NAEEM MURR

The Writer

Beneath the low swell of a gray sky, Daniel Mulvaugh walked slowly down Church Street toward the man with one leg, the writer. He was there, somewhere, in that council estate at the bottom of the hill.

Daniel was a tall, slender man with a military bearing. He wore a thick mustache to compensate for his baldness and to cover his uneven teeth. Though his jaw and nose were coarsely masculine, his large eyes were softly brown and almond-shaped.

On coming to the church on Church Street—Our Lady Queen of Peace—Daniel stopped. He put his briefcase down and burrowed his cold hands into his pockets.

Lilac sprouted from the broken tiles of the roof. Beneath the parapet jutted gargoyles made featureless by acid rain. The windows and the main doors were boarded shut.

Who could imagine he'd once been married in this church? That he'd once stood at its altar so nervous, so distracted, he hadn't noticed anything strange about his bride, no discrepancy in her voice or even in her hand as he'd placed the ring upon it. When he'd lifted her veil to kiss her, he'd been confronted by nothing but hair. Sally had been standing backwards all the time, had worn her wedding dress back to front and was now shaking with laughter. *I have no breasts and I'm double-jointed. It was a chance in a lifetime.* Her girlfriends in the congregation clapped and whistled. Daniel's mother sat like a stone fury.

Now, as a few raindrops were cast like a handful of seeds onto the pavement, Daniel almost smiled. He loved Sally. He had loved her.

He reached out and took hold of the church's cast-iron gate. He felt tense, as if he had to do something. So often now he was afflicted by this diffuse impatience. It was getting worse as he aged, perhaps because it had no real cause, he thought, because generally, outside work, he had nothing in particular to do, nowhere specifically to go. He released the rails, wiped the rust from his hands, and walked on.

This morning, Misty had come into his office to show him the letter from the man with one leg. His limb had apparently been severed by an aluminum beer barrel that had fallen through a cellar hatch. For the past five years, he'd

been receiving supplementary benefit, rent benefit, and a disability allowance. But now the new government, like a scruffy schoolboy, was poking its stick into the anthills of its institutions: the D.H.S.S. was to integrate the disabled into the work force. *They should just call it the D.H. Shutzstaffel, and be done with it*, Misty had said. But acting under this new edict, she had, a few months ago, tried to get the man with one leg to attend a government rehabilitation course. He responded with a polite letter of refusal. She then informed him that if he didn't accept the position they were holding for him, his benefits would be withheld. The result was the letter she brought in to show Daniel.

My dear friends at the D.H.S.S.:

I wish to express regret at my negligence toward you. Your generous and hitherto unconditional sponsorship has been invaluable to me. The real problem I have with rehabilitation is that I am already habilitated—equipped, that is, with all I need for my vocation. I'm a writer. At this point in time, I wish to continue the experiments of Henri Gauche, who had claimed, as a proud young man, that he could bring an entirely imagined human existence to life simply through description. A few young blades at his club challenged his honor over this—isn't *hubris* the seed of all greatness?—and he began work on a fictitious woman called Elise Essouffle in 1896. After a year of dedicated writing, his friends withdrew the bet, and his family became worried. But it was too late. He was obsessed. He was in love. A further seven abject years of dedicated writing achieved nothing. But then, one cold morning in March, sunk in the most profound despair, he made a fractional alteration to the manuscript and immediately felt the paper begin to warm. Thus revived, he worked on for a further twelve years, giving up his youth and irreparably corrupting his health. In July of 1915, he wrote to a friend that the paper had broken into a fine sweat. In the following nineteen years, he lost that heat and sweat innumerable times, and was driven even to attempt suicide (luckily, le Ruisseau Bafouillant was more shallow than he'd anticipated). One day, on the brink of despair and now nearing complete blindness, he crossed out what he thought was the word livid—in fact, the word he erased was lurid. Suddenly, he felt the faint pulse of her heart. Thirty years later, his tenacious life at last abandoned him. On the morning of the 28th of July, 1965, Henri Gauche's body was carried down la Rue Interminable to the cemetery. Directly behind the coffin shuffled a woman in black. She had a rather sour and suspicious face, and stooped a little. Her dress was not ugly, but well behind the times. "Let's face it," whispered one of Henri's old friends to another as

he nodded toward this woman, "his prose always lacked grace."

My friends, your generous contribution to my sustenance will not be forgotten.

Your humble servant,
Amos Radcliff

She read Daniel the letter because it amused her. They shared the same sardonic humor. But she'd entered his office just at the moment he'd been afflicted by that restlessness, the restlessness of a tree, so pinioned to the earth, struck by the wind. I've been honest and worked hard all my life, he thought as he listened to her reading the letter. He then snatched it from Misty's baffled hand.

"I think we should just forget him," Misty said, regretful now. "What does it matter if one gets through the net?"

He replied, simply, that he would deal with it.

Apart from some obvious signs of education, he didn't really believe that this Radcliff would be different from anyone else in those estates, the kind of people he had to deal with every day. He couldn't distinguish them any more. But there was a difference: for some reason, he still felt angry at this man. For once, he was focused.

Radcliff lived on the same council estate in which Daniel had grown up, right at the center of that conspiracy of ugliness called Lambeth. The sky was part of it, and the rubbish in the streets, and the indolent men in doorways waiting for the pubs, waiting for the bookies, or just waiting. Almost everyone he'd known growing up was on the dole or in prison. Of all his nine brothers and sisters, he was the only one to have gone beyond the comprehensive. He wasn't in contact with any of them now. His brothers kept asking him for money, and his sisters cohabited with men who divided their time between procreation and sitting in black nylon socks behind a tabloid. He'd gone away—to Bath, to Paris, to Nairobi—but he'd always come back. There was something morbid in that. It made him think of how he hadn't been able to sleep on the night before his mother's burial. He kept returning to her coffin in the sitting room, not believing that all her hard and pallid years had ended. And having grown up here, how could you do anything but return? What could you become when this gray seed was inside you, when this stiver of the spectrum was your pallet, when beauty was a single horse chestnut shedding its blossoms in the street?

He now entered a small park within a square of derelict houses. The paddling pool at its center was, after all these years, still surrounded by a wire fence. It had been closed off when he was young because people kept throwing

bottles into it, and so those summer days became punctuated by the screams of children.

Sally, surfacing only briefly, he knew, from her depression, had brought him here one night toward the end of their marriage and convinced him to climb over the fence with her. She held his hand and they sat without speaking beside the water. Each sound that disturbed them hung upon their silence as the leaves and fragments of bark and sycamore seeds hung upon the surface tension of the pool. That night, as she slept, he examined her face, its precarious peace, and he felt that if he touched her, she would break into liquid and glass.

He paused for a moment before the pool and tried to imagine her with him. He couldn't. His head throbbed. He felt guilty for a moment, and suddenly angry. Was her sickness his fault? She'd told him that he was not the man she'd married. And he'd said, if he didn't work, what would they eat? And when the child came, what would they clothe it in? Was it his fault she couldn't conceive? A few times they'd woken up in her blood. Hadn't he cleaned it efficiently and told her not to worry? *Not worry? You stand there with my blood on you as if it's your blood and you tell me not to worry?*

Was it his fault that she always felt there should be something more? that he simply had less faith in life? Was it his fault that he was not enough to keep her within the small region of this rational world, this world of intersticing conversations, of mealtimes and washing up, of friends you can never bear for one reason or another, but whom you nevertheless invite to dinner weekend after weekend? That was life. That was what life was. She just didn't believe it.

He should go to visit her, he knew, in that pale institution with its maundering hallways and smell of antiseptic flowers. No longer officially a patient, she still lived on the grounds. When he visited, they would sit in her little room avoiding the past. They would sit, a hub of pure and devoid sanity, the tea in china cups and she in a starched blouse.

No, he would not go back to her. He could not love again. That he knew. He could not be not seen again. He must forget her. He must forget.

He moved on quickly through the park and onto Walnut Street, at the end of which was the council estate. Nearby, he heard the voices of children, and, within this, another sound, high-pitched, insistent, and eerie. He couldn't see anything, but as he passed by an off-license and a curry house, he came to a vacant lot.

Near the street, a torn couch lay beside an upturned cooker. At the center of the lot a crowd of children surrounded something.

He began to walk on, but then that cry came again. It hurt him somehow.

his face and his head suggested a mild electric shock. His eyes and mouth brimmed with an enigmatic humor that ran into his leathery face by way of numerous wrinkles. He wore nylon pajamas that were too small for him—red paisley on a blue background—and a pair of ragged brown tartan slippers. Daniel noticed that in these slippers were two feet, and extending from these two feet, two legs.

When Daniel took Amos's proffered hand, he felt immediately an almost unnatural strength.

"I'll make you a nice cup of tea," Amos said, taking his coat. He led Daniel through a small hallway and into a sitting room. He flung the coat over the back of a black vinyl couch, gestured for Daniel to sit down, and disappeared into the kitchen.

To Daniel, the place smelled as all such places smell—sour, greasy, dusty, a generic odor that the council provided at no extra cost with the rooms. Everything was as it should be: the couch's black vinyl torn to reveal a red interior like an open wound, the impatiens upon the battered steel filing cabinet, the gas fire with an orange light flickering beneath a plastic simulation of coals, the large model of the HMS Ark Royal bought no doubt with green shield stamps, the Russian doll within a doll within a doll, the Silver Jubilee commemoration plates upon the wall, snow globes, engraved goblets, barometers stuck to pieces of rock. In short, all those things one sees in dismal little tourist shops, and about which one wonders, who on earth buys them? But nobody actually does buy them, Daniel thought. They too, like elephants, have their secret graveyard, that place to which they instinctively migrate after a weary shelf life. And here it was. He'd stumbled upon it.

Even the photographs, he felt, were not of anyone in particular. The same ones in all these places. How many had he visited? If Amos came out of the kitchen transformed into a woman holding a leaking child, or an adolescent scratching himself as if his awkward youth were a skin he could tear away, it would not surprise him.

Daniel noticed a shiny ball lying in an ashtray upon the top of the filing cabinet. He picked it up. It was steel, smooth and heavy. Absently, he wandered back to the couch with the ball, hefting it in his palm. He heard the man behind him returning with the tea. Suddenly embarrassed to be touching this man's things, and remembering his powerful grip, Daniel closed his hand quickly over the ball, and as he turned around to sit, slipped it into his trouser pocket.

Amos clattered the tray of tea things down upon the coffee table in front of the couch. He sat opposite Daniel in a shabby armchair and poured the tea. Daniel's mug was white with a big red heart on the side. Before his eyes, as

He made his way over the rubble and into the children, some of whom ran away.

It was a fox, whining and snarling, tied to a jut of steel. It stumbled, one of its rear legs broken. Only one eye remained, one dark, soft eye. A fat child with a crew cut stared vacantly at Daniel. He carried a stick that he suddenly lifted and brought down upon the fox's back. The stick broke. The fox staggered, squealed, and looked around as if actually surprised. Daniel lunged at the boy, but at that moment a steel pipe struck his shin and a stone hit his cheek. The rest of the children scattered as he picked up the pipe.

