I said to Ascher. We have nowhere to turn but to our inner resources, I said to Ascher. “Help” is a prayer and “Help me” is an even better prayer, I said to Ascher. Sex was nowhere to be found. It was not in Paris and it was not in London. I had made loud sounds in my own mind about the quality of my writing, but no one had heard me, and yet I had no choice but to fill the void with more words on paper that would only and ultimately overflow my

drawers and rise in fragile piles from the floor of my West Side apartment. My insides screamed for the recognition that was denied me and yet there was nothing to do but walk about and blow my nose. Ascher knew my pain. Ascher always knew my pain, but Ascher also knew the inveterate habit of his own insistent silence that exceeded the other silences the world so ceaselessly imposed. I am a walking man, I shouted to the silent Ascher. As my father was a walking man, so too am I doomed to walk and walk and walk, I said, checking in with Ascher from phone booths in foreign cities. God is the only refuge for the rejected walking alone, I said to Ascher. Should you see any such person on the streets of Manhattan or anywhere, you will know he is a candidate for God, for God takes those who cannot do and makes it all right for them that they cannot do, I said to Ascher. While on these trips, Celeste would come to my apartment and water my plants so the charge of plant abuse could not be made. Though I had misgivings, wondering if I was imposing on her or if it was just a stratagem for keeping her close, I had no one else on whom I could call. Actually, there was one to whom I gave my heart in this period. She went by the name Sumptner and wore a stud in her nose. She had been sober but now she wasn't sober or sober only some of the time while trying to find the willingness to be sober more if not all of the time. Something hypnotically graceful about her slow movements only added to her allure. To watch her push a hair from her forehead was to sink under her spell. I loved her from the start and told her as much. I said I wanted to grow old with her and would give her all my money if only she would be with me on the nights I needed her. The truth was I almost lost her. I saw her one night in a store but she was gone before we could speak and I spent the kind of night that comes to many who are single or divorced or even married, a night of stunned anguish that I had let slip away a

shining beauty who could fill the intense needs of my soul. But she came back, placing her full beauty on display in the same store where I had seen her the week before.

Suppose, I said to Ascher, in the time of AIDS, we have died to the need for mating while maintaining the pretense that we haven't? Ascher heard nothing of what I said, the silence into which I spoke forcing me to grow stronger through the tribulation of neglect that he was constantly imposing. Suppose, Ascher, I went on, I am the only sincere and truly available man on the island of Manhattan and must of necessity be shunned by virtue of this very fact? Suppose, Ascher, just suppose, I am being and have always been punished for my availability? Sumptner and I made love, to the extent that I was capable. The fact of incompleteness was right there for her to see, and yet she professed not to mind. Other facts are these. Dead rats lived in the walls of her apartment and a computer occupied her living room, tormenting her with the intrusive power of her boss, who maintained his hold on her through its presence. A man had jilted her. She had met him in Starbucks. She had been in rehabs and detoxes in forty-seven states. She was tired of the life she had been leading and was now struggling to be free. She made us tea by boiling water in her only pot. She told me I was handsome. as we played Scrabble. The game brought her back to a time when she was young and the family structure was still holding insofar as she had a room to go to and a mom who dropped in on her to say goodnight and a father who dropped in later. The rehab people told her a relationship would solve her reliance on alcohol and drugs. The plan for such a relationship should not include a Starbucks habitué with a big bulge in his tight jeans and eyes like lasers and the conscience of a psychopath and no income but someone who had been weathered by adversity and had a job and a home you could enter without feeling you were in the wild kingdom. "You need

someone with the gelt to give you the babies and the house,” they said to Sumptner. “You must stop running where your thirst leads you,” they said to Sumptner. “Strategize. Strategize,” they said, tapping the sides of their heads. But the rock candy called to her. It called to her so strong in the ladies’ room of a movie theater one night. “I want the rock candy so bad,” she said, returning to her seat. “I always did rock candy in the ladies’ room. The ladies’ room is a complete trigger for me.” But she stayed the course of her own sobriety. I worshipped her youth and imagined possibility where there was none. The hole opened and I fell through to the place of commitment, saying *I can be with this woman. I can make any adjustments necessary so we can make this work.* I gave her the manuscripts of two confessional novels I had written. I wanted her to know me and love me anyway. Sumptner slept with men and with women, but she said a woman could not satisfy her in the way that a man could. Ascher was kept fully informed of all developments, late-breaking included. I noted that she had a young-stuff man in her group named Rodney with the confidence his round head and twenty-year-old body gave him and that *he sought to ride to victory on the fact that he was younger than Sumptner by as many years as I was older.* Even so did I pack my bag and take off for the British Columbia, having handed Sumptner the keys to my apartment so she could look after my plants in my absence. A round head will always defeat a flat head, I said to Ascher, after Young Love had soundly trounced me in the game of love. Ascher, my poor useless Ascher, I said to Ascher, you who have gone to any length to thwart my growth, I will say it again: a round head always defeats a flat head. And then, of course, because he offered nothing in reply, it was for me to explain, and in great detail, how it was I flew to Vancouver, where I stayed in a hostel and fell in love with the trolleys and grieved that

the influx of Asian money that drove the construction of the new housing was wreaking such change on the cityscape. I told Ascher how it was I called and called but Sumptner did not answer, and when she finally did, she sounded perfunctory and distant in her responses, and how it was I feared I was doing something wrong, imposing on her, and that her coldness was a just punishment for the need I was expressing in calling her at all. When a woman knows you need her, she will kill you dead, I said to Ascher. You deserve to die for falling victim to such a need, I said to Ascher. The whole point of life is to be tortured out of that neediness, I further said. And in fairness what else could I say? Was the trajectory of my life not to more and more release from women, that is, from the sexual bond with women, that is, from the proprietary bond with women? When a woman has bared her teeth at you as Celeste had at me, when you have been subjected to the charge “You are sucking my blood and I cannot breathe,” then what are you to do but assume your primary function in the lives of women is to disappear? All my life I have been hearing women instruct men to disappear. “Please, Hatchidor, you must disappear, and only come back when I tell you to,” my mother would say. The prayer of certain men is that if they disappear for long enough, the woman will welcome him back. As it was with Celeste, so it now was with Sumptner. “Sumptner, I have disappeared for two whole days and am awaiting further instructions,” I said to her, from a public phone on a downtown street in Vancouver. The rain in Vancouver, was a fine and penetrating rain and the overcast sky offered no mercy, sealing you into the grayness of the city, to the point that you could not breathe. It is for a woman to hit you very hard and to discard you very hard. It is for a woman to banish you from her midst and to call the police on you for crimes you have or haven’t committed. A man’s whole life can be nothing more than a

vain attempt to prove his innocence in the ongoing docket in which he has been placed by womanhood itself. It is for every man to know this. *I don't want you. I never wanted you. You smell bad. You have always smelled bad. When will you go away? Please, please, when will you ever go away?*" So Sumptner raised up, with the power that I had given her to raise up, saying to me thusly, "Rodney has a round head and you do not have a round head. Rodney has the ways of the young. His penis is long and thick. Rodney, as his name suggests, gives good wood and fills me up in a way you cannot begin to do. You wanted me to love you and I don't. You wanted me to be fascinated with you through your novels and they are unreadable. You are ponderous and meandering and your speech patterns are uninteresting. Go to the water's edge and go there now and allow it to claim you. The ocean is the only woman who will ever receive you. Let her love you in her indifferent way. Let her wash over you in her indifferent way. The ocean is deep. It is a cold womb. It will contain you and forget you." In this way did Sumptner speak to me so I had no choice but to release from the phone and drift. I did not go to the water's edge. I went instead to East Hastings Street and there saw the youth of Canada on fire with their own need for destruction. Like flies, so numerous and yet so flimsy in their beings, did they swarm over me. There were girls wearing no clothes who had been turned into emaciated orifices and then there were the girls who wore the dirty remnants of clothes. There were boys with needles in their eyes and in their ears begging for more. There were soothsayers who had lost the power of speech and everywhere there were buildings without windows and streets without hope. Perfect lawns had been pulled up next to the street and on these lawns men wearing silk ascots sipped their evening drinks and women with long, kiss-worthy necks observed the scene with an unthreatened detachment. Some

kind of violence, entirely unpreventable, was going on in our midst, a swarming, pestilential fury of drug-wasted, pasty-faced kids with a bird-dogging manner that kept them in my face with their hands out for money. All this I told Ascher as backdrop to the relief I was experiencing now that I had been released by Sumptner. To be flattened is an exquisite thing, I said to Ascher. To be directed to go straight to the jumping off place is a priceless thing, I said to Ascher. Nothing must ever be allowed to stand between a man and his own demise, I said to Ascher, even as I found new life flowing into me. It was the life predicated on acceptance and *relief*, relief at not having to hold onto that which cannot be kept in place, for who was I to stop nose-candy-seeking Sumptner from flying off in her own direction? Who was I to think I could prevent her from the fate her illness had in store for her? And who was I to stop the triumphal march of a round head over a flat head? The answer, as I said to Ascher, was that I was no one to do these things, no one at all. I bought some cheese. I sat on a bench in a huge park and stared out at the prosaic gray hulls of the tankers in the bay holding steady and hearing their remorseless message claiming the impermanence of all solid matter and that man is full of folly who believes his destiny is rooted to the land. The world is vast and but a world within a world, a ring circled into infinity by other rings, the tankers flying the flags of many countries proclaimed. I sat and meditated, feeling first the sunlight and then the shade, and felt new power flow through me. That afternoon I found myself in a field designed for nothing less than the promotion of rapture, as it contained a baseball diamond that caused me to weep at the sight of uniformed players here, north of the border. Baseball is not baseball. Baseball is order and union and summons the heart to longing for these things, I said to Ascher, informing him how I wept with happiness at the sight of a

woman and her child, wept at the sight of a picnic table in the full state of forlornness, wept at the clouds in the sky and the earth, wept at the manners of speech I was hearing, wept that I was alive and that wherever I stood was holy ground. What is it for me to say I have been here before? I said to hear-me-not-even-as-he-heard-me Ascher, before leaving for Victoria, where blond beauty with full lips was on display on a street I have no name for. She gave me a look that noted my own significance and asked if I would like some company. She had an ample bosom. She had a tiny waist. She had features you could live a long time longing for, but her youth and her beauty were a deterrent to my understanding of the nature of her offer. A new joy broke forth in me at having been seen by beauty and wanted by beauty. But then her clothes did not look quite right. There was dirt upon her flimsy dress and pinprick pupils were telling their own tale and a grasping manner defined her spirit when I queried her. Her presentation, as I noted to Ascher, was along commercial lines. But as the seconds passed I was less and less sold on the need to know her beneath her outer garment. I saw suddenly the drugs she was taking to present herself as she did and on the other side of the street the brutal love that the dreadlocks brother administered to keep his corporation on the curve of growth. I saw the semen of other men and soiled sheets and dirty panties and what the word *unclean* could really mean and what the time of AIDS could really mean, and was saved by the words I suddenly spoke, saying, There is a place that would move heaven and earth to get you on your feet as you need to be and ease your tortured spirit into the happy state so radiant with love. If you go there and relinquish your drugs and your wines, etc., then will you be free and not in bondage to your demons and your overseer. You will have a power you never dreamed of, a power you are now seeking in your medicinals and that you have

given to Mr. Dreadlocks guy. The power you are looking for is not out there. It is within you... In this way did I speak to her, suddenly feeling more like a brother than a potential trick. But my impact on her was not sufficient to reverse the direction to her dwindling life. Do you want me to call in the air power? Do you want yourself bombed into oblivion? she replied, motioning with a tilt of her head to the other side of the street. I have seen enough of British Columbia, I said to Ascher, but my return to New York City did not seem to leave me with a full understanding of where my limitation truly stood me as I made another foray into the realm of the young. I was virtually pressed against her in a crowded subway car during rush hour one morning. She was reading a children's book from which she lifted her eyes to make contact with my own, a peek-a-boo look tinged with seduction, and in that quick moment, amid the crush of bodies, an intimacy established itself. When the doors opened at Forty-second Street, she darted through the station, and it took effort to catch up with her. At the top of the stairs I tapped her lightly on the shoulder. When she turned it was with a stare of recognition in her eyes. Feeling the pressure to build on the connection, I said simply that I had seen her reading a children's book and that I had once worked for a publisher of children's books and could we meet? She gave her name as Rage and said I was to call her but she was busy with the acceleration of her life, having spent a year in China where she learned to cool herself in the heat by sleeping with wet rags on her wrists. Over lunch some days later, she told me her college had been Smith and that she had academic excellence on her side. Yes, there had been a mother, but she had died when Rage was five and so she had grown up under the sole administration of her father, who was not stingy with his blows. In spite of or even because of his reign of abuse, she had been close to him. I was bonded to his fury. I

danced in his flames. I learned to absorb his heat. This Rage told me in a midtown restaurant, where she had shown up with a sweater tied around her neck. I am twice your age, I said. Age is not the issue, she replied, in a tone of reprimand. But age was the issue. Age bonded me to a kind of self-consciousness. The quality of the spring light bonded me to self-consciousness, exposing as it did my paleness. The tiredness of my apartment, the meagerness of my accomplishments. All of it bonded me to self-consciousness. We went to a play. I still maintained a theater subscription for two, a remnant of my time with Celeste. There was happiness in sitting in a cushioned seat in a darkened theater next to an attractive woman. Oh yes, this is what life is, that I could, with an expenditure of money and a little effort to dress properly, step into another dimension and have the life that others enjoyed, I remarked to Ascher. Afterward Rage suggested that we go for drinks. When you invade the dominion of the young, you must suffer the fear that at any moment you may be denounced and dismissed. *Hey mister, what do you think you are doing? Hey mister, you are old. Hey mister, I don't want you. I have never wanted you.* When you trespass on the young, they have the right to slap and sass you and treat you with complete contempt. You treat me as if I were the dirt beneath my shoes, my mother said, I said to Ascher. That is what the young will do to those who invade, who trespass, I said to Ascher, in regard to my mother, in regard to Rage, in regard to myself. For my whole life my mother trespassed on me, I said to Ascher. You, let me come and trespass upon you, my mother would say, so I could think of no one but her. My whole life has been about my mother and her trespassing ways, I said to Ascher. You have had your life. Allow me to have mine, I said to my mother. Ascher knew this. Ascher knew how hard I fought the tide of my mother. Always the waves of my mother

