

I

ALL RISE



Talk to him.

YOUR HONOR, in the winter of 1972 R and I broke up, or I should say he broke up with me. His reasons were vague, but the gist was that he had a secret self, a cowardly, despicable self he could never show me, and that he needed to go away like a sick animal until he could improve this self and bring it up to a standard he judged deserving of company. I argued with him—I'd been his girlfriend for almost two years, his secrets were my secrets, if there was something cruel or cowardly in him I of all people would know—but it was useless. Three weeks after he'd moved out I got a postcard from him (without a return address) saying that he felt our decision, as he called it, hard as it was, had been the right one, and I had to admit to myself that our relationship was over for good.

Things got worse then for a while before they got better. I won't go into it except to say that I didn't go out, not even to see my grandmother, and I didn't let anyone come to see me, either. The only thing that helped, oddly, was the fact that the weather was stormy, and so I had to keep running around the apartment with the strange

little brass wrench made especially for tightening the bolts on either side of the antique window frames—when they got loose in windy weather the windows would shriek. There were six windows, and just as I finished tightening the bolts on one, another would start to howl, so I would run with the wrench, and then maybe I would have a half hour of silence on the only chair left in the apartment. For a while, at least, it seemed that all there was of the world was that long rain and the need to keep the bolts fastened. When the weather finally cleared, I went out for a walk. Everything was flooded, and there was a feeling of calm from all that still, reflecting water. I walked for a long time, six or seven hours at least, through neighborhoods I had never been to before and have never been back to since. By the time I got home I was exhausted but I felt that I had purged myself of something.

SHE WASHED the blood from my hands and gave me a fresh T-shirt, maybe even her own. She thought I was your girlfriend or even your wife. No one has come for you yet. I won't leave your side. *Talk to him.*

NOT LONG after that R's grand piano was lowered through the huge living room window, the same way it had come in. It was the last of his possessions to go, and as long as the piano had been there, it was as if he hadn't really left. In the weeks that I lived alone with the piano, before they came to take it away, I would sometimes pat it as I passed in just the same way that I had patted R.

A few days later an old friend of mine named Paul Alpers called to tell me about a dream he'd had. In it he and the great poet César Vallejo were at a house in the country that had belonged to Vallejo's family since he was a child. It was empty, and all the walls were painted a bluish white. The whole effect was very peaceful, Paul said, and in the dream he thought Vallejo lucky to be able to go to such a place to work. This looks like the holding place before the

afterlife, Paul told him. Vallejo didn't hear him, and he had to repeat himself twice. Finally the poet, who in real life died at forty-six, penniless, in a rainstorm, just as he had predicted, understood and nodded. Before they entered the house Vallejo had told Paul a story about how his uncle used to dip his fingers in the mud to make a mark on his forehead—something to do with Ash Wednesday. And then, Vallejo said (said Paul), he would do something I never understood. To illustrate, Vallejo dipped his two fingers in the mud and drew a mustache across Paul's upper lip. They both laughed. Throughout the dream, Paul said, most striking was the complicity between them, as if they had known each other many years.

Naturally Paul had thought of me when he'd woken up, because when we were sophomores in college we'd met in a seminar on avant-garde poets. We'd become friends because we always agreed with each other in class, while everyone else disagreed with us, more and more vehemently as the semester progressed, and with time an alliance had formed between Paul and me that after all these years—five—could still be unfolded and inflated instantly. He asked how I was, alluding to the breakup, which someone must have told him about. I said I was ok except that I thought maybe my hair was falling out. I also told him that along with the piano, the sofa, chairs, bed, and even the silverware had gone with R, since when I met him I'd been living more or less out of a suitcase, whereas he had been like a sitting Buddha surrounded by all of the furniture he'd inherited from his mother. Paul said he thought he might know someone, a poet, a friend of a friend, who was going back to Chile and might need a foster home for his furniture. A phone call was made and it was confirmed that the poet, Daniel Varsky, did indeed have some items he didn't know what to do with, not wanting to sell them in case he changed his mind and decided to return to New York. Paul gave me his number and said Daniel was expecting me to get in touch. I put off making the call for a few days, mostly because there was something awkward about asking a stranger for his

furniture even if the way had already been paved, and also because in the month since R and all of his many belongings had gone I'd become accustomed to having nothing. Problems only arose when someone else came over and I would see, reflected in the look on my guest's face, that from the outside the conditions, my conditions, Your Honor, appeared pathetic.

When I finally called Daniel Varsky he picked up after one ring. There was a cautiousness in that initial greeting, before he knew who it was on the other end, that I later came to associate with Daniel Varsky, and with Chileans, few as I've met, in general. It took a minute for him to sort out who I was, a minute for the light to go on revealing me as a friend of a friend and not some loopy woman calling—about his furniture? she'd heard he wanted to get rid of it? or just give it out on loan?—a minute in which I considered apologizing, hanging up, and carrying on as I had been, with just a mattress, plastic utensils, and the one chair. But once the light had gone on (Aha! Of course! Sorry! It's all waiting right here for you) his voice softened and became louder at the same time, giving way to an expansiveness I also came to associate with Daniel Varsky and, by extension, everyone who hails from that dagger pointing at the heart of Antarctica, as Henry Kissinger once called it.

He lived all the way uptown, on the corner of 101st Street and Central Park West. On the way, I stopped to visit my grandmother, who lived in a nursing home on West End Avenue. She no longer recognized me, but once I'd gotten over this I found myself able to enjoy being with her. We normally sat and discussed the weather in eight or nine different ways, before moving on to my grandfather, who a decade after his death continued to be a subject of fascination to her, as if with each year of his absence his life, or their life together, became more of an enigma to her. She liked to sit on the sofa marveling at the lobby—All of this belongs to me? she'd periodically ask, waving in a gesture that took in the whole place—and wearing all of her jewelry at once. Whenever I came, I brought her a chocolate

babkah from Zabar's. She always ate a little out of politeness, and the cake would flake onto her lap and stick to her lips, and after I left she gave the rest away to the nurses.

When I got to 99th Street, Daniel Varsky buzzed me in. As I waited for the elevator in the dingy lobby it occurred to me that I might not like his furniture, that it might be dark or otherwise oppressive, and that it would be too late to back out gracefully. But on the contrary, when he opened the door my first impression was of light, so much so that I had to squint, and for a moment I couldn't see his face because it was in silhouette. There was also the smell of something cooking which later turned out to be an eggplant dish he'd learned to make in Israel. Once my eyes adjusted I was surprised to find that Daniel Varsky was young. I'd expected someone older since Paul had said his friend was a poet, and though we both wrote poetry, or tried to write it, we made a point of never referring to ourselves as poets, a term we reserved for those whose work had been judged worthy of publication, not just in an obscure journal or two, but in an actual book that could be purchased in a bookstore. In retrospect this turns out to have been an embarrassingly conventional definition of a poet, and though Paul and I and others we knew prided ourselves on our literary sophistication, in those days we were still walking around with our ambition intact and in certain ways it blinded us.

Daniel was twenty-three, a year younger than I was, and though he hadn't yet published a book of poems he seemed to have spent his time better, or more imaginatively, or maybe what could be said is that he felt a pressure to go places, meet people, and experience things that, whenever I have encountered it in someone, has always made me envious. He had traveled for the last four years, living in different cities, on the floors of the apartments of people he met along the way, and sometimes apartments of his own when he could convince his mother or maybe it was his grandmother to wire him money, but now at last he was going home to take his place alongside

the friends he had grown up with who were fighting for liberation, revolution, or at least socialism in Chile.

The eggplant was ready and while Daniel set the table he told me to look around at the furniture. The apartment was small, but there was a large southern-facing window through which all the light entered. The most striking thing about the place was the mess—papers all over the floor, coffee-stained Styrofoam cups, notebooks, plastic bags, cheap rubber shoes, divorced records and sleeves. Anyone else would have felt compelled to say, Excuse the mess, or joked about a herd of wild animals passing through, but Daniel didn't mention it. The only more or less empty surface was the walls, bare aside from a few maps he'd tacked up of the cities he had lived in—Jerusalem, Berlin, London, Barcelona—and on certain avenues, corners, and squares he had scribbled notes that I didn't immediately understand because they were in Spanish, and it would have seemed rude to have gone up and tried to decipher them while my host and benefactor set down the silverware. So I turned my attention to the furniture, or what I could see of it under the mess—a sofa, a large wooden desk with lots of drawers, some big and some small, a pair of bookshelves crammed with volumes in Spanish, French, and English, and the nicest piece, a kind of chest or trunk with iron braces that looked as if it had been rescued from a sunken ship and put to use as a coffee table. He must have acquired everything secondhand, none of it looked new, but all the pieces shared a kind of sympathy, and the fact that they were suffocating under papers and books made them more attractive rather than less. Suddenly I felt awash in gratitude to their owner, as if he were handing down to me not just some wood and upholstery but the chance at a new life, leaving it up to me to rise to the occasion. I'm embarrassed to say that my eyes actually filled with tears, Your Honor, though as is so often the case, the tears sprang from older, more obscure regrets I had delayed thinking about, which the gift, or loan, of a stranger's furniture had somehow unsettled.