The fox snarled, limped, fell, staggered to its feet. Impulsively, he tried to reach for it, but it snapped at him. He felt a wetness on his cheek and expected blood, but discovered he was crying. What was he to do? Release it? But it was dead. It was dying. He would find a telephone. As he began to walk away, the children, who'd been standing at the outskirts of the lot, closed in. He felt furious and hopeless. With the steel pipe in his hand, he strode back to the fox. It swayed as if drunk and looked up at him, its good eye blinking softly. The white fur beneath its muzzle was matted with blood. He struck it one firm blow between its dark ears. It fell ridiculously, its front legs splayed, its head bowed, its tongue lolling.

Casting down the pipe, he walked away. The children watched him. He saw now how young some of them were. They would remember this. As he entered the estate, he glanced back to see them returning across the rubble to the dead fox.

Daniel's shin throbbed and his cheek stung as he stood in the lift, which shuddered and squealed. It reeked of urine.

He remained for a long while before Radcliff's door, number 1317. It seemed to him like a door into nothing, into a sheer drop of thirteen stories. He knocked, waited a few minutes, and was just about to return to the lift when he heard the sound of numerous bolts being drawn. The door cracked, and a sprightly face appeared.

"Mr. Radcliff?"

"It is he."

"My name is Daniel Mulvaugh. I'm from the D.H.S.S."

"Did you say Radcliff? Let me see if he's in."

"What are you looking for, Mr. Radcliff, a mirror?"

The man scrutinized Daniel for a moment before fully opening the door. He smiled and looked down at himself.

"Ah yes, here I am. Come on in."

He was not much shorter than Daniel, but appeared short because he was so thickset. Even his coarse hands were muscular. The gray, unkempt hair on

he took the cup, the heart paled from red to pink and the words *I love you* emerged.

Amos poured his own tea and sat back, regarding Daniel with, it seemed, warm expectation.

"Well, Mr. Radcliff," Daniel began, "it's quite remarkable what they can do with a prosthesis nowadays, isn't it?"

"A what?"

"What's it made of? Whalebone? Screw it off for me, let's have a gander."

"I seem to have missed you somewhere."

"Mr. Radcliff," Daniel continued officiously, enjoying himself. He pulled out a manila file from his briefcase and opened it. "For the past five years—correct me if I'm wrong—you've been receiving a disability allowance. I have here receipts for a wheelchair and twelve new prostheses—an inordinate number; somebody actually queried it here. But I've discovered your problem, Mr. Radcliff: you have nowhere to put them."

Amos listened to him generously, as if he were someone with only the bare rudiments of English.

"So?" Daniel prompted.

Amos raised his eyebrows conspiratorially, reached up to the breast pocket of his pajamas, and removed a small leather pouch. After lifting it to his nose, apparently to inhale its odor, he opened it and took out a wooden pipe and an array of cleaning materials. He unscrewed the pipe's stem, flicked it a few times, and then began to clean it.

"I went to a healer," he said finally.

"A healer?"

"Of course, I don't believe in them—I'm not completely insensitive to Locke, Hume, Brecht, and their ilk—but I have to tell you, he was the genuine article. He had cobalt eyes, a pitch-black beard, and bright red hair. That has healer written all over it, doesn't it. If you're interested, he has a little flat above an undertaker's in Aldershot. Don't mention my name, though. First time I went, I did the most terrible thing. I was unused to the whole business, so when he fell into his healing frenzy, I tried to shove a teaspoon into his mouth. I chipped one of his front teeth. He wasn't a happy healer."

"Well, he couldn't have been that unhappy if he regenerated your limb."

"What limb? Oh, that limb. Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't exactly lose that limb."

"Did you just misplace it perhaps."

"It was very sore."

"Oh really."

"*Very* sore. I was hit by a truck on the South Circular—a bloody Frog. It was early in the morning, no traffic. Bugger was driving on the wrong side of the road, wasn't he."

"According to this, Mr. Radcliff, you were hit by a beer barrel. Was this truck carrying beer?"

"Come to think of it, it was."

"You were also apparently in a cellar. How about this: The truck hit you into an open cellar, then turned over, spilled its load of beer barrels, one of which rolled into the cellar and amputated your leg."

"Excellent. You should write for the B.B.C."

"Do you realize, Mr. Radcliff, the seriousness of this?"

"Of what?"

"You've been claiming unemployment benefit, rent benefit, and a disability allowance for five years. Not only will you have to pay this money back—"

"You're not going to stop my payments, are you?"

"Not only will you have to pay this money back—"

"How am I going to live?"

"Well, I know this is probably an outrageous suggestion, but you could get a job."

"Don't you dare use that kind of language in this house."

Daniel put the folder back into his briefcase and stood up. He was not angry really, just in despair at the dismal reality of this man's existence. Amos seemed alarmed. He dropped his pipe stem on the coffee table and stood also, putting his hands out to placate Daniel.

"Listen," Amos said gently. "Listen. I have a job. I wrote to you. I have a job. I'm an artist."

"Mr. Radcliff, this government isn't in the business of patronage. You seem to feel that this money is owed to you."

"Well, I come from a long line of those who've accepted the king's shilling for one thing or another. But listen, Danny, I can see in you a sensitive soul. It's as plain as day. I see in you someone who can understand. I have to be able to do my work. It's up to you. If you'll just forget me, those checks, which you have to admit hardly keep me in luxury, will continue coming through that door. I know you want to run a tight ship, but don't become so obsessed you run aground."

"I haven't got time to listen to this. I've had to work all my life, Mr. Radcliff. I've worked hard. I've never taken a single unnecessary day off. I've never shirked my responsibilities. I've never accepted the 'king's shilling' as

you put it, except for services rendered. I've paid my taxes, and I have never been in debt."

"I'm proud of you, Daniel. We're all proud of you," Amos said cloyingly. "You're a pillar in the temple, you're a Moslem in the brewery, you're a eunuch in the harem, but—"

"Frankly . . . frankly, I find it contemptible—"

"Contemptible is a shirker, my pillar, my solid oak. Contemptible are those gaunt demons that live upon our backs and whisper of their abjectness into our ears. You want to know about suffering; you want to know about dedication; you want to know about those whose solvency is spiritual, those whose integrity is no mere scaffolding, no system of braces and joists, then let me tell you a story, my friend. Sit yourself down."

"I will listen, Mr. Radcliff, but I will stand."

"As you wish. At least finish your tea. It's a pity to waste it."

Daniel felt a strange tremulousness in his stomach, as if his insides were about to dissolve. It seemed to him now that if he put out his hand, it would go right through Amos Radcliff, that this man was a mere effluvium of this clutter of things. Sadness descended into him, filled his limbs with obscurity. Didn't he have to help him? Wasn't that his job, to care? He sat down.

Amos sat too, leaned confidentially across the coffee table, and rubbed his hands. His face affected a mysterious depth.

"Ivan Ivanovitch was heir to a great fortune. As a young Russian noble, he used his vast resources to experience everything he could. He traveled the world, lived years of orgiastic excess in which he went further than Sade in plumbing the depths of human abjectness. But he also lived years of physical abnegation as a monk, mortifying his flesh, embracing lepers, drinking the spittle of consumptives, and so forth. He fought in the Napoleonic wars, killed many men, and was almost killed many times. All this before he was thirty. On his thirtieth birthday he retired to his country estate just outside St. Petersburg and began to write. You see, he was driven by a desire to write the definitive thing. He wrote and wrote and wrote all day, every day. It absorbed him entirely. Behind his back, of course, he was being robbed blind by his relatives. Paper was brought to him by the cartload, and over the course of the next ten years, he filled the whole cellar of his mansion with sheets covered in his cramped hand. Finally, he moved himself and his desk down to the cellar in order to be among his carefully stacked and numbered sheets, and over the next decade he wrought them into a great work of fifty hefty volumes. Not once in that period did he leave the cellar. Food and bedpans were brought to him by Osip, his valet, the one servant who still remained loyal.

At the end of that ten years, Osip heard him stamping up the stairs and waited in solemn anticipation. Ivan Ivanovitch emerged like some submarine beast, the now completely bald dome of his head breaking the surface for a moment. He snorted. He frowned. He looked at Osip without seeing him, and then about-turned and sank back into his world. More years passed, and he wrought these fifty volumes into ten, these ten into three, these three into one—one slim volume. And then one Sunday, as Osip was putting on the samovar and preparing his master's lunch in the kitchen, he heard him ascending the stairs, his step light and unsure. Once more that bald head broke the surface, and he held that single volume in his trembling hands. He was a ruined man, wheezing, etiolated, his body covered in sores. But again, his brow furrowed and he submerged. More years went by. He worked upon that volume until he'd distilled it to a handful of pages, then to a page, then to a paragraph, then to a single sentence, and then to a word. One word. *The* word. They have it now in the Museum in Moscow, written legibly, but with a shaking hand onto a moldering piece of parchment. And that same word is carved into the monument set over his grave . . . . *That's* integrity. *That's* dedication. Daniel, all I'm asking is that you forget me. I have great work ahead of me. Great work. You have to do so little to give me freedom. What is nothing for you is life for me."

"So, what was the word?" Daniel asked, despite himself.

"What word?"

"What was the word?"

"Oh . . . . Well, it's been so long since I've been to Moscow."

Daniel stood up.

"I can't believe I even asked you."

Amos stood also and snatched Daniel's coat from the couch, holding it out as if to help him on with it. Daniel felt indignant at this action, which seemed to mock him.

"The truth is," Amos said, "it just loses too much in translation."

"Mr. Radcliff," Daniel said, trying to seem merely weary as he slid his arm into the right sleeve of the proffered coat, "let me tell you that what you've done is a criminal offense and will be dealt with as such."

Amos quickly put his own left arm into the other sleeve, and there they stood, squeezed shoulder to shoulder, bound by the straining cloth of the coat.

"You can't leave like this," Amos said. "We might never see one another again. . . . Look, I know I'm wrong. I know I'm being frivolous. Please let's sit down. Let me find out at least what my options are. I think I might have some chocolate digestives. Let's talk."

Daniel pulled his arm out of the coat's sleeve and sat down. Amos also

divested himself of the coat and hurried into the kitchen, returning with a small plate piled with crumbled up chocolate biscuits.

"I get the broken ones for half price at the co-op. I have a mate there who drops a couple of packs while shelving every week."

"Couldn't he drop them from a lower shelf?"

"His name's Rupert Tomchit. I think further than that he shouldn't be taxed."

"All right. Well, let's get to business."

"Before that, tell me a little about yourself, my friend."

"I'm not here to tell you about myself, Mr. Radcliff."

"Do you mean here in my flat or here on this Earth?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You're an interesting fellow, my solid oak. I can spot a government official from a mile off. But when I saw you at the door, you fooled me completely. I made the mistake of looking at your face instead of at your shoes—so comfortable, so . . . brown. You see, you seemed lost, bewildered. You seemed sad. You seemed as if you were at my door on anything but official business. It even struck me for a moment that you were the second coming, not slouching toward Bethlehem, but ambling from Clapham Common, set upon this Earth as innocent as a babe with my address in your hand, 1317 Hicks House."

"That occurred to you, did it."

"For a moment. But let me give you a word of advice: you can never trust a face. The world is inscrutable. Shall I tell you how I learned that?"

"Well, you obviously *didn't* learn it if you let me in, did you."

"Has anyone ever told you you're astute, Daniel—don't answer, it's rhetorical."

"Look, is it short?"

"Is life short?"

"For God's sake . . . ."

"Good. If you're sitting comfortably, I'll begin." He picked up his pipe stem, squinted through it, and then began to clean it again. "In my wayward youth, my friend, the government, solicitous as it was, gave me full room and board in Broadmoor for a year or so."