are breaking over me, I said to Ascher. On downtown streets. On park benches. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art do my mother's waves break over me. I never got beyond the point of generalities in speaking about my mother with Rage, I said to Ascher. I forbid you to speak about your mother, Rage said to me. The men in my life do not speak about their mothers. The men in my life have knives for teeth and smiles that slash. The men in my life have the power to hurt with their very breath. Are you up to the task? She asked, setting the café on fire with her flames. I whispered in her ear about the moon and marigolds and of the unearthly treasure that her beauty held. She socked me in the eye so that I fell to the ground and then she kicked me in the ribs with her booted foot. You are not demure. You are not ladylike, I whimpered. All this I told Ascher. All this I had to tell Ascher, given my driving need for full disclosure. Because a man such as I has no choice but to enter into full disclosure, to share with you the brutality of Rage on that night. Intimacy is dangerous. Intimacy kills. A dinner party for fifty is safer than dinner for two. Where is your mind that you do not know this? Have you relocated it *to the other side of the park* she screamed. And when I could not speak as to the whereabouts of my mind, she exclaimed, yes exclaimed, We must go slow. We must go slow. Rage was a woman-child with a great mind. She had been to Smith College and she had also been to China. She had a bird within her in perpetual song, if only she would know it. She needed no ablutions for her soul. She was pristine at her core and had the integrity of one experienced in dealing with complete menace. I know what it is to stay alive, she said, even as I was formulating the same words to apply to her person. After parting, I retreated to one of those islands in the middle of Broadway where I have never allowed myself to sit. Ascher knew that to sit in the middle of Broadway was to be rendered instantly old or

derelict. Once you have sat on an island on Broadway, The words “old” and “derelict” follow you for the rest of your days. My father sat in his dotage on the islands of Broadway, seeking the sun’s rays. In a wheelchair he sat on the islands of Broadway, where he would give himself over to outdoor prayer amid the cooing pigeons and rushing traffic and within a stone’s throw of the intellectual vibrancy of Columbia University, deaf to the mocking laughter of the intellectual elite resounding through the neighborhood. For days and weeks and even months did the laughter pour forth but my father heard it not from the still place where he had entered, there on the islands of Broadway. There is nothing more at the moment to say about a father who was but an afflicted shadow passing through, I said to Ascher, and posed to him one simple question: What is this posture of guilt women discern in me that allows them to flatten me with their criminal verdicts? Right there on an island on Broadway I cried out this question for Ascher to hear, if he only would, and in the resounding silence that followed was delivered into the surrendered state. Rage was not done with me, nor I with her, but she was mindful of her time, I reported to Ascher. Every evening was an opportunity for learning or advancement: museum exhibits, free concerts, parties. Once a month she had a dinner for fifty to create cosmic structures for her own advancement. On her list were the belly dancers at Damrosch Park behind Lincoln Center. She showed up for the event wearing starlet sunglasses and little booties and a hint of cleavage showed in the silk blouse she had chosen. Every Smith girl wants a Smith mug when she grows up, I said, seeing her drink lemonade from just such a mug, but she did not reply, her focus being entirely on the stage where thick, pasty-skinned white women in beaded belly dancer outfits waving colored scarves undulated to Middle Eastern music that grew more

unbearable with each passing hour. And yet Rage's passion was genuine. Aren't you thrilled by Wanda's delicate technique? Doesn't it set you on fire? Rage whispered. Was Wanda the lumbering one with the linebacker's thighs? She's great, I lied, and in that moment saw myself speaking with all the enthusiasm of a corpse. As we headed down toward Times Square, I poured out my love of the city, saying thusly: once in the long ago there lived a boy who trembled in the darker spaces of the city when he should have the misfortune of finding himself therein. This boy remembered a time beyond his young life when safety ruled and people could sleep outdoors without fear of molestation or decapitation and even defenestration from the highest reaches of the tenements on their block. He was a boy who dreamt at night of Lionel trains and in his waking state was gripped with fear that harm would come to his older brother, who had learned to mistake abuse for love at the hands of his father. He grew up in a time of gangs in New York City, and when a young man named Salvatore Negron, a.k.a. the Cape Man, stabbed and stabbed and stabbed some more two boys to death in a New York City playground, then the city became Salvatore Negron and Salvatore Negron became the city. In every lonely, isolated spot was Salvatore Negron suspected to lurk, his cape swirling in torrents of luscious, Velasquez black as the very symbol of death. And when tormented Negro boys swarmed out of the welfare hotel where they were housed and beat his brother black and blue, the beating fueled by their unquenchable anger, then it was confirmed for him that the city had become a place of physical intimidation and assault. All this I told Rage as we walked. The city is safer, I said to Rage. The city has been cleaned up. All elements of the city are coming together, I said, so that west can meet east and south can say hello to north and oneness indivisible can be achieved. Look, look, I said to Rage. Where are the

whitewashed windows of the 1980s? I said to Rage. Where has the blight that was a spreading thing gone that the *spit shining* of the city is so intact, with all of Scarsdale moving to the Upper West Side? Where is Japan, so formerly ubiquitous on the New York City scene? Where is the exodus that is no more and what is this reverse migration that is flooding our city with the aged aided by their walkers forsaking the sterile safety of the hamlets they fled to for a return to their *roots*? What are the words *rent stabilization* and *vacancy decontrol* and *luxury high rise*? What is this thing called homelessness that we do not see anymore and why is it that the people of Lands' End are eating their bacon and eggs off the streets of once seedy Times Square preliminary to visiting the theater of Walt Disney? Where has the word *seediness* gone? One day I saw a spectacle *I will never forget*, I said to Rage. A squadron of motorcycle police showed themselves on Fifth Avenue. They were men who ate the Sabretts hot dogs boiled in dirty water at the sidewalk carts. They were men of the coffee shops where the rats run wild. They were men who had known the parochial school fist of the brothers in their New York City youth. They were white and they were in leather and they were aggrieved, for the city had not been to their liking under the previous regime. Now the time had come when they could hit and hit very hard and express their frenzy for flesh. This I said to Rage as we entered a restaurant where, over dinner, I was moved by the intimacy of our corner table and the candlelight to say, Rage, permit me to say that you are so wonderfully attractive. The scowl that formed on her face surprised me, as did the words she spoke, though I knew by now her capacity for vehemence. Do not touch my body with your words. Do not ever ever do that again. Can we get beyond your hideous superficiality? Rage said. People looked our way before mercifully returning to their

dinners. It is for women to rule the earth, I said to Ascher. A historical injustice is in the corrective stage, I said to Ascher. It is a necessary thing for women to be venomous toward men, I said to Ascher. It is a necessary thing for women to strike men dead with their words, I said to Ascher. Decency compelled me to say these things to Ascher, as I remembered the time when the word “skank” was in vogue and women bled to death in back alleys from botched abortions and remembered too the term “woman driver” and the raised fist and my own excesses. Guilt is a reasonable place for a man. A head hanging in shame is a reasonable posture for a man. All men should feel guilty and ashamed, I said to Ascher. All men who have sisters should feel doubly guilty and ashamed for the violations that are theirs. There is not a sister in this land who does not have the complete right to be vile toward her brother, I said to Ascher. Ascher, have you ever even considered what a sister can mean? A sister is always gaining on you. A sister is always plotting against you. A sister can mean you nothing but harm while maintaining a smiling face. Sisters are born for treachery against the established order, and we must give them free rein to come with their knives and their flashing teeth and *exact their revenge*. We must vacate the premises to facilitate their arrival. All of this too did I say to Ascher. On leaving the restaurant, Rage shared that she had witnessed an accident the year before. A car had run a light and crushed a man’s leg as he crossed the street. The man’s mangled leg was a gruesome sight but she couldn’t turn away. We were at a street crossing ourselves as she told me this story. Could it have been clearer that she was giving me an opportunity to show my vaunted caring by taking her hand as we crossed the street? I said to Ascher. And did I not perform this act with award-winning grace and tact by relinquishing her hand when we were to the other side? But studies have shown that you

cannot contain a tornado in a blanket of tissues, I said to the filthy one, nor muzzle an attack dog with a paper napkin, I said as well to the filthy one. As we waited for the subway, Rage raised up on me. "Don't ever touch me like that again, do you understand? You used my little story as a pretext to try to get close to me. Don't pretend that you don't know what I'm talking about. God, I hate your stupid, stupid face. You have the face of a cretin, if no one has been honest enough to tell you before. Your eyes are too close together and your forehead is negligible. And you are completely moronic in your conversation, with an appalling lack of ideas and imagination. You are a complete loser and belong with no one. In such a manner did Rage hold forth, drawing a crowd with her vocal denunciation. Tell him, baby. Tell him like it is, they chanted. Don't be letting her rag on you like that, others said. It is an established policy for the young to brutalize the old, I said to Ascher. America is at the mercy of the young, I said to Ascher. The young have disemboweled us, I said to Ascher. We have only the god of youth in America, to whom we pray without ceasing, I said to Ascher. To be shunned by the young is to receive a lethal injection, I said to Ascher. We must always surrender to the young and do all that we can for the young, I said to Ascher. It is that important, I said to Ascher. I returned home craving a more pure darkness than our city lights allow, and so fortified the curtains with thick blankets and retreated into the closet wearing a blindfold. Oh how healing is the blackness. How hungry it is for us. How welcoming of annihilation we are when we only put our minds to it. In the fall I traveled once again. Albuquerque had coyotes that sped with lightness of foot and predatory intent down deserted streets. I fell in love with three lesbians. They offered me their stone walls. When our limited connection became too much, I meditated under a tree. Everything came right in my world when I did. Sky

ran into earth and cats grew large before disappearing. Light entered my very soul and I was radiant upon the earth *because I walked with the mindset of aloneness*. I rented a car and began a relationship with the roads I traveled. A yearning came over me for the spaces of Wal-Mart. I bought a shirt off the rack on the theory that *anything would do* and freedom was in living plain and added a pair of pajamas, too. Santa Fe and Taos beckoned. I slept in rundown hostels with dangerous young men. Old and rusted cars shared the room with us. Everywhere there was the smell of oil. Though I worried that my life would be taken from me in the night, nothing could keep me from the sleep that was my reward for living. In daylight I drove for miles and miles on alternate routes and saw no other cars with which to compete. In the distance were mountains crowned with snow. A roadside outhouse awaited me on a curving decline. Beyond a gravel patch it stood beckoning. Something about the small-scale curve gave it a nature personal to me, my heart opening as if to an old haunt. But that reverence was soon dispelled by one of increasing dread that this could be a place designed to bring solitary sojourners into conspicuous and vulnerable display and that I was in serial murderer territory. As it occurred to me, standing in the outhouse, that Ted Bundy himself might have traveled here, a voice from on high shouted, You are Ted Bundy, suspect in the eyes of the nation and the world. And yet I made it to Moab, in southern Utah. Dirt bikers had flocked to the town, some staying at the hostel where I had paid for a bed. Young and powerful, they could sleep with broken teeth and broken bones from their rough trail rides. The bedsprings sang from their sexual vitality and the walls exploded from their drunken and rollicking ways. Energy was everywhere, and it was mine to observe. A man apart from the biker crowd appeared with his massage board and adolescence preserved in his

craggy face. Los Angeles-based, he spoke much of his chi and his origins in the Bronx, the strongest memory being of rampant pigeon shit and the rusted el. Ascher knew I recognized some of myself in this fellow traveler, in particular his painful pursuit of the young who rebuffed him from their doors when he came knocking during the night. But I also had other tidings to relate to Ascher, in particular the sighting, in the distance beyond a sandstone arch in a *national park*, of my mother and my father, enveloped in an aura of peace and love, waiting for me, though they understood I would not come to them then and there. And so there was nothing for me to do but to stop and receive this *sign that I had been given*. Moab had a retro diner. The interior showed a lot of chrome. Young men wore white paper hats to go with their white shirts. The waitress attended the tables with good cheer. I did not lie to Ascher about my fall off the vegetarian wagon and my delight in the two burgers doused with ketchup that I devoured with an order of fries and thick vanilla shake. There I was with the freedom to eat as I had when a child and the country knew no better than to gorge on beef and grease.