We must have talked for seven or eight hours at least. Maybe

more. It turned out that we both loved Rilke. We also both liked Auden, though I liked him more, and neither of us cared much for Yeats, but both felt secretly guilty about this, in case it suggested some sort of personal failure at the level where poetry lives and matters. The only moment of disharmony came when I raised the subject of Neruda, the one Chilean poet I knew, to which Daniel responded with a flash of anger: Why is it, he asked, that wherever a Chilean goes in the world, Neruda and his fucking seashells has already been there and set up a monopoly? He held my gaze waiting for me to counter him, and as he did I got the feeling that where he came from it was commonplace to talk as we were talking, and even to argue about poetry to the point of violence, and for a moment I felt brushed by loneliness. Just a moment, though, and then I jumped to apologize, and swore up and down to read the abbreviated list of great Chilean poets he scribbled on the back of a paper bag (at the top of which, in capital letters overshadowing the rest, was Nicanor Parra) and also to never again utter the name of Neruda, either in his presence or anyone else's.

We talked then of Polish poetry, of Russian poetry, of Turkish and Greek and Argentine poetry, of Sappho and the lost notebooks of Pasternak, of the death of Ungaretti, the suicide of Weldon Kees, and the disappearance of Arthur Cravan, who Daniel claimed was still alive, cared for by the whores of Mexico City. But sometimes, in the dip or hollow between one rambling sentence and the next, a dark cloud would cross his face, hesitate for a moment as if it might stay, and then slide past, dissolving toward the edges of the room, and at those moments I almost felt I should turn away, since though we talked a lot about poetry we had not yet said much of anything about ourselves.

At a certain point Daniel jumped up and went rifling through the desk with all the drawers, opening some and closing others, in search of a cycle of poems he'd written. It was called *Forget Everything I Ever Said*, or something like that, and he had translated it himself.

He cleared his throat and began to read aloud in a voice that coming from anyone else might have seemed affected or even comic, touched as it was with a faint tremolo, but coming from Daniel seemed completely natural. He didn't apologize or hide behind the pages. Just the opposite. He straightened up like a pole, as if he were borrowing energy from the poem, and looked up frequently, so frequently that I began to suspect he had memorized what he'd written. It was at one of these moments, as we met eye-to-eye across a word, that I realized he was actually quite good-looking. He had a big nose, a big Chilean-Jewish nose, and big hands with skinny fingers, and big feet, but there was also something delicate about him, something to do with his long eyelashes or his bones. The poem was good, not great but very good, or maybe it was even better than very good, it was hard to tell without being able to read it myself. It seemed to be about a girl who had broken his heart, though it could just as easily have been about a dog; halfway through I got lost, and started to think about how R always used to wash his narrow feet before he got into bed because the floor of our apartment was dirty, and though he never told me to wash mine it was implicit, since if I hadn't then the sheets would have gotten dirty, making his own washing pointless. I didn't like sitting on the edge of the tub or standing at the sink with one knee to my ear, watching the black dirt swirl in the white porcelain, but it was one of those countless things one does in life to avoid an argument, and now the thought of it made me want to laugh or possibly choke.

By then Daniel Varsky's apartment had gotten dim and aquatic, the sun having gone down behind a building, and the shadows that had been hiding behind everything began to flood out. I remember there were some very large books on his shelf, fine books with tall cloth spines. I don't remember any of their titles, perhaps they were a set, but they seemed somehow to be in collusion with the darkening hour. It was as if the walls of his apartment were suddenly carpeted like the walls of a movie theater to keep the sound from getting out, or other sounds from getting in, and inside that tank,

Your Honor, in what light there was, we were both the audience and the picture. Or as if we alone had been cut loose from the island and were now drifting in uncharted waters, black waters of unknowable depth. I was considered attractive in those days, some people even called me beautiful, though my skin was never good and it was this that I noticed when I looked in the mirror, this and a faintly perturbed look, a slight wrinkling of the forehead that I hadn't known I was doing. But before I was with R, and while I was with him, too, there were plenty of men who made it clear they would have liked to go home with me, either for a night or longer, and as Daniel and I got up and moved to the living room I wondered what he thought of me.

It was then that he told me the desk had been used, briefly, by Lorca. I didn't know if he was joking or not, it seemed highly improbable that this traveler from Chile, younger than I, could have gotten hold of such a valuable item, but I decided to assume that he was serious so as not to risk offending someone who had shown me only kindness. When I asked how he had gotten it, he shrugged and said he had bought it, but didn't elaborate. I thought he was going to say, And now I am giving it to you, but he didn't, he just gave one of the legs a little kick, not a violent one but a gentle one, full of respect, and kept walking.

Either then or later we kissed.

SHE INJECTED another dose of morphine into your drip, and fixed a loose electrode on your chest. Out the window, dawn was spreading over Jerusalem. For a moment she and I watched the green glow of your EKG rise and fall. Then she drew the curtain and left us alone.

OUR KISS was anticlimactic. It wasn't that the kiss was bad, but it was just a note of punctuation in our long conversation, a parenthetical remark made in order to assure each other of a deeply felt agreement,

a mutual offer of companionship, which is so much more rare than sexual passion or even love. Daniel's lips were bigger than I expected, not big on his face but big when I closed my eyes and they touched mine, and for a split second I felt as if they were smothering me. More than likely it was just that I was so used to R's lips, thin non-Semitic lips that often turned blue in the cold. With one hand Daniel Varsky squeezed my thigh, and I touched his hair, which smelled like a dirty river. I think by then we'd arrived, or were about to arrive, at the cesspool of politics, and at first angrily, then almost on the edge of tears, Daniel Varsky railed against Nixon and Kissinger and their sanctions and ruthless machinations that were, he said, trying to strangle all that was new and young and beautiful in Chile, the hope that had carried the doctor Allende all the way to Moneda Palace. Workers' wages up by 50 percent he said, and all these pigs care about is their copper and their multinationals! Just the thought of a democratically elected Marxist president makes them shit in their pants! Why don't they just leave us alone and let us get on with our lives, he said, and for a minute his look was almost pleading or imploring, as if I somehow held sway with the shady characters at the helm of the dark ship of my country. He had a very prominent Adam's apple, and every time he swallowed it bobbed around in his throat, and now it seemed to be bobbing continuously, like an apple tossed out to sea. I didn't know much about what was happening in Chile, at least not then, not yet. A year and a half later, after Paul Alpers told me that Daniel Varsky had been taken in the middle of the night by Manuel Contreras' secret police, I knew. But in the winter of 1972, sitting in his apartment on 101st Street in the last of the evening light, while General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte was still the demure, groveling army chief of staff who tried to get his friends' children to call him Tata, I didn't know much.

What's strange is that I don't remember how the night (by then it was already an enormous New York City night) ended. Obviously we must have said goodbye after which I left his apartment, or maybe we

left together and he walked me to the subway or hailed me a cab, since in those days the neighborhood, or the city in general, wasn't safe. I just don't have any recollection of it. A couple of weeks later a moving truck arrived at my apartment and the men unloaded the furniture. By that time Daniel Varsky had already gone home to Chile.

Two years passed. In the beginning I used to get postcards. At first they were warm and even jovial: Everything is fine. I'm thinking of joining the Chilean Speleological Society but don't worry, it won't interfere with my poetry, if anything the two pursuits are complementary. I may have a chance to attend a mathematics lecture by Parra. The political situation is going to hell, if I don't join the Speleological Society I'm going to join the MIR. Take good care of Lorca's desk, one day I'll be back for it. Besos, D.V. After the coup they became somber, and then they became cryptic, and then, about six months before I heard he'd disappeared, they stopped coming altogether. I kept them all in one of the drawers of his desk. I didn't write back because there was no address to write back to. In those years I was still writing poetry, and I wrote a few poems addressed, or dedicated, to Daniel Varsky. My grandmother died and was buried too far out in the suburbs for anyone to visit, I went out with a number of men, moved apartments twice, and wrote my first novel at Daniel Varsky's desk. Sometimes I forgot about him for months at a time. I don't know if I knew about Villa Grimaldi yet, almost certainly I hadn't heard of 38 Calle Londres, Cuatro Alamos, or the Discoteca also known as Venda Sexy because of the sexual atrocities performed there and the loud music the torturers favored, but whatever the case I knew enough that at other times, having fallen asleep on Daniel's sofa as I often did, I had nightmares about what they did to him. Sometimes I would look around at his furniture, the sofa, desk, coffee table, bookshelves, and chairs, and be filled with a crushing despair, and sometimes just an oblique sadness, and sometimes I would look at it all and become convinced that it amounted to a riddle, a riddle he had left me that I was supposed to crack.