"What did you do?"

"What do we all do, Daniel? Anyway, in the gaol, the most feared man was a man called Charley Samson, who became later known as Squirrel. I'll tell you, he was a beast of a man, a man beset by his own bulk. His face was suitably pugilistic, but unfortunately for him, he had curly blond locks and eyes that glimmered with a beatific light. He'd been a soldier in Northern

Ireland, and during an engagement with a sniper in the streets, his M-16 had backfired. His face bore small flecks of scars, some white, some black, and his tear ducts had been so badly damaged that tears issued almost constantly from his eyes. He'd been in and out of gaol almost all his life for various crimes of violence. Now he was in for good: just a few weeks before I arrived for my sojourn, he'd beaten his cellmate to death . . . .

"You see, it was the custom at the Moor to give your cellmates on the anniversary of their incarceration some joke gift. My cellmate gave me a pot of honey—but that's another story. Samson's cellmate gave him a tin of caulking. They'd been cellmates for four years. I suppose that's what made him feel he could get away with it. I imagine he'd hoped, on the tacit guarantee of that hair and those eyes, even to elicit a smile from Samson.

"After that, Samson was, of course, put in solitary confinement. But he was allowed into the yard for the one hour we all had for break at one o'clock.

"Now, in the center of the yard stood a single horse chestnut. For the prisoners, that tree was our seasons; it allowed us to still feel ourselves part of the world beyond the walls. Walking past the cells, I'd often see a man examining a leaf, feeling the relief of its veins, smelling its scent on his fingers. That tree brought us sound in its movements, in the birds it sometimes attracted; it brought us color in its blossoms, and texture in its bark. All the other colors, sounds, and textures available to us—the radios, the cold steel of the mattresses, the lurid pictures on our walls—were merely an emanation of our imprisonment.

"I don't mean to tell you that these were gentle men, or that they were good men. In my time there, I saw things I will never stop seeing . . . ."

Amos's face became grave, intense, immobile with remembering. Daniel felt suddenly a deep regret for his flippancy and his condescension. Amos regarded him abstractedly for a moment, and then got up from his chair. He went over to the battered steel filing cabinet and searched through its drawers. He took something from the lowest drawer, returned to his seat, and deposited on the coffee table between them a chestnut in its wizened casing.

"I don't know why I keep these things . . . . Where was I?"

"The tree."

"Yes. And one day, of all things, there was a squirrel in it. Who knows how it had scaled those walls. I think many of us believed it had been born from the tree itself. Whatever the case, there it was in the branches, chattering imperiously down at all of us.

"Now, one day, Samson, who usually kept to his own place in the yard—a little niche in which he stood like a grotesque sculpture, watching us all with his sad eyes, tears, as always, streaming down his chaffed, scarred face—well,

one day he began to walk toward the tree. As he walked he seemed to be frowning somewhat self-consciously, and I remember feeling surprised, even touched by his discomfort at the general scrutiny. He walked toward the tree in the way that you approach someone you've decided to confront, someone popular who'd glibly insulted you. His right fist was clenched, and I honestly believed he was about to punch the tree. Instead, he hunkered down and released from that fist a pile of crushed walnuts.

"A friend of mine, Zarkees, worked in the office, which had a view of the yard. He told me that he'd seen the squirrel come down to take the walnuts a little while after we'd all gone back to our cells.

"Each day, Samson coaxed the squirrel. Everyone stood away from the tree now, though, as you could imagine, it was a favorite spot. We did this half out of fear for this brutal, remorseless man, and half out of an interest as to where this was leading. After a few weeks, he managed to get the squirrel to come down during the recreation period, though it would still scatter at the slightest sound.

"As time went on, Samson extended the nuts farther and farther from the tree toward his habitual position in the yard, and in this way, slowly, he drew the squirrel toward him. All the prisoners were engrossed. I remember, at break, some of them almost running to get a good position.

"Day by day the squirrel came closer to Samson, who utterly effaced himself in his niche, staring at it with an expression of what seemed to be fearful anticipation. I'll tell you, it was an amazing sight—not just him, but all those men, those misanthropes and miscreants, holding their breaths, absorbed in the movements of this erratic little creature. It used to make me think of my father, who'd remained absolutely stoic when he received the news of my brother's death, but when Bog died—one of our sheep dogs—he'd wept inconsolably.

"Anyway, one day, Samson placed the nuts upon his shoe, obviously too nervous to hold them in his hand. He seemed to be trying to blend himself with the wall as the squirrel approached. There was such a hush in the yard. The squirrel stopped for a moment at his boot, sniffed cautiously, but then, like a bather into cold water, it inched itself upon the black leather. It took a nut and chewed it, standing to do this, balancing itself precariously. There were nuts all the way up the laces and into the tongue. The squirrel seemed content. For a moment, it nuzzled itself beneath its arm.

"It was over in a split-second. With lightening speed, Charley snatched it up by its neck and stuffed it into a small burlap sack that his other hand had produced from his pocket.

"I'll tell you, my friend, it was as if there were a fish hook dug into each

one of our hearts, and a fine, steel thread that led from all these hooks to the small life trapped in that bag. He was holding our hearts in his coarse hand. This was perhaps his aim, the almost admirable ambition of his brutality. Every man in that yard stood mute and suffering.

"He walked up to the tree. I thought for a moment he was going to strike the bag against it. Some of the men inched a little closer, but in his hand he had us. He was smiling; tears coursed down his cheeks. Suddenly, he began to run. The men scattered before him, and then with a great heave, he flung the writhing bag over the wall .... Are you married, Daniel?"

"Is that a true story?"

"True? Of course it's true. Are you married?"

"I *was* married."

"Divorced?"

"She's divorced."

"You didn't want to divorce her?"

"I didn't want her to be divorced." His voice raised.

Amos tugged pensively at his lower lip and seemed to examine Daniel. Now Daniel saw his eyes. They were cold and inhospitable. Amos himself seemed lost in them. How hadn't he noticed them before? Was it just that the rest of his face, so full of humor and warmth, could never have intimated such eyes? Daniel looked away.

"Where is she now?" Amos persisted.

"She's not anywhere."

"Is she dead?"

"I suppose so."

"How did she die?"

"Very slowly ... very slowly. She might not even be quite dead yet."

Daniel felt ashamed of himself. In his head he was asking her for forgiveness. Finally, he looked back up at Amos's face, avoiding his eyes. He saw that his brow was wrought, his expression fierce with suffering.

"You know, I was eighteen," Amos said, "when I met the first woman I ever loved. I met her at a hospital in Bangkok—we were both being sewn up."

"What do you mean, sewn up?"

"Well, when I first got off the boat at Bangkok, I met this man who told me that his girls were choice. He led me to a corrugated iron lean-to at the outskirts of the city. Inside it was this old woman and six naked children. When we walked in, she shouted at the children and they all lay facedown. High up on their backs were written prices in what looked like lipstick, and tattooed below these prices were very badly translated obscene phrases. I re-

fused. I turned to leave, and then felt a little punch in my side. It was so ineffectual, I didn't even bother to turn around.

"Then I wandered about lost in the streets for a while. I was sweating like a pig. I reached my hand down to feel the back of my leg, which seemed to be literally running with sweat, and brought it up covered in blood. . . .

"The hospital was very crowded. I was lying facedown on a bench having the wound in my side stitched up, and right in front of me sat a tall Oriental girl. She had a lovely face, very black hair, and blue eyes. She was having the back of her head sewn up. A thick rope of braided hair lay coiled in her lap. One end was matted with blood. Her father had cut it off with a bread knife after he'd caught her sitting in a bar with some Filipino sailors. I found this out later. In the hospital, we didn't speak at all. They weren't using anesthetic for either of us, and we just stared at one another, our faces white and flinching. That was quite a courtship: quick and to the point.

"The girl was done before me. That was when I heard her voice. She had an Australian accent. She said to her nurse, 'While you have the needle out, love, would you mind hemming my skirt?' God, I was so young. As she got up to leave, I asked her if I could have her braid. I thought she'd be cheeky, but she actually blushed, and without any trace of Australian told me she needed to use it to cover her wound until her hair grew back . . . . Wait."

Amos lifted his finger to Daniel, got up, and walked quickly into another room. A few moments later, he returned holding a fraying braid of pitch-black hair. He seemed to half offer it up to Daniel as he sat, but Daniel leaned away, repulsed. Amos put it down on the coffee table and remained silent for a moment. He looked as if he were attempting to discern something through the cold obscurity of his own eyes.

"Her name was Chloe. Her father was Japanese—an academic of some kind—and her mother had been Australian, had flown the jade trade between Thailand and China. She'd died three years previously when her little Mosquito had crashed. Chloe had been thirteen.

"I'm sure she never really loved me. She was just desperate to get out of Bangkok, away from her father, who was brutal to her. And I wanted to get away too. I was always finding her in the bars talking to other men. I was young. I loved her—my first love. I thought if I could just be alone with her for a while, I could make her love me.

"I'd always wanted to sail, and so I asked her to come to Tahiti with me. She agreed. We bought a rusty, leaking old ketch from a German—a strange little man who showed me hidden in his stinking shack a Manet, a Gauguin, a Matisse, and two van Goghs. If I could just sell these, he said, I would be a wealthy man . . . . You know anything about art?"

"Not really."

Amos pointed up at the wall beside the window. Daniel now noticed a painting obscured by shadow.

The vinyl of the couch clung to him as he pulled himself up and went over to examine it. Its colors were vivid, blue-greens and pinks. It was of a window opening out onto a view of a few sailing boats. But the boats, Daniel could see, were not important. The subject was the frame, the window. In the lower right-hand corner, it was signed, Henri Matisse.

"Was he a forger?" Daniel said.

Amos smiled. "No. He was something else. Anyway, how I got that's another story . . . .

"Things began well. We had six days of sun and strong breeze as we headed up through the Belintang Channel. Every night Chloe had nightmares, in which she'd cry out in Japanese. She'd never tell me what they were about. My incessant, youthful amorousness was obviously a burden to her. She treated me like a child, caressed me gently, would sing to me even. But she was always looking out at the sea, always asking when we would arrive.

"On the morning of the seventh day, we awoke to a strange light, an eerie silence and complete calm. When I climbed out of the hatch, I saw a yellowish sickness in the sky. I told Chloe to stay below. I tied on a lifeline and stupidly rigged the sails. For about half an hour, they remained completely slack, and then, as I stood there staring up at the livid sky, the sails flapped once, twice, and began to tremble." Amos snapped his fingers. "It was upon us like that. The whole mast suddenly collapsed—thank God it was as rotten as the rest of the boat. I then forced her into the waves. She almost upended. I was thrown into the ocean. I could hardly keep myself above the surface. Then, through a trough, I caught a glimpse of the boat and Chloe tugging at my lifeline. She kept slipping as the waves broke over the deck. At that moment, as if two huge hands had taken hold of my back, I felt myself lifted and thrown toward her . . . ."

Amos reached down and pulled up the right cuff of his pajamas to his knee. Running up his shin was a ten-inch white and glossy scar.

"My leg struck a cleat.

"Chloe tried to take hold of me, but do you know what I did? I hit her in the face, hard. I couldn't bear it that she was helping me. I don't know why. So there we were, on a small, sinking boat, in the middle of a typhoon, and she was lying on the deck, her nose bleeding, and looking at me with such hatred—*such* hatred.