Drifters by the thousands wandered past, with no goddesses in sight and none to herald their approach. As to the origins of their life of isolation and rootlessness, they cited a voice that called and then called some more, telling them that motion was the thing that eradicated wanting and desire, that only motion could save them from the thing they left behind, that the store windows were full of folly, that the tears of the young and the old combined were the product of folly, and that all lamentation was the sick and futile chokehold of of the finite on the infinite. This voice, they said, was with them always, the voice they listened to and answered to, lay down in sleep with and awoke with, until it was the voice they were speaking from and abode with and lay down in sleep with and

awoke with. Such was the truth of the drifters who found in motion the means of their survival. All this I told Ascher by means of hand signals that spared me the budget-breaking expense of long-distance phone calls. (There were indoor odysseys as well in the porno palaces farther west, where men with no teeth sat on the aisles giving blowjobs to fellow indigents whose loneliness/desire had led them there and in that darkness could they say, yes, I too am beautiful, yes I too have the measurements of a man but the portals of a woman. Men with bad posture and bad skin and bad teeth. Men who lived in a dream of their own understanding. Men who knew the consequences of being boarded up within one's self and what their smell was really like.) There was another trip to be taken, one that found me in decrepit Copenhagen, where I boarded with a young man in a suit who had arrived from South Africa. Because political discourse was the only discussion I could have with him, I asked if he was afraid for his life now that apartheid had come to an end, as he did have the look of stark terror of one such as Franz Kafka. Having a vested interest in extermination and revenge, I asked him if he was hearing drums in the night and smelling the odor of lawlessness, not about Coetzee or the blood-stained krugerrand, with the unfortunate result that my line of inquiry only brought him to a deeper level of speechlessness and trauma. Monstrous despair weighed on me as I walked along a parched boulevard in the pale afternoon light. True, I was tired from the trip. True, it was my first day. And true it was that I did not feel I could last the night. Oh, it is an old story, this fear, this shock, this trauma at being deposited in the new. Ascher knew all this from my similar experience in Rome. A criminal indictment would have been served up if he professed that he didn't. I wanted to lie down on the grass. I wanted to fall through the sidewalk cracks. I wanted to tear out the pain that was afflicting me, the

terrible weight of terror that I was just a needy child in an adult body and Mommy now was elsewhere. Oh that one should have a god. Oh that one should need a god. Oh that one should begin and end his day with prayer and meditation and in between say *in this moment do I have everything I need, in this moment am I being taken care of, in this moment I am, I am*. A bench was there to call to me, and there I sat for the meditation whose time had come, soon seeing through eyes I had not possessed moments before. I saw a bench that was friendly in its contours and trees that no longer bore withered fruit for the lonely. I saw trucks that shouted *we knew you when you were a little boy* and had the pleasure of witnessing apron strings dissolve in thin air. I was once again on the holy ground where my feet were planted and in a state of rapture to be living my dream of being out in the world alone on a *weekday afternoon*. And yet my heart was heavy with those of the millions who had been placed on the defensive by the forces of darkness in suits of Republican prosperity. A council of the oligarchs had been called to drive President William Jefferson Clinton from the Oval Office in this, our land. They were not a band of juried ones but a conclave with a mission statement to make this land solely their own, a vanguard not of the proletariat but of the elite. Ascher understood the progression of their vindictive illness in the deepest way. He understood their unspoken assertion that WJC was an interloper, a freak of nature who had broken the continuity of their reign and taken from them what was rightfully theirs for all time. Ascher knew the body blows of the self-righteous when he saw them. He knew what a Starr report was, and how the dryness of the indicting prose would be driven by hate. He knew a death squad when he saw one with effrontery and imperiousness as its badge. And he further knew the colossal fear that was informing it, the fear that what these pharisees had would

be taken away from them by those who lived beyond their self-serving interests. They did not know that they were a ball of cancer metastasizing throughout the nation. They did not know the iniquity of the self-righteous afflicting the worldly with their wrath. WJC could play the saxophone. WJC could eat a Mars Bar and was in burger heaven with his Big Macs. They did not know he was an exemplar of the angel state notwithstanding the largeness of his appetites. There was nothing I could do but walk and walk. I had a great deal of empty space for my *anguish and horror*. Copenhagen wasn't destitute of streets. A year or so before I had read Kierkegaard. *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. What a comforting sound that one sentence made when said aloud. How compatible with myself he made me on a Saturday night, giving my aloneness a legitimacy it could not otherwise have. And how did America repay Kierkegaard? I said to Ascher. With a 7-11 store. That's how, I said. Right there on a main thoroughfare was a 7-11 stocked with Kraft Philadelphia Cream Cheese and Velveeta Cheese in a land renowned for its cheeses, including the incredibly stinky bleu cheese. The imperiousness of America was not in its armies but in its transactions, I said to Ascher. The march of America was not bugles blaring but cash registers ringing while the birds provided air cover by singing *for me and my girl*. No one can be irrefutably reduced, I said to Ascher. No nation can be irrefutably reduced, I said to Ascher. But that does not mean we cannot try, I also said to Ascher. The armies of the right were gathering strength; WJC would simply have to go so vengeance could be reinstated as king, they said. So I walked the earth. It was simple enough to do. Always I did what I could to mind my p's and q's, stopping here and there for the snacks of Denmark while avoiding the cost overruns that were anathema to my regime. I did the same in Norway. The word *fjord* meant nothing to me, and yet I saw

their scale and jagged ascent from the bow of a slow-moving boat. Travel is preliminary to death. Travel is what you do when you have no place to be. Travel is about standing on the street corners of the great cities of the world. These thoughts I offered to Ascher before leaving the trams of Oslo for Bergen, where the lake conferred peace on the citizenry. Youth was on glowing display, given the university nearby. Young men and women made love under the trees, in a halcyon pocket of the world that had its own understanding of things. A movie theater presented itself. It had a clean and hushed interior. It also had an usher to show me to my seat. I cried with shame at this show of respect for a lousy art form. This is a movie theater, I wanted to say, but what would have been the point of such a comment? I said to the hapless Ascher. Nick Nolte was on the screen. He was a big and sweaty American dog wandering the aisles of a Los Angeles supermarket. A rock score set out to overwhelm your senses and give the movie what it otherwise lacked. This is not the totality of America, I wanted to shout to those in attendance. I wanted to make some kind of apology, as if to say that these Scandinavians were too good for us. A man apprehended Nick Nolte in his bathroom. He shoved Nick Nolte's head in the toilet bowl and flushed repeatedly while his partner in crime tore apart the poor man's apartment. I could hardly bear to stay in my seat knowing cultured Norwegians *with bellies full of fish* had paid their hard-earned kroner to see such American coarseness. I told Ascher that shame is, next to pride, the paramount emotion, or is fear the paramount emotion? The word *paramount* should not exist when it comes to emotions, I said to Ascher. One should simply be able to state them and get on with it, I said to Ascher. In any case, there was no revocation of my future. Though I cried and carried on and begged forgiveness, the gentle Norwegians took no action against me. No

one should ever dupe a Norwegian with a film such as the one on that wide screen. It was now clear that just as in Denmark, where the pernicious Seven-Eleven stores had taken root, America was spreading its debilitating influence here as well. The Norwegians may have fish on their collective breath, but they have good hearts and stout character. They are men with good beards and their women do no one any harm. The Norwegians should be left to live and die with uncorrupted cultural norms, I said to Ascher, while on the ferry to Malmo. On this leg of my journey, I asked that a fellow traveler take a photograph of me leaning against the rail. He took up the task with good cheer, quickly going through the roll of film until no more *images* were to be *had*. He then handed me the camera and, as a *piece de resistance*, plunged over the side of the ferry, swam the short distance to shore, and ran with his wetness through the streets of Malmo. I had met my double. We are always meeting our double. Should it have come as a surprise that he shot to the right and the left and above and below my *face*? Should consternation and outrage have met this betrayal of my trust that a man would avoid the premises of my own face? Intimacy bedevils. Some must fly hither and thither from it, I said to the unconscious Ascher, in informing him that Malmo, an industrial city in the south of Sweden, did not soften the blow of what the hounds of hell were seeking to do to WJC. Not only is it wasteful and destructive, I said to Ascher, it is profoundly unkind to strip a man so publicly naked and conduct such an onslaught on his character. Ascher uttered a low moan, and in that instant the whole mocking nature of my character was revealed to me, the hyena laughing in the night. Once again was I struck with the power of prayer to effect internal change in a life such as mine. The Swedes sang to me. They were very gentle. They never spoke that harsh and guttural German tongue. In Lund I took shelter in

an abandoned railroad car. The important thing was that I stayed within my budget. Ascher knew that financial discipline was essential to me so my future could be golden. The influence of Ascher on me in the matter of thrift has to be acknowledged. While there is no getting around the loathsomeness of his acquisitive bent and the death in life it imposed on him, Ascher was a model of consistency in the formula he applied to daily living—save, save, save. In the realm of eternity itself, where everything is now now now, will Ascher be chanting tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow. But then, no one knew, as Ascher, did, the heartlessness of the city street for someone with an empty pocket. Such awareness was in Ascher's very cells, and he did nothing to check my impulses in that same direction. Ascher, it can be said, tacitly encouraged my impulse toward thrift. All Ascher ever wanted was for me to be as he had been for the living hell of his entire eternity. No one means anyone any good on a consistent basis in this life. Our brief forays into goodness are inevitably canceled out by the monstrous staying power of ill will. We all want each other to fail because we have failed ourselves. Failure is the great song of the universe, calling us into its darkness. In Stockholm my mother was waiting for me. She served me waffles with lingonberries and told me I was her Svenska pojka, as she told me all throughout my childhood, causing my sisters to draw out even sharper knives for my eventual beheading. We had a long talk in which I told her my whole life had been about breaking free of the force field she had created around me, but that my actions, regardless of their seeming harshness, were but a reaction, and so ultimately futile in nature. My mother, characteristic of the age she lived in, merely said oh go on just oh go on with all your foolishness. A man's love for his mother never ends, and whatever peeve he summons is understood by the mother as a distorted manifestation of that love, for I

was never more than one of her creations, and so I could never tell her anything of a truthful nature that she didn't already know herself. My mother brought great understanding to the world, and smothered me with it. Only a man of great character can go through life without a single criticism of his mother. Only a few such men exist, and Ascher was one of them, Ascher's motto being *In silence does my strength exist*. I left my mother where I found her, on one of the archipelagos. When a man reaches fifty, even in America, it becomes absurd to talk about his mother in a critical way. The shame that he has ever spoken thusly about his mother only accumulates, until he is tortured by self-recrimination as he once felt tortured by her. No real man ever speaks negatively about his mother. John ("Marion") Wayne never talked in this way about his mother. John Wayne was a man who knew precisely how not to talk about his mother. John Wayne knew how not to talk about his mother because he was his mother. John Wayne and his mother loved each other so profoundly that they became one. All American men of greatness have loved their mothers. All American men of greatness have been their mothers. Only in America is the father left to shiver in the coldness of neglect and get his just deserts. The father of our country, George Washington, was his mother and admitted as much with his face. *I am my mother. Can you not see I am my mother? Will you not accept me as my mother?* Over and over did George Washington ask this question with his face and so remained practitioner of the truthfulness for which he was rightly esteemed. When a man cannot stand himself for one second longer for having spoken about his mother, he has no choice but to run to listen to Swedish jazz. I found such an establishment *and stepped inside*. All the men in the combo were white and all were Swedish. All were certifiably so. Signs attested to this fact. The bass player was white.

The alto sax was white. The percussionist so keen on his *solos* was white. The piano man was white. The man with the horn flashing golden in the subdued light was white. While throughout the country the cold air prevailed, they warmed the club with their sound. Jazz had changed their lives, the white men of Sweden said. Jazz had given new meaning to their lives, they said. They could not live without this jazz, they said. They had given up homes, families, respectable jobs for this jazz, they said. They had even given up their Volvos, they said. They worshipped at the altar of jazz, they said. They would forever be in the debt of jazz, they said. Jazz is immortal and it has made us immortal, they said. We have found the secret of life. We have found warmth in our cool. We have found the bebop rhythm. We have found a way to melt the snows of Sweden. All this they said.. A woman was among them. She held no instrument. Her dress was of the deepest black and Sultry Beauty was her name and after a while she floated lyrics in the air to accompany the sound that they were making. And when she sang, and when the jazz men of Sweden left her behind for their racket express, her eyes expressed a desire for a dalliance of the most mature kind and a promise of all the energy she would give it, the communication on her part being that she only had eyes for me. So overwhelming was the effect of this gift that I was at great pains to verify its authenticity and so danced with my head to the bebop rhythm to signal that I was with her and with *it* in the most musically connected of ways. All my life I have danced with my head with no perceptible movement of my feet, I confessed to Ascher. All my life I have gotten away with this stunt, I said to Ascher. In truth, I said, I saw no reason why it should ever stop. A man's feet can be slow and easily get tangled. And then there is the burden of leading that men are required to assume. But a man's head runs no risk. With what can it get tangled but the air? I pointed out to

Ascher. I have never been able to dance, I said to Ascher. I have failed at dancing as I have failed at everything a man is required to do in this world, I said to Ascher. I have failed at school, I have failed at work, I have failed at family life, I have failed at writing. My life is about the constancy of failure and its enduring strength, I said to Ascher. I was sent to learn dancing, I said to Ascher, but I could not do it. The simple box step I mastered, but everything thereafter eluded me. The dance instructors got into my business. You're faking it, they said. You are not dancing at all, they said. Preposterous. Preposterous. You do not so much as move your feet, the dance instructors said. As for the women of the ballroom dancing school, they shunned me for other partners. It is safer to dance with one's head, I said to Ascher. One does not suffer the body blows of the scornful, I said to Ascher. One who dances with his head ensures that his dignity remains intact, I said to Ascher. So many were the things I said to Ascher and needed to say to Ascher. Do you know what it is to have your dignity shredded because you have been exposed for dancing with your head and not your feet? I said to Ascher. Do you know what it is to be run over repeatedly by the buses on Broadway because you cannot bear for a second longer that you are not Fred Astaire and that the doors to graceful partnership have once again been closed to you? The inability to dance is a failure of intelligence, to see patterns and to execute them, I said to Ascher. To be honest, I said to Ascher, I have never understood jazz. I have some vague idea that John Coltrane played the alto sax, but here I could be wrong. I know the names of jazz—I know Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young and Dizzy Gillespie and Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis, but an Armenian man can never know jazz, I said to Ascher. An Armenian can only know his own invisibility. All these points I hammered home to Ascher, who laughed in the face

of my self-hatred. It will always be for a Jew to consider himself the champion of the world. It will always be for a Jew to walk in the golden light of God's love. Because that is what a Jew is. A Jew is nothing more or less than God's love, and it is for the rest of us to envy him as it is for a son so very favorite in his father's eyes to be envied by his siblings. All this the filthy Ascher knew. Filthy Ascher knew that he was loved while the even filthier Armenian was not in a position to be loved or hated because he could not so much as be seen. It is for an Armenian to stab himself with knives and revile himself to the utmost while it is for a Jew to live his life to the fullest. A Jew stands as a reproach to human failure. Envy, unadulterated envy, is the only reason for anyone to dislike a Jew. All this I shared with Ascher as well, who could only pretend to hear me not. There was no basis in reality for me to approach this woman, none whatsoever, but such awareness dissolved amid the sounds of music and in this ambiance of soft lights. If delusion is a requirement for living, it fully flourished in the intimate atmosphere of this club. What is that you say? The woman said to me crossly, when I approached her at the break, treating me as one of the million such men who have approached her in that world of low colored lights. The first rebuff has always been enough to drive me off, and this encounter was no different. I flew out into the cold Stockholm night with a feeling not of lost opportunities but of relief. All my life I have wanted to be shed of the demands and burdens of women, I said to Ascher. All my life I have wanted to someday stand alone on a street corner in Stockholm on a cool, starry night such as the one that awaited me on my departure from the club for white jazz. And now that I was there on a desolate cobblestone street, it was for me to accept that the dream had been realized and that the unencumbered state had been reached. Success has never been about engagement with a woman so much as it has