From time to time, I've met people, mostly Chileans, who knew or had heard of Daniel Varsky. For a short time after his death his reputation grew, and he was counted among the martyred poets silenced by Pinochet. But of course the ones who tortured and killed Daniel had never read his poetry; it's possible they didn't even know that he wrote poetry at all. Some years after he disappeared, with the help of Paul Alpers, I wrote letters to Daniel's friends asking if they had any poems of his that they could send to me. I had the idea that I could get them published somewhere as a kind of memorial to him. But I only received one letter back, a short reply from an old school friend saying he didn't have anything. I must have written something about the desk in my letter, otherwise the postscript would have been too strange: By the way, it said, I doubt Lorca ever owned that desk. That was all. I put the letter in the drawer with Daniel's postcards. For a while I even thought of writing to his mother, but in the end I never did.

Many years have passed since then. I was married for a while, but now I live alone again, though not unhappily. There are moments when a kind of clarity comes over you, and suddenly you can see through walls to another dimension that you'd forgotten or chosen to ignore in order to continue living with the various illusions that make life, particularly life with other people, possible. And that's where I'd arrived, Your Honor. If it weren't for the events I'm about to describe, I might have gone on not thinking about Daniel Varsky, or very rarely, though I was still in possession of his bookshelves, his desk, and the trunk of a Spanish galleon or the salvage of an accident on the high seas, quaintly used as a coffee table. The sofa began to rot, I don't remember exactly when but I had to throw it away. At times I thought of getting rid of the rest, too. It reminded me, when I was in a certain mood, of things I would rather forget. For example sometimes I am asked by the occasional journalist who wishes to interview me why I stopped writing poetry. Either I say that the poetry I wrote wasn't any good, perhaps it was even terrible, or I say that a poem has

the potential for perfection and this possibility finally silenced me, or sometimes I say that I felt trapped in the poems I tried to write, which is like saying one feels trapped in the universe, or trapped by the inevitability of death, but the truth of why I stopped writing poetry is not any of these, not nearly, not exactly, the truth is that if I could explain why I stopped writing poetry then I might write it again. What I am saying is that Daniel Varsky's desk, which became my desk of more than twenty-five years, reminded me of these things. I'd always considered myself only a temporary guardian and had assumed a day would come, after which, albeit with mixed feelings, I would be relieved of my responsibility of living with and watching over the furniture of my friend, the dead poet Daniel Varsky, and that from then on I would be free to move as I wished, possibly even to another country. It isn't exactly that the furniture had kept me in New York, but if pressed I have to admit this was the excuse I'd used for not leaving all those years, long after it became clear the city had nothing left for me. And yet when that day came it sent my life, at last solitary and serene, reeling.

It was 1999, the end of March. I was at my desk working when the phone rang. I didn't recognize the voice that asked for me on the other end. Coolly, I inquired who was calling. Over the years I've learned to guard my privacy, not because so many people have tried to invade it (some have), but because writing demands that one be protective and adamant about so much that a certain a priori unwillingness to oblige spills over even to situations where it isn't necessary. The young woman said that we'd never met. I asked her the reason for her call. I think you knew my father, she said, Daniel Varsky.

At the sound of his name I felt a chill through me, not only from the shock of learning that Daniel had a daughter, or the sudden expansion of the tragedy I'd perched on the edge of for so long, or even the certain knowledge that my long stewardship had come to an end, but also because some part of me had waited for such a phone call for years, and now, despite the late hour, it had come.

I asked how she'd found me. I decided to look, she said. But how did you know to look for *me*? I only met your father once, and it was a very long time ago. My mother, she said. I had no idea who she was referring to. She said, You once wrote her a letter asking if she had any of my father's poems. Anyway, it's a long story. I could tell it to you when I see you. (Of course we would be seeing each other, she knew perfectly well that what she was about to ask for couldn't be denied, but all the same her assurance threw me.) In the letter you wrote that you had his desk, she said. Do you still have it?

I looked across the room at the wooden desk at which I had written seven novels, and on whose surface, in the cone of light cast by a lamp, lay the piles of pages and notes that were to constitute an eighth. One drawer was slightly ajar, one of the nineteen drawers, some small and some large, whose odd number and strange array, I realized now, on the cusp of their being suddenly taken from me, had come to signify a kind of guiding if mysterious order in my life, an order that, when my work was going well, took on an almost mystical quality. Nineteen drawers of varying size, some below the desktop and some above, whose mundane occupations (stamps here, paper clips there) hid a far more complex design, the blueprint of the mind formed over tens of thousands of days of thinking while staring at them, as if they held the conclusion to a stubborn sentence, the culminating phrase, the radical break from everything I had ever written that would at last lead to the book I had always wanted, and always failed, to write. Those drawers represented a singular logic deeply embedded, a pattern of consciousness that could be articulated in no other way but their precise number and arrangement. Or am I making too much of it?

My chair was turned slightly away, waiting for me to return and swivel it back to attention. On such an evening I might have stayed up half the night working, writing and staring out at the blackness of the Hudson, as long as the energy and clarity lasted. There was no

one to call me to bed, no one to demand that the rhythms of my life operate in a duet, no one toward whom I had to bend. Had the caller been almost anyone else, after hanging up I would have returned to the desk that over the course of two and a half decades I'd physically grown around, my posture formed by years of leaning over it and fitting myself to it.

For a moment I considered saying that I had given it away or thrown it out. Or simply telling the caller that she was mistaken: I'd never been in possession of her father's desk. Her hope was tentative, she had offered me a way out—*Do you still have it?* She would have been disappointed, but I would have been taking nothing away from her, at least nothing that she had ever had. And I could have continued writing at the desk for another twenty-five or thirty years, or however long my mind stayed agile and the pressing need didn't subside.

But instead, without pausing to consider the repercussions, I told her that, yes, I had it. I've looked back and wondered why I so quickly uttered those words that almost immediately derailed my life. And though the obvious answer is that it was the kind and even the right thing to do, Your Honor, I knew that wasn't the reason I'd said it. I've wronged people I've loved far more gravely in the name of my work, and the person asking something of me now was a complete stranger. No, I agreed to it for the same reason I would have written it in a story: because saying yes felt inevitable.

I'd like to have it, she said. Of course, I answered, and, without pausing to give myself a moment to change my mind, asked her when she wanted to come for it. I'm only in New York for another week, she said. How about Saturday? That, I calculated, would leave me five more days with the desk. Fine, I said, though there couldn't have been a greater discrepancy between the casual tone of my voice and the distraught feeling taking hold of me as I spoke. I have a few other pieces of furniture that belonged to your father, too. You can have them all.

Before she hung up, I asked her name. Leah, she said. Leah Varsky? No, she said, Weisz. And then, matter-of-factly she explained that her mother, who was Israeli, had lived in Santiago in the early seventies. She'd had a brief affair with Daniel around the time of the military coup, and soon afterwards had left the country. When her mother had found out that she was pregnant, she'd written to Daniel. She'd never heard back from him; he had already been arrested.

When, in the silence that followed, it became clear that we had run out of all the small manageable bits of the conversation, leaving only the pieces too unwieldy for such a phone call, I said, that, yes, I'd been holding on to the desk for a long time. I always thought someone would come for it one day, I told her, though of course I'd have tried to return it sooner had I known.

After she hung up I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. When I came back into the room—a living room I used as a study, because I had no need for a living room—I walked over and sat down at the desk as if nothing had changed. But of course something had, and when I looked at the computer screen to the sentence I'd abandoned when the telephone rang I knew it would be impossible to go any further that night.

I got up and moved to my reading chair. I picked up the book from the side table, but found, somewhat uncharacteristically, that my mind was wandering. I stared across the room at the desk, as I had stared at it on countless nights when I'd reached an impasse but wasn't ready to capitulate. No, I don't harbor any mystical ideas about writing, Your Honor, it's work like any other kind of craft; the power of literature, I've always thought, lies in how willful the act of making it is. As such, I've never bought into the idea that the writer requires any special ritual in order to write. If need be, I could write almost anywhere, as easily in an ashram as in a crowded café, or so I've always insisted when asked whether I write with a pen or a computer, at morning or night, alone or surrounded, in a saddle like Goethe, standing like Hemingway, lying down like Twain, and so on,

as if there were a secret to it all that might spring the lock of the safe housing the novel, fully formed and ready for publication, apparently suspended in each of us. No, what I was distraught to be losing was the familiar conditions of my work; it was sentimentality speaking and nothing else.

It was a setback. Something melancholy clung to the whole business, a melancholy that had begun with the story of Daniel Varsky, but now belonged to me. But it was not an irreparable problem. Tomorrow morning, I decided, I would go out to buy a new desk.