"The boat was flooding. Another wave almost swept us off the deck. She

got up and made her way to the open hatch, but as she was just there the boat lurched, and she was thrown into the rusty metal edge of the hatch cover.

"I finally got her below. The water was knee-high. Her side was bleeding badly. The radio was ruined. Our only bottle of iodine had broken. The water was black with it, and that smell—I'll never forget that smell. After I'd dressed her wound as best I could, I got out on deck again and tried the flares. They were so old they burst into powder.

"The storm lasted two more days. The water rose to my thighs. Why the boat didn't sink, I don't know. Chloe slept through those days, and when she finally awoke, she looked terrible. The skin beneath her eyes was bruised, her face utterly white.

"When it was calm, I bailed out the boat, a bucket at a time. I set a course northeast and started the engine, hoping to hit China. Within a few hours the petrol was gone. I remember I was standing on the deck as the engine cut out. And then the silence . . . .

"There were gulls sitting in the calm water. Chloe called out to me, but I didn't answer. I had no hope to give her. I knew I should go down to her, but I didn't. I couldn't. I moved softly about the deck so that she wouldn't hear me—as if, if she thought I were gone, I could be gone. Do you understand? Would you blame me for that?"

Daniel didn't answer.

"Would you?"

"I don't know," he said softly.

"And then she began to curse me. God, she cursed me for so long, called me things I'd never heard even from the mouths of dockers. Her voice rose into a scream and suddenly choked. It was out of my hands. Do you understand?"

Daniel nodded softly. He stared at Amos's hands, which were now clasped together at his belly. Powerful, worn hands, the nails were too split, blackened, and broken ever to be new again.

"Could you forgive me?"

"I'm not her," Daniel said.

Amos nodded and seemed almost to smile, as if this were somehow the right answer.

"Finally, I went down to her. She'd obviously tried to get up. There was fresh blood all over the bed. Nothing was dry. Nothing was clean. I hung a sheet out in the sun, and with it I dressed her wound, which had now begun to smell unbearably. She was so white. I tried to say I was sorry, but she wouldn't speak to me. She hated me. Within two days, she was dead.

"I was found by an Auckland tramp. They took me to a hospital in Singapore." Pausing, he opened his hands before him and examined his palms, a sad, bemused look overcoming his face. "How strange—fate," he said, looking up now and narrowing his eyes, "where you end up and with whom. How it changes your life: it was at that hospital in Singapore that I was first introduced to literature—introduced in a very particular way. By a nurse, Sylvia Brandreth, a little Welsh girl from Swansea."

"She taught you?"

"Not taught exactly. You see, she thought it was bad for me to brood and brought me a pile of books. Of course, I told her to leave me alone. Then she realized . . . ."

"Realized what?"

"I couldn't read."

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons," he said with sudden anger. Rubbing his eyes, he calmed himself. "Anyway she took the books away, and the next evening—it was her evening off—she came to my bed. She was dressed beautifully. I still remember. It was a dress of blue silk in a kind of kimono style. It reminded me a bit of Chloe, though she didn't look like Chloe. She had a little shield-shaped face, small eyes, and lovely, thick lips, her upper lip very slightly cleft; and I remember her hair held to her head in dry, pale curls. She sat down next to my bed and asked me if I wouldn't mind listening to some of the poetry she'd written.

"This became the staple of our time together. She'd always insist before each poem on giving me an explanation of how it came into being. After a while, her explanations invariably had something to do with me. *This I wrote when you first came into the hospital. This I wrote the day you opened your eyes.* She read what I later learned to be Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," saying she'd written it thinking of us, here in the hospital, that we were in suspension, that the whole thing would shatter when I was well, when I was gone.

"For some reason she'd fallen for me, fallen badly. While I recovered, I watched her suffering. More than that, I made her suffer. I wanted her to love me." He paused, his face intense. He'd brought up his right hand, his fingers pinching together, as if he were trying to draw from the air some essence that he might then be able to articulate.

After a few moments, a look of frustration overcame him. He repeated with more vehemence, "I *wanted* her to love me. I *wanted* her to suffer. On one day, I'd take her hand, would look her full in the eyes and tell her I could hardly bear a moment without her. On another, I'd act as if she didn't exist.

"This just increased the passion with which she read. It was strange. The poetry was, of course, not hers; and when I thought about it later, when I knew this, it seemed to me that to do what she did, she rendered herself somehow without a voice . . . .

"She became accident-prone, constantly burning herself on the sterilizing equipment. One day she stood up into the open door of a steel medicine cabinet. Her head needed thirty stitches. She also kept getting sick: the flu, cold sores, eye infections, things that would just not go away.

"*This*, it seems to me, was her true voice.

"Meanwhile, every day I was getting better, stronger, healthier.

"On the day before I was to leave, she came to my bed with a man and two girlfriends in tow. The women were dressed to the nines. The man was a missionary, Father Dunne. He looked like a sick rabbit. Sylvia was wearing a cream dress and a hat with a small veil through which I could still see the scar on her forehead. She pressed a gold ring into my hand. A few curious patients gathered at the foot of my bed in their pajamas. I let the ring sit in my open palm. The priest was pulling at his malarial fingers to crack them. Finally, he mumbled that he ought perhaps to come back another time. One of the women suddenly let out a strange sob and walked away.

"The next day, I didn't see her as I got ready to leave. But when I stepped out of the hospital into the blazing sun, there she stood. For a few minutes we talked, of all things, about the weather. Then there was a long silence. She kept trying to catch my eye. Finally, she shoved a piece of paper into my hand. She told me she'd written it this morning, and that she'd really written it. I asked her what she meant by this. She said I'd probably know one day. Without looking at her face, I took it and left. Just before I turned the corner, I looked back. She was smiling . . . smiling . . . ."

Amos sighed, slapped his knees, got up, and walked somberly into the room from which he'd retrieved Chloe's hair. Daniel picked up the braid. It was coarse, heavy. It smelled faintly rank. The cut end was held together with wax. Suddenly, it seemed to writhe in his hands. He dropped it on the table.

Amos returned a few moments later holding a piece of yellowed paper. He handed it to Daniel, whose heart was still pounding. Daniel was afraid. His fingers felt numb as he unfolded the brittle sheet.

The words were ruined. Blue smudges. Sea, sweat, and years. He released his breath, smiled, and looked up at Amos, who was scrutinizing him. After folding the sheet carefully, Daniel put it down on the coffee table.

"Did you ever read it?" he said.

"No. I was going to throw it away as soon as I'd turned the corner. I suppose I can count that as the one remnant of humanity in that act. An act

that probably led Sylvia to revenge herself on someone, and that someone to revenge himself and so on. What a strange symbiosis. Revenge lives in us. We are its medium. In return, it gives us purpose. It gives us form. But here it is, this poem that I kept. . . . Did you know that Michelangelo could never continue a sculpture, no matter how long or hard he'd worked on it, if he discovered a flaw in the stone? The first version of *The David*, apparently, had a flaw right at the knee. The smile on her face, on Sylvia Brandreth's face as I walked away, I think of now as the flaw that smiled at Michelangelo after all his work. It was God's smile. It said: Don't forget me."

Amos stood up, frowned, seemed restless. He walked over to the window and looked out.

"The world changes," he said. He pointed down at something outside. "I remember on top of those garages almost five years ago, someone painted 'You are the damned' in huge red letters. It seemed so personal. The years passed. In autumn, it was hushed by the leaves and reiterated by the wind; in winter, it was silenced by the snow and repeated at each thaw. The years passed and it faded, was spoken to me more and more quietly, under the breath, so to speak, until it finally reached that subtlety available to those who've been together a long time. Now, for me, those barren roofs intimate it. They will never be rid of it."

Rain began to fall against the window. Amos stood for a long time staring out. Daniel felt alone, a voyeur, forgotten.

"So when did you learn to read?" he said, finding it hard to bear this man's back, his silence.

"I didn't," Amos said.

"You didn't?"

"I never had time to learn."

"You mean you *can't* read."

"I can't read."

"And you can't write."

"I can't write."

"Then who wrote the letters to us?"

"Sarah. She lives on the fifteenth floor. She helps me. She reads to me when she has time. I have lots of people who read to me."

"You *can't* write?"

"Not even enough for my own epitaph, my mighty oak."

Daniel felt hopeless. He stood up to go, his limbs sluggish, his heart heavy.

"Look," Daniel said, "I'm going to say that there were extenuating circumstances, all right? I'll do as much as I can to try to make sure there are no

criminal charges brought against you. But the checks will stop. You must get yourself a job."

"A job," Amos said wistfully, still looking out of the window. "I've had so many jobs. You know, I even spent some time as a gigolo in Blackpool. I was paid to dance with single women at the Blackpool Ritz."

He turned to Daniel from the window, and in the dim light there seemed now something vaguely malignant about his look.

"The waltzes were my favorite. You must have danced with your wife?"

"Not ballroom."

"Pity. It's a nice way of touching someone, a nice way of moving with someone. You're cleaved. The constraints are simple: the music and another person. To be a good dancer, you have to remember both. But if you must yield, my friend, you must yield to the latter. Why? Because you don't dance to forget, but to remember. Let me show you something. Listen to this."

He ran across to his gramophone, fumbled about with the records beneath it, pulled one from its cover, and set it on, winding frantically. The music began in a haze of scratches, like the sea. Amos shifted the coffee table to the side of his armchair, and took hold of the arm of the couch on which Daniel sat.

"Help me with this, will you."

"Help you?"

"Let's get it against the wall."

"Why?"

"Come on."

Daniel took the other end of the couch and they heaved it up against the wall.

"Now, let me show you something."

"Mr. Radcliff—"

"Five minutes, and then you can go. Give me your hand."

Amos snatched up Daniel's left hand and wrapped Daniel's right arm behind him.

"Now, slowly, one, two, three. It's easy. When you get back you can dance with your wife, or your girlfriend, whoever. It'll surprise her. Stop being so inert. It's worse than dancing with a sack of bloody potatoes."

"Mr. Radcliff, let go of me."

Daniel could hardly believe how strong Amos was. They were spinning around in the small space at the center of the room. He tried to stop a few times, and pull himself away, but Amos quite literally carried him through the motions.

"Where's your life? Where's your rhythm? Yield a little; we're not fighting."

"Let go of me, Mr. Radcliff."

"Laaa two three, daaa, two three, La da da da two three."

"Amos, please!"

"No no, we can't stop. The intimation of a dance is that it will last forever."

"Damn you. Let me go!"

Daniel tore himself away. Amos regarded him darkly. He seemed suddenly a very different man. Daniel felt afraid, afraid of this man's strength, afraid of his smile, afraid of his bleak eyes. Amos pulled the needle off the record. He walked back to the window and looked out as if nothing had happened.

"I need time," he said. "I need time to think. I've never had time. My life came in a rush. I need to look down upon this, and it needs me to look down upon it. Do you understand? All of this that I see needs to be resolved in me. My job is to see. To think. All you have to do, my friend, is to forget me."

"Is that all, Mr. Radcliff?"

"That is all."

"Before I leave, would you like me to help you move this back into the center of the room?" He touched his hand upon the sofa.

"No . . . . No, this way I can remember that I danced with you here."

Daniel saw a secret smile touch the corner of Amos's lips.

"Good-bye, Mr. Radcliff."

He moved closer to Amos and proffered his hand.

"How glibly people offer their hands," Amos said as he turned around.

He took Daniel's hand in his own. Daniel felt that profound strength again.