been about emergence from the family into which I was born, I said to Ascher. It was for Ascher to know how many of my siblings had never made it beyond the family gates and what a state of fear this had placed in me that I would never escape either. My brother Luke came back into my life the following year. He was not at the memorial service for poor withholding Ascher. My brother Luke had fled his family of origin to make his life among the trailer parks of the United States of America. hH got sozzled with the rednecks of America, those with thin lips and Major League peeve at the forces messing with them *and they knew who they were*. He was reeling from childhood wounds but had a bottle of St. John's wort to keep himself together. Though he had children in all fifty states he was living with but two and the woman who had given birth to them. My brother could not live and he could not die. I said hello to him when he called and asked him if trains were as much in his blood as way back when. He knew better than to say they weren't. I told Ascher it was my misfortune not to fall on my brother as the prodigal son and shower him with gifts. I allowed him only so close, I confessed to Ascher, the machinery for self-survival now in full gear, my concern being that the place of scarcity from which my brother was arriving would overwhelm my capacity to give and tax my capacity to love. I had reservations about this brother of mine as I had had reservations about this father of mine as about these sisters of mine so that I lived in the state of reservation isolation and called it the only place where I could be. Shame creates a poverty of the spirit. Shame disintegrates the bonds of love. All this is taught and studied and learned in the classrooms of the mind. My brother was in trouble. He had come back to New York City to die. He was older than he needed to be and had the physical dimensions of a large refrigerator. He had hooked up with a woman who fed him constantly. Though it took but

a glance to see that his time was coming, Vera feigned blindness. She did not see his three hundred pounds. She did not see the project it was for him to rise from a chair or the wheeze that accompanied his movements across the room. She did not see the origins of his gluttony, or the nature of the contract he had with his wife, a child of One Hundred Eleventh Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive two blocks from where he himself had been born. She did not see the aneurysm in Colleen's brain, or the deceased husband who had fired the bullet that had placed it there before turning the gun on himself. None of this did Vera see. There was only the relentless nature of her quest to appropriate Luke to her in the way that she could. He's a great raconteur, Vera said, over my statement that he was unemployed and ill. He's a great raconteur, Vera said again, confirming her appropriating tentacles had been extended. All my life I have known my brother was born to die, I said to Ascher, and repeated the same to Lucinda Blakely, who heard me not either. Lucinda Blakely was never a friend of mine. Lucinda Blakely wanted only to deny me. I have never existed for the likes of Lucinda Blakely. The Lucinda Blakelys of the world have their secret societies. They have only to glance across the room to know who is among them and who is not. They know this with the lightning mentalities they possess. Never have the Lucinda Blakelys of the world shown an iota of interest in those such as me even as they dare us to try to engage them. The Lucinda Blakelys see your niceness coming from miles away but truly they cannot abide you. They are genetically predisposed to reject you. It is not a matter of volition. They simply have no choice. The Lucinda Blakelys of the world have been bred for their own excellence. You must listen to them but they never ever listen to you. If you so much as begin to speak they leave the room en masse or suffuse your words with such a deadening

spirit that these very words fall to the floor and perish. With great expressions of love and sympathy do they shower each other when bereavement strikes, but stare at you as if you are a bug at their dinner table should you so much as whisper your pain at a loved one's passing. Lucinda Blakely's weapon was her little book. At each and every gathering she pulled it out. Like a stabbing of the heart was it to see her huddled with someone and making tiny notations for a future get-together. A few who must go nameless have corroborated for me the viciously exclusionary nature of her ways while offering scientific certification that the level of meanness in her laugh surpasses any previously recorded in a human voice. None of this will ever do me any good, as I reported to Ascher. It is for me to forgive Lucinda Blakely. It is for me to love Lucinda Blakely. It is for me to recognize that Lucinda Blakely and I are one. When Lucinda Blakely's mother died, it was for us to witness Lucinda Blakely being showered with attention for well over a year. Comfort and praise came to her from hundreds if not thousands. People testified to her great courage and strength that she could endure the passing of her ninety-year-old mother, who meant the earth to Lucinda Blakely. Endlessly did her chorus of hundreds if not thousands chant, "Heroic! Heroic! Power of example! Power of example!" Such is just the way it was for Lucinda Blakely. Such is just the way it was and is for all time for *those who play their cards right*. And Lucinda Blakely with her little book was always playing her cards right. Never has a look of such supreme and malicious satisfaction crossed the face of anyone as would cross the face of Lucinda Blakely when she had finished with her little book and deposited it in her little bag. It was when she had finished with her little ritual that she would turn her eyes to me. No matter what part of the room I had situated myself, and no matter the extent to which I sought to

engross myself with others solely as a means of survival against the exclusionary actions of Lucinda Blakely, Lucinda knew what I so conspicuously knew, that *I had eyes only for Lucinda Blakely and could think of nothing else but what Lucinda Blakely was doing in that room at that very moment.* My back would be turned completely to Lucinda Blakely and yet somehow our eyes would lock in a communication that said she knew and I knew that she had won and I had lost, that I remained remanded to the isolation/deprivation corner and there must be content to spend my days while she basked in the love and the warmth of the room because she had played her cards right and I had not. All my life women have been slowly and steadily isolating me, I said to Ascher. They praised me to the skies, they stroked me, and by degrees they eventually turned me loose. I became too strong for their *wiles*. I saw through their *strategies*. I came to the aloneness place where I must live out the rest of my days. Lucinda Blakely knew this. She knew I was beyond her chains that bind. She knew I was not little Jeb Wilkes, who on pain of death *could not bring himself to speak of his father*; little Jeb Wilkes who could only speak of his beloved mother and his beloved and deceased wife. Little Jeb Wilkes in whom hatred of the patriarch reigned supreme. Only such as these could Lucinda Blakely take into her little black book. Only such as these did she care to know, while banishing all others into exile. Many are the times I have wanted to denounce Lucinda Blakely in the course of her little black book activity, to say, now I have done with you, Lucinda Blakely, done with your everlasting smirk, done with every last vestige of sly villainy that you can throw against me. But I don't. I ride out the storm that the sight of her engaged in this social hoarding prompts in me. All my life I have been battling injustice while committing folly. All my life have I been on the losing end. All men born into a matriarchy are born on the losing

end. My sister Vera made sure I would be on the losing end. She took away my father as a way of ensuring I would lose. That is why, though she knew Ascher only in passing, she showed up at the memorial service to bawl her eyes out. Vera could cry on a dime. All women are born with the capacity to cry on a dime. All women can take over a room with their crying. "I am taking over. Watch me cry," Vera announced, at the memorial service for the abysmal Ascher. But even the declaration of her intent was not enough to make the men of a certain persuasion resist her. Such were the men who flocked to her. Such were the men she too absorbed in her little black book. The truth is that Ascher's lot in life became my *lot in life*. For some years now I too have been tottering up and down Broadway. For some years now I too have been frequenting the same restaurants as the filthy one and hoarding money and going to bed each night chanting, as some in the Chinese community do, "How glorious to be rich." I too am on the fringes of life, as I have been for my entire existence. And I too have an ex-wife I profess to love just as Ascher had the hideous Velma. I am Ascher. I have always been Ascher, only I am a worse Ascher than Ascher could ever have aspired to be because I am an inferior Ascher and lack a mind such as his that, when it so desires, can blow smoke rings around existence. Nor do I have Ascher's wealth, and as a consequence do not have a woman such as the wretched Velma coming after me. I am Velma. I am filthy, filthy Velma as well. I am the one in need of someone else's wealth. I am in need of what Celeste could give me if she only would. How odious and shameful these words are even as I speak them. Celeste did not deal with me fairly, I said to the departed Ascher, though in truth, it was I who did not deal fairly with myself. I could have hired a lawyer. I could have had a professional person advocate for me. Didn't Celeste have a lawyer? Didn't she have a

battery of lawyers, including a former Supreme Court justice? Leave it to me to say I'll be above the law, I won't sully myself with the law, I will shine my spiritual light on the situation and create an amicable settlement where none is possible, I said to the absent Ascher, for Celeste was saying, You will get nothing, nothing. You came to me with a bag of dirty laundry and no credit card. That is what you came to me with. Never mind that I had tried to be a good husband. Never mind that I had stayed with her and never abandoned her, as her previous husband Peter had. Never mind that she had rewarded Peter for this abandonment with an enormous settlement. Never mind that I had crossed a finish line that wasn't a finish line. Never mind that for the rest of my life I would have to prove that I was not guilty, and that it would be she who got to render the verdict. Never mind the growth and vision that came to me in this process of separation and divorce as the relationship, not the marriage, took on importance and giving became paramount. No one has ever given me what I truly deserve, I said to Ascher. Detachment is the only answer, I said to Ascher. Alice Piccoli was seen at the memorial service for Ascher. Alice Piccoli has no regard for the dead and dying; she was there only for the food. Events far and wide draw her for the sole purpose of stuffing her face with *eats*. Called upon to say a few words about the deceased Ascher, she could offer only muffled sounds, having clogged her mouth cake and crudités. And so those at the memorial service got to see what I endure every workday, that there has never been anyone lower and more worthy of immediate termination than Alice Piccoli. To listen to the sounds from the adjoining cubicle where she sits day after day, as I must if I am to earn my daily bread, is to be led into realms of imagined violence never before personally reached. Daily the problem presents itself of how to deal with a woman who all day can be heard unwrapping foils of

tin from around her home-prepared food and who can be counted on to scavenge, like the rat she is, for the free food set out at the end of the week by the cafeteria people, and who possesses a telepathic awareness of the exactly opportune time to forage among the leftovers after the bigwigs in the main conference room have stopped chowing down? And then to be treated to her mirthless laughter and the sight of her hideous tongue as she hangs it out of her mouth. Who knows what lunacy is in her mind at such a time, and does a fact-finding commission need to be appointed to find out? One does not want to go down a road that involves Alice Piccoli even in one's thoughts. To do so is to be corroded by her essence, even as I ponder whether this tongue exposure is some revolting sexual overture from this beyond-middle-age predator. Would she take me into her filthy bed? Would she do with me as she would? Would she lower her fat ass and tired flesh onto me? Would she amalgamate me into her decay? Would I be made to swim in an ambiance of her germ-rich saliva and her old fillings? Would I be made to deal with her grotesque and horrifyingly stained underwear? Would my life be taken from me even as her breath was upon me? The vileness of women is that they want us as much as we want them, I said to Ascher. We are horrified by our humanity, I said to Ascher. Revulsion is our only shield, I said to Ascher. Postures of indifference are our only shield, I said to Ascher. Scorn and invective are our ammunition, I said to Ascher. Bullets must fly to preserve our sanity, I said to Ascher. Ascher knew the drill. He knew that women such as Alice Piccoli had been shadowing me my entire life. He knew that old flesh had attached to me from the time of my birth, as he knew what it was for me to have been in the employ of this women's org. for years and years and to be surrounded by women, to take orders from women, to report to women, to please women, to help women, to aid and abet women in

their growth, to serve as an ambassador of goodwill to all the women in all their cubicles and offices and in the hallways of the org. and the elevator of the org. and the cafeteria of the org. and always always to have the face of extreme pleasantness and neutrality there upon my face. There was nothing I wanted from the org. but my own security. I had no creative urges I wished to unleash upon the org that would require me to see the material before me as other than it was. I had no agenda that involved power at the org. I did not wish to rise to the top echelon of the org. I just wanted to be left alone to serve the org. and be loved by the org. for what I could give the women of the org in the way of *straighter sentences than those they had given me, sentences that did not buckle and break but which had a continuity all their own along which the mind could ride in rich satisfaction and comfort.* The org loved me and I would always love the org., I said to Ascher, rising up and above the thought patterns that would shower my world with a mocking laughter and speaking instead from the realm of *conviction.* One needs a vessel into which to pour one's love, I remarked to Ascher. One cannot contain one's love but must radiate its effect into the community at large, for love that implodes is not love at all. All this I said in full candor to the dozing Ascher. A tumor is imploded love. A malfeasance is corrupted love. Greed and lechery are but contortions of love, I said to Ascher. All my life I have been looking for a form for this love, I said to Ascher. I have been seeking a structure, I said to Ascher, but the forms, the structures are discrete, they are a chaos of papers scribbled on madly in the night. I am in the perpetual quandary of being able to straighten out other people's sentences but never my own, I said to Ascher. The sentence is a mystery that needs explanation, I said to Ascher. The word is a mystery that needs explanation, I said to Ascher. The sound of the word is the mystery upon us, I

said to Ascher. The word is but a symbol of the ineffable, I said to Ascher. No word can control an eternity, I said to Ascher. More than anyone did Ascher know what it was to be pegged and slotted, for I gave him all the information he could possibly need in this regard. Ascher knew what it was to be a senior editor who would never rise above that title. He knew what it was to be a man who could *deal with grammar but not with science and who fled the scene of all electrons, whether positive or negative*. He knew the prevailing assumption, that manliness is lacking in the semicolon and that people—women—laugh at me when I hand them my card, the idea striking them as preposterous that a man should work for an org. devoted to the cause of girls and the women they may become if only they are given a chance to become it, with never a thought of *what boys may become if only they are given the chance to become it*. Ascher knew that the org is my security blanket, that twice a month I receive a paycheck and allocate a significant portion—say it, the maximum—to my 401(k) account. He knows it makes me happy to be saving for the future in this way. He knows that my security is of paramount concern to me, that I am always asking the higher-ups, when the opportunity presents itself, how the org overall is doing. He knows that every conversation I have ever had ultimately goes in the direction of *Am I safe? Will I be safe in the future? What guarantees can you make for my safety?* Ascher knew I am afraid the org might go belly up and that I will lose the pension I have been counting on to see me through the rest of my days along with my 401(k) and Social Security. He knows that I have found a home here among the other deskbound types. He knows that even in the venues of failure I stand out for my failures and that I am never called upon to do more than the tasks for which I was initially hired. He knows that I supervise no one and never have. He knows that I have not an