It was past midnight by the time I fell asleep, and, as always when I go to bed entangled in some difficulty, my sleep was uneven and my dreams vivid. But by morning, despite the receding sense that I had been dragged through something epic, I only remembered a fragment—a man standing outside my building, freezing to death in the glacial wind that blows down the Hudson corridor from Canada, from the Arctic Circle itself, who, as I passed, asked me to pull a red thread that was hanging from his mouth. I obliged, bullied by the pressure of charity, but as I pulled the thread continued to pile up at my feet. When my arms tired the man barked at me to keep pulling, until over a passage of time, compressed as it only can be in dreams, he and I became joined in the conviction that something crucial lay at the end of that string; or maybe it was only I who had the luxury to believe or not, while for him it was a matter of life and death.

The next day I did not go out to look for a new desk, or the day after that. When I sat down to work, not only was I unable to muster the necessary concentration, but when I looked over the pages I'd already written I found them to be superfluous words lacking life and authenticity, with no compelling reason behind them. What I hoped had been the sophisticated artifice that the best fiction employs, I now saw was only a garden-variety artifice, artifice used to draw attention away from what is ultimately shallow rather than reveal the shattering depths below the surface of everything. What I thought was a simpler, purer prose, more searing for being stripped of all distracting

ornament, was actually a dull and lumbering mass, void of tension or energy, standing in opposition to nothing, toppling nothing, shouting nothing. Though I had been struggling with the mechanism behind the book for some time, unable to work out how the pieces fit together, I'd believed all along that there was something there, a design that if I could only dislodge and separate it from the rest would prove to have all the delicacy and irreducibility of an idea that demands a novel, written in only one way, to express it. But now I saw that I had been wrong.

I left the apartment and went for a long walk through Riverside Park and down Broadway to clear my mood. I stopped at Zabar's to pick up some things for dinner, waving to the same man in the cheese department who'd been there since the days when I visited my grandmother, weaving past the old, heavily powdered hunchbacks pushing a jar of pickles around in a cart, standing in line behind a woman with an eternal and involuntary nod—yes, yes, yes, yes—the exuberant yes of the girl she once was, even where she meant no, no, enough already, no.

But when I got back home it was exactly the same. The next day was worse. My judgment of all I'd written over the last year or more took on a sickening solidity. In the days that followed, all I accomplished at the desk was to box up the manuscript and notes, and empty the drawers of their contents. There were old letters, scraps of paper on which I'd written things now incomprehensible, scattered odds and ends, remaindered parts of objects long ago thrown away, assorted electrical transformers, stationery printed with the address where I'd lived with my ex-husband, S—a collection of mostly useless things, and, underneath some old notebooks, Daniel's postcards. Lodged at the back of one drawer I found a yellowed paperback Daniel must have forgotten so many years ago, a collection of stories by a writer named Lotte Berg, inscribed to him from the author in 1970. I filled a large bag with things to be thrown out; everything else I put away in a box except for the postcards and paperback. Those I

placed, without reading them, into a manila envelope. I emptied all the many drawers, some very small, as I said, and some of average size, except for the one with a small brass lock. If you were sitting at the desk the lock would be located just above your right knee. The drawer had been locked for as long as I could remember, and though I'd looked many times I'd never found the key. Once, in a fit of curiosity, or maybe boredom, I tried to break the lock open with a screwdriver, but only managed to scrape my knuckles. Often I'd wished that it were a different drawer that was locked, since the one on the top right was the most practical, and whenever I went to look for something in one of the many drawers, I always instinctively reached for it first, awakening a fleeting unhappiness, a kind of orphaned feeling that I knew had nothing to do with the drawer but that had somehow come to live there. For some reason I always assumed that the drawer contained letters from the girl in the poem Daniel Varsky once read to me, or if not her then someone like her.

The following Saturday at noon Leah Weisz rang my bell. When I opened the door and saw the figure standing there I caught my breath: it was Daniel Varsky, despite the intervening twenty-seven years, exactly as I'd remembered he'd stood that winter afternoon when I rang his bell and he opened the door for me, only now everything was reversed as in a mirror, or reversed as if time had suddenly come to a halt then begun to hurtle backwards, undoing everything it had done. The same thinness, the same nose, and, despite it, the underlying delicateness. This echo of Daniel Varsky now extended her hand. It was cold when I shook it, despite the warmth outside. She wore a blue velvet blazer scuffed at the elbows and a red linen scarf around her neck, the ends slung over her shoulders in the rakish way of a college student bent under the burden of her first encounter with Kierkegaard or Sartre, battling the wind to cross a quadrangle. She looked as young as that, eighteen or nineteen, but when I did the math I realized Leah must have been twenty-four or twenty-five, almost exactly the age Daniel and I had been when we'd met

each other. And, unlike a fresh-faced student, there was something foreboding about the way her hair fell in her eyes, and the eyes themselves, which were dark, almost black.

But inside I saw that she was not her father. Among other things, she was smaller, more compact, almost puckish. Her hair was auburn, not black as Daniel's had been. Under the overhead lights of my hallway, Daniel's features fell away enough that had I passed Leah in the street I might not have noticed anything familiar about her.

She saw the desk immediately and walked slowly toward it. Stopping in front of the hulking mass, more present to her, I imagine, than her father could ever have been, she put her hand to her forehead and sat down in the chair. For a moment I thought she might cry. Instead she laid her hands on the surface, ran them back and forth, and began to fiddle with the drawers. I stifled my annoyance at this intrusion, as well as those that followed, as she wasn't content to open only one drawer and look inside, but proceeded to look in three or four before she seemed satisfied that they were all empty. For a moment I thought I might cry.

To be polite, and in order to put a halt to any further inquisition of the furniture, I offered her tea. She rose from the desk and turned to look around the room. You live alone? she asked. Her tone, or the expression on her face as she glanced at the leaning stack of books next to my stained armchair and the dirty mugs collecting on the windowsill, reminded me of the pitying way friends had sometimes looked at me when they came to see me in the months before I met her father, when I lived alone in the apartment emptied of R's things. Yes, I said. How do you take your tea? You never married? she asked, and perhaps because I was taken aback by the bluntness of the question, before I could think I answered, No. I don't plan to either, she said. No? I asked. Why not? Look at you, she said. You're free to go wherever you want, to live as you please. She tucked her hair behind her ears and took in another sweeping glance across the room, as if it were the whole

apartment or maybe even the life itself that was about to be transferred to her name, not just a desk.

It would have been impossible, at least for the moment, to ask all that I wanted to about the circumstances of Daniel's arrest, where he was detained, and whether anything was known about how and where he had died. Instead, over the course of the next half hour, I learned that Leah had lived in New York for two years, studying piano at Juilliard, before she decided, one day, that she no longer wished to play the giant instrument she had been chained to since she was five, and a few weeks later she went home to Jerusalem. She had been living there for the past year, trying to figure out what it was she wanted to do now. She had only come back to New York to pick up some of the things she had left behind with friends, and she planned on shipping it all, along with the desk, back to Jerusalem.

Perhaps there were other details that I missed, because as she spoke I found myself struggling to accept the idea that I was about to hand over the single meaningful object in my life as a writer, the lone physical representation of all that was otherwise weightless and intangible, to this waif who might sit at it from time to time as if at a paternal altar. And yet, Your Honor, what could I do? Arrangements were made for her to return the following day with a moving truck that would bring the furniture directly to a shipping container in Newark. Because I couldn't bear to watch the desk being carted away, I told her that I would be out, but that I would make sure that Vlad, the gruff Romanian superintendent, was there to let her in.

Early the next morning I left the manila envelope with Daniel's postcards on the empty desk, and drove up to Norfolk, Connecticut, where S and I had rented a house for nine or ten summers, and to which I hadn't returned since we'd separated. It was only once I'd parked next to the library, stepping out of the car to stretch my legs in view of the town green, that I realized any reason I had for being there shouldn't be indulged, and, moreover, I desperately wanted to avoid running into anyone I knew. I got back into the car and for

the next four or five hours drove aimlessly along the country roads, through New Marlborough to Great Barrington, beyond to Lenox, tracing routes S and I had taken a hundred times before we looked up and noticed that our marriage had starved to death.

As I drove, I found myself thinking of how, four or five years after we'd gotten married, S and I were invited to a dinner party at the home of a German dancer then living in New York. At the time S worked at a theater, now closed, where the dancer was performing a solo piece. The apartment was small and filled with the dancer's unusual possessions, things he had found on the street, or during his tireless travels, or that he had been given, all arranged with the sense of space, proportion, timing, and grace that made him such a joy to watch onstage. In fact, it was strange and almost frustrating to see the dancer in street clothes and brown house slippers, moving so practically through the apartment, with little or no sign of the tremendous physical talent that lay dormant in him, and I found myself craving for some break in this pragmatic façade, a leap or turn, some explosion of his true energy. All the same, once I got used to this and became absorbed in looking at his many little collections, I had the elated, otherworldly feeling I sometimes get entering the sphere of another's life, when for a moment changing my banal habits and living like *that* seems entirely possible, a feeling that always dissolves by the next morning, when I wake up to the familiar, unmovable shapes of my own life. At some point I got up from the dinner table to use the bathroom, and in the hall I passed the open door of the dancer's bedroom. It was spare, with only a bed and wooden chair and a little altar with candles set up in one corner. There was a large window facing south through which lower Manhattan hung suspended in the dark. The other walls were blank except for one painting tacked up with pins, a vibrant picture from whose many bright, high-spirited strokes faces sometimes emerged, as if from a bog, now and then topped with a hat. The faces on the top half of the paper were upside down, as if the painter had turned the page around or circled it on

his or her knees while painting, in order to reach more easily. It was a strange piece of work, unlike the style of the other things the dancer had collected, and I studied it for a minute or two before continuing on to the bathroom.

The fire in the living room burned down, the night progressed. At the end, as we were putting on our coats, I surprised myself by asking the dancer who had made the painting. He told me that his best friend from childhood had done it when he was nine. My friend and his older sister, he said, though I think she did most of it. Afterwards they gave it to me. The dancer helped me on with my coat. You know, that painting has a sad story, he added a moment later, almost as an afterthought.

One afternoon, the mother gave the children sleeping pills in their tea. The boy was nine and his sister was eleven. Once they were asleep, she carried them to the car and drove out to the forest. By this time it was getting dark. She poured gasoline all over the car and lit a match. All three burned to death. It's strange, the dancer said, but I was always jealous of how things were in my friend's house. That year they kept the Christmas tree until April. It turned brown and the needles were dropping off, but many times I nagged my mother about why we couldn't keep our Christmas tree up as long as they did at Jörn's.

In the silence that followed this story, told in the most straightforward manner, the dancer smiled. It's possible that it was because I had my coat on, and the apartment was warm, but suddenly I began to feel hot and light-headed. There were many other things I would have liked to ask about the children and his friendship with them, but I was afraid I might faint, and so after another guest had made a joke about the morbid end to the night, we thanked the dancer for the meal and said goodbye. As we rode down in the elevator I fought to steady myself, but S, who was humming quietly, seemed not to notice.

At that time, S and I were thinking of having a child. From the beginning both of us had imagined that we would. But there were

always things we felt we had to work out first in our own lives, together and separately, and time simply passed without bringing any resolution, or a clearer sense of how we might go about being something more than what we were already struggling to be. And though when I was younger I believed I wanted to have a child, I was not surprised to find myself at thirty-five, and then forty, without one. Maybe it seems like ambivalence, Your Honor, and I suppose in part it was, but it was something else, too, a feeling I've always had, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, that there is—that there will always be—more time left for me. The years went by, my face changed in the mirror, my body was no longer what it had been, but I found it difficult to believe that the possibility of having my own child could expire without my explicit agreement.

In the taxi home that night I continued to think about that mother and her children. The wheels of the car softly rolling over the pine needles on the forest floor, the engine cut in a clearing, the pale faces of those young painters asleep in the backseat, dirt under their fingernails. How could she have done it? I said aloud to S. It was not really the question I wanted to ask, but it was as close as I could get just then. She lost her mind, he said simply, as if that were the end of it.

Not long afterwards I wrote a story about the dancer's childhood friend who had died asleep in his mother's car in the German forest. I didn't change any of the details; I only imagined more of them. The house the children lived in, the buoyant smell of spring evenings seeping through the windows, the trees in the garden that they had planted themselves, all rose up easily before me. How the children would sing together songs that their mother had taught them, how she read the Bible to them, how they kept their collection of birds' eggs on the sill, and how the boy would climb into the sister's bed on stormy nights. The story was accepted by a prominent magazine. I didn't call the dancer before it was published, nor did I send him a copy of the story. He lived through it, and I made use of it, embellishing it as I saw fit. Seen in a certain light, that is the kind of work I do,

Your Honor. When I received a copy of the magazine I did wonder for a moment if the dancer would see it and how it would make him feel. But I did not spend very long on the thought, basking instead in the pride of seeing my work printed in the illustrious font of the magazine. I didn't run into the dancer for some time afterwards, nor did I think about what I would say if I did. Furthermore, after the story was published, I stopped thinking about the mother and her children who had burned to death in a car, as if by writing about them I had made them disappear.

I continued to write. I wrote another novel at the desk of Daniel Varsky, and another after that, largely based on my father who had died the year before. It was a novel I could not have written while he was alive. Had he been able to read it, I have little doubt that he would have felt betrayed. Toward the end of his life he lost control of his body and was abandoned by his dignity, something he remained painfully aware of until his final days. In the novel I chronicled these humiliations in vivid detail, even the time he defecated in his pants and I had to clean him, an incident he found so shameful that for many days afterwards he was unable to look me in the eye, and which, it goes without saying, he would have pleaded with me, if he could have brought himself to mention it, never to repeat to anyone. But I did not stop at these torturous, intimate scenes, scenes which, could my father momentarily suspend his sense of shame, he might have acknowledged as reflecting less on him than the universal plight of growing old and facing one's death—I did not stop there, but instead took his illness and suffering, with all of its pungent detail, and finally even his death, as an opportunity to write about his life, and more specifically about his failings, as both a person and a father, failings whose precise and abundant detail could be ascribed to him alone. I paraded his faults and my misgivings, the high drama of my young life with him, thinly disguised (mostly by exaggeration) across the pages of the book. I gave unforgiving descriptions of his crimes as I saw them, and then I forgave him. And yet even if in the end it

was all for the sake of hard-won compassion, even if the final notes of the book were of triumphant love and grief at the loss of him, in the weeks and months leading up to its publication a sickening feeling sometimes took hold of me and dumped its blackness before moving on. In the publicity interviews I gave, I emphasized that the book was fiction and professed my frustration with journalists and readers alike who insisted on reading novels as the autobiographies of their authors, as if there were no such thing as the writer's imagination, as if the writer's work lay only in dutiful chronicling and not fierce invention. I championed the writer's freedom—to create, to alter and amend, to collapse and expand, to ascribe meaning, to design, to perform, to affect, to choose a life, to experiment, and on and on—and quoted Henry James on the “immense increase” of that freedom, a “revelation,” as he calls it, that anyone who has made a serious artistic attempt cannot help but become conscious of. Yes, with the novel based on my father if not flying then at least migrating off the shelves in bookstores across the country, I celebrated the writer's unparalleled freedom, freedom from responsibility to anything and anyone but her own instincts and vision. Perhaps I did not exactly say but certainly implied that the writer served a higher calling, what one calls only in art and religion a vocation, and cannot worry too much about the feelings of those whose lives she borrows from.

Yes, I believed—perhaps even still believe—that the writer should not be cramped by the possible consequences of her work. She has no duty to earthly accuracy or verisimilitude. She is not an accountant; nor is she required to be something as ridiculous and misguided as a moral compass. In her work the writer is free of laws. But in her life, Your Honor, she is not free.

SOME MONTHS after the novel about my father was published, I was out walking and passed a bookstore near Washington Square Park.

Out of habit, I slowed as I reached the window to see whether my book was on display. At that moment I saw the dancer inside at the register, he saw me, we locked eyes. For a second, I considered hurrying on my way without remembering exactly what it was that made me so uneasy. But this quickly became impossible; the dancer raised his hand in greeting and all I could do was wait for him to get his change and come out to say hello.

He wore a beautiful wool coat and a silk scarf knotted around his throat. In the sunlight I saw that he was older. Not by much, but enough that he could no longer be called young. I asked how he was, and he told me about a friend of his who like so many in those years had died of AIDS. He spoke of a recent breakup with a long-term boyfriend, someone he had not yet met the last time I saw him, and then about an upcoming performance of a piece he had choreographed. Though five or six years had passed, S and I were still married and lived in the same West Side apartment. From the outside, not very much had changed, and so when it was my turn to offer news I simply said that everything was fine and that I was still writing. The dancer nodded. It's possible he even smiled, in a genuine way, a way that always makes me, with my unrelenting self-consciousness, feel slightly nervous and embarrassed when I encounter it, knowing I could never be so easy, open, or fluent. I know, he said. I read everything you write. Do you? I said, surprised and suddenly agitated. But he smiled again, and it seemed to me that the danger had passed, the story would go unmentioned.

We walked a few blocks together toward Union Square, as far as was possible before we each had to turn off in separate directions. As we said goodbye, the dancer bent down and removed a piece of fluff from the collar of my coat. The moment was tender and almost intimate. I took it down off my wall, you know, he said softly. What? I said. After I read your story, I took the painting down off my wall. I found I couldn't bear to look at it anymore. You did? I said, caught off guard. Why? At first I wondered myself, he said. It had followed

me from apartment to apartment, from city to city, for almost twenty years. But after a while I understood what your story had made so clear to me. What was that? I wanted to ask, but couldn't. Then the dancer, who though older was still languid and full of grace, reached out and tapped me with two fingers on the cheek, turned, and walked away.

As I made my way home, the dancer's gesture first baffled and then annoyed me. On the surface, it had been easy to mistake for tenderness, but the more I thought about it, the more there seemed something condescending in it, even meant to humiliate. In my mind the dancer's smile became less and less genuine, and it began to seem to me that he had been choreographing the gesture for years, turning it over, waiting to run into me. And was it deserved? Hadn't he gamely told the story, not only to me but all of the dinner guests that night? If I had discovered it through surreptitious means—reading his journals or letters, which I couldn't possibly have done, knowing him as little as I did—it would have been different. Or if he had told me the story in confidence, filled with still-painful emotion. But he had not. He had offered it with the same smile and festivity with which he had offered us a glass of grappa after dinner.

As I walked, I happened to pass a playground. It was already late in the afternoon but the small fenced-in area was full of the children's high-pitched activity. Among the many apartments I've lived in over the years, one had been across the street from a playground and I'd always noticed that in the last half an hour before dusk the children's voices seemed to get noisier. I could never tell whether it was because in the failing light the city had grown a decibel more quiet, or because the children had really grown louder, knowing their time there was almost through. Certain phrases or peals of laughter would break away from the rest, rising up, and hearing one of these I would sometimes get up from my desk to watch the children below. But I didn't stop to watch them now. Consumed by my run-in with the dancer, I barely noticed them until a cry rang out,

pained and terrified, an agonizing child's cry that tore into me, as if it were an appeal to me alone. I stopped short and jerked around, sure I was going to find a mangled child fallen from a great height. But there was nothing, only the children running in and out of their circles and games, and no sign of where the cry had come from. My heart was racing, adrenaline coursing through me, my whole being poised to rush to save whoever had let loose that terrible scream. But the children continued to play, unalarmed. I scanned the buildings above, thinking that perhaps the cry had come from an open window, though it was November and cold enough to need the heat. I stood gripping the fence for some time.

When I got home, S was still out. I put on Beethoven's String Quartet in A Minor, a piece I'd always loved since a college boyfriend first played it for me in his dorm room. I still remember the knobs of his spine as he bent over the record player and slowly let the needle down. The third movement is one of the most moving passages ever written, and I've never listened to it without feeling as if I alone have been lifted up on the shoulders of some giant creature touring the charred landscape of all human feeling. Like most music that affects me deeply, I would never listen to it while others were around, just as I would not pass on a book that I especially loved to another. I am embarrassed to admit this, knowing that it reveals some essential lack or selfishness in my nature, and aware that it runs contrary to the instincts of most, whose passion for something leads them to want to share it, to ignite a similar passion in others, and that without the benefit of such enthusiasm I would still be ignorant of many of the books and much of the music I love most, not least of all the third movement of Opus 132 that bore me up one spring night in 1967. But rather than an expansion, I've always felt a diminishment of my own pleasure when I've invited someone else to take part in it, a rupture in the intimacy I felt with the work, an invasion of privacy. It is worst when someone else picks up the copy of a book I've just been enthralled by and begins casually to thumb through the first

pages. Simply reading at all in the presence of another did not come naturally to me, and I suppose I never really got used to it, even after years of being married. But by that point S had been hired as a booking manager of Lincoln Center and his work required longer hours than it had in the past, and sometimes even took him away on trips to Berlin or London or Tokyo for days at a time. Alone, I could slip into a kind of stillness, into a place like that bog those children once drew, where faces rise up out of the elements, and all is quiet, like the moment just before the arrival of an idea, a stillness and peace I've only ever felt when alone. When at last S came through the door I always found it jarring. But in time he came to understand and accept this, and took to entering by whichever room I wasn't in—the kitchen if I was in the living room, the living room if I was in the bedroom—and occupying himself there by emptying his pockets for some minutes, or organizing his foreign change in little black film canisters, before gradually merging into wherever I was, and this small gesture always melted my resentment into gratitude.

When the movement came to an end I turned off the stereo without listening to the rest, and went to the kitchen to start a soup. I was cutting the vegetables when the knife slipped and sliced deeply into my thumb, and at the instant I shouted out I heard a double of my cry, one belonging to a child. It seemed to come from the other side of the wall, in the next apartment over. I was overcome by a feeling of regret, so sharp that I felt it as a kind of physical pain in my gut, and I had to sit. I admit that I even cried, sobbing until the blood from my finger began to drip onto my shirt. After I'd gotten control of myself and wrapped the cut in a paper towel, I went to knock on my neighbor's door, an old woman named Mrs. Becker who lived alone. I heard her slow footsteps shuffling to the door, and then, after I announced myself, the patient unlocking of various bolts. She peered up at me through enormous black glasses, glasses that somehow made her look like a small, burrowing animal. Yes, dear, come in, so nice to see you. The smell of ancient food was overwhelming, years and

years of cooking odors clinging to the rugs and upholstery, thousands of pots of soup that allowed her to scrape by. I thought that I heard a cry coming from here just a moment ago. A cry? Mrs. Becker asked. It sounded like a child, I said, peering past her into the dark recesses of her apartment, cluttered with claw-footed furniture that would only be moved, with great difficulty, when she died. Sometimes I watch the television, but no, I don't think it was on, I was just sitting here looking at a book. Maybe it came from downstairs. I'm fine, dear, thank you for your concern.

I didn't tell anyone what I'd heard, not even Dr. Lichtman, my therapist of many years. And for some time I didn't hear the child again. But the cries stayed with me. Sometimes I would suddenly hear them within me when I wrote, causing me to lose my train of thought or become flustered. I began to sense in them something mocking, an undertone I had not heard at first. Other times I would hear a cry just as I woke, as I crossed over into wakefulness or departed from sleep, and on those mornings I rose with the feeling of something wound around my neck. A hidden weight seemed to attach itself to simple objects, a teacup, a doorknob, a glass, hardly noticeable at first, beyond the sense that every move required a slightly greater exertion of energy, and by the time I negotiated among these things and arrived at my desk, some reserve in me was already worn down or washed away. The pauses between words became longer, when for an instant the momentum of pressing thought into language faltered and a dark spot of indifference bloomed. I suppose it's what I've battled most often in my life as a writer, a sort of entropy of care or languishing of will, so consistently, in fact, that I barely paid it any attention—a pull to give in to an undertow of speechlessness. But now I often became suspended in these moments, they grew longer and wider, and sometimes it became impossible to see the other shore. And when I finally got there, when a word at last came along like a lifeboat, and then another and another, I greeted them with a faint distrust, a suspiciousness that took root and did not confine itself to my work. It is

impossible to distrust one's writing without awakening a deeper distrust in oneself.

Around that time a houseplant I'd had for many years, a large ficus that had grown happily in our apartment's sunniest corner, suddenly became diseased and began to drop its leaves. I gathered them into a bag and brought it to a plant store to ask how to treat it, but no one could tell me what it had. I became obsessed with saving it, and explained again and again to S the various methods I'd used to try to cure it. But nothing eradicated the disease and in the end the ficus died. I had to throw it out on the street, and for a day, until the garbage truck picked it up, I could see it from my window, bare and ruined. Even after the garbagemen took it away, I continued to page through books on care for houseplants, to study the pictures of mealybugs, of twig blight and canker, until one night S came up behind me, closed the book, put his two hands on my shoulders and held them strongly there while staring fixedly into my eyes, as if he had just applied glue to the bottom of my feet and needed to hold me in place, applying steady pressure until it dried.

That was the end of the ficus, but it was not the end of my agitation. No, I suppose you could say it was just the beginning. One afternoon I was alone in the house. S was at work, and I had just come back from an exhibition of paintings by R. B. Kitaj. I made myself lunch, and as I sat down to eat I heard the shrill laughter of a child. The sound of it, its closeness and something else, something somber and unsettling behind that little ascension of notes, made me drop my sandwich and stand so suddenly that my chair fell back. I hurried into the living room and then the bedroom. I don't know what I expected to find; both were empty. But the window next to our bed was open, and leaning out I saw a boy, no more than six or seven, disappearing alone down the block, pulling a small green wagon behind him.

I remember now that it was that spring that Daniel Varsky's couch began to rot. One afternoon I forgot to close the window before I went out, and a storm blew up and soaked the sofa. A few days later it

started to give off a terrible stench, the smell of mold, but something else too, a sour, festering smell as if the rain had unloosed something foul hidden in its depths. The super removed it, grimacing at the smell, the sofa on which Daniel Varsky and I had once kissed all those years ago, and it too sat dejectedly on the street until the garbage men came for it.