"I killed a man with this hand."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

"No. I'm giving myself up to you. After thirty years, I'm giving myself up."

Daniel freed his hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Radcliff."

He turned and took a step toward the short hallway that led to the door. He felt a little afraid to have his back to this man, and at the same time it seemed incomprehensible to him that he was leaving. It was a dream he'd dreamed as a child, a dream that sometimes still leaked into his waking moments. And this was the part he could remember: trying to leave, but being unable to. At the doorway, he turned around. The room shocked him. The

shifted sofa made it seem bereft. And not only bereft, but ruined somehow, like a room many years after the disturbance of life. A dark aura, a density had gathered about the coil of hair, the pieces of the pipe, and the yellowed note on the coffee table. Amos stood at the window, clasping his hands behind his back, staring out. The pajama leg he'd pulled up in order to show Daniel his scar was still hoisted above his muscular calf. Just beside Amos on the wall hung the Matisse. The sun had drowned completely in the black clouds, and the room was now etched by a grainy luminance, as of dust motes in moonlight. Amos cast no shadow.

Daniel walked softly back into the room. He wanted to say something. Anything, so that he wouldn't have to remember this.

"I was on a ship called the Oruba out of Liverpool," Amos said, turning around. "His name was Andrew Scofield. He was my cabin mate."

Amos went back to his chair, sat down, and squinted up at Daniel until he returned to his seat. From far away, from the distance of his memory, Amos smiled. With the sofa against the wall and the coffee table pushed off to the side, the space between them, Daniel felt, seemed naked, vast, as if they were two strangers meeting in an open field.

"I took great pains to befriend him. At first glance, if you were generous, you might have thought him a Heathcliff, with brooding, romantic features. But there was nothing truly elemental about him. He looked out on the world like something nocturnal and hunted. Every day, he wore a blue serge jacket with nautical gold buttons. Around his neck, he tied the most garish scarves. They were his concession, I think, to the sailor's dashing image. And he always reeked of a eucalyptus-cinnamon rub his mother had concocted to alleviate his asthma . . . .

"So why did I attach myself to him? You'll have to allow me a brief digression. You see, I once had a brother, Jimmy. He'd been born prematurely. Almost everything he ate, he threw up. Frail and tiny, just tiny, he clung to our mother as if he were drowning.

"When I was ten and he was seven, I decided he would live, that I would take him under my wing.

"It was hard for him to break his attachment to our mother, but I was insistent. The truth was she didn't want him near her. She couldn't bring herself to love him. When I was older, she told me that. I like to think it was because she couldn't stand being in constant fear for his life, that her dislike stemmed from love overtaxed—from love. But I think the truth was, she was simply repulsed by his weakness. What she loved about us—me and Eileen and Erin—was our strength, our vigor, our rapid independence from her. She was a hard mother, would rarely provide comfort if we hurt ourselves, unless

it was serious, would never indulge the fey or childishly whimsical in us. She'd laugh at anything petty and weak between us, and refused to act as peacemaker in our bickering. But this was not cruelty, and it was not neglect. Hers was the indifference of nature. She'd given life to us. She provided for us. She loved our health, our appetites, our vigor, our restlessness and loud voices—everything that was vital in us. I heard her say to my father once that Jimmy was perhaps inevitable. That he was the chaff.

"So I decided he would live. I dragged him away from her, and he soon became extremely attached to me. I led him through the mortal perils that are the bread and mead of children at that age—oh mothers, if they only knew."

"Not your mother."

"I think even mine. We walked out on narrow jetties during storms; we climbed sluice gates above torrential waters; we hung in the steel arches beneath railway bridges over the river.

"For years, I was plucking his small hands from my body. I felt he was lucky enough as it was. After all, I led our gang of boys. This protected him at first, but soon the other boys learned that if a confrontation did occur, he was on his own.

"Now, you have to understand, I believed I was changing him. I believed he was changing. And to all appearances he was becoming tougher, hardier, braver. It seemed he ate more, and with gusto. I discovered only later, from my sister, Eileen, that he'd been vomiting in secret. I think he'd developed a kind of fatalism that took the place of bravery. Whatever the case, his hands were no more upon me. And honestly, I think I missed that as much as he did.

"But Mother was happy. She'd feel at his little muscles, would pile his plate, not noticing his flickers of despair, and smile encouragingly at his stories that he was going to work his way from port to port around the world, that he would make for himself a new life in some distant land, and would return to us altered beyond all recognition.

"Signs of internal breakage began gradually to appear: a slight stutter, a constant trembling of the muscle below his right eye. And then there were those sudden bouts of the most terrifying foolhardiness. One time—and I beat the living shit out of him when I found out—he'd lain between the rails on the train track while a train passed over him.

"But these bouts were balanced by periods of the most extreme weakness, when he would hide himself like an ailing animal, vomiting, incontinent, nights of sweating and crying out. He also began to succumb to a strange condition, a kind of epilepsy, I think. He'd freeze and stare into space, stock-still for sometimes half an hour. I remember seeing him in the middle of the yard

one time, holding a sack of grain, the chickens pecking fruitlessly at his feet. . . .

"But, I think, what was most awful was his suggestibility during these periods. I remember one time, my father shouted across the yard at me to go and milk the cows. When I arrived at the barn, there sat Jimmy, pistonning the teats of a cow, squirting milk all over his legs, all over the floor, all over the howling, delirious cats.

"As I broke the hold of his stiff hands, I wanted to say to him, be weak again, be sick again, take hold of me again. But, of course, it was too late.

"The two of us got jobs at the docks in Dublin. It was hard work, and I was constantly worried about him. But the dockers were good to Jimmy. He was like a child, with his gaunt face, which made his eyes large. He'd stand at the fringe of things, laughing appropriately, smoking badly.

"When he was working, he seemed to be able to feel those periods of complete withdrawal coming on, and would go somewhere to succumb to it. I'd search for him and find him perhaps squatting on a great coil of rope, staring down into the river.

"And then one day—it was almost as dark as night, black clouds and pouring with rain. On that day, Jimmy walked over to the open hold of the boat to which he'd been assigned as part of the loading crew, and must have fallen into one of his withdrawn states right there at the lip. Kelly, who was operating the derrick, didn't see him as he hauled across the deck two tons of tweed. Jimmy was struck into the hold and that two tons was lowered expertly upon his body.

"They found him in America.

"So now perhaps you understand why I was drawn to Andrew . . . .

"It turned out that Andrew's sister, Elspeth, was engaged to the captain of the ship. At first, I couldn't imagine what could have incited any woman to a desire for a man so pompous and phlegmatic. His one love was ragtime. He used to lie in a net hammock out in the rising sun listening to it at full blast and jerking his body about as if he were a large insect caught in a small web.

"I assumed that for someone without experience of the world, he could seem quite impressive. He affected a martial demeanor. Every evening, he'd strut about the deck of that rusty old hulk, trailed always by his first mate—a little Frenchman we called Parrot—as if he were inspecting the Victory before Trafalgar.

"And I have to admit, he was certainly a well-read man, an autodidact with a morbid sense of the profound. I remember observing him and Parrot from the upper deck when they were on one of their evening inspection tours. The captain would periodically turn to the sea, regard the sinking sun with a

gimlet eye, and mysteriously mutter things like, 'So why shouldn't they languish, those harpies. Is this not the bloodied eye of sanctuary?' To which Parrot would feel it incumbent upon himself to respond, 'I had a bloody eye once. No one hit me, it was an infection.' The captain would continue obliviously in his deep-throated, vaguely defiant voice, 'The mark of Cain is as the sea's grain: ever apparent and extensive, but membranous and fluctuant.' To which Parrot might reply, 'Oh by the good Lord, there's little that's not appurtenant to that boy's foul parricide, is there . . . .'

"The captain's engagement explained why Andrew was aboard, as he had no experience and was obviously not in the best of health. It also explained the captain's solicitude toward him. He invited him to supper a few times, and honored him with the appellation of 'my lad.'

"And then one day—it was just after we'd left port at Lisbon—the captain invited all the crew to dinner in his cabin.

"It was an extremely formal occasion. Parrot was dressed in crimson livery. The captain's cabin was done up grandly, a small chandelier suspended above the table. Our names had been written in an exquisite hand and put before our places. The cutlery was ornate and silver, the crockery the most exquisite bone china, and the glasses all Waterford crystal. At least this was the case at all the places but one: Andrew's name had been written with an old marker on a sheet of greasy newspaper. His place settings were a tin plate, a Swiss army knife, and an empty pickle jar, barely cleaned out. The captain apologized to him earnestly, saying that he had not enough place settings, and as he felt him to be almost family . . . .

"We began with the most beautiful prawn salad in crystal bowls placed somberly before us by Parrot. But Andrew received a half coconut shell in which lay the heads of all our prawns smothered in catsup. The captain and Parrot galvanized conversation and ate with gusto. I could see Andrew, who was sitting directly across from me—we were both beside the captain, who was at the head of the table. I could see him reddening, his face flinching with confusion as he dug about through the heads with one of the Swiss army knife's countless implements.

"Finally, much to the relief of us all, the captain burst into laughter and slapped Andrew on his arm. It had the form of a jovial slap, but it almost knocked Andrew off his seat. 'Forgive me, my lad,' the captain said cloyingly. 'Just a joke. And our lovely Elspeth tells me that the one thing I lack—the one thing!—is humor.' Andrew smiled the thinnest, most fragile smile I'd ever seen.

"Then the main course came. There was an enormous ham. Apparently one that the captain had sent all the way from Virginia. 'A thirty-dollar ham,'

he kept saying. 'It will melt in your mouth.' At that point it didn't appear so appetizing. It was surrounded by spongy white fat and looked to my mind like a large wet scab. There was also a whole tunny fish cooked in garlic butter and covered in a julienne of vegetables, and two great steaming bowls, one of mashed potatoes and the other of sweet peas.

"Now, the captain insisted on carving and serving everyone. With the ham, he shaved off all the fat down to the red and succulent meat. The fish he decapitated and neatly boned. He gave us all mountains of food—delivered with dignified celerity by Parrot, who also poured into our crystal glasses the most delicious red wine. But for Andrew, the captain had a special treat. He filled Andrew's tin plate from separate bowls, one of which contained the boiled and buttered husks of the peas, the other, the unwashed and uncooked peelings of the potatoes au gratin. To this, he somberly added all of the ham's slick white wet fat garnished with a rose made from the rolled peel of a tomato. And finally, the fish's head. This plate he took pains to deliver himself, gesturing to it with his hand and stage-whispering to Andrew, 'No humor, she said. It's a pity she's not here to share this feast with us, my lad. *Bon appétit!*' Hard upon this, Parrot graciously filled Andrew's pickle jar with seawater from an old galosh.

"The captain laughed uproariously. A few members of the crew laughed with him, but most didn't know where to look.

" 'Come on, my lad, eat up,' he said.

"Andrew began to wring his hands like an autistic child. A terrible pressure seemed to be building up inside him. Slowly, he withdrew one of the blades from the Swiss army knife. I'll tell you, my body has never been more tense. I noticed Parrot moving into place behind Andrew, and the captain, though still flushed with his affected humor, narrowed the focus of his eyes upon the knife.

"And then—thank God for angels. I'll tell you, there are a few on this earth, a very few, but Hamid was one. My friend, Hamid. He was the most generous and the most tortured man I ever knew, the man the missing of whom is like a fever in me sometimes . . . ."