office but a cubicle. He knows that my name is not considered important enough to be in the directory downstairs in the lobby. He knows that I eat my lunch between 12 noon and 1 p.m., not after 1 p.m. like most of the executive staff, *who pride themselves on holding out*. He knows that several times a day I stare at the calendar and would like to flog it like a horse to make the weeks and months go faster until I am over the imaginary finish line that will secure me my security. He knows that my dream of being a writer lived and never died here, that I apportion part of the office day to my own personal writing, and that of late I have taken to writing by hand, as I am now doing, for fear the computer will reveal my secrets in an act of cyber-treachery and that I will be fired for writing about the very place where I work. He knows that in my bones I have become convinced that beyond these confines there is not a single job comparable in pay waiting for me on this planet, that if I outlive my usefulness here I can say good-bye forever to a well-paying job with health and other benefits and a pension to boot and expect to sell no more than hot dogs in Central Park or stand as a uniformed guard in some wing of the Metropolitan Museum. Ascher knew further that the org. is the only family I have, and that without it, no matter what I say, I might feel lost and adrift and that the fear that Celeste has been slowly leaving me might strike me full force. Ascher knew that the awareness of my aloneness has been a growing thing and savage has been his silent delight at this fact of my developing consciousness. Ascher knew it started with the woman in the lobby *hanging out with the doorman* and the sudden realization, after years of reviling scorn for her obstructive ways, that *she had no place else to go*, that the phone did not ring, that the suitors did not call, and that the last flowers she had been given *had by now disintegrated from the earth*. Manhattan is full of women and men standing in the lobbies of their

buildings *hanging with their doormen*, I said to Ascher. Manhattan is full of people living in the stillness of their lives, I said to Ascher. Manhattan is full of people given to saying, *Do you remember when?* I said to Ascher. This is a realization that bears mentioning, I said to Ascher, who knew also that I had fought tooth and nail with my new boss Debra Klupp, fought, that is, against the winds, malodorous and strong, of conservative change. Many were the times when I laid out in detail for the filthy one the machinations of her mind. Ascher knew the department was a microcosm of the country and that Debra Klupp represents the forces of evil sweeping the land, that she brings the same relentless duplicity to our department that the president operates from in Washington, D.C. Ascher knew that Debra Klupp was a mortal threat to my well-being and he knew something more, that Debra Klupp is my mother and has always been my mother. Ascher knew that all my fighting with Debra Klupp has been to keep her from smothering me with the creeping intimacy she seeks to impose. He knew my ferocious antagonism to her and her regime even as he knew that I was one with her, that the overarching purpose of the workplace is to end all sense of duality, to come to that place of seeing that the one on whom you have placed all your anger and resentment and *disgust* has existed for no other reason than for you to understand and accept that you *have been talking about yourself*. Ascher knew that this was the case with the completely loathsome Beatrice Kirby, also present at the memorial service for no good reason, and with whom I worked for years. I presented to Ascher in stunning detail the full ridiculousness of her regime as well, how she practiced extreme frugality and lived for the end of the day when she could go home and watch her beloved *Law and Order* on TV, how she lived in a rent control apartment and could barely get herself to take a vacation, how she wore the same drab

wardrobe year after year, the same ragged and filthy topcoat, how when the planes slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the first words out of her mouth were “My God, my investment counselor is in that tower. What on earth will happen to me if he finds himself gone from the earth?” Beatrice Kirby was completely disgusting. For twenty-five years she was the anonymous editor of the org.’s unread newsletter, which did not stop her in the least from cranking it out with full self-importance. So many people gone, I said to Ascher. So many people fleeing the premises of their lives, I said to Ascher. So many events and the order of them breaking down, I said to Ascher. So much to grab hold of and so little time to do it, I said to Ascher. So much in the chute for the process of consolidation and God saying, when will you ever learn? I said to Ascher. How many were the times I sought to make Ascher’s ears ring with the spoken word, regardless of the content that *my sound* was carrying? How many times did I report to him on what Beatrice Kirby said to me when I came to the office with a haircut, without the slightest conscious understanding of what her particular sound meant? How many times did I repeat her very words, words that went something like this—*Got your ears lowered, did we?* But did Ascher tell me what she was saying? Did he for one instant release from his withholding nature? Ascher knew what Beatrice Kirby was saying long before I did or ever could, knew that she was inviting me to explore her physical dimensions if I only dared. Beatrice Kirby had physical dimensions that any woman could stand behind. She had dimensions that leap off this page. She had flagship breasts that shaped your world view when they were before you, breasts that even blind men wished to fondle and lay their heads upon their parameters. She had long thin legs that made the celibates weep and do much gnashing of teeth. She could make smooth-talking

men do the herky-jerky in the presence of her gifts. And yet she was for me in the realm of *fleeting thought*. There were her spacious nostrils. There was her *brimming* anger. There was the ill-concealed judgment pouring from her head. There was her asperity of manner and self-righteous indignation. There was the way she bit into her ham sandwich with all her cavities intact. There were the salad bars in the groceries of Brooklyn that she gathered her dinner from at the end of the workday. There was the remote she handled while saturating herself with prime time television to a *reasonable hour of the night* so sleep could claim her. There were the numbers she had approximated in her head for her own safety, and then the numbers she had added so she could ensure safety plus. There was the horrifying thought of her on the toilet and intuitive images of her soiled underwear. There was the profundity of her grievance against men for all they had not given her. There was the film of cynicism she wore as a second skin. There were the lanterns lighted against the dark she chose not to see. There was her claim on a benighted status at a spiritual depth no one dared address. All this and more created the barrier of revulsion that overpowered the draw of her breasts until the day that it did not and I wanted to be alone with Beatrice Kirby in some seldom visited space where documents and books were stored on shelves that secluded us from world view, and where we could stimulate each other to the conclusion we both were seeking, and then to do it again and again on the days when the *urge revisited us*. It is no small matter to find that lust is to the other side of revulsion. In that regard, can it be clearer that the sole purpose of the org. is to bring us to the point of understanding that we are only talking about ourselves? Ascher knew that I was working on that same breakthrough in the matter of the loathsome Alice Piccoli, though none has yet occurred. Alice Piccoli remains a vulture feeding on carrion

and with no real feelings for the living. Ascher received from me documented proof that Alice Piccoli is aligned with death and has no real feelings for anyone. All we can hope for in regard to Alice Piccoli is that we never have to see her likes again, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp is another matter, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp puts a lockdown on my brain with the power she manifests, I said to Ascher. My relations with Debra Klupp are too personal for one man to bear, I said to Ascher. Surely justice and mercy will be mine if I flee from Debra Klupp, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp brings a complexity that is not visible on any radar screen, I said to Ascher, all this time saying to Ascher what had to be said, giving to Ascher every scintilla of my life while expecting nothing of him in return, Ascher understanding the burden of relationship and the attraction of unavailability. It is important to walk on the ground of truth, I said to Ascher, and salient beyond belief, I said to Ascher, is the fact that Debra Klupp hails from the great state of Texas, where she was left to burn under a scorching sun for many days before her parents would show her the mercy she required. Largeness and meanness are the birthright of any unfortunate born in the great state of Texas, I said to Ascher. The Texas squint is the birthright of those born in Texas, I said to Ascher. The appalling fury of the right wing is the birthright of anyone born in the great state of Texas, I said to Ascher. Original sin is the birthright of anyone born in the great state of Texas, I said to Ascher. The only sin is poverty in the great state of Texas, I said to Ascher. Poverty is the birthright of the wicked in the great state of Texas, I said to Ascher, and the Republican Party exists to punish the wicked, I said to Ascher. For this reason and no other has Debra Klupp come to New York City, so that the wicked among us can be punished, I said to Ascher. And for this to happen, the wicked must be exposed, they must lose their jobs, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp has

come to the org. as the agent of job loss, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp is seeking to undermine its democratic foundations, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp operates from the point of view of secrecy and stealth, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp adorns herself in black and lives to confound the innocent and make them weep for her mercy, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp is larger than her own life, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp billows forth in her expanding skirts and is marshmallow soft with iron at her core, I said to Ascher. Debra Klupp is durable goods and the raising and lowering of the American flag and all that happens in between. Debra Klupp is our national monuments, including Grant's Tomb. Debra Klupp withstands the garbage that is hurled at her by the people of the org. Debra Klupp eats the garbage hurled at her by the people of the org, all elements working within her for her joy. Debra Klupp has dimensions not available to people who live on the island of Manhattan. All her life she has heard the island of Manhattan smart-mouthing the rest of the country and telling the hinterlands it is too good for a Burger King breakfast or a *JC Penny love-in*. It is time to roll up the sleeves and take off the gloves in regard to the island of Manhattan, Debra Klupp said. It is time for America to show all of New York City who is the real boss, Debra Klupp said, by imposing and executing its own business plan to curb the willful idiosyncrasy of New York City. It is time for malls and drive-through banks and Stop n' Shop and for the demoralization of the intellect with an assault of endless sameness. It is time for the concretization of our parks and the felling of all trees and for the hunting down of the last vestiges of railroad tracks so cement can be poured and the trucks *can roll*. It is time for an intensified campaign to re-pollute our rivers and streams so *smells can have their day*. It is time for rotten meat and tainted fish to be on the plates of all those in the five boroughs and

outlying counties. It is time for the ratcheting up of technology so words can lose their meaning and within a labyrinth of beeps no one can be found. All this Debra Klupp offered as her position statement for the furtherance of corporate hegemony upon the land. I am an idea whose time has come, Debra Klupp announced. I will attach meters to the water, the air, your breath, and the more I own you the more you will love me. I am the force of inevitability that you will endlessly accept. I will take away your Social Security, your healthcare, your pension, your very life; I will pee and defecate on your faces and you will love me, because if there is one thing the American people will respond to favorably it is abuse, for we are a religious people and we know that we have sinned and that punishment is now at hand and by my hand. All this I know and have known, Debra Klupp stated. The more you revile me the more you must love me, for odiousness is a draw, Debra Klupp further said, as I told Ascher with the alarm bells ringing in my mind. Debra Klupp had grown up at a time when people were taking off their clothes in public and when decorum and law and order were laughable notions. She knew the what of what and the how of how and the pow of pow. Debra Klupp knew what the word *perspective* meant and what the words *a god of my very own* and *fidelity to my own purpose in life* and *steadfast in the face of opposition* and *love yourself when no one else will* meant. The org women reviled her. You all hate me, Debra Klupp said. Don't think I don't know it, Debra Klupp said. The truth was my life was with Debra Klupp at this juncture more than it was with Celeste. The truth was that Celeste had left me but I didn't know she had left me. Something had changed. She forgot my birthday. That's right. She forgot my birthday. And then she felt so guilty when I gently reminded her that she said she would make it up to me with a special gift only I never received this special

gift. In this way do we know that we are not on people's minds to the extent that we would like to be. In this way did I come to understand that the external parameters of my life were shrinking—Ramona Skiles had left me and Celeste was leaving me, too. The rich will always leave us, I said to Ascher. The rich have no choice but to leave us, I said to Ascher. The rich have the impunity of their money, I said to Ascher. The rich have the buffer of their money. The most kindhearted of the rich have this buffer, I said to Ascher. The rich can neither see nor feel your pain, I said to Ascher. The fact is, I said to Ascher, I too was rich through *the money of the marriage* when I came to my current apartment and I too had the impunity of the money of the rich, demanding in my mind that tenants lacking my *financial caliber* not be allowed to stay in this building that I was now calling home. Nothing must come between the rich and physical safety, I said to Ascher. Nothing must come between the rich and their financial comfort, I said to Ascher. Nothing must ever impede the growth of their well-being, I said to Ascher. Was it not my right to roll over people given that I had the money of the marriage to roll over them with? The rich will always flee from people who threaten, of whom there were a few in my building, as I said to Ascher. Or the rich will make the people who threaten flee from them, I said to Ascher. Either way the fleeing must get done, I said to Ascher. Let me never ride another bus again but know only the air-conditioned comfort of the Waldorf and the limousine, I said to Ascher. I wanted safety from the young males of color with baleful expressions in their eyes that said *it was only a matter of time before they lay hands on me with fists and knives and shot me with their guns so smoking hot*. No one has ever been more willing to convict himself of criminal intent than I have been, I said to Ascher. All my life I have been calling myself bad names, I said to Ascher. Bad names are the birthright of men

such as I, I said to Ascher. I have gone through my entire life without a single meaningful thought, I said to Ascher. My sole purpose in life is to prove my innocence, I said to Ascher, and each and every day I fail, I said to Ascher. Now it is not the young men of color with baleful expressions who threaten me but the white hordes with fistfuls of dollars who are the cause of my terror. Every month the moving van is parked outside the building. Every month a person of color who has been in the building for years dies off and a person of whiteness moves in. Ascher, I have become a person of color, I said to Ascher. I am full of color, I said to Ascher. What is this monstrosity of whiteness that I perceive? I said to Ascher, this white wolf now at my door talking fifty thou, a hundred thou? I said to Ascher. What is this spit-shined city I now see where men signal their importance by crowding their mouths with expensive cigars and put down their three hundred thou and nine hundred thou in their frenzy for the done deal? And what is this store that sells gold-plated chocolates and this restaurant with the two-hundred-dollar entree? What is this surfeit of moneyed whiteness that is now approaching my very own door? I said to Ascher. Mr. Samson, my next-door neighbor, was a person of color who died of AIDS two years ago, I said to Ascher. A few kind souls entered the apartment of bedridden Mr. Samson to visit with him in his last days, I said to Ascher. Now the completely despicable Solatino Gault is installed as my neighbor. He is the new breed, with his thriving business and his weekend home. Ascher knew about Solatino and his habit of standing with the doormen and gossiping about the tenants as they went in and out of the building. He knew that Solatino was nothing but a financially secure *yenta* and the new breed of tenant who pays a significantly higher rent than I could realistically afford. Ascher knew I was at the beginning of the end, that the eviction masters were