Some nights later I woke suddenly out of a cavernous dream that took place in an old dance hall. For a moment I was unsure of where I was, and then I turned and saw S sleeping beside me. I was comforted for a moment until I looked closer and saw that instead of human skin he seemed to be covered in a tough gray hide like that of a rhinoceros. I saw it so clearly that even now I can remember the exact look of that scaly gray skin. Not quite awake and not quite asleep, I became frightened. I wanted to touch him myself to be certain of what I saw, but I was afraid to wake the beast lying next to me. So I closed my eyes and eventually fell asleep again, and the fear of S's skin became a dream about finding my father's body washed up on the shore like a dead whale's, only instead of being a whale it was a decomposing rhinoceros, and in order to move it I had to stab it deeply enough that my spear would lodge there, allowing me to drag the body along behind me. But no matter how hard I drove the spear into the rhino's flank I couldn't get it in deeply enough. In the end, the decomposing corpse found its way to the sidewalk outside the apartment where the diseased ficus and the rotting couch had also been discarded, but by this time it had morphed again and when I looked down at it from our fifth-floor window, I realized that what I took to be a rhinoceros was the body of the lost, decomposing poet Daniel Varsky. The next day, passing the super in the lobby, I thought I heard him say, You make good use of death. I stopped and spun around. What did you say? I demanded. He looked me over calmly, and I thought I saw the hint of a smirk at the corners of his mouth. They're fixing the roof on the tenth, he said. Lots of noise, he added, and clanged the gate of the service elevator shut.

My work continued to go badly. I wrote more slowly than I ever had before, and continued to second-guess what I'd written, unable to escape the feeling that all I'd written in the past had been wrong, misguided, a kind of enormous mistake. I began to suspect that instead of exposing the hidden depths of things, as all along I'd supposed I was doing, perhaps the opposite was true, that I'd been hiding behind the things I wrote, using them to obscure a secret lack, a deficiency I'd hidden from others all my life, and, by writing, had kept, even, from myself. A deficiency that became larger as the years passed, and harder to conceal, making my work more and more difficult. What sort of deficiency? I suppose you could call it a deficiency of spirit. Of strength, of vitality, of compassion, and because of this, welded to it, a deficiency of effect. So long as I wrote, there was the illusion of these things. The fact that I didn't witness the effect didn't mean it didn't exist. I made a point of answering the question I received with some frequency from journalists, Do you think books can change people's lives? (which really meant, Do you actually think anything you write could mean anything to anyone?), with a little airtight thought experiment in which I asked the interviewer to imagine the sort of person he might be if all of the literature he'd read in his life were somehow excised from his mind, his mind and soul, and as the journalist contemplated that nuclear winter I sat back with a self-satisfied smile, saved again from facing the truth.

Yes, a deficiency of effect, born of a deficiency of spirit. That is the best way I can describe it, Your Honor. And though I had been able to hide it for years, countering the appearance of a certain anemia in life with the excuse of another, more profound level of existence in my work, suddenly I found I couldn't any longer.

I didn't talk about it with S. In fact, I didn't even bring it up with Dr. Lichtman, whom I saw regularly during my marriage. I thought I would, but each time I arrived at her office a silence overtook me, and the deficiency hidden under hundreds of thousands of words and a million small gestures remained safe for another week. Because to

have acknowledged the problem, to have said it aloud, would have kicked loose the rock on which everything else rested, ringing in an emergency, and afterwards interminable months, years perhaps, of what Dr. Lichtman called “our work” but which was really just an excruciating excavation of myself with an array of blunt instruments while she sat by in a worn leather chair, feet on the ottoman, occasionally noting something on the legal pad she kept balanced on her knees for moments when I clawed up out of the hole, face blackened and hands scratched, clutching a little nugget of self-knowledge.

So instead I went on as before, only not as before, because now I felt a creeping shame and disgust with myself. In the presence of others—especially S, to whom I was of course closest—the feeling was most acute, while alone I could forget it a little bit, or at least ignore it. In bed at night I recoiled to the farthest edge, and sometimes when S and I passed each other in the hall I couldn’t bring myself to meet his eyes, and when he called my name from another room I had to exert a certain force, a strong pressure, to goad myself to answer. When he confronted me I shrugged and told him it was my work, and when he did not press me on the subject, laying off as he always did, as I had taught him to do, giving me a wider and wider berth, I secretly grew angry at him, frustrated that he did not notice how dire the circumstances were, how awful I was feeling, angry at him and perhaps even disgusted. Yes, disgusted, Your Honor, I didn’t save it only for myself, for not noticing that for all these years he had been living with someone who had made a life’s work of duplicity. Everything about him began to annoy me. The way he whistled in the bathroom, and moved his lips as he read the paper, the way he had to ruin every nice moment by pointing its niceness out. When I was not aggravated with him I was angry at myself, angry and full of guilt for causing so much grief to this man for whom happiness, or at the very least gladness, came easily, who had a talent for putting strangers at ease and drawing them over to his side so that people naturally went out of their way to do him favors, but whose Achilles’

heel was his poor judgment, proof being that he had willfully roped himself to me, a person who was always falling through the ice, who had the opposite effect on others, immediately making them raise their hackles, as if they sensed that their shins might be kicked.

And then one evening he came home late. It was raining out and he was soaking wet, his hair plastered down. He came into the kitchen still wearing the dripping coat and shoes muddy from the park. I was reading the paper as I always do in the evening, and he stood above me showering droplets on the pages. He had a terrible look on his face, and at first I thought he had been through something awful, a near-fatal accident, or seen a death on the subway tracks. He said, Do you remember that plant? I couldn't imagine what he was trying to get at, soaking wet like that, with shining eyes. The ficus? I said. Yes, he said, the ficus. You took more interest in that plant's health than you have taken in me for years, he said. I was taken aback. He sniffed and wiped the water from his face. I can't remember the last time you asked me how I felt about something, about anything that might matter. Instinctively I went to reach for him, but he pulled away. You're lost in your own world, Nadia, in the things that happen there, and you've locked all the doors. Sometimes I look at you sleeping. I wake up and look at you and I feel closer to you when you're like that, unguarded, than when you're awake. When you're awake you're like someone with her eyes closed, watching a movie on the inside of your eyelids. I can't reach you anymore. Once upon a time I could, but not now, and not for a long time. And I don't think you give a damn about reaching me. I feel more alone with you than I feel with anyone else, even just walking by myself down the street. Can you imagine how that feels?

He went on for some time while I sat listening in silence because I knew he was right, and like two people who have loved each other however imperfectly, who have tried to make a life together, however imperfectly, who have lived side by side and watched the wrinkles slowly form at the corner of the other's eyes, and watched a little drop

of gray, as if poured from a jug, drop into the other's skin and spread itself evenly, listening to the other's coughs and sneezes and little collected mumblings, like two people who'd had one idea together and slowly allowed that idea to be replaced with two separate, less hopeful, less ambitious ideas, we spoke deep into the night, and the next day, and the next night. For forty days and forty nights, I want to say, but the fact of the matter is it only took three. One of us had loved the other more perfectly, had watched the other more closely, and one of us listened and the other hadn't, and one of us held on to the ambition of the one idea far longer than was reasonable, whereas the other, passing a garbage can one night, had casually thrown it away.

And as we spoke a picture of myself emerged and developed, reacting to S's hurt like a Polaroid reacting to heat, a picture of myself to hang on the wall next to the one I'd already been living with for months—the one of someone who made use of the pain of others for her own ends, who, while others suffered, starved, and were tormented, hid herself safely away and prided herself on her special perceptiveness and sensitivity to the symmetry buried below things, someone who needed little help to convince herself that her self-important project was serving the greater good, but who in fact was utterly beside the point, totally irrelevant, and worse, a fraud who hid a poverty of spirit behind a mountain of words. Yes, next to that pretty picture I now hung another: a picture of someone so selfish and self-absorbed that she had been unconcerned enough about her husband's feelings to give him not even a fraction of the care and attention she gave to imagining the emotional lives of the people she sketched out on paper, to furnishing their inner lives, taking pains to adjust the light on their faces, brushing a stray hair from their eyes. Busy with all of this, not wishing to be disturbed, I'd hardly stopped to think of how S might have felt, for example, when he walked through the door of our home and found his wife silent, with back turned and shoulders hunched so as to defend her little kingdom, how he felt as he removed his shoes, checked the mail, dropped the

foreign coins into their little canisters, wondering just how cold my mood would be when at last he tried to approach me across the rickety bridge. I had barely paused to consider him fully at all.