Amos's voice broke. He remained silent, staring down into the carpet. Daniel felt an impulse to reach out to him, but Amos now seemed almost to be receding.

"Hamid," Amos continued, looking up, his face touched with a smile, his eyes still desolate, "suddenly replaced Andrew's plate with his own. He snatched up the fish's head and looked directly into its eyes with an expression of deep suffering. He pushed his chair back away from the table, hung in it languorously, urged his eyes up at the heavens and then down, anguished, at

the fish. 'Alas,' he said, in his thick Egyptian accent. 'Alas poor Tunny, I knew him, Andrew, a fish of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy . . . .'

"The suffering in all of us was diffused. Andrew drained, became merely perplexed, his brow furrowed . . . .

"It wasn't until we docked at Pernambuco that Andrew received an aerogramme from his sister informing him that she'd written to the captain a month before to break off their engagement.

"Andrew became the butt of a prankster. Someone sewed up the front of one of his jackets and put the buttons all the way down the back; someone replaced his shoe polish with axle grease and his brilliantine with swarfega. A ship is a closed world, a world without recourse. A voyage is a small lifetime. If there's trouble, it must be dealt with, one way or another. But Andrew was not one to deal with things.

"He wrote often to his sister with his troubles, and would sometimes read me her letters. I became enchanted by her tone, her humor, her strength. She was the life, the tenacity that her brother lacked. He must have written to her of me, because when we docked at Montevideo, I received an aerogramme. Hamid read it to me. It was really just a note, thanking me for looking after Andrew, and ending politely that she hoped we might get a chance to meet. She added also—and this I found strange—that she would prefer me not to tell Andrew that she'd written as he'd always been rather possessive of her.

"Instantly, I dictated a letter back. It makes me blush now to think of it, my friend. Hamid, that weeping romantic, wove into it a few dozen extended metaphors of his own. My god, it reeked of purple prose and thinly disguised ardor, words concerning the vast loneliness of the sea, the yearning cries of the gulls and so forth. I tried to eke out more about her from Andrew, but this was blood from a stone. I learned only that ten months separated them in age, and that she lived with their ailing mother in Lockbroom.

"At Valparaiso, I got my reply. Hamid read it to me, imbuing his voice with love and lust. In truth, it was quite perfunctory, but ended with a beautifully written passage about the loveliness of the Highlands in which, unmistakably, was the suggestion of her own loneliness and sense of wasted life, looking after her mother. I was ecstatic. She begged me also to keep an eye on Andrew, as his recent letters contained venom of a potency she'd never come across before in him. She'd also written to the captain imploring him to understand the responsibilities of his position, and to treat Andrew as a captain should any member of his crew.

"After Valparaiso, we headed off to Guayaquil, where we picked up a group of young American biologists. We'd been commissioned to take them to the Galápagos Islands. As the land receded, I stood chatting on deck with

Hamid and Parrot, who was perfectly pleasant when he was not around the captain. Andrew stood beside me. Suddenly he started back, releasing a strange, suffocated cry from deep in his throat. If I hadn't taken hold of him, he would have fallen back over the gunwale. He was trembling, his face livid, his eyes starting out of his head. At Hamid's solicitous approach, Andrew let out a rending scream. It was then that I saw, nuzzling its way from the front pocket of Hamid's shirt, a tiny lizard. Hamid was a collector. He had a whole menagerie in his cabin. I made Hamid surrender his new pet to me, and I flung it far out into the sea. Andrew, with a desperate avidity, watched it sink with a plop, and then feverishly scrutinized the side of the boat as if expecting it to crawl back on board . . . .

"A few days into the voyage, the captain, walking on the deck while Andrew was mopping it down, slipped on the soapy wet surface. I was nearby, and ran to the captain's aid because he'd cried out as if he'd broken every bone in his body. The truth was, he'd not even fallen, but had just found it necessary to take hold of the gunwale. Once steady, he ran at Andrew, took hold of him by the collar, and almost lifted him full off his bare feet. He held him out over the side of the ship and bellowed into his face: 'Where are your signs!' I noticed then that Andrew hadn't put up the signs the swabber was meant to use to warn people of a slippery surface. He told the captain, his face beet red, partially from suffocation, that they were not in their usual place, and that he'd searched everywhere for them. By this time everyone on board had gathered to the scene. The captain then dragged Andrew by his jacket collar to the stern of the ship and opened the locker in which the signs were usually kept. There they were in full view.

"So once more, Andrew was humiliated before us all—not just the crew, but that cluster of young biologists, who thereafter nicknamed the captain Ahab, and talked about him in whispers, stifling their puerile laughter, one of them brave enough every now and again upon seeing Andrew to call out under his breath, 'There she blows.'

"Andrew told me afterwards, through his teeth, not looking at me, and, I'll tell you, his voice murderous with fury, that when he'd opened that locker, the signs had not been there. He was just telling me what everyone on the ship already knew.

"We stayed for a month anchored off the Galápagos Islands while the biologists conducted their research. It was a dull time. We had to all stay aboard. I'd often come upon Andrew on the deck, gesticulating and whispering fiercely to himself, venting his anger upon the open sea.

"When the month was up, we sailed back to Guayaquil, arriving a few days after Easter Sunday. In the middle of the day of our arrival, the captain

gathered the crew for an Easter service. Just as he began, an enormous Easter egg was delivered to the boat.

"It was to Andrew, from his sister. It was bigger than the biggest watermelon, wrapped in ribbons and lace. One of the sailors had to help the delivery man on board with it. The sun flashed from its bright silver surface. All the crew let out soft *oohs* and *ahs*, and for the first time since almost the journey's start, I saw Andrew smile. I can't say I didn't feel a little piqued.

" 'You're a lucky man,' the captain said, not unkindly. There seemed a sort of resignation in his voice. 'I hope you'll share some of your bounty with us, Andrew.' This was the first time he'd called Andrew by his name. The other sailors importuned him to open the egg, and shyly, tentatively, taking his time to enjoy his first taste of what it was like to be at the very center of affable attention, Andrew tugged at the bow. But it was tied too tight. We all urged him on as he struggled with it, and he broke into delightful, childish laughter. Every now and then he'd glance with filial deference up at the captain, who looked down benevolently. Finally, one of the sailors lent Andrew a knife. With one wrench of his thin frame, the ribbon snapped and the egg fell into two halves. The general cry of triumph was suddenly choked . . . .

"Thankfully Andrew immediately collapsed into a dead faint. The huge iguana, obviously kidnapped from the Galápagos, looked sleepily upon the world, flicking out its black tongue. It sat upon that split shell with the fatalistic patience of a million years.

"Hamid and I instantly started from the now laughing crowd and dragged Andrew's limp body from the proximity of the enormous iguana that, along with the captain, seemed imperceptibly to smile.

"We carried Andrew back to his cabin. For the next few nights, he slept fitfully, crying out and waking up in a cold sweat.

"Slowly, he recovered, but he stopped working completely and became like a ghost on the boat, staring out to sea. Hamid and I convinced Parrot, who was feeling guilty anyway, to give him a little more time. We did Andrew's work ourselves.

"He was constantly anxious, and would speak to me only about the iguana, his questions emerging slowly, carefully, as if through a thick fog of something else going on in his mind. He'd ask me always about the same details. What had happened to it? Had I seen it thrown overboard? Who else had seen it? Who had thrown it? He began to develop all kinds of morbid fears. He would eat things only after very carefully examining them, and would often hang around the galley so he could see what was being cooked. He would have me check everywhere before he entered our cabin, and insisted, even on the most stifling nights, that the door be locked before he could

sleep. I remember that eucalyptus-cinnamon smell saturating the room, causing my saliva to taste revoltingly sweet. That's when I first took up a pipe.

"On docking at Callao, I received an aerogramme from his sister in response to the one I'd sent her from Guayaquil, telling her of the incident with the iguana. It was a frantic letter, and I loved the suddén intimacy that this incident had created between us. I loved her dependence upon me. Her emotional state heightened her language. She addressed me by my first name countless times, told me that she knew me to be a man of kindness and worth, that all she wanted was to see us both—yes, *both*—back in England safe and sound. When Hamid read it to me, I felt a flush at the back of my neck, an ecstatic shiver down my spine. I knew that for me things could not have turned out better than they did.

"And then came that final straw. Rumors emerged, started obviously by the captain and spread by the contagion of Parrot's tongue: apparently the captain, after spending time at the beginning of the voyage with Andrew's sister, had, within a few weeks at sea, succumbed to a rather embarrassing malaise. Nothing that an application of powdered DDT and a smoking of his linen wouldn't take care of, but an irritating imposition nevertheless.

"A new currency of jokes came into vogue concerning what a nautical family Andrew's was. Elspeth became known as little Miss Rockpool. I tried to insulate Andrew as much as I could. But although I had quite an influence on the crew, I'll tell you, almost every day Hamid was pulling me out of skirmishes.

"Of course, you must be thinking, why didn't someone go and see the captain? I did. A few times. He was very cordial. He'd turn down the ragtime, extricate himself from his hammock, and have me sit in his luxurious study. He made me tongue-tied. Surrounded by books, he seemed steeped in knowledge, his florid, fat face replete with knowing. It was unbearable for me to be with him because, strange as it seems, I could understand how Elspeth could love him. I felt utterly inadequate. He told me I was wasted and that, if I liked, he would teach me to read.

"The one thing I could not bear about him, though, was his look. When he looked at you, his small, almost buried eyes never met yours halfway, but pierced you, obliterated you. They were abysmal, lonely, blind with knowing. I'll always remember the halting way he revealed anything personal, how he could do it only if he led into it from objectivity. 'It's interesting you should say that, Amos,' he'd say. 'I knew someone once who knew . . . well, I mean to say I knew a man. His name was Miles Eton. He was my father.'

"I mentioned Elspeth only one time, and I have never witnessed such an instantaneous transformation of a man. It could have been the dimness of the

study, a sudden malformation of shadow upon his coarse features, but I'll never forget that grotesque distortion of his face, that brutish thing he became.

"When I confronted him—as I did many times—about his treatment of Andrew, he'd color slightly and smile like a virgin caught kissing the back of her hand. He referred to Andrew merely as 'his little vice.'

"Andrew found all the talk about his sister bewildering. He was too naive to understand exactly what was intimated by it until someone finally told him.

"He came to the cabin and screamed at me.

" 'He is telling everyone she is a slut,' he said, 'a dirty slut.'

"I asked him to come for a walk about the decks. To my surprise, he came. He seemed almost reasonable, as if even his insanity had been overwhelmed. It was pouring with rain. The decks were deserted. We walked past the lighted portholes of cabins, with their breath of tobacco, their soft murmurs and occasional laughter. I talked to him paternally, reminding him of how little time we had left aboard, telling him stories of my past conflicts. He listened, or seemed to be listening. I remember the rain dripping from his lank, oily hair. As we turned the corner at the stern of the boat, he pulled up. His eyes narrowed. There stood the captain in a southwester, leaning on the taffrail, smoking his pipe and staring into the boat's wake, which churned the reflection of a great yellow moon. For a moment I saw him in all his lonely anguish. We're all the same, my friend, when we look out at the sea; and at that instant I felt for him, felt deeply because I knew what he'd lost.

"He didn't see us. Andrew about-faced and returned swiftly to our cabin, with me in tow. He jumped onto his bed and lay there, curled like an exhausted child into the steel wall, his clothes soaking wet. I tried to get him to change, told him he'd catch his death, but he didn't respond. I got onto my bed, but couldn't sleep. I was afraid, angry, helpless. Then I heard him, barely fifteen minutes later, stir from his apparent slumber and very quietly get up. I heard the slow, stiff sliding of a drawer, and then he was gone.

"For some reason, I felt sure he was going to kill himself. I put on my coat and quickly followed. As I approached the stern, I heard low voices. It was the gentleness of these voices that prevented me from revealing myself. I also felt foolish, prowling about like this, and didn't want to make myself apparent unless absolutely necessary. It even occurred to me that some private confrontation between the two men might bring it to an end once and for all.

"From the corner behind which I kept myself hidden, I could tell the captain was drunk. He swayed and kept clutching for the gunwale. Andrew stood directly in front of him, very close, and spoke in a quick, rhythmic whisper. This continued for a few moments until the captain reached up and took hold of Andrew's cheek, pinching it as one does the cheek of a delightful

child. At this, Andrew took his right hand out of his pocket and put it behind his back. Something slowly unraveled from his fist and hung pale against his dark clothes. I didn't interfere even then. Don't ask me why.

"It was over in a moment. Andrew swung that thing and brought it with a dull thud against the captain's temple.

"I heard the soft sound of it. It was like the falling of an apple onto hard ground. To see a man die. It's like nothing else. You know it instantly. One thing we all do, my friend, is articulate our death quite perfectly. After a lifetime of stammering and stuttering in all our actions there is that one moment of fluency—ugly, abject as it may be, it's expressed perfectly. I heard the soft sound. I will never forget it. The captain did not lift his hand to his head, but stood for a second while his drunken, sluggish neurons told him he was dead. And then, like a great edifice, he collapsed.

"Let me say that nothing went through my head. I stepped out. I took the weapon from Andrew's hand and placed it calmly into my pocket. I lifted the captain's body, my actions accelerated by the blood now leaking from his mouth. I was determined not to get it either on me or the deck. I took the erstwhile captain by the hand and lowered his body as far down as I could to minimize the splash. Then he was gone, lost in the great moonscar of our wake.

"I told Andrew, who was staring at me very strangely, to go quietly back to our cabin. Mechanically, he obeyed. I then leaned against the taffrail as the captain had been doing and tried to smoke my pipe so that I could have some measure of time. But my hands were shaking too much to prepare it. So I stood with the dry pipe in my mouth, my back to the great jaundiced moon. The rain had ceased. The black sea had a sluggish, muscular swell as of some great beast stirring from sleep. I girded myself. I'm not an actor. Dissimulation does not agree with me. I cried out, perhaps a minute later, perhaps an hour later, 'Man overboard' as loud as I could. Nothing happened. Then I realized, by the unbroken seal of my dry throat, that I hadn't shouted at all. I coughed, and this time I did call out.

"The boat quickened with voices. I shouted again, and those voices rapidly approached. Suddenly, it struck me how casually I was standing, holding my pipe, my legs crossed as if I were leaning on the bar in a pub on a Sunday afternoon. I stuffed the pipe into my pocket and turned around so that I would be looking down into the water. I shouted again. The voices and footsteps were almost upon me when another realization struck: I'd not attempted to cast a life buoy or fire a flare upon the water. When the crew arrived, I was pulling free the life buoy. As they crowded about me, I felt panicked. The weapon was still in my pocket. I was convinced that even in the midst of all

this furor someone would ask me what was weighing down the side of my coat so much. So, of all things, right there and then, I pulled my coat off. Instantly, everyone grabbed me. They knew, I thought. Something had given me away. I yielded to their arrest, and then I heard a gentle voice, Hamid's voice. 'He's gone,' he said, 'he's gone.' I realized then that those hands held me to restrain me from foolhardy heroism, that they held me anxiously and tenderly.

"And so, incapable of dissimulation, my fear had made me dissimulate perfectly. It had introduced me, like the devil himself, into the world of mendacity. I told them all that I'd seen the drunken captain stagger at a sudden swell, lose his footing and tumble into the water. Had I not called? Had I not thrown the life buoy? Had I not even been willing to risk my own life . . . ?

"Not a question was asked. I was not doubted for a second. Not only because of this evidence, but because of who I was, because any of the crew who knew me, knew me to be a man of absolute integrity and honesty. I did not lie.

"We had a funeral on board, dropped a Union Jack upon the ocean. It floated away like a great petal.

"What had happened remained unspoken between Andrew and me. Indeed we barely spoke at all. But every now and again, I'd find him staring at me queerly, as if trying to work something out. It was a black look that very much disquieted me. Not that I expected gratitude . . . no, perhaps I did. I think at the very least, I expected a sense of communion, of common fate. We'd become, for better or worse, irrevocably joined by what had happened.

"I decided that I'd broach the subject when we were on shore and alone together, away from the laden atmosphere of the ship.

"Our next stop was Arica, a small harbor town at the base of an enormous sandstone cliff called the Morro. The moment we docked, he tried to slip off the boat without me, but I hurried down after him. At the bottom of the gangplank, he drew up suddenly. There, on the dock, stood Elspeth.

"He was as surprised as I was. She embraced her brother very firmly, and her eyes flickered over to me as I slowly descended to the quay. He began to cry, succumbed like a child to her. She was younger and prettier than I'd imagined. I was shocked by her striking resemblance to him. Her hair, though, was thicker and darker than his and fell about her face and shoulders in a profusion of curls.

" 'Dr. Livingston, I presume,' she said, holding out one hand to me, the other gently rubbing her brother's back. Profoundly disappointed, I told her that I was Amos. She laughed in the most delightful way. I didn't even bother to ask her what her joke had been. To touch her after all that time. She

smiled at me—oh, the most beguiling smile—and our eyes were locked, the thread of our silence pulled taut between us, our hands not releasing. That I remember as one of the happiest moments of my life.

"But Andrew soon recovered himself, looked back at me savagely, his face puffy and red from the tears. Roughly, he took his sister's arm, and tried to drag her away. She resisted and asked me to join them, whereupon her brother wrenched at her again and whispered some harsh words. She flushed completely, her face crimson, and I quickly said that it would be better perhaps if we met up later, considering how long it had been since she'd last seen her brother. They left me at the base of the gangplank.

"I didn't move for a long while. I felt as if a cold pike was being driven slowly into my heart. How extremely one feels in youth. I honestly at that moment could not conceive of my life without her. The thoughts of what he might tell her tortured me . . . can you imagine?

"Andrew returned to the ship late. For the full ten hours of his absence, I'd lain on my bunk in abeyance, not sleeping, not moving, not thinking.

" 'She's gone,' he said. 'She's gone back to England.' There was a silence between us like one I'd never experienced and wish never to experience again, a silence of such murderous intensity. Everything in me was subsiding, was in flux. He must have felt it, for when I pulled myself off my bunk, he flinched back, and responded with the pitiful barking of his voice, like a small dog recoiling from a huge one trapped behind a fence. And I'll tell you, we must have both felt how fragile that fence was.

"And do you know what he said? He said, 'If you think I'd let my sister marry a murderer . . . .' He stared feverishly at me. I didn't respond. 'Why did you kill him?' he said, but I barely heard his question because I was suddenly euphoric. Why would he mention marriage if his sister had not confessed strong feelings for me? And then, slowly, it came to me, what he was saying.

" '*You* killed him,' I said. At this, he seemed genuinely incredulous.

" 'You threw him into the ocean,' he said.

" 'But he was already dead,' I said. 'Anybody could have seen that. There was blood, black blood coming from his mouth. I did it to save you. I *did* save you.'

" 'Oh no,' he said, 'there wasn't any blood. He wasn't dead . . . .'

"So we argued for hours, like two people arguing over whose fault it was that the dinner had been burned. But I realized that he believed it, believed that from sheer capriciousness, I'd killed the captain before his eyes, believed that a debt was not owed from him to me, but from me to him, for his silence. The pitch of our argument escalated until I became afraid we'd be overheard. I snatched up my coat, left the cabin, and went ashore.

"As I walked, every muscle in me was taut with his image, every muscle wanted to extinguish him, his ignoble weakness, his cowering, feverish, and distorted face. The firm ground felt so good under my feet. I entered a maze of squat buildings, pungent with cooking, and suddenly, suddenly I felt a hand take mine . . . .

"And where is she now? I mean *she*, that moment of her that took my hand and kissed me. Where is that place, that sailor, that kiss? For a moment something glimmers as the seventh wave comes in, and then it's sucked back and lost. Where are the impulses that were her? They were surely not just the energy of a candle, of the tide, of the wind. Surely not. I want her reflex and release. I want her long earring, and the small scar on her face, and the shape of the flushed blood on her neck. How can we be judged without evidence? How can we be judged without the proof that we'd ever felt ourselves to be more than a handful of dust? And who anyway would wish to test the morals and mettle of such a handful?

"In short. Love. We decided we would marry as soon as I returned, and that I would somehow break the news to Andrew. I asked her what he'd told her, but she said only that it had been mostly incoherent, and that now the captain was dead, Andrew would calm down. I, of course, knew that he would not.

"When I got back to the cabin, Andrew was gone. I looked at his scattered things and hated them. His smell of eucalyptus and cinnamon lingered, pervasive, indelible, noxious.

"As I stood there, the ship listed severely in the wake of a large vessel that came into the harbor, and I was suddenly blinded with pain. The weapon Andrew had used on the captain had fallen upon my head from the top of the cabinet where I'd hidden it. I was afraid. This was the last piece of evidence. I decided to take it ashore that night, out of sight of the ship, and fling it far out into the sea.

"But I was curious. Locking the cabin, I examined it. The sock contained three stainless steel balls. Oddly enough, I knew exactly what they were. I'd owned one as a child. It had championed my marbling and won me the largest collection in the school. It had been a *Merrimack* or *Monitor* among wooden battleships, often shattering precious chinas into fragments. I'd traded one shilling, a plastic wallet, and a glowing skull head for it, and I'd loved more than anything in the world that pure, smooth sphere with its unnatural heft.

"I later learned that they were used in hospitals, in bags that were counterweights, keeping people's broken arms and legs at the correct elevation.

"I held the three balls, naked in my right hand. How things change. And

then I slipped them back into the sock. Why would I have done this, if I hadn't known?

"When Andrew returned to the cabin, he gave me his usual fearful, scowling look. I told him that we needed to talk, off the boat, that it was very important. He regarded me so bitterly, with such contempt, that I was sure he'd refuse. And he didn't exactly agree, at least not in words. But when I opened the door and said let's go, he simply obeyed.

"Almost everyone was already ashore. The few aboard were playing cards at the prow in the last rays of the sun, a small hub of cursing and laughter. I heard Hamid's voice among them, and in my mind I said good-bye to him.

"We walked by the shore, following a path that climbed the lip of the cliff, him walking slightly in front of me, moving lifelessly, like a man condemned. I remember the harsh cries of the birds. They were like coarse hands tearing the dark silk of the sky. The day's soft eye closed, a last moment of consciousness stretched at the rim of the world. We were high up now, and I could see at the base of the cliff flecks of white water.

"I stopped walking, and he stopped, turning to face me, his back to the ocean. I said to him, gently, reasonably, 'You don't really believe that I killed the captain, do you?'

"He said, 'Are you telling me not to believe it?'

" 'I'm going to marry your sister,' I said. 'We're going to be brothers.'