slowly approaching the door and I would be forced to vacate the premises and leave Manhattan itself for exile in Queens if I was lucky and Secaucus, New Jersey, if I wasn't. No other fate can await me, Ascher knew, as he knew only a fool would think these rent protection laws would stay in place forever. I am trying to accommodate myself to new realities, I said to Ascher many times. I am trying not to let fear rule me, I said to Ascher many times. Maybe I would be better off leaving Manhattan, I said to Ascher many times. Who said I have to live here anyway? I said to Ascher many times. I have lived my entire life on the island of Manhattan and yet I haven't a single friend, I said to Ascher many times. What possible difference could it make where I live? I said to Ascher. All I need is my bottled water and my organic vegetables and my tofu, I said to Ascher, and my nonfat yogurt and my hummus, I said to Ascher, and my pita bread and two oranges and an apple and soy beverage and vegetarian chili, I said to Ascher. That is all I need. That is all I have ever needed, I said to Ascher. I am playing a waiting game, I said to Ascher. My life is only and completely about waiting, I said to Ascher. Every evening I do my sums, I said to Ascher. I sit at my kitchen table and add up the day's expenses, I said to Ascher. I can be asleep in the chair but still, I must do my sums, I said to Ascher, sums I have been doing ever since Celeste told me I must go away and go away now and be exiled from the financial security of her paradise. I must retain control, I said to Ascher. I must retain financial integrity, I said to Ascher. I must not let the wild horses of consumerism drag me away from my primary purpose, which is to save, I said to Ascher. I must be as you, oh filthy filthy Ascher. I must impose a regime of austerity so in the winter of my life I can be warmed by a blanket of cash and hold at bay the credit card boys and girls who would break me under the weight of endlessly mounting debt. America is relentless, I

said to Ascher. The primary purpose of America is to drain your wallet and all your accounts, I said to Ascher. I have been taking stock of my apartment, I said to Ascher. Nothing has changed in my apartment, I said to Ascher. Nothing can change, I said to Ascher. The order of things must maintain itself, I said to Ascher. The sofa and the gate-leg table and the silverware and plateware and the lamps and the queen-sized bed Celeste dispatched from the country before selling the house must maintain themselves, as must all the various and sundry items I have not listed, as well as two upholstered chairs that were once owned by my ex-in-laws, I said to Ascher. Every day have I stared at the sofa without sitting on it. It would never do for me to sit on this sofa. I could have no peace of mind whatsoever sitting on this sofa, not with the air conditioner in the nearby window and those accordion-shaped extensions to fill out the frame in their tattered state, I said to Ascher. When things fall apart there is nothing to do but allow them to disintegrate, but one must not be in proximity to them as they are doing so, Ascher heard me say many times. The price to pay in agitation was too severe for the sofa to win out, Ascher heard me say. Dust and dirt collecting through the shredded air conditioner extensions disturb the very soul, Ascher heard me say. A feeling of complete helplessness overcame me at the thought of taking action to shore up or replace the tattered extensions, Ascher also heard me say. No one has ever been as cold and passively hostile as Ascher showed himself to be, a charge Ascher did not refute or deny, simply going on to the other things that came his way and giving them his equally noncommittal attention. And so I was in a state of suffering with my surroundings, not only with the air conditioner extensions but with the armchair so soiled that had once been so white, an armchair that the parents of Celeste themselves had parked themselves on and

conceivably, following a heavy meal, *passed gas on*, so that possibly, possibly, such emissions, in great number and over a period of time, have contributed to the discoloration of the chair with the result that I would be sitting in the fecal remnants of ex-in-laws and the question becomes how to possibly countenance such a thing. All of this was discussed at length with the filthy one, who himself had developed a legendary reputation for not leaving one chair unmarked that has had the misfortune of bearing his weight so that hotels, restaurants, public forms of transit and all venues where seats, benches, or other devices for sitting are to be found must receive the buffer of a disposable pad before he has the opportunity of lowering himself and leaving his signature. The truth is that Ascher's life has always been about going potty. He is relentless and remorseless in his intention to leave a stain wherever he goes. In this way would Ascher mark the entire world as his own. The hegemonic tendencies of Ascher were without end. And then there was the rug, a loud green rug that I bought without considering the other elements in the room or even its size, and as a consequence I have a rug that is not only too big but which clashes with everything else in the room. The rug is like my whole life, I said to Ascher. I plunge right in. This is for me, I say, with the wildest enthusiasm. And I mean it, of course. I see a shirt in a store window and say, yes, I must buy that shirt. That shirt will do well by me. And it is a fine shirt, of course. It is a shirt that would serve most people well, but it can't do me well. It never could do me well. The sun poured in and bleached the rug of all its initial brightness. There was no defense I could erect against the sun, I said to Ascher. The draperies were not adequate to withstand its rays, I took pains to explain to Ascher, and there was nothing to be done as a complicated installation kept them hanging and this installation *was not to be tampered*

with because of its astonishing complexity. It would take time, and more importantly, money, to tackle the complexity of this installation. Infrastructure always requires money, I said to Ascher. A home improvement of that kind could never take place until I was well over the finish line, I said to Ascher. Only a fool would dare to plunge into such a reckless undertaking before crossing well over the finish line, I said to Ascher. Finish lines leave us weeping, I said to Ascher. It is humanly impossible to cross a finish line without sometime thereafter weeping, I said to Ascher. We grasp, we struggle, we hold our breath praying for the finish line to come into view and then, when it does, it has no effect, it simply has no effect. All finish lines should be abolished, I said to Ascher. All finish lines have ever wanted to do was torture us, I said to Ascher. Finish lines are a colossal tragedy. They have been here forever, I said to Ascher. They are diabolical in their persistence, I said to Ascher. People pursue them through the gates of insanity and death, I said to Ascher. Because of finish lines people have ruined their lives in all seasons, I said to Ascher. I have ruined my life because of finish lines, I said to Ascher. I have done nothing but fail because of finish lines, I said to Ascher. A finish line is nothing more than your mother's apron's strings, I said to Ascher. A finish line will always keep you close to shore so that you cannot venture out into deep water, I said to Ascher. No one in his right mind would embrace a finish line, I said to Ascher, pointing out that finish lines mitigate against right minds and that right minds are the sworn enemies of finish lines. Not a single right mind exists in the universe because of finish lines, I said to Ascher. The entire country is rushing toward a finish line that does not exist, I said to Ascher. Only in God can we find refuge from the finish line, I said to Ascher. God is the finish line, I said to Ascher. Everything has become clear to me, I said to Ascher. The

apartment I moved into was a place for me to experience my aloneness and ultimately die, I said to Ascher. Go ahead and buy your rugs and import all the tired old possessions from your former life, the apartment said to me. Go ahead and bed down with those women who will have you, the apartment said to me. Pretend that you are young when you are not young. Fill your dresser drawer with pornographic movies. Do all the insane things an allegedly sane man does and slowly feel that aloneness spreading through you. Ascher was also apprised of the reappearance of my brother Luke after his long absence. The similarities between my life and my brother's life were terrifying to me, I said to Ascher. My brother fell in love with a woman who would have him, I said to Ascher. He lived with her while she was separated from her then husband, I said to Ascher. I cautioned my brother not to move in, I said to Ascher. There could be trouble, I said to my brother, I said to Ascher. *The day for I said and she said and he said will someday be long gone, I said to Ascher.* The woman's husband was brought low by gambling and drugs and drinking, I said to Ascher. By his reasoning, he had no choice but to take his wife into the fold with him. With the gun he drew he took his own life after nearly taking his wife's, I said to Ascher. My brother Luke lived to go to college on the disability payments that came to the dead man's wife. He earned a degree but came to New York at age fifty-five with a resume that was blank. He sat over cups of coffee while his children went to violence-scarred schools in the Bronx and his wife shopped for pies on sale and other groceries at the Shop Rite down the block to feed him. Sometimes *the smell of a vinyl album and the sound of Elvis singing "Love Me Tender"* caused a commotion in his mind. He found a job in an office building with rows of empty desks and filing cabinets with open drawers for the

collection of plastic bottles. Occasionally men and women appeared wearing glasses with oversize frames. A scuffed bowling ball rested in the corner of the room he occupied, where he spent solitary lunch hours munching on homemade sandwiches and entire store-bought pies and staring out the dirty window. *I could die anywhere. I am so tired and haven't done anything*, he thought, before becoming part of the drained rush-hour crowd headed back uptown at the end of the event-less day. All of this—my brother's ravaged face and inflated body and tedious days—Ascher was kept fully informed about. I was not loving my brother in this time of his return to New York City after a long and mysterious absence. I was not my brother's keeper. Ascher knew why. I told Ascher why, in the plainest English imaginable. I was not loving my brother's destitution. I was not loving the sight of my brother going through the motions in a world that had passed him by. While maintaining a guise of brotherly love, I was secretly fearing my brother. Don't come too close. I don't want and don't need to catch what you have. Stay away from me with the crime of poverty you have committed. Stay away, I say, stay away. All this I felt toward my brother while offering a phony brotherliness. Ascher had to know all this. I surrendered supporting documents that would fully incriminate me to the indifferent Ascher. My brother had no health coverage. His children had no health coverage. He had holes in his shoes and holes in his teeth. He had a bipolar diagnosis and only St. Johns wort *in massive quantities* to treat it. Ascher received this information in copious amounts but thought nothing of a data storage center for posterity. No one can take an Armenian seriously, I said to Ascher. Armenians are born to be laughed at, I said to Ascher. Only a fool would countenance a single thing an Armenian had to say, I said to Ascher. How many times must I explain my family to you? I said to Ascher. How many times must you

be made to see what a complete disaster they were? I said to Ascher. None of which stopped my brother from arriving back in New York City, from which he had vanished years ago. I simply can't be bothered with the details concerning my family, I said to Ascher. My entire life I have amassed facts and figures regarding these benighted and forlorn creatures, I said to Ascher. My family never existed, I said to Ascher. I never truly existed, I said to Ascher. All proof of my existence will vanish upon my death, I said to Ascher. Not a single person will invoke my memory, I said to Ascher. What is it to have your memory invoked anyway? I said to Ascher. Better to be forgotten. Better to be entirely forgotten. This apartment is about the slow process of being forgotten, I said to Ascher. No one sees me anymore, I said to Ascher. My neighbors don't see me. Young women, or women of any age, don't see me. Only the store owners and the Albanian doorman see me, I said to Ascher. The doorman Enver sees me entirely as I am. I cannot fool him. Every day he sees me carrying a gallon bottle of water into the building along with my groceries from the health food store. He sees what it is for me to walk up that block alone and to be alone on a Saturday night. He no longer reminds me that I am the tenant and he is the doorman. We are through with that lesson. We talk the language of sports where we can meet on common ground and I do not have to be liquidated like the ignorant masses who have not scaled the mountain of science as the Albanian doorman has and which not even the Stalinist labor camps could purge him of. The Albanian doorman has killed with his bare hands and with weapons of steel. He has eaten goat meat in the Carpathian Mountains. He has been among men with metal teeth and lived to tell about it. He knows I am not Old World but America-born and will cross swords with him should he try to transport me back where I never belonged. Smathers Billingsley is

the reason I must speak with the doorman Enver on Saturday nights, Smathers Billingsley whom Lucinda Blakely so adores and for whom she opens her little book whenever he is in her vicinity. Lucinda Blakely falls to the floor when Smathers Billingsley so much as speaks. Lucinda Blakely tries to eat his words as if they are tasty morsels floating in the air. Lucinda Blakely opens wide her legs when Smathers Billingsley speaks and opens wide her legs when silence is reigning in Smathers Billingsley. Smathers Billingsley consumes Lucinda Blakely. Smathers Billingsley consumes me. Smathers Billingsley consumes the entire Upper West Side of Manhattan. No one can go near Smathers Billingsley and not be consumed by him. No one can go near Smathers Billingsley and not think, I am being consumed by Smathers Billingsley. Smathers Billingsley occupies my whole mind, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley has not left me one square inch to myself, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley has left me bereft of my own person, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley is perfect love, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley is the love I cannot so much as approximate, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley ruins all theology, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley rejects God and yet loves people, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley has a light within him, I said to Ascher, and whether it is of fire or of love means nothing if we simply say it is the fire of love, a light that draws people to him, I said to Ascher. To be in the same room as Smathers Billingsley is to be in hell, I said to Ascher. The room tilts and everyone slides in the direction of Smathers Billingsley, I said to Ascher. In mid-sentence do people leave you to slide over to Smathers Billingsley, I said to Ascher. We have your number and we don't want you, the room shouts to me when Smathers Billingsley is present. Smathers Billingsley leaves you defenseless against this very truth, I said to Ascher. Sun and moon do not exist except to

reflect on Smathers Billingsley, I said to Ascher. Smathers Billingsley was born behind a white picket fence to the sound of a Good Humor truck arriving in the neighborhood, I said to Ascher. No army can defeat him. No hole can bury him. No leopard can pounce upon his soul. Smathers Billingsley does nothing less than manifest the physiognomy of triumph and within the contours of his well-filled jeans. The destiny of a man, I said to Ascher, is to laugh and sing and dance in the spaces his expanded mind can bring. This was never my fate when I was in the same room as Smathers Billingsley, I said to Ascher. Always, always did it happen that Smathers Billingsley operated as the magnetic center, leaving me naked and himself adorned. Ascher, you have me on a leash, you have bound and constricted me, I said to Ascher. So you have gone now, my filthy one, you have fled into the purported reaches of death. So I never again have to tie my aspirations to your indifferent ears? Is that what you are daring to say? I too am on the verge of being old and useless. Ascher, I am going where I am going armed to the teeth with God. Ascher, I will sit on the garbage cans of New York City and chant *om*. Ascher, I don't want this world anymore. Ascher, it is tiresome, this round of repetition and the security-driven bent that shapes my every waking day. Ascher, you were a slave to your own prosperity. You were meaningless amid your piles of money and your stock certificates. There is no death that can survive eternal values, I said to Ascher's shrunken soul. Stand up, you sissy, stand up, I said to Ascher's corpse-like figure. A sentence is the refuge of the desperate, I said to the benighted Ascher. There is no room left in me for care or concern about anyone. My family lives in the trash cans of New York City. They cannot rise above their own isolation. My brother Luke fell over dead, just as I knew he would. I rented a video of a coarse comedy routine and tried and failed to pick up a woman by

presenting a false resume the same day. The video I threw out the window. The resume I burned. At the wake I alienated everyone with a diatribe in the form of a eulogy, telling the family remnant and anyone who would listen the truth, that Luke was born to lose and that he had learned to settle for abuse from *my father's hand* when love was not forthcoming. Then we buried him by some railroad tracks. Trains whistled and moaned their way past. They clackety-clacked past. They had the nerve to be nondescript commuter trains and not the powerful diesels that made our hearts ache with unfathomable pain back in our childhood, as if the sound of a train whistle could summon all the unarticulated longing of the universe. This is my brother. He is in the earth. He has been lowered where the falling leaves cannot go and the squirrels cannot run. He has gone where the heavens do not see and the rapidly revolving wheels of the modern world do not their revolutions make. Vera did not invite me to her barbecue the next month. She said my negativity was an acid rain upon the world and destroying all the forests. I turned a deaf ear to the suffering of all mankind. I prospered in the dark and fell short during daylight hours. The whole city emoted over the death of Smathers Billingsley's brother. Lucinda Blakely wept with her little book open. Jeb Wilkes wept. They attached themselves to Smathers Billingsley's legs and wept on his trousers. Their hostility was overt. They rendered me doubly invisible and I responded accordingly. I watched old movies, I said to Ascher. I listened to old songs. I turned on PBS like the rest of the old duffers. I was through hating Ascher, having eaten through the fabric of revulsion and come out the other side, I said to Ascher. All is meaningless, just an approximate sound. There are rumblings beyond the shadow of the earth that render preposterous the ruminations of the earthbound, I said to Ascher. Today I say nothing to anyone. There is

nothing to say. I smile. I behave in *a pleasant manner*. I keep working on the quality of my mind. I go to the store. I buy things organic. I eat no refined sugar. I avoid caffeine. Alcohol and all drugs are long gone from my system. I do not smoke. I do not bathe with the masses. I floss. I use a proxabrush. I gum-stimulate. I stretch in five different positions. I read ten pages daily *of quality literature*. My brother was defenseless. He was out on his feet. He had been dead in life. He had swallowed his rage and then he could not find it. He tried to make a life from *staring at passing trains and smelling his forearms*. I had wanted him to go away but he stood in the pouring rain without an umbrella and assured me the sun would dry him off. He was a heavy load I could not be rid of except by running away. I cannot be responsible for a grown man, even if he is my brother, I said to Ascher. I cannot be responsible for anyone, I said to Ascher. All I ever want to do is run away from the life that people would present me with so I can be in the silent spaces of my own mind and savor the deprivation that draws itself to me, I said to Ascher. I should have the right to make a clean breast of things before I die, I said to Ascher. My brother had a family and *was dependent on mass transit*, I said to Ascher. There were paralyzing bands of constriction around his brain, I said to Ascher. He drank tea all day so he could have the cup of life in his hand, I said to Ascher. There are no families anymore. There are only warring factions. There are only cells and silos and bungalows for the lonely. I live in an area of preposterous filth, of which Riordan is a prime example. I need to get to the bottom of him, if you will bear such an expression, and I believe I already have, I said to Ascher. Riordan wanted to overpower me, and for that reason I banished him. Riordan wants only for his parents to die so he can claim their remaining wealth. The world is really full of such children masquerading as grownups

bound to their parents not by love but by the ties of money. Riordan lives on boiled potatoes. He shits spuds all the day long. Catholics are fools for marital love and have never met a beating they didn't like. Riordan came to hate me in the aftermath of the memorial service because *I was not meeting his needs*, to use the ruinous phrase of all those of his ilk who bathe themselves in the debilitating waters of psychotherapy but never avail themselves of God and prayer. Riordan bought tickets to musical events and asked me to go. He was looking to me to bail him out of his Saturday night loneliness. All this Ascher was apprised of in depth. Catholics are foreign to me. Their skin is cold, like the stone walls of all the great cathedrals, I said to Ascher. Asd for Riordan, I told him no and then I told him no again. I threw the pushy one back on his aloneness when what he wanted was a foot in my door. *Riordan wanted sex with me and had a master plan for attaining it*, I informed Ascher. Riordan sensed a victim when he saw one, making me more of one than I was, I said to Ascher. I had no choice but to set Riordan down easy or any way that I could. I did exactly as my intuition told me to do and so far it has worked out in terms of my longevity. No one can move in on me with impunity. No one can use stealth as his calling card. In banning Riordan from my domicile, he banned me from his life. Riordan and I can barely be on the same block anymore, I said to Ascher. That is just as well. And yet Riordan the rodent one has been going through a transformation. Riordan has upgraded his social life. He is living with a woman now. Riordan says he is in love. Riordan has no need for me anymore except to demonstrate that he is sociable and I am not. Riordan parades up and down Broadway with his *lady* in a ludicrous parody of partnership. Now I must fear the very sight of Riordan, whom I could laugh at and dismiss only months ago, I said to Ascher. Riordan has become dangerous to my well-

being, and knows it well. And Lucinda Blakely has been seen opening her book and entering Riordan in its pages, leaving me defenseless against the truth that poor Riordan is in favor with Lucinda Blakely and I am not. Ascher could have helped me with the likes of Lucinda Blakely, as he could have helped me with the demon Riordan and the unholy alliance he effected for no other purpose than to *drive me down as I have wanted to drive others down*. And he could have helped me in my ongoing battle for the soul not only of this department but of this very country with the formidable and always riotously laughing Debra Klupp who feasts on the hatred of others as a nutrient-rich boost to her vitality. Ascher has left me to deal with my sister Vera and her histrionic tears and all the other machinations she is capable of and the passing of my brother Luke. *The planes flying into the buildings the planes being received by the buildings into which they flew the buildings accommodating the insistence on entry of the planes seeking only to fly into them*. And yet what did Ascher do when he was here? Did Ascher help me to break through the deadly dull affect of my brother so I could learn where he had been all those years and in what ways I could serve him? Did Ascher seek in any way to restrain me from my cruelty in laughing at the preposterous family tree that Luke had paid for, a flimsy and dubious piece of research that offered skimpy material on our Armenian roots? Could Ascher not have pointed out that my brother was terrified and excruciatingly vulnerable? Could he not have pointed out how ashamed of himself my brother felt? Could he not have told me to go easy on my brother with my harsh laughter? Could he not have told me it is a criminal offense to wound the already wounded and defeat the defeated and kill the already dead? Could he not have poured compassion into me as I pour the water of life into my all-too-eager mouth? Did I have to read such a eulogy at

Luke's funeral? Did I have to be so vile that Vera banished me from her annual barbecue? Ascher knew that I had schemes to engineer my own isolation. He knew that being banished by Vera was cause for uttering the word *delicious* to describe the feeling her shunning of me aroused. Ascher knew it was a validation of my power and merely offered further proof of Vera's lifelong ambition to assign me to the dark place. I was painted in black before leaving that family, I told Ascher. Nothing was so powerful or long-lasting as defeat, I said to Ascher. My whole life is about blame, I said to Ascher. To impugn motives and to willfully exaggerate and distort the record is joy itself, I said to Ascher. To live with a victim mentality is a reward that must never be given up, I said to Ascher. All roads lead back to my mother, I said to Ascher. *All roads must lead back to your mother when you have made no other roads for yourself*, I said to Ascher. All roads fall far short of heaven's gate, I said to Ascher. All roads are a manifestation of a failure of discipline, I said to Ascher. All roads are Broadway and the benches on the islands in the middle of Broadway and the benches of Riverside and Central Parks and the museums along Fifth Avenue and all the various and sundry streets of the city that I love to walk, I said to Ascher. All roads and all the scenes upon them I take in with the gaze of detachment I apply to them, I said to Ascher. Life is increasingly about gazing with detachment, I said to Ascher. It is about gazing without touching, I said to Ascher. To touch is to signal criminal intent, I said to Ascher. To so much as think of touching when one is old is to signal criminal intent, and a verdict of guilty is completely assured, I said to Ascher. I cannot touch. I can only look, I said to Ascher. I must only look. I must never touch, I said to Ascher. The conviction squads are everywhere with eyes upon me. Everything is out of control now, I said to Ascher. The election in which the president

won without winning. (Who is this strange man, this model of deformity?) *The planes flying into buildings*. My brother's death. Death is all around. The spirits are watching. We are play-acting as if we are in control when the reality is laughably different. I am en route to becoming an old man, I said to Ascher. Women do not give me a second look, I said to Ascher. I cannot touch. I can only look, I said to Ascher. On Saturday nights I stay off the streets so humiliation squads cannot mock me, I said to Ascher. Celeste has left me, I said to Ascher. I expected her to stay but she has gone, I said to Ascher. Celeste has forgotten me, I said to Ascher. I have forgotten me, I said to Ascher. I deserve to be forgotten, I said to Ascher. A person who has thought of nothing but his own security for an entire lifetime deserves to be forgotten, I said to Ascher. A person blessed with such ineffectualness deserves to be forgotten, I said to Ascher. A person who arouses such contempt deserves to be forgotten, I said to Ascher. A person with whom the doorman stands on intrusive terms deserves to be forgotten, I said to Ascher. Celeste has forgotten me because she could forget me, I said to Ascher. Celeste has forgotten me because she needs to forget me, I said to Ascher. I have never been anything to any woman other than someone to be entirely forgotten, I said to Ascher. My mother forgot me, I said to Ascher. My mother stopped knowing who I was, I said to Ascher. I invented my mother's interest in me because I saw that she was bored to tears with me, I said to Ascher. I went on suicide surveys among the lonely while wearing a T-shirt that read, *I am never lonely*, I said to Ascher. I cannot blame Celeste. She has only come to see what everyone has come to see, I said to Ascher. She has seen the truth revealed and gravitated back into the orbit of her previous ex-husband Peter, which was only the logical thing for her to do, as he has, even with his AIDS and *bipolar condition*, more vigor and rigor of mind and body

attaching to his person than I could even dream of possessing, I said to Ascher. I am old and useless and ineffectual, I said to Ascher. I relish being forgotten. I relish being discarded. The freedom that attaches to me is monumental, I said to Ascher. I never wanted to see what others have seen all along, I said to Ascher. All I have ever done is impose myself on people, I said to Ascher, with a conceit and an arrogance that only temporarily obscures the deep-down awareness that no one has ever ever wanted me. I seldom call Celeste, I said to Ascher. It is not for me to call Celeste, except as the rare occasion requires. It is always for Celeste to call me, I said to Ascher. Things would take a turn for the worse were I to call Celeste, I said to Ascher. She would say I was imposing on her, that I was crowding her, that I wasn't giving her room to breathe, that I was sucking the life's blood from her very body. All these things she would say to me, I said to Ascher. I must never position any woman so she can say such a thing to me, I said to Ascher. A woman by her very nature is prepared to say a man such as me is imposing on her. A woman is built to say such a thing, I said to Ascher. Celeste struck me hammer blows with such words until I yielded my position in the loft, I said to Ascher. That was many years ago, I said to Ascher, and yet that is her power, I said to Ascher. It is for all the world to see I live alone, I said to Ascher. It is for all the world to see the wounds I have inflicted but never the wounds that have been inflicted on me, I said to Ascher. My sole capacity is the capacity to love, I said to Ascher. It is the only talent I have been given, I said to Ascher. The more you love the more you will be ignored, I said to Ascher. Celeste has gone elsewhere, I said to Ascher. She has no more need of me, I said to Ascher. I am so well known to her that she has no choice but to turn me into a stranger, to say, in the middle of familiarity, *I do not know this man. I do not recognize a single one*

of his parts. How strange that I did not see this before. Celeste's circle of friends grows wider and wider. Ascher, did you hear me? Her power grows greater and greater. Ascher, are you listening? I said to Ascher. She has saved me by ruining me, I said to Ascher. She has tortured me into strength, I said to Ascher. A woman lives to get a man in the position where he spends the majority of his life waiting for the phone to ring and for it to be her on the line, but her calls can only come when you are not expecting them, I said to Ascher. My neediness feeds her need for distance, and she is committed to siphoning every last vestige of this neediness out of me, I said to Ascher. And the women of New York City are aiding and abetting her in my growing isolation because a simple law applies, I said to Ascher. The more a thing appears to be, the less it is, I said to Ascher. The more sex is in the air, the less it is on the ground, I said to Ascher. The more Victoria's Secret stores there are, the more women profess a desire to be scantily clad in the privacy of their homes, the more they express a desire for *the schwinging*, as the completely sexualized Ramona Skiles would say, the less available they are for that theater of action. Everything must be detached from, I said to Ascher. The phone must ring only when others have need of me, I said to Ascher. It must not and absolutely will not ring when I have need of them, I said to Ascher. All that has happened is that I have grown old, I said to Ascher. No one wants a man who has grown old, I said to Ascher. I am an old man with the lustful urges of the young, I said to Ascher. The meaning of the words *age-appropriate* are lost on me, I said to Ascher. Masturbation is a bodily need if we are not to see through the prism of sex, and for this purpose do I have X-rated tapes in my dresser drawer, I said to Ascher. The word *filth* gets applied too easily, I said to Ascher. I spent my whole life living with the concept of sin, and now I am at the point

where the body is just the body doing what it does, I said to Ascher. All my life I wanted my body to be more than it ever could be, I said to Ascher. I could not accept my eyes, my teeth, my hair, my weight. All my life I have had to stay alone because of the inferiority of my mind and my body, I said to Ascher. That God should dare to set me down here with a body and a mind such as mine, and subject me to unending humiliation, one harsh consonant after another in a surname like a long freight train, boxcar after boxcar rolling along when all you in your vehicle want to do is cross to the other side, I said to Ascher. That is what my name has been to me, a barrier keeping me from the other side, I said to Ascher. The waiting game has begun, I said to Ascher. The countdown has begun, I said to Ascher. I do what I can, I said to Ascher. I take walks in the park. I ride the subway. I visit museums. I have a sudden desire to see a baseball game and act on it. I participate in my life by getting up in the morning. On weekends I sit in the dark with a big bag of popcorn watching a rented movie on TV. I have three sessions of quiet time with myself each and every day. I take out the garbage. I wash the kitchen floor. I make sure my plants are never thirsty for long. I check that both doors are locked before retiring for the night, and I check that the apartment key is on the shelf in the vestibule and not in the front door lock so I cannot be said to be in sly conspiracy for my own demise as so many others are. Nothing happens unless a person wills it so, I said to Ascher. Nothing. I drink at least a gallon of bottled water each day so purity can flow through me. I sleep with my underwear close to my person. I place it under me so it will feel the full weight of me and show itself wrinkled come the morning. Sometimes my underwear escapes from me in the night and when I wake to pee and find it is not there I have no seeming option but to fly into panic and seek to locate the missing item. If it does

not come out of hiding readily, I strip the bed and if it still is not there I check the places where it has been known to go in the night—the kitchen chair or the bathtub or the dining table or the doorknob or spread out in wanton display on the floor—and I say to it, Come with me now, you who are the only thing with which I any longer have intimacy, come with me to the bed that I have made for us, come sleep with me for the duration of my night so I can have the comfort of your closeness where nothing else is allowed to reach, come press against my flesh and let me whisper to you in a child's voice my joy at being alone. All this Ascher was apprised of, in keeping with the dictate that a strict accounting be made of all my affairs, as Ascher was kept up-to-date on the many instances when, walking down the street, I have heard myself say *Honduran national economy*, words that I have never explored beyond their sound. Is it for me to take up the issue how we allow countries to fly their flags while taking their money? I said to Ascher. Is it for me to indict a governmental policy that I have been complicit with? I said to Ascher. I do not have the mind for such things, I said to Ascher. Instead, I spend time thinking of places to hide should danger threaten, as when I imagine myself surrounded by criminals who have many times crossed over into that forbidden territory of the murderer until they have taken up residence there, and now see that their faces express a perverse joy at the prospect of slowly torturing me to death. All this Ascher knew in the greatest detail, as he did my sudden metamorphosis, there in the midst of these sadists, into a gnat, yes a gnat, and though he gave not a hint of his feeling or reaction to this profound change, so reluctant was he to spend a single cent of emotion on me, nevertheless even Ascher had to be surprised that this virtual cloak of invisibility did not yield me the safety to which I aspired, and in fact increased the threat by ensuring that these veteran murderers would

be even more diabolical should they apprehend me in my lesser state. Though Ascher was not one to tip his hand, I have reason to believe he didn't lack the capacity *to think along with me* that the ones who live to lay hands on others might sense that I remained in their midst in a different form so that it was incumbent on me to remove myself entirely from their sight while *at the same time keeping alive the titillating threat of capture and annihilation*. It would not do to linger on the back of a murderer's trousers or on the blade of his knife or nest in follicle heaven atop his head. No, no, and no again, I said to Ascher. The point is only that minute size and great distance do not make for a sense of security. Ascher, I could be a speck on the horizon and still need more to ensure my safety from their planned horror, I said to Ascher. And so agitation lives within my fantasy, I said to Ascher. No peace of mind is to be had within my fantasy, I said to Ascher. Not once in the fantasy is the gnat allowed to relax its vigil, I said to Ascher. I want to go someplace where I can't be seen, a least for a while, I said to Ascher. I want to go into the darkness, I said to Ascher. I want to live within my own silences, I said to Ascher. No one in this society is allowed to call anyone else, I said to Ascher. Calling is too threatening. The sense of order breaks down when a call is made. You must have board approval, have reached the highest standards, before you are allowed to call anyone. Celeste has killed hundreds if not millions who have called her. They are bothering me with their calls. They are weighing me down with their calls. I cannot help them. I can only be sad for them, Celeste says in regard to these calls. It is always for me to allow people to call me. I must never call. To call is to impose upon. To call is to present the shadow of my illness from which the recipient must withdraw with disgust. All this I learned from Celeste, whose calls I must wait for, for I take my life in my hands

should I pick up the phone and dial her number. All this Ascher was completely informed about, as he was fully aware that it was ultimately for me to wait for her to go away completely, for that time when she would place more than a river between me and herself and when, in fact, she has placed life itself between me and her, that time when I have been reduced to a plenipotentiary of zero in her eyes and have no more weight, no more substance, than the falling leaves or the hanging strings that are well represented throughout the world. Every last bit of information about this predicament did filthy Ascher know, and that it was only for me to await the time when Celeste and I were perfect strangers to each other. And until this time I must do this interim waiting. Can you for a moment doubt that Ascher was not briefed with a full array of supporting documents as to the fact that there is no choice but to do this *interim waiting* because my life is predicated on not needing anything from anybody but only giving to anybody and everybody because I am *whole and complete within myself and sing the song of all universes in my soul*? How many times must a man say the words *whole and complete*? How many times must he say them in rooms with neither shadow nor light but only uneventful darkness and the *absence of flesh* to see him through? Many times did I tell the passively hostile Ascher that all is well in the universe when I can be with Celeste over dinner at our favorite little restaurant where the waiters know us and even assume we are *man and wife*. Will your wife be coming tonight? the waiter asks, if I have arrived early. Will your husband be joining you? the waiter asks Celeste, if my arrival has been delayed. Either way we tell the waiter nothing about our marital status. We don't use the "D" word with the waiter. There would be no point to using the "D" word with the waiter, as Celeste and I well know. Because it reassures the waiter to think that we are married. It

comforts his soul. All this I related to Ascher in minute detail, Ascher being the archivist of every thought and feeling I have ever known myself to have. Ascher was given a full picture of how Celeste and I conducted ourselves in that little restaurant. He knew the burdock root that Celeste favored and the salmon with ginger sauce I ordered with some concern for whether such fruit of the sea was clean and conducive to my health or undermining of my existence on this planet. Ascher knew of the mu tea we drank and the tofu pie we shared for dessert and the walks we took afterward, often to Riverside Park. All this Ascher knew in a way I could not let him forget. And he knew of the benches we sat on and the scampering dogs we stared at and the flowers we delighted in, as he knew of the trains with their mournful whistles that ran through the railroad tunnel below the park. Nor was he left in the dark about the quality of the fading light as evening announced itself ever more strongly, spreading its darkness with a gentle insistence that could not be ignored, the cylinder of time revolving and revolving and keeping us *within its spin*. All these things were committed to the care of his nonexistent memory. It does not matter what Ascher remembered or did not remember. It only matters that those things that were said were said so they could sound forever throughout the universe as their creation guaranteed. That is all meaning is, a track laid for the spoken word somewhere in the universe for it to travel round and round upon until all the tracks merge into one sound. Ascher knew my wound, knew that I have been steadily left by Celeste over the years, that Celeste now only sees me out of pity that drives her sense of obligation. All of this Ascher knew as he knew that Peter, who abused her frightfully, tightens his hold on her and consolidates the family unit I intruded on by reinstalling himself in Celeste's life. Ascher knew that even a man who is homosexual and has a male

lover has more staying power with Celeste than I could possibly hope to have. Ascher knew that my whole life has been the desperate attempt to be remembered when the only possible outcome, given the inferiority of the genetic material with which I was constituted, is to be entirely forgotten, and that this process is now only accelerating. Ascher knew that Celeste has been seeing me as a virtual stranger. Ascher, could he have deigned to be forthcoming, had to know this. Ascher, filthy filthy Ascher, knew that Celeste's father and mother are dying *even as I speak* in the East Side apartment where I first met them. Ascher was fully informed that Celeste's brilliant father is now a nonagenarian not even cognizant of his whereabouts. Ascher knew what Celeste meant when she told me cryptically and repeatedly that her father was not who I thought he was. Ascher knew this because I lodged the information in his brain. Ascher knew that for several years following our separation Celeste did not see this father of hers, refused to speak with him and ordered me not to have the slightest contact with him *lest he reach out and grab her through me*. Celeste's father was a German Jew who had the foresight to leave Nazi Germany while he still could. He came with his cultural identity well intact and *his feet on the ground*. Celeste's father was a smooth-running machine who could make things happen, I said to Ascher. But there is no need to say a word more about Celeste's father, I said to Ascher. Celeste has always been longing for death, I said to Ascher, at the same time as she has always been fearing death, I also said to Ascher. *I want to die* are the first words I ever heard Celeste speak, I said to Ascher. There were times when I feared she would die, I said to Ascher, times when the monumental pain of having been set upon by her father would give her no choice but to die. But that time has passed, I said to Ascher. Celeste grows stronger by the minute, I said to Ascher. Celeste

now only calls to inquire how I am doing, the days long past when I could offer her help and support. Now it is only for me to share what is going on in my life. Studies have shown the perfunctory nature of her calls, which she makes from a sense of obligation and obligation only, I said to Ascher. Celeste is built to leave people, I said to Ascher. Celeste is built to pity people, I said to Ascher. I have joined the camp of the pitiful, I said to Ascher. Celeste has girlfriends. They are drawn to her, I said to Ascher. She has something they want, though in most cases they don't know what that thing is. The truth is that Celeste feels sorry for them. She only sees them because she doesn't want to hurt their feelings, as I explained to Ascher. And now she has placed me in the same category as these pitiable souls. Celeste has gotten from me all she ever wanted or needed and now I am of no use to her. She has seen my limitation. She has seen I cannot talk about music or art. She has seen I am not three-dimensional but bound to the word. She would have said good-bye long ago were it not for my complaint that she had forgotten my birthday. Not that it was a complaint so much as an expression of sadness, I said to Ascher. The state of my life is that I spent my fiftieth birthday alone without so much as a single phone call, I said to Ascher, reminding him that no one can do a birthday like I can do a birthday. Since I was a child I have been separating myself and being alone on my birthday. Since I was a child I have gone off by myself on my birthday and fallen in love with my own tears. No one had better dare to give me a single thing on my birthday, I said to Ascher. I am too good and not good enough to be given things on my birthday, I said to Ascher. No one must threaten my sense of deprivation on my birthday, I said to Ascher. My birthday is my deprivation, I said to Ascher. A man needs nothing more than his deprivation to feel whole and complete. The world is utterly meaningless and

unbearable without a sense of deprivation. Ascher knew the origin of this wound. He knew how I have kept it open for my entire life. How can a son want the very man he has killed, the man he has assassinated and exterminated for his entire life? Such a desire is absurd, I said to Ascher. It takes a patricide to know a patricide, I said to Ascher. Though he would admit to nothing, Ascher and I were together as long as we were because we had both killed our fathers soon after we were born. As for the ridiculous Jeb Wilkes, he will not even acknowledge having a father. It is a word he does not ever allow to pass his lips. To come near Lucinda Blakely, one and all must first renounce their allegiance to their fathers. Lucinda Blakely does not allow other gods before her, she says, in opening her little book. Have you renounced and denounced your father? she says to Smathers Billingsley and he can only affirm that he has, if he is not to be banished forever from the court of Lucinda Blakely. Lucinda Blakely does not care in the least that I was once married to Celeste and Jeb Wilkes has shown not one iota of interest either. It is not in their nature to care *one iota* about my life given the power that Smathers Billingsley holds over them, as was so clearly demonstrated at the deplorable and histrionics-filled memorial service where the two of them threw themselves on Smathers Billingsley, Lucinda Blakely opening not one but seven—seven—of her hideous little books, seeking to book Smathers Billingsley into her life in perpetuity. The sight of such fawning behavior summoned pain so acute as to cause me to shriek that the fundamental truth of my life was to maintain the primacy, real or imagined, of my relationship with my mother in all subsequent relationships. No other god could be before me but the god of recognition, I further shouted, right there the memorial service, as I dutifully reported to Ascher himself. To love a father is to die for a father. Luke understood this better than

anyone. I am dying for you, Father, Luke said, all throughout his life. Watch me die for you, Father, Luke said, all throughout his life. Are you happy, father? Are you, happy? Are you complete seeing that I remain incomplete? Luke asked our father all throughout his life. Our father did not answer. Our father could not be bothered to answer, some will dare to say, *and they know who they are*, when in fact it takes great love and compassion never to answer a child. A father cannot be expected to answer when he has other things on his mind. A father understands that it is a supreme compliment never to be answered by a father, that in fact it is a strengthening device that all true fathers use to ensure the growth of their sons. Words only get in the way of love, these fathers say, *if they were ever to say anything*. A father can never be a father unless he believes in the complete power of silence. A true father embraces with utter conviction the simple truth that to withhold is to love. No father who isn't withholding and in fact thoroughly denying can ever even approximate love, these fathers know. A true father wants his son to listen to the wind and examine the parched desert for signs of life. A true father wants his son deposited in a town of desolation through which the tumbleweed blows. A true father wants his son to be delivered through his tears to the surrendered place. A true father wants a hunger that hurts in his son's belly and for that son to know that the party of life is elsewhere and for the son to reach the point that he doesn't care that there is a party or life or any of it at all. A true father believes in cracked lips and the sun beating down on an uncovered head. *Ascher, you were my Harvard and my Yale. In giving nothing, you gave everything*. My father gave Luke a shoeshine box. Go out and shine some shoes, my father said to Luke. Go on now, get those shoes shined. There are men out there with scuffed shoes. Those shoes must be shined, and now. Those were the only words my

father was on record as having spoken to Luke, I said to Ascher. And then Luke died. He died in the way he had to die. Luke fell dead of a heart attack while trying to lift a heavy parcel. Luke had no business lifting heavy parcels. He was not equipped for such a circumstance. Luke's weight was a heavy parcel. Luke had no need of other heavy parcels. Luke died while trying to help his only son. His only son killed him no more than I did, I said to Ascher. No one in my immediate environment cared that Luke had died, I said to Ascher. Even as I announced the death of my brother Luke, Lucinda Blakely was opening her book to nail down Smathers Billingsley even more than she had. Even as I announced the death of my brother Luke, Jeb Wilkes was going on and on about how wretched a son he had been to his mother and kneeling at the feet of Lucinda Blakely. Does the loathsome Velma shed one tear anymore over the passing of Ascher, or does she drink like even more of a fish on her luxury cruises? The world is full of the histrionic and the austere, I said to the deceased Ascher. The world is full of its own deceit and treachery, I said to Ascher who was no more and whom I loved for lending such a consistently deaf ear. There is no point in talking to anyone but the dead, I said to the departed Ascher. At least from them one can expect a modicum of good behavior and the silence they are known for, I said to the long vanished Ascher. May darkness fall on the entire world I brought into being, I said to the absent Ascher. May the silence of love finally reign.