After three nights of talking as we had not in many years, we arrived at the inevitable end. Slowly, like a great hot-air balloon drifting down and landing with a bump in the grass, our marriage of a decade expired. But it took us time to split apart. The apartment had to be sold, the books divided up, but really, Your Honor, there is no need to go on about this, it would take too long, and I feel I haven't got a lot of time with you, so I won't go into the pain of two people prying apart their lives inch by inch, the sudden vulnerability of the human situation, the sorrow, regret, anger, guilt, and disgust with oneself, the fear and suffocating loneliness, but also the relief, so incomparable, and I will only say that when it was all finished I found myself alone again in a new apartment, surrounded by my belongings and what was left of Daniel Varsky's furniture, which followed me like a pack of mangy dogs.

I suppose you can imagine the rest, Your Honor. In your line of work you must see it all the time, the way people continue to repeat the same story of themselves over and over, complete with the old mistakes. One would think that someone like me, with enough psychological acumen to supposedly uncover the little delicate skeleton that organizes the behavior of others, would be able to learn from the painful lessons of self-scrutiny, and correct a little, to find the way out of the maddening circular game where we are forever eating our own tails. Not so, Your Honor. The months passed, and before long I'd turned those pictures of myself to face the wall, and lost myself in writing another book.

BY THE TIME I got back from Norfolk it was dark. I parked the car, then walked up and down Broadway, inventing various errands in order to delay returning to confront the absence of the desk for as

long as possible. When at last I went home, there was a note on the hall table. Thank you for this, it said, in surprisingly small handwriting. I hope to meet you again one day. And then, below her signature, Leah had put her address on Ha'Oren Street in Jerusalem.

I was only in the apartment for fifteen or twenty minutes—enough time to glance at the yawning emptiness where the desk had stood, fix myself a sandwich, and, full of decisive purpose, go to fetch the box containing the various worked-up sections of the new book—when I experienced the first attack. It came over me quickly, with almost no warning. I began fighting for air. Everything seemed to close around me, as if I'd been dropped into a narrow hole in the ground. My heart-beat became so rapid I wondered whether I was going into cardiac arrest. The anxiety was overwhelming—something like the feeling of having been left behind on a dark shore while everyone and everything I'd ever known in my life had departed on a great, illuminated ship. Clutching my heart and talking aloud to try to calm myself, I paced the former living room that was now also a former study, and only when I turned on the television and saw the face of the anchorman did the feeling at last begin to subside, though my hands continued to shake for ten minutes more.

In the week that followed I experienced similar attacks daily, sometimes even twice a day. To the original symptoms were added terrible stomach pain, extreme nausea, and more varieties of terror hidden in the smallest things than I ever imagined possible. Although at first the attacks were set off by glancing at or being reminded of my work, very quickly they spread out in all directions, and threatened to infect everything. Just the idea of going out of the apartment and trying to accomplish some tiny, inane task that in my infinite well-ness I would have thought nothing of filled me with dread. I stood trembling at the door, trying to think myself through it and out the other side. Twenty minutes later I would still be standing there, and all that had changed was that I was now drenched in sweat.

None of it made sense. I'd been steadily writing and publishing

books at the rate of about one every four years for half of my life. The emotional difficulties of the profession were legion, and I had stumbled and fallen again and again. The crises that had begun with the dancer and the child's cry had been the worst, but there had been others in the past. Sometimes a depression, the result of the war writing wages on one's confidence and sense of purpose, all but incapacitated me. It had happened often between books, when, used to having my work to reflect myself back to me, I had to make do with staring out onto an opaque nothingness. But no matter how bad it had gotten, my ability to write, however haltingly and poorly, had never abandoned me. I'd always felt the surge of the fighter in me, and had been able to drum up the opposition; to turn the nothingness into something to push, and push, and push against, until I'd broken through to the other side, still swinging. But this—this was something entirely different. This had bypassed all of my defenses, had slipped unnoticed past the halls of reason, like a supervirus that has become resistant to everything, and only once it had taken root in the very core of me had it reared its terrifying head.

Five days after the attacks began I phoned Dr. Lichtman. After my marriage had ended I'd stopped seeing her, having slowly given up on the idea of undertaking vast renovations on the foundation of my self in order to make myself more suitable for social life. I'd accepted the consequences of my natural tendencies, letting my habits slide, not without relief, back to their ungirdled state. Since then I had seen her only from time to time, when I couldn't find the exit to a long-standing mood; more often, because she lived in the neighborhood, I ran into her on the street, and like two people who had once been but were no longer close, we waved, paused as if to stop, but continued on our ways.

It took a gargantuan effort for me to get myself from my apartment to her office nine blocks away. At regular intervals I had to stop and grip some pole or railing, to borrow from it a sense of permanence. By the time I was sitting in Dr. Lichtman's waiting room filled with

evocative, musty books, the armpits of my shirt were soaked in sweat, and when the door opened and she appeared, light streaming through her finely spun, goldish hair that for two decades she'd worn puffed at the top in a fashion I've never seen on anyone else, as if she had needed quickly to hide something and had put it there, I nearly threw myself on her. Folded into the familiar gray wool couch, surrounded once again by the objects I'd stared at so often in the past that they now seemed to me landmarks on the map of my psyche, I described the past two weeks. Over the course of the hour and a half (she'd managed to clear a double session for me), a feeling of calm began slowly, tentatively, to return for the first time in days. And, even as I was speaking about being incapacitated by panic, narrating my experience of being in the grips of a monster that seemed to have sprung from nowhere and made me a stranger to myself, on another level of mind, freed from thinking about what was now being attended to by Dr. Lichtman, I began to take hold of an idea that was wholly preposterous, Your Honor, beyond that it offered me an escape. The life I had chosen, a life largely absent of others, certainly emptied of the ties that keep most people tangled up in each other, only made sense when I was actually writing the sort of work I had sequestered myself in order to produce. It would be wrong to say that the conditions of such a life had been a hardship. Something in me naturally migrated away from the fray, preferring the deliberate meaningfulness of fiction to unaccounted-for reality, preferring a shapeless freedom to the robust work of yoking my thoughts to the logic and flow of another's. When I had tried it in any sort of sustained way, first in relationships, and then in my marriage to S, it had failed. Looking back, perhaps the only reason I had been happy, for a while, with R is that he had been as absent as I had been, or even more so. We were two people locked in our antigravity suits who happened to be orbiting around the same pieces of his mother's old furniture. And then he had drifted off, through some loophole in our apartment, to an unreachable

part of the cosmos. After that there was a series of doomed relationships, then my marriage, and once S and I parted ways I'd promised myself that it was the last time I would try. In the five or six years since then I'd had only brief affairs, and when these men tried to turn it into something more I refused, and soon afterwards brought things to an end and returned alone to my life.

And what of it, Your Honor? What of my life? You see, I thought— One has to make a sacrifice. I chose the freedom of long unscheduled afternoons in which nothing happens but the slightest shift in mood as captured in a semicolon. Yes, work was that for me, an irresponsible exercise in pure freedom. And if I neglected or even ignored the rest, it was because I believed the rest conspired to chip away at that freedom, to interfere and force upon it a compromise. The first words out of my mouth in the morning spoken to S, and already the constraints began, the false politeness. Habits are formed. Kindness above all, responsiveness, a patient show of interest. But you also have to try to be entertaining and amusing. It's exhausting work, in the way that trying to keep three or four lies going at once is exhausting. Only to be repeated tomorrow and tomorrow after that. You hear a sound and it's truth turning in its grave. Imagination dies a slower death, by suffocation. You try to put up walls, to cordon off the little plot where you labor as something apart, with a separate climate and different rules. But the habits seep in anyway like poisoned groundwater, and all you were trying to raise there chokes and withers. What I'm trying to say is that it seems to me you can't have it both ways. So I made a sacrifice, and let go.

The idea I began to entertain during that first session with Dr. Lichtman took hold, so that after seeing her ten or eleven times in almost as many days, and, aided by Xanax, having managed to scale the panic down from a nightmare to a threatening menace, I announced to her that I had decided, in a week's time, to take a trip. She was surprised, of course, and asked where I was going. A number of possible answers crossed my mind. Places I had, over the years,

received invitations from that perhaps could be extended again. Rome. Berlin. Istanbul. But in the end I said what I knew I was going to say all along. Jerusalem. She raised her eyebrows. I'm not going in order to claim back the desk, if that's what you're thinking, I said. Then why? she asked, the light through her windows spinning her hair, the rising wave of hair drawn up high above the scalp, into something almost transparent—almost but not quite, so that it seemed like the secret to wellness, however unlikely, could still be hidden there. But my time was up, and I was excused from the need to answer. At the door we shook hands, a gesture that always struck me as strangely out of place, as if, with all one's organs spread on the table and the allotted time in the operating room almost up, the surgeon were to wrap them each neatly in plastic wrap before putting them back and hurriedly sewing you up again. The following Friday, having given Vlad instructions to look after my apartment while I was away, taken one Xanax to get through security, and another hurtling down the runway, I was aloft on a night flight bound for Ben Gurion airport.