" 'No no,' he said, and then, I remember, he laughed. A bitter, shallow laugh. He said, 'I've decided. I'm going to tell them, and I'm going to tell my sister. I've already written a letter to her . . . .' And so he went on. I stopped listening. I felt a pressure in my lungs, and my head was swimming a little, as if my blood were too thin.

"I interrupted him: 'We're going to be brothers,' I said, and I reached up my hand to touch his shoulder. He recoiled, and that recoil seemed so inhuman to me, as when you touch the eye of a snail . . . . Where is that moment too, the weight that suddenly became apparent to me in my pocket, that fine coating of ruddy dust on his polished shoes? He'd polished his shoes. Can you understand, Daniel, how that can make someone hate you enough to kill you?

"So he'd recoiled at my touch. I'd touched him with my left hand. Only at that point did I realize that my right hand was in my pocket and holding firmly onto the sock.

"I turned slightly away from him, looking up the path that led farther along the cliff. Gently, I removed the weighted sock and held it behind my right thigh.

"He seemed to realize something. His face was anxious. But some impulse made him turn his head almost full around to look upon the sea. He frowned, at the night, at the ocean, at the wind—I don't know what he frowned at—and then he looked back at me. The weighted sock now hung at my side. He saw it and his face contorted in a way I . . . . My left hand, the hand from which he'd recoiled, took hold of his pale blue shirt. He tried to wrench himself free. The buttons flew off as the shirt tore open. I took hold of his bright scarf. The shirt flapped up about his naked midriff. He made the strangest sounds, indescribable sounds. He wasn't looking at me, but down the path, as if he were watching himself running away. All his strength had left him. He was limp. He reached up and took hold of my hand, the hand that clasped him at his throat. His hands were so cold. I pulled back the weighted sock, held him stiffly at arm's length . . . .

"The sound was sickening. The sock tore, and the steel balls fell out. I dropped the flaccid sock. I walked a little way down the path, sat upon a large rock I'd seen on the way up, and looked back at him. He'd crumpled into a perfect kneeling position, like some delirious zealot. But his trunk, his upper body, had bent over sideways, had listed profoundly, his head swaying just above the ground. I watched dark blood from his broken temple collect in the socket of his eye, spread down and across his nose, dripping. The three steel balls lay bright and hard before his startled vision in a neat triangle.

"I don't know how long I sat there and looked. It became profoundly night. Finally, I returned to him, picked him up as if he were a sleeping child, and cast him over the cliff. Then I retrieved the balls, and threw two of them as far as I could . . . . Strange, when I picked them up, their weight and their smoothness still brought back to me that proud joy of my childhood.

"I made no attempt to skulk back, or to sneak aboard. As I climbed the gangplank, I heard them still, the laughter, the cards, the curses. I went to my cabin and lay down on my bed. My sleepless eyes alighted restlessly upon all his things. I breathed in his odor. He was gone. In my stomach I felt the agonizing light tenuousness of the actor who is about to make his debut in a great role before a packed theater. I remembered, once during the war, going to the house of a woman to tell her that her son, Cédéric, was dead. This was in France. In Provence. When I told her, I was girded for her grief. It didn't come. She simply beckoned me with her finger, took me to the back room, pulled out a trunk from under an old brass bed, and showed me everything in it. She spoke in very broken English. This little tractor Cédéric had stolen from the nursery. He loved it so much she didn't have the heart to make him take it back. These fur boots were worn by both him and his brother, Bertrand (also dead). They were like twins, only eleven months apart. She moved in

random, now showing me things that had belonged to Bertrand, the balsa wood glider that his father (also Bertrand, also dead) had made for him. His father had painted it to make it look like a Tornado, with a shark's mouth. And then this, her husband's pallet and painting set. He'd been a beautiful painter, such a purist. See this, he painted this, that mill. That's where we used to live, near Narbonne. This is the charm we hung over our door. It's a Spanish charm to protect from Acts of God, an Indalu from Mojácar. She was half Spanish. She showed me her Fallas dress . . . . She spoke frantically, as if I would at any moment leave. But I stayed, all night I stayed as everything in every cupboard was dredged out and accounted for, attached to life. I stayed until finally, exhausted, she fell asleep in a chair opposite me. And I carried her, just as I had carried Andrew (perhaps that's what made me remember) to her bed, to her sleep, and to her waking.

"We forget, my friend. It's all about trying not to forget. Wasn't the war itself just forgetfulness? Just as we forget what it is to kiss someone, to make love with someone, we forget what it is to kill. These are things we feel we cannot forget. God knows why. And so one kisses to remember kissing, one kills to remember killing.

"Anyway . . . . Anyway, suddenly there's a knock at the door and Hamid sticks his head in. 'Still here! Come and play some cards with us,' he said. I said no. 'Why don't you go ashore?' Tired, I said. 'Where's the ghost of Easter present?' Ashore, I think, I said. Someone shouted for Hamid. He bid me good night.

"His body washed ashore far from the cliffs. Suicide. No investigation. No suggestion of foul play. All the sailors were accounted for. I, at the attestation of Hamid, was in my cabin all night. Andrew had been acting strangely, maundering like a senile man about the deck. He was depressed and antisocial. A few of the sailors had seen him involved in a terrible conflagration with his sister in the street just the day before . . . .

"His body and his effects were shipped home. That letter I wrote to Elspeth was the hardest letter I've ever written. To lie is the worst thing in the world. As I wrote, I compounded lie upon lie, telling her of his mental instability, about how extremely the captain's cruelty had affected his sensitive constitution. I also told her, with a view of course to defuse any letter he might have sent her, that he'd begun to become paranoid, had believed me at first to be complicit with the captain, and then, in one of those violent volte-face of the mentally unbalanced, had begun to accuse me of actually murdering the captain.

"The letter with which she responded was full of the most virulent hatred for the captain. How had she ever even dreamed of marrying such a

creature? She considered him solely responsible for her brother's death. Pages and pages of vituperation, of pure, writhing, anguished hatred for the man to whom she referred only as 'my brother's murderer.' And then there was a final note to tell me that she was flying back out to South America, and would arrive in Arica on the fifteenth.

"I met her at the train station. She'd come because she wanted to see the place where he'd spent his last hours. She wanted to see the things he'd last seen. It would help her, she said, to remember him.

"We went first to my cabin. She sat on his bed with her hand lightly upon the coarse, woolen blanket, the last light cutting across her from the small porthole, reminding me of how similar their features were. And then, for some reason I can never explain, I took her hand and led her off the boat and up the steep ascent of the cliff. It was an evening just as it had been on that night, the sun sinking. She soon broke from me and walked just ahead, looking about her, trying to understand and so hold in memory things that merely were: the sound of the birds, the sea, the setting sun.

"Then we came to where the slope leveled off. She stopped for a moment and leaned against that rock upon which I'd sat as my crime had become a dream in the darkness. After a few moments, she walked to the edge of the cliff, looked out over the sea. Then I saw it, pale against the dark ground. I quickly positioned myself between her and it, and embraced her about her waist. I could feel her body convulsing gently. She told me I was hurting her and turned in my arms to face me. I quickly took hold of her wet face and pressed it into my neck. She reached up to my hand. I thought she was going to peel it away, but she didn't: she pressed upon it until I could feel every contour of her skull. Once again, I'd done exactly the right thing. Gently, I guided her back.

"When I returned to England, we were married. Often I'd see him in her, especially if she pulled her hair back—she had lovely hair, and I wouldn't say by any means that it was all that distinguished her from him, but it was what distinguished her most. I encouraged her to grow it long, to wear it always down, and I remember her joking sometimes that it was only her hair that I loved.

"Ah, here's the real horror, my friend, the horror to which the murder was nothing. Twelve years of dissimulation, twelve years and three children. Twelve years when the black hole of that memory began to draw in and distort my mind until I could barely speak to her because everything was a lie, every statement, every response, every question, every word was a lie. I could neither tell her about my childhood, nor about what I'd been doing just ten minutes before. All was a lie.

"And finally, after twelve years and the terrible silence that was destroying our marriage, I told her. She was sitting just as you are, on the couch in our house in Dorset. She was reading. I pulled up a chair and took her hand . . . .

"I told her, just as I've told you now, deliberately, and with an even more exact attention to detail. I described everything from start to finish. Absolutely everything. Our children were sleeping.

"After the story, she put the book that had been resting in her lap down, went to the spare room, made up the bed, and went to sleep. For a month, she said and did nothing, a month of unimaginable terror for me—to lose her, to lose my children—such terror.

"And then one night I was lying in bed awake—I barely slept in that month—and I heard the bedroom door open. The slant of light from the hall cut across the bed and was then extinguished as she closed the door behind her. My heart stopped. I didn't move, but like a frightened child pretended to be asleep. I knew now that she was coming to tell me that I must leave. But gently, and at this my heart leapt, she got into bed beside me. Then I smelt a strange and sickly odor, the odor of camphor mixed with something else, something I remembered. I turned around. She'd cut off almost all her hair. She wore his blue jacket and one of his garish scarves. She pulled herself toward me. I held her back by her shoulders, but she shrugged off my hands and embraced me. I resisted her kiss a few times, turning away, but finally she took hold of my face and kissed me with her brother's lips, kissed me tenderly, and I cried.

"That was enough for her. It took a while for her hair to grow back. I remember all the children's solemn and whispered questions about it. But we began again. We brought up our children, and we lived together as husband and wife until she died nine years ago from an infection contracted after an appendix operation."

It was almost dark in the room now. Daniel stared at the Matisse.

"What's happened to your children?" he said.

"They're scattered to the farthest regions, my fine oak, one in Australia, one in California, one in Scarborough . . . . I have nothing to offer them. This is my estate," he said, standing up, going over to the window, and staring out.

"You know," he went on, "in this building, there are some people who have never left their rooms, who don't, perhaps, believe it is possible to leave. They stand at their windows and watch the seasons change, a tonal enumeration like a child counting, one two three four, five six seven eight, nine ten eleven twelve. Their senses blossom and die, alpine flowers in a shady crevice, like snaky gleams on water. Whether they know it or not, whether it's conscious or not, they try to understand why the rain is on their windows, why

when the drops run they feel something detach inside them, and they remember, and they know that this is their dumb sound, this rain, that it is all they have to say, and that it is more than enough.

"Right now, there's a naked boy looking at himself in the mirror, three floors up, standing, staring, his nakedness opaque to him, his nakedness existing in that place into which the mirror is a porthole, his nakedness mute, its tongue torn out.

"Two flats across and one down, there's an old woman who's gouged out a hole in her wall, has put into it the receptor of her hearing aid, and now lives upon the sound and silence of the couple who live next to her. She's a spider against that wall, so hungry for their sapless lives."

"And down below, a young man who's lived with his mother all his life. They sleep in the same single bed. They clutch at each other as if they're adrift upon their sleep; and when she dies, they'll find him eating raw meat and frozen fish .... This is all, Daniel ... all of me."

There was a long silence. Finally, Daniel stood, picked up his coat and briefcase, and walked down the musty hallway to the door. The moment he put his hand upon the door handle, he realized, he knew that it was a door into space, into a drop of thirteen stories. As he turned the handle, Amos spoke:

"Will you forget me, Daniel?" he said.

"I can't," Daniel said, looking back as he opened the door. Amos was still looking out of the window.

"Daniel, for you it's so little. For me, it's so much. Can't you just forget me?"

"I can't," Daniel said, and with his eyes all the time on Amos, he stepped out.