After the Season

1

They had to say goodbye in front of security.

But because it was a small airport, all the check-in desks and the control points were in the same hall, so he could follow her with his eyes as she set her bag on the conveyor belt, walked through the metal detector, showed her boarding pass, and was led to the plane, which was standing on the runway right outside the glass door.

She kept on looking back at him and waving. On the steps up to the plane she turned one last time, laughing and crying, and laid her hand on her heart. When she'd disappeared into the plane, he waved at the little windows, but didn't know if she could see him or not. Then the engines were started, the propellers turned, the plane began to roll, faster and faster, and took off.

His flight wasn't leaving for another hour. He got himself a cup of coffee and a newspaper and sat down on a bench. Since they had met, he hadn't read a newspaper anymore or sat alone over a cup of coffee. After a quarter of an hour, during which he still hadn't read a single line or swallowed a single mouthful, he thought, I've forgotten how to be alone. It was a thought he liked.

2

He had arrived thirteen days before. The season was over, and with it the good weather. It was raining, and he spent the afternoon with a book on the covered porch of his bed-and-breakfast. When he made himself go out into the bad weather the next day to walk along the beach in the rain to the lighthouse, he first encountered the woman on the way there, and then again on the way back. They smiled at each other, with curiosity at first, and then a hint of familiarity the second time around. They were the only two people out for a walk in the entire area, companions in both misfortune and pleasure: each of them would have preferred a clear blue sky, but enjoyed the soft rain.

In the evening she was sitting alone on the large terrace of the popular seafood restaurant with its plastic roof and windows already installed for fall. She had a full glass in front of her and was reading a book—a sign, perhaps, that she hadn't eaten yet and wasn't waiting for her husband or lover? He hesitated in the doorway until she looked up and smiled at him companionably. Then he took his courage in both hands, walked over to her table, and asked if he might join her.

"Please," she said, and laid her book aside.

He sat down, and because she had already ordered, she could make suggestions, and he chose the cod she had already picked out for herself. Then neither of them knew how to strike up a conversation. The book was no help; it was lying there in a way that made it impossible for him to read the title. Finally he said, "There's something about taking a late vacation on the Cape."

"Because the weather's so good?" She laughed.

Was she making fun of him? He looked at her, not a pretty face, eyes too small, chin too pronounced, but her expression wasn't mocking, it was cheerful, maybe even a little unsure. "Because you have the beach to yourself. Because you can get a table in restaurants that are impossible to get into during the season. Because you're less alone with a few people than you are with a crowd."

"Do you always come when the season's over?"

"It's my first time here. I should really be working. But my finger isn't back in shape yet, and it can do its exercises just as well here as in New York." He moved the little finger of his left hand up and down, curling it and stretching it out again.

She looked at the little finger, puzzled. "What is it exercising for?"

"For the flute. I play in an orchestra. And you?"

"I learned the piano but rarely ever play." She blushed. "That's not what you meant. I often came here with my parents when I was a child, and sometimes that makes me nostalgic. And after the season's over, the Cape has that magic you described. Everything is emptier and more peaceful—I like it."

He didn't say that a vacation during the season would be more than he could afford, and assumed it must be true for her as well. She wore sneakers, jeans, and a sweatshirt, and there was a faded waxed jacket on the back of her chair. When they studied the wine list together, she suggested a cheap bottle of sauvignon blanc. She talked about Los Angeles, about her work at a foundation that supported theater programs for children from the ghetto, about life with no winter, about the sheer might of the Pacific, about the traffic. He talked about tripping over a cable laid in the wrong place and breaking his finger, about breaking his arm when he jumped out of the window aged nine and breaking his leg while skiing aged thirteen. At

first they sat alone on the terrace, then other guests came, and then they sat alone again over another bottle of wine. When they looked through the window, the sea and the beach were enveloped in utter darkness. The rain pattered on the roof.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"I know you get breakfast in a bed-and-breakfast. But would you like to come over and have it with me?"

He walked her home. She took his arm under the umbrella. Neither of them spoke. Her little house was on the street that led to his bed-and-breakfast a mile further on. The light went on automatically over the front door, and suddenly when they looked at each other everything was too bright. She gave him a quick hug and the faintest breath of a kiss. Before she closed the door he said, "My name's Richard. What's . . . ?"

"I'm Susan."

3

Richard woke up early, folded his arms behind his head, and listened to the rain in the trees and on the gravel of the path outside. He liked the regular, soothing pattering sound, even if it didn't bode well for the day. Would he and Susan walk on the beach after breakfast? Or in the woods surrounding the lake? Or take a bike ride? He hadn't rented a car and guessed she hadn't either. So the radius of any excursion they might undertake together was limited.

He curled and stretched his little finger so as not to have to exercise that much later. He was feeling a little anxious. If Susan and he were actually going to spend the day together after breakfast and also eat together or maybe even cook—what came after that?

Must he sleep with her? Show her that she was a desirable woman and he was aroused by her? Because if he didn't he would upset her and embarrass himself? It was years since he'd slept with a woman. He didn't feel he was someone who was easily aroused, and hadn't found her very desirable on the previous evening. She had lots of things to tell, lots of questions to ask, she listened attentively, she was lively and witty. The way she always hesitated for a fraction of a second before she said something and squeezed her eyes when she was concentrating was charming. She aroused his interest. But his desire?

Breakfast had been set for him in the main room, and because he didn't want to disappoint the elderly couple who'd squeezed orange juice, whipped up scrambled eggs, and made pancakes, he sat down and ate. The wife came out of the kitchen every couple of minutes to ask if he'd care for more coffee or more butter or a different kind of jam or maybe some fruit or yoghurt. Finally he realized she wanted to talk to him. He asked her how long she'd lived here, and she set down the coffeepot and stood by the table. Forty years ago her husband had inherited a little money and they'd bought the house on the Cape, where he wanted to write and she wanted to paint. But neither the writing nor the painting came to anything, and when the children were grown and the inheritance had run out, they turned the house into a bed-and-breakfast. "Whatever you want to know about the Cape, the most beautiful spots and the best places to eat, just ask me. And if you're going out today—the beach is still the beach when it's raining, the woods are just wet."

In the woods, the mist hung in the trees. It also enveloped the houses that were set back from the road. The little house that Susan lived in was a porter's lodge; next to it was a driveway leading to a large, mist-shrouded, mysterious house. He

couldn't find a bell, and so he knocked. "Coming," she yelled, and her voice sounded a long way away. He heard her running up some stairs, banging a door shut, and running along a corridor. Then she was standing in front of him, out of breath, clutching a bottle of champagne. "I was in the cellar."

The champagne made him anxious again. He saw himself sitting side by side with her on a sofa in front of a fire with their glasses. She slid closer to him. Had things gone that far already?

"Don't stand there staring. Come in!"

In the big room next to the kitchen he actually saw a fireplace with logs next to it and a sofa in front. Susan had laid the table in the kitchen and once again he drank orange juice and ate scrambled eggs and afterward there was fruit salad with nuts in it. "It tasted wonderful. But now I need to get out and run or ride a bike or swim." As she looked doubtfully at the rain, he explained about his double breakfast.

"You didn't want to disappoint John and Linda? That was so sweet of you!" She looked at him admiringly, pleased. "Yes, why not go swimming! You don't have bathing trunks? You want to . . ." She looked a bit doubtful, but acquiesced, packed towels into a large bag, and added an umbrella, the champagne, and two glasses. "We can walk across the property, it's a prettier route and faster, too."

4

They passed the big house with its tall pillars and closed shutters, as mysterious now as it had been at a distance. They climbed the broad steps, stood on the terrace between the columns, walked around the house, and found the stairway to the covered porch that circled the floor above. From here there

was an overcast view across the dunes and the beach to the gray sea.

"It's absolutely calm," she whispered.

Could she see that at such a distance? Could she hear it?

It had stopped raining, and in the deep silence he too could do no more than whisper. "Where are the gulls?"

"Out on the waves. When the rain stops, the worms come out of the earth and the fish come up to the surface of the water."

"I don't believe it."

She laughed. "Didn't we want to have a swim?" She started to run, so fast and so sure of the way that he couldn't manage the big bag and keep up with her. He lost sight of her in the dunes, and as he reached the beach she was already pulling off the last sock and running toward the water. When he reached the sea she was swimming far out.

The water was indeed absolutely calm, and felt cold only until he started to swim. Then it stroked his naked body. He swam out a long way and then allowed himself to be carried, floating on his back. Susan was further out still, doing the crawl. When the rain began again, he enjoyed the drops falling on his face.

The rain got heavier, and he could no longer see Susan. He called out. He swam in the direction he thought he'd seen her last, and called out again. When he was almost no longer able to see land, he turned back. He wasn't a fast swimmer, and exerted himself to go faster but only made slow progress, and the slowness turned his anxiety into panic. How long would Susan hold out? Did he have his cell phone in the pocket of his pants? Would he be able to get a connection on the beach? Where was the nearest house? The anxiety was too much for him; he got slower and even more panicked.

Then he saw a pale figure climb out of the sea and stand on the beach. Anger gave him strength. How could she have inflicted such fear on him! When she waved, he didn't wave back.

When he was standing in front of her, furious, she smiled at him. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter? I was petrified when I could no longer see you. Why didn't you swim close to me on your way back?"

"I didn't see you."

"You didn't see me?"

She went red. "I'm rather shortsighted."

His anger suddenly struck him as absurd. They were facing each other naked and wet, rain was dripping down both their faces, they both had goose bumps and were shivering and warming their chests with their arms. She looked at him with the vulnerable, searching look that he now knew wasn't uncertainty, just shortsightedness. He saw the blue veins in her thin white skin, her pubic hair, reddish blond although the hair on her head was pale blond, her flat stomach and narrow hips, her strong arms and legs. He was ashamed of his body, and pulled his stomach in. "I'm sorry I was so rough."

"I understand. You were afraid." She smiled again.

He was embarrassed. Then he gave himself a shake, jerked his head toward the place by the dunes where their things were lying, called "Go!," and started running. She was faster than he was and could have overtaken him effortlessly. But she ran beside him, and it reminded him of his childhood and the joy of running together toward some common goal with his sisters or his friends. He saw her small breasts, which she'd shielded with her arms when they'd been standing on the beach, and her small behind.

5

Their clothes were wet. But the towels had stayed dry in the bag and Susan and Richard wrapped themselves in them, sat down under the umbrella, and drank champagne.

She leaned against him. "Tell me about yourself from the beginning, about your mother and father and your siblings, and all the way to now. Were you born in America?"

"Berlin. My parents were music teachers, he taught piano and she taught violin and viola. There were four of us children, and I was allowed to go to the music high school, though my three sisters were far better than I was. It's what my father wanted; he couldn't bear the thought that I would fail the way he'd failed. So for him I went to the music high school, for him I became second flute in the New York Philharmonic, and one day for him I'll become first flute in another good orchestra."

"Are your parents still alive?"

"My father died seven years ago, my mother last year."

She thought. Then she asked, "If you hadn't become a flautist for your father, but had done what you wanted—what would you be?"

"Don't laugh at me. When first my father then my mother died, I thought, finally I'm free, I can do what I want. But they're still sitting in my head, talking at me. I would have to get out for a year, away from the orchestra, away from the flute, go running, go swimming, think about it all and maybe write about how it was at home with my parents and my sisters. So that at the end of a year I'd know what I want. Maybe it would even turn out to be the flute."

"I've sometimes wished someone would talk at me. My par-

ents were killed in a car accident when I was twelve. The aunt I was sent to live with didn't like children. I also don't know if my father liked me. He sometimes said he looked forward to the time when I'd be older and he'd be able to see if he could make anything of me—didn't sound good."

"I'm sorry. How was your mother?"

"Beautiful. She wanted me to turn out as beautiful as she was. My clothes were as fine as Mother's, and when she helped me dress, she was wonderful, so affectionate and gentle. She could have taught me how to deal with mean girlfriends, pushy boyfriends, but I had to learn that on my own."

They sat under the umbrella, given over to their memories. Like two children who've got lost and are yearning for home, he thought. He thought of some of the favorite books of his childhood, in which boys and girls got lost and survived in caves and huts, or were attacked on a journey and dragged off into slavery, or kidnapped in London and forced to beg or steal, or sold from their homes in Ticino to become chimney sweeps in Milan. He had mourned with the children over the loss of their parents and shared their hopes of being reunited with them. But the appeal of the stories was that the children coped without their parents. When finally they came home, they had outgrown them. Why is it hard to be self-sufficient, even though all you need is yourself, nobody else? He sighed.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he said, and put his arm around her.

"You sighed."

"I'd like to be further along than I am."

She snuggled against his side. "I know that feeling. But don't we make progress in fits and starts? Nothing happens for a long time, then suddenly we get a surprise, have an encounter, reach a decision point, and we're no longer the same as we were before."

"Not the same as we were before? Six months ago I was at a class reunion, and the people who'd been decent and nice when we were in school were still decent and nice, and the assholes were still assholes. The others must have had the same reaction to me. And it gave me a shock. You work on yourself, you think you're changing and developing, and then the others immediately recognize you as the person you always were."

"You Europeans are pessimists. You come from the Old World and can't imagine that there can be a New World and that people can make themselves new too."

"Let's take a walk along the beach. The rain's almost stopped."

They wrapped the towels around themselves and walked over the sand at the water's edge. They were barefoot, and the cold, wet sand prickled.

"I'm not a pessimist. I'm always hoping my life will get better."

"Me too."

When the rain got heavier again, they went back to Susan's house. They were freezing. While Richard took a shower, Susan went down to the cellar and turned on the heat; while Susan showered, Richard made a fire in the fireplace. He had put on Susan's father's bathrobe, which she had kept, red, warm, made of heavy wool lined with silk. They hung up their wet clothes to dry and figured out how to make the samovar that stood on the mantelpiece above the fireplace work. Then they sat on the sofa, she in one corner, cross-legged, he with his legs folded under him in the other, drank tea, and looked at each other.

"I'm sure my clothes will be ready to put on again soon."

"Stay. What are you going to do in the rain? Sit alone in your room?"

"I . . ." He wanted to add that he didn't want to impose, be

a burden on her, mess up her day. But these were meaningless phrases. He knew that his company gave her pleasure. He read it in her face and heard it in her voice. He smiled at her, politely at first, and then embarrassed. What if the situation was arousing expectations in Susan that he couldn't satisfy? But then she pulled a book out of the many piled along with newspapers beside the sofa and began to read. She sat reading so self-sufficiently, so comfortably, so relaxedly that he began to relax too. He looked for a book, found one that interested him, but didn't begin it: instead he watched her read, till she looked up and smiled at him. He smiled back, finally free of all tension, and began reading.

6

When he reached the bed-and-breakfast at ten p.m., Linda and John were sitting in front of the television. He told them he wouldn't be needing any breakfast next morning because he'd be having it with the young woman in the little house a mile further down the road, whom he'd got to know over dinner in the restaurant.

"She doesn't live in the big house?"

"She doesn't do it if she comes alone, and hasn't done it for a long time now."

"But last year . . ."

"Last year she came alone, but always had visitors."

Richard listened to Linda and John with mounting irritation. "You're talking about Susan . . ." He realized they'd introduced themselves to each other only with their first names.

"Susan Hartman."

"She owns the big house with the pillars?"

"Her grandfather bought it in the twenties. After her parents died the administrator ran down the estate, collected the rent, and invested nothing until Susan fired him a few years ago and restored the houses and the garden."

"Didn't that cost a fortune?"

"It didn't cause her any pain. Those of us who live here are happy—there were people interested in parceling up the land and dividing the house or replacing it with a hotel. It would have changed the entire area."

Richard said good night to Linda and John and went up to his room. He would not have started talking to Susan if he'd known how rich she was. He didn't like rich people. He despised inherited wealth and considered earned riches to be ill-gotten. His parents had never earned enough to give their four children the things they would have liked, and his salary from the New York Philharmonic was only just enough to cover his costs in the expensive city. He had no rich friends either now or earlier in his life.

He was furious with Susan. As if she'd led him around by the nose. As if she'd lured him into the situation in which he was now stuck. But was he stuck? He didn't have to go have breakfast with her the next day. Or he could go and tell her they couldn't see each other anymore, they were too different, their lives were too different, their worlds were too different. But they had just spent the afternoon together in front of the fire, reading sentences aloud to each other from time to time, they had cooked together, eaten, washed up, watched a movie, and both of them had felt good. Too different?

He brushed his teeth so furiously that he hurt his left cheek. He sat down on the bed with his hand to his cheek, feeling sorry for himself. He really was stuck. He had fallen in love with Susan. Only a little, he told himself. For what did he really

know about her? What actually did he like about her? How would things go, given the difference in their lives and their worlds? Perhaps she would find it charming to eat three times in the little Italian restaurant he could afford. After that, should he allow her to invite him out instead? Or should he run up debt on credit cards?

He didn't sleep well. He kept waking up, and around six a.m., when he realized he wouldn't go to sleep again, he gave up, put on his clothes, and left the house. The sky was filled with dark clouds, but there was a red glow in the east. If Richard wasn't to miss the sunrise over the ocean he'd have to hurry and run in his regular shoes, which he'd put on instead of his running shoes. The soles made a loud noise on the road, once scaring up a flock of crows and once several hares. In the east the red was glowing brighter and stronger; Richard had seen a sunset like that before, but never such a sunrise. As he passed Susan's house he took care to move quietly.

Then he reached the beach. The sun came up golden out of a molten sea and into a sky that was all flames—it was a matter of moments, and then the clouds extinguished everything. Richard suddenly felt as if it wasn't just darker but colder.

He needn't have bothered to be quiet in front of Susan's house. She too was already up, sitting at the foot of a dune. She saw him, got to her feet, and came toward him. She moved slowly: the sand by the dunes was deep and made walking difficult. Richard went to meet her, but only because he wished to be polite. He preferred to just watch her as she walked calmly and confidently, her head sometimes down and then raised, and when it was raised her eyes were always on his face. It felt as if they were negotiating something, but he didn't know what it was. He didn't understand what question was in her eyes or what answers she found in his. He smiled but she didn't smile back, just looked at him gravely.

When they stood facing each other, she took his hand. "Come!" She led him to her house and upstairs into the bedroom. She undressed, lay down on the bed, and watched as he undressed and lay down beside her. "I've waited such a long time for you."

7

That was the way she made love to him. As if she had been searching for him forever and had finally found him. As if neither she nor he could do anything wrong.

She swept him along, and he allowed it to happen. He didn't ask himself: How am I? And didn't ask her: How was I? As they lay next to each other afterward, he knew that he loved her. This little person with eyes that were too small and a chin that was too pronounced, skin that was too thin, and a figure more like a boy's than the womanly shapes he had loved until now. With a confidence that after being pushed around from only moderately loving parents to a loveless aunt she had no right to have. With more money than could be good for her. And who saw something in him that he didn't see himself, and thereby made a gift of it to him.

For the first time, he had made love to a woman as if no images existed of how love was supposed to take place. As if they were a couple out of the nineteenth century, for whom the movies and television could not yet dictate the right way to kiss, the right way to moan, the right way for the face to express passion and the body to shudder with desire. A couple who were discovering love and kissing and moaning for themselves. Susan didn't seem to close her eyes once. Whenever he looked at her, she was also looking at him. He loved that look, faraway, trusting.

She propped herself up and laughed at him. "Thank goodness I smiled at you in the restaurant when you didn't know what to do. At first I didn't think it was necessary. I thought you'd come to me as directly and quickly as you could."

He happily echoed her laugh. It didn't occur to them to take the clumsy, grating aspects of their meeting in the restaurant as any kind of warning. They took it as an awkwardness that laughter could dispel.

They stayed in bed until evening. Then they opened the garage and took Susan's car, a well-maintained elderly BMW, to drive through rain and darkness to a supermarket. The light was harsh, it smelled of cleaning fluids, the music was synthetic, and the handful of customers were wearily pushing their carts through the empty aisles. "We should have stayed in bed," she whispered to him, and he was glad that she was as disturbed by the light and the smell and the music as he was. She sighed, laughed, started shopping, and soon had filled up her cart. From time to time he added something, apples, pancake mix, wine. At the checkout, he paid with his credit card and knew that next month, for the first time, he wouldn't be able to pay in full. It made him uncomfortable, but more than that, it irritated him that on a day like today something as trivial as an overdrawn credit account could upset him. So in the wine and liquor section he bought three bottles of champagne for good measure.

On the way home she asked, "Shall we get your things?"

"Maybe Linda and John are already asleep. I don't want to wake them."

Susan nodded. She drove fast and with assurance, and by the way she took the many curves, he could tell that she knew the car and the route well. "Did you drive the car here from Los Angeles?"

"No, the car belongs here. Clark takes care of the house and the garden and the car as well."

"You only stay in the big house when you have guests?"

"Shall we move up there tomorrow?"

"I don't know. It's . . ."

"It's too big for me. But with you there it would be fun. We'd read in the library, play billiards in the billiards room, you could practice the flute in the music room, and I'd have breakfast served in the little salon and dinner in the big one." She talked more and more happily, more and more firmly. "We'll sleep in the big bedroom where my grandparents and parents slept. Or we'll sleep in my room in the bed where I dreamed of my prince when I was a girl."

He saw her smiling face in the dull glow of the dashboard. Susan was lost in her memories. For the first time since they'd met, she was somewhere else. Richard wanted to ask which actor or singer she'd dreamed of back then, wanted to know everything about the men in her life, wanted to hear that they'd all been mere prophets while he was the Messiah. But then he thought that his worries about the other men were as petty as the excessive charge on his credit account. He was tired and laid his head on Susan's shoulder. She reached over and stroked his head with her left hand, pressed his head to her shoulder, and he fell asleep.

8

Over the next few days he learned everything about the men in Susan's life. He also learned about her longing for children, at least two, preferably four. At first with her husband there was no success, then she no longer loved him and she got divorced.

He learned she'd studied art history at college, then had gone to business school, and had reorganized a toy train manufacturer which she'd inherited from her father and then sold along with the other firms she'd inherited. He learned that she had an apartment in Manhattan that she was in the process of having renovated because she wanted to move from Los Angeles to New York. He also learned that she was forty-one, two years older than he was.

Again and again, whatever Susan told him about her life until now ended in plans for their future together. She described her apartment in New York: the wide staircase in the duplex that led up from the sixth floor to the seventh, the wide corridors, the large high rooms, the kitchen with the dumbwaiter, the view of the park. She had grown up in the apartment until her aunt fetched her to Santa Barbara after her parents' death. "I used to slide down the banisters and roller-skate in the corridors, I could get into the dumbwaiter till I was six, and when I was in bed I could watch the tops of the trees waving from out of my window. You have to go see the apartment!" She couldn't show it to him herself because she was flying back from the Cape to Los Angeles to organize both the foundation's move and her own. "Will you meet with the architect? We can still change everything."

Her grandfather had acquired not only the duplex but the entire building on Fifth Avenue at a very favorable price during the Depression. Along with the estate on the Cape and another in the Adirondacks. "I have to renovate that again too. Do you enjoy architecture? Building and renovating and decorating? I got the plans and brought them with me—shall we look at them together?"

She talked about a couple, old friends of hers, who had been trying in vain to have children for years, and had just spent

their vacation at a fertility farm. She described the diet and the program, which laid out when the two of them were to sleep, exercise, eat, even have sex. She found it funny, but was also a little anxious. "You Europeans don't know about this kind of thing, or so I read. You see life as fate that cannot be changed."

"Yes," he said, "and if we're destined to kill our fathers and sleep with our mothers, there's nothing we can do about it."

She laughed. "Then you really can't hold anything against the fertility farm. If it doesn't help your destiny, it can't do any harm, either." She shrugged apologetically. "It's just because things didn't work with Robert back then. Perhaps it wasn't my fault, perhaps he was the one with the problem, we didn't have any tests done. But all the same, I've been afraid ever since."

He nodded. He was feeling afraid too. About the minimum two, maximum four children. And beforehand, about having to follow a set diet and have sex at set times with Susan at the fertility farm. About the loud ticking of the biological clock until the fourth child arrived or no more children were possible. About the possibility that Susan's abandon and passion when she made love to him weren't about him at all.

"Don't be afraid. I just say what's on my mind. That doesn't mean it's my last word on anything. You censor what you say.

"Again, that's European."

He didn't want a conversation about his fear. She was right: he censored what he said, while she said directly whatever she was thinking or feeling. No, she didn't want to plan a visit with him to the fertility farm. But she did want to plan the future with him, and although he too wanted it more with every day that passed, he had so much less to bring to the relationship than she did: no apartment, no houses, no money. If he and the woman at the first desk of the second violin section had fallen in love, then they would have looked for an apart-

ment together and decided together which of his furniture and which of her furniture would go into the new apartment and what they would have to find at a thrift store. Susan was certainly ready to fill a room or two with his furniture. But he knew it wouldn't fit in.

He'd be able to bring his flute and his sheet music, and practice at the music stand that would certainly exist among all her furniture. He could put his books in her bookcases, order his papers in her father's filing cabinet, and write his letters at her father's desk. He would best leave his clothes in the closet here in the country; in the city, he wouldn't look so good in them when he was with her. She would be delighted to use her sense of fashion to buy him new ones.

He practiced a lot. Most of the time "dry," as he called it, when he simply curled and stretched his little finger. But more and more frequently on the flute itself. It was becoming a part of him in a way it never had before. It belonged to him, it was worth a lot, with it he created music and made money, he could take it wherever he went, he was at home with it anywhere. And when he played, he offered Susan something that no one else could offer her. When he improvised, he made melodies that fit her moods.

9

The corner room in the big house was their favorite. The many windows reached down to the floor and could be slid aside in good weather and protected with shutters when it was bad. When rain prevented them from walking on the beach, this was where they could still feel in touch with the ocean, the waves, the seagulls, and the occasional passing ship. Some-

times when they were out on the sand, the cold rain lashed their faces so sharply that it hurt.

The room was furnished with cane recliners, big chairs and tables, with soft cushions against the hard-woven surfaces. "Pity," he said when she led him through the house and he saw the recliners, which were only wide enough for one person. Two days later, as they were having breakfast in the little salon, a truck pulled up and two men in blue coveralls carried a double recliner into the house. It matched the other furniture, and the cushions had the same flower pattern as the other cushions.

The weather made every day like every other. It rained day after day, sometimes rising to the level of a storm, sometimes stopping for hours or sometimes mere minutes, and sometimes the skies cleared for a moment and the rooftops made sheets of light. When the weather allowed, Susan and Richard walked on the beach; if they ran out of supplies they drove to the supermarket, otherwise they stayed in the big house. When they switched from the little house to the big one, Susan had called Clark's wife, Mita, who came for a few hours every day to take care of cleaning and washing and cooking. She was so discreet that it was several days before Richard met her.

One evening they invited Linda and John to dinner. Susan and Richard cooked, having no idea how, so that they even found it difficult to follow the cookbook. But they finally managed to serve steaks with potatoes and salad and felt good about being able to cope in a crisis together. Apart from this they invited no one, nor did they visit other people. "There'll still be time for our friends."

When dusk came, they made love. The evening light sufficed them until it was totally dark, when they lit a candle. They made love so peacefully that Richard sometimes wondered if he'd make Susan happier by ripping off the clothes of both of

them, throwing himself on her, and surrendering himself to her. He didn't manage to try, and she didn't seem to miss it. We're not feral cats, he thought, we're house cats.

Until they had their big fight, the first and the only one. They were going to go to the supermarket, and Susan kept Richard waiting in the car because she had to take a sudden phone call, which went on forever. That she let him wait without any explanation, that she had forgotten him or could simply neglect him, made him so angry that he got out, went into the house, and attacked her just as she put down the receiver. "Is this what I have to expect? What you do is important and what I do isn't? Your time is precious and mine doesn't count?"

At first she didn't understand. "Los Angeles called. The chairman . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why do you always . . ."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting for a few minutes. I thought a European man sees . . ."

"The Europeans—I've had it up to here with your Europeans. I was waiting out there for half an hour . . ."

Now she got angry too. "Half an hour? It was a minute or two. If that's too long for you, go into the house and read the newspaper. You prima donna, you . . ."

"Prima donna? Me? Which of us . . ."

She accused him of making an incomprehensible, exaggerated to-do. He didn't understand what was supposed to be incomprehensible and exaggerated about wanting to count as much as she did, when he had nothing and she had everything. She didn't understand how he could be so absurd as to think that he didn't count. By the end they were yelling at each other in fury and despair.

"I hate you!" She advanced on him, he moved back, she kept coming, and when he was against the wall and could move no

further, she beat his chest with her fists till he took her in his arms and held her tight. At first she fumbled at the buttons of his shirt, then tore it open, he tried to pull off her jeans and she his, but it was too cumbersome and went too slowly, so they each did their own, yanking off jeans and underpants and socks in a single motion. They had sex on the floor in the hall, fast, urgent, passionate.

Afterward he lay on his back with her half in the curve of his arm and half against his chest. "Well," he said, and laughed aloud. She made a slight movement, a shake of the head, a tiny shrug of the shoulders, and pressed herself closer to him. He sensed that unlike him, she hadn't made the transition from passionate fighting into passionate sex. She hadn't torn open his shirt because she wanted to feel his chest, she'd torn it open because she wanted to find his heart. The object of passion had been a return to the peace she had lost during their fight.

They drove to the supermarket and Susan filled up the cart as if they were staying for weeks. On the way home the sun broke through the clouds and they took the next road to the sea, not the open ocean but the bay. The water was unruffled and the sky clear; they could see the tip of the Cape and the other side of the bay.

"I like it before a storm when you can see so far and the contours are so sharp."

"Storm?"

"Yes. I don't know whether it's the humidity or the electricity that makes the air so clear, but it's the kind of air you get before a storm. Treacherous air: it promises you good weather and what you get is a storm."

"Please forgive me for attacking you before. And I didn't just attack you, I yelled at you too. I'm truly sorry."

He waited for her to say something. Then he saw that she

was crying and stood still, shocked. She lifted her tearstained face and put her arms around his neck. "No one has ever said anything as nice to me before. That he's sorry for what he said to me. I'm sorry too. I yelled too, I cursed you, and I hit you. We're never going to do that again, do you hear me? Never."

10

Then it was the last day. She was flying at four thirty, and he was flying at five thirty, and they ate a quiet breakfast on the terrace for the first time. The sun was so hot that it was as if the rain and the cold had just been an infection from which the summer had recovered again. Then they took a walk on the beach.

"It's only a few weeks."

"I know."

"Will you remember the appointment with the architect tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"And will you remember the mattress?"

"I haven't forgotten any of it. I'll buy a temporary mattress and cardboard furniture and plastic cutlery and dishes. If I have time, I'll go to the storage place and see if I like any of your parents' stuff. We'll furnish it all together, piece by piece. I love you."

"This is where we met the first day."

"Yes, on the way there. And over there again on the way back."

They talked about how they'd met, how unlikely their meetings had been, because it would have been so much more natural for him to be heading in one direction and she in another,

how they could have failed to connect in the seafood restaurant that evening if she hadn't smiled at him, no, if he hadn't looked her way, how she had found him, no, he had found her.

"Shall we pack and then open the windows in the corner room? We still have a few hours."

"You don't have to pack much. Leave your summer clothes and your beach things here, then they'll be waiting for you next year."

He nodded. Although Linda and John had repaid him part of the money he'd paid in advance, his credit card charges were way over the limit. But the idea that he would have to buy more clothes in New York to replace what he was leaving here, thus running up his debt further, no longer scared him. That was how things were when you loved someone above your financial station. He would find a solution.

With the packed suitcases standing by the door, the house felt strange. They climbed the steps as they had done so often. But they trod carefully and spoke in hushed voices.

They slid the windows open and heard the breaking of the waves and the cries of the gulls. The sun was still shining, but Richard fetched the coverlet from the bedroom and spread it over the double recliner.

"Come!"

They undressed and slipped under the coverlet.

"How am I going to sleep without you?"

"And I without you?"

"Can you really not fly to Los Angeles with me?"

"I have rehearsals. Can you really not come to New York with me?"

She laughed. "Should I buy the orchestra? And then you schedule the rehearsals?"

"You can't buy the orchestra that quickly."

"Should I call?"

"Stay!"

They were afraid of saying goodbye, and at the same time its imminence made them curiously lighthearted. They were no longer in their shared life and not yet in their individual lives again: they were in no-man's-land. And that was how they made love, a little shyly at first, because they were becoming less familiar to each other again, and then serenely. As always she looked at him throughout, lost to the world, trusting.

They drove to the airport in Susan's car. Clark would collect it and drive it back. They exchanged details of when they would be where and how they could be reached, as if neither of them had a cell phone on which they could be reached anytime, anywhere. They told each other what they were going to be doing in the days and weeks until they were together again, and from time to time they played with ideas of this and that to do together in the future. The closer they came to the airport, the more Richard felt compelled to say something to Susan that would stay with her and keep her company. But he couldn't think of the right thing. "I love you," he said over and over again. "I love you."

11

He would have liked to see the house and the beach one more time from the plane. But they lay to the north, and the flight was headed southwest. He looked down at sea and islands, then Long Island, and finally Manhattan. The plane flew in a big turn as far as the Hudson and he recognized the church that stood only a few steps from his apartment.

It had been hard to get used to his neighborhood. It was noisy,

and at the beginning when he came home past the cool, tough kids sitting out on the stoops in front of the houses or leaning on the railings drinking and smoking and playing loud music, he hadn't felt safe. Sometimes they said things to him and he didn't understand what they wanted and why they looked at him so truculently and laughed at him mockingly once he'd passed them by. Once they blocked his path and wanted his flute case—he thought they wanted to steal the flute, but they just wanted to see it and hear it. They switched off the music and were suddenly ill at ease in the ensuing silence. He was ill at ease too and still anxious on top of it, and first the flute sounded thin, but then he got braver and more at ease and the kids hummed the melody and clapped to the rhythm. Afterward he drank a beer with them. Since then they always hailed him with "Hey, pipe," or "Hola, flauta," and he greeted them back and gradually learned their names.

His apartment was noisy too. He heard his neighbors fighting, hitting one another, and having sex, and he knew their favorite programs on TV and the radio. One night he heard a shot fired in the building and for the next few days he eyed everyone he passed on the staircase suspiciously. When a neighbor invited him to a party, he tried to match up the people to the noises: the thin-lipped woman to the bickering voice, the man with the tattoos to the blows, the large daughter and her boyfriend to the sounds of sex. Once a year he repaid the invitations by giving a party himself, at which those neighbors, who hated one another, managed to behave well for his sake. He was never given any grief for his flute playing; he could practice early in the mornings and late at night, and wouldn't have disturbed anyone even at midnight. He always slept with earplugs.

The neighborhood changed over the years. Young couples

renovated run-down houses and transformed empty stores into restaurants. Richard met neighbors who were doctors, lawyers, and bankers, and could take his visitors out to a proper dinner. His building was one of the ones that remained as they were; the heirs who owned it were too conflicted among themselves to sell it or work on it. But he liked it that way. He liked the noises. They gave him the feeling that he was living in the real world, not just a rich enclave.

He became aware that when he'd described the next days and weeks to Susan, he'd left out the second oboe. They met weekly for dinner at the Italian restaurant on the corner, talked about life as Europeans in America, their professional hopes and disappointments, orchestra gossip, women—the oboist came from Vienna and found American women as difficult as Richard had up to now. He had also left out the old man who lived on the top floor of his building and sometimes came down in the evening for a game of chess with him and played so imaginatively and profoundly that Richard never minded always losing. He hadn't told her about Maria, one of the kids from the street, who had somehow got hold of a flute, had him show her how to hold it and put it to her mouth and read the music and kissed him on the lips and gave him a full-body hug when she said goodbye. Nor had he told her about Spanish lessons with the exiled Salvadoran teacher who lived on the next street over, nor about the decrepit fitness center where he felt comfortable. All he had described to Susan were the orchestra rehearsals and performances, the flautist who practiced with him from time to time, the children of the aunt who'd emigrated to New Jersey with a GI after the war, the fact that he was learning Spanish but not with whom, and that he went to a fitness center, but not where. He hadn't intended to keep secrets from her. It had just happened that way.

12

The taxi set him down in front of his building. It was warm, mothers with their babies were sitting out on the stoops, children were playing hide-and-seek between the parked cars, old men had set up folding chairs and brought cans of beer with them, a few boys were trying to walk as if they were grown up, and some girls were watching them and giggling. "Hola, flauta," his neighbor greeted him, "back from your trip?"

Richard looked up and down the street, sat down on the steps, put his suitcase next to him, and propped his arms on his knees. This was his world: the street, the neat houses and the shabby ones, the Italian restaurant on one corner where he met the oboist and at the other corner the street with the food shops, the newsstand, and the fitness center, and above the buildings the towers of the church that was next door to his Spanish teacher. He hadn't just got used to this world. He loved it. Since coming to New York, he hadn't had any lasting relationship with a woman. What kept him there was work, his friends, the people who lived on the street and in the buildings, the routine of shopping for groceries, going to the gym, always eating in the same restaurants. A day spent fetching the newspapers in the morning and exchanging three sentences about the weather with Amir, the owner of the newsstand, then reading the paper in the café, where they'd learned to bring him two soft-boiled eggs in a glass with chives and whole-wheat toast for breakfast, then practicing for a few hours before cleaning the apartment or doing the laundry, then exercising, then teaching Maria and getting a hug, then eating spaghetti Bolognese at the Italian place, then having a

game of chess before going to bed—a day like that left nothing to be desired.

He looked at the building and up at the windows of his apartment. The morning glories were flowering; maybe Maria had actually watered them. He had started with window boxes, and now they were climbing in front of several of the windows. Had Maria also checked the bucket that collected the drips from the broken pipe? He would have to get it repaired, he hadn't had time to take care of it before he left on his trip.

He got to his feet, intending to go upstairs. But then he sat down again. Pulling the mail out of his box, climbing the stairs, unlocking the door, airing out the apartment, unpacking his bag, going through his mail and answering one or two e-mails, then taking a hot shower, throwing his dirty clothes into the laundry basket and getting clean clothes out of the cupboard, then finding a message on his answering machine from the oboist asking if he'd like to meet up tonight and calling him back to say yes—if he stepped back into his old life again it would never let go of him.

What had he been thinking? That he could carry his old life into a new life with Susan? That he could cross the city several times a week to go to the fitness center and his Spanish lesson? That then he would have chance encounters with Maria and the kids? That the old man from his building would occasionally take a taxi to the duplex on Fifth Avenue and play a game of chess with him in the drawing room under a genuine Gerhard Richter? That the oboist would feel comfortable in a restaurant on the East Side? He had had good reason to keep quiet with Susan about all the sides of his life he couldn't bring into their life together. He hadn't wanted to confront the fact that the new life would require him giving up the old one.

So? He loved Susan. He had had her all those days on the

Cape and had felt that nothing was lacking. And he would have her here now, and he would feel that nothing was lacking here either. The time they'd spent on the Cape hadn't just been wonderful because his own life was so far away! His life couldn't come between them here just because it found its recognizable form two miles from the location of the new life!

But yes, it could. So he mustn't go upstairs, he must go away, leave his old life behind, set out for the new life instead, right here, right now. Find a hotel. Camp out in Susan's apartment among the painters' ladders and their cans of paint. Arrange for someone to get all his things from his apartment and bring them to him. But the thought of a hotel room or Susan's apartment made him anxious, and he felt homesick even though he hadn't even left yet.

If only he were still on the Cape with Susan! If only her apartment were ready and she were here! If only lightning would strike his building and it would go up in flames!

He made a bet with himself. If someone went into the building in the next ten minutes, he would go in too; if no one did, then he'd take his suitcase and move to a hotel on the East Side. After fifteen minutes no one had entered the building, and he was still sitting on the steps. He tried it again. If in the next fifteen minutes an empty taxi drove down the street, he would take it and go to a hotel on the East Side, and if it didn't, he would go up to his apartment. Barely a minute later an empty taxi came along, but he didn't take it, nor did he go upstairs.

He admitted to himself that he couldn't cope on his own. He was also ready to admit it to Susan. He needed her help. She had to come to him and stay with him. She had to help him empty his old apartment and she had to settle into the new one with him. She could go to Los Angeles afterward. He called her. She was sitting in Boston in the lounge, but boarding had begun.

"I'm about to get onto the flight to Los Angeles."

"I need you."

"I need you too. My darling, I miss you so much!"

"No, I really need you. I can't cope with my old life and our new life together. You have to come, and go to Los Angeles later. Please!" There was a crackle in the receiver. "Susan? Can you hear me?"

"I'm on my way to the gate. Are you coming to Los Angeles?"

"No, Susan, you need to come to New York, I beg you."

"I wish I could come, I wish I were with you." He heard her being asked for her boarding pass. "Perhaps we can see each other next weekend, let's talk about it on the phone, I have to board now, I'm the last one. I love you."

"Susan!"

But she'd hung up, and when he called again, he was connected to her mailbox.

13

It got dark. The neighbor came to sit with him. "Problems?"

Richard nodded.

"Women?"

Richard laughed and nodded again.

"Understand." The neighbor stood up and left. Shortly afterward he came back, set a bottle of beer down next to Richard, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Drink!"

Richard drank and watched the bustle on the street. The kids a few buildings along, smoking and drinking and blasting their music. The dealer in the shadow of the steps, silently handing out little folded pieces of paper and pocketing dollar

bills. The lovers in the doorway of the building. The old man, the last one left, who hadn't yet folded up his chair to carry it upstairs and got himself a can of beer out of his cooler from time to time. It was still warm; there was none of the sharpness in the air that can signal the nearness of fall on a late-summer evening; rather, it held the promise of a long, gentle end to the summer.

Richard was tired. He still had the feeling that he must choose between his old life and the new one, that he had to have the right idea or the necessary courage and then he would stand up as if involuntarily and either go upstairs or drive away. But the feeling was tired, just as he was.

Why should he take a taxi to a hotel on the East Side today? Why not tomorrow? Why should he not stay in his old life until he devoted himself to the new one? It would be laughable if in a few weeks he couldn't manage to switch out of his old life and into the new one. Could do it now. If he had to. But he didn't have to. Besides, nothing was to stop him going there now and coming back tomorrow. If he went later, he would never come back. The new life with Susan would hold him there.

What was important was to decide. And he had decided. He would give up his old life and start a new one with Susan. As soon as he could begin it properly. He couldn't do that yet. He would do it as soon as things were that far along. He would do it because he'd decided to. He would do it. Just not yet.

When he stood up, his arms and legs hurt. He stretched and looked around. The kids were at home, watching TV or playing with their computers or asleep. The street was empty.

Richard took his suitcase, unlocked the front door, collected the mail from the mailbox, climbed the stairs, and unlocked the door to his apartment. The bucket that collected the drips from the broken pipe was almost empty, and there was a bunch

of asters on the table. Maria. The oboist was asking on the answering machine if they were going to see each other this evening. His Spanish teacher said hello on a postcard from his yoga vacation in Mexico. Richard switched on his computer, then switched it off again; the e-mails could wait. He unpacked, undressed, and threw his dirty clothes in the laundry basket.

He stood in the room naked, listening to the noises in the building. It was quiet next door; upstairs a TV murmured gently. From somewhere way below him in the building came the sounds of an argument, till a door slammed with a crash. Air conditioners hummed in several windows. The building was asleep.

Richard switched off the light and went to bed. Before he went to sleep he thought of Susan standing on the steps up to the plane, laughing and crying.

The Night in Baden-Baden

1

He took Therese with him, because that's what she'd been hoping. Because she was so happy about it. Because when she was happy she was a wonderful companion. Because there was no good reason not to take her.

It was the premiere of his first play. He was to sit in the box and walk onstage at the end and allow himself to be applauded or booed with the actors and the director. It was true that he didn't feel he deserved to be booed for a production he hadn't overseen himself. But he did want to stand onstage and be applauded.

He had booked a double room in Brenners Park-Hotel, where he had never been before. He looked forward to the luxuriousness of the room and the bathroom and to being able to wander through the park before the performance and take a seat on the veranda to enjoy a cup of Earl Grey and a club sandwich. They left in the early afternoon, made it onto the Autobahn in good time despite the Friday-afternoon traffic, and by four p.m. were already in Baden-Baden. First she took a bath in the tub with the gold fixtures, then he did. Afterward they wandered through the park and after the Earl Grey and the club sandwiches on the veranda, they drank champagne. Being together was pleasantly relaxing.

But she wanted more from him than he wanted from her or could give her. That's why for a whole year she hadn't wanted

to see him, but then she missed their evenings together going to the movies or the theater or out to dinner, and accepted that all they ended with was a fleeting good-night kiss at her front door. Sometimes she snuggled up against him in the movie house, and sometimes he put his arm around her shoulders. Sometimes she took his hand when they were walking, and then sometimes he would hold hers tightly in his. Did she see in this a promise of greater possibilities between them? He wanted to keep things vague.

They went to the theater and were greeted by the director, introduced to the actors, and taken to their box. Then the curtain went up. He didn't recognize his play. The night during which a terrorist on the run takes refuge with his parents, his sister, and his brother was a travesty onstage, in which everyone made themselves ridiculous, the terrorist with his jargon, the parents with their nervous legalisms, the business-oriented brother and his moralizing sister. But it worked, and after a brief hesitation he allowed himself to go onstage and be applauded with the actors and the director.

Therese hadn't read the play and was uninhibited in her delight at his success. This did him good. At dinner after the premiere she kept smiling at him so warmly that despite his normal awkwardness at social events he felt his own inhibitions slip away. He realized that the director hadn't twisted his play toward travesty, but that that was how the man had understood it. Should he accept the fact that without his own knowledge or intent, he'd written a travesty?

They went back to the hotel elated. The room had been made up for the night, the curtains closed, and the bed turned down. He ordered a half bottle of champagne, they sat on the sofa in their pajamas, and he popped the cork. There was nothing more to say, but it didn't matter. There was a CD player on the chest of drawers, along with some CDs, including one

with French accordion music. She snuggled up to him, and he put his arm around her shoulders. Then the CD and the champagne both came to an end. They went to bed, where after a fleeting kiss they turned with their backs to each other.

The next day they took their time on the homeward journey; they visited the art museum in Baden-Baden, stopped at a wine grower's, and went to the castle in Heidelberg. Once again it was easy to spend time together. Although the sensation of the phone in the pocket of his trousers made him feel queasy. He'd switched it off—what pile of messages might there be waiting?

2

None, as he discovered back home that evening. Anne, his girlfriend, hadn't left any word. He couldn't tell whether any calls from her were among the ones that had come in; maybe the blocked number was hers, maybe not.

He called her. He was sorry he hadn't been able to call from the hotel last night, it had been too late. He'd left early this morning, he hadn't wanted to disturb her so early. Yes, and he had forgotten his cell phone at home. "Did you try to reach me?"

"It was the first evening for weeks that we haven't talked to each other. I missed you."

"I missed you too."

It was true. Last night had felt wrong. The closeness in the shared bed had been too much. It hadn't corresponded to any inner closeness born of love or desire or even a longing for warmth or fear of loneliness. With Anne, the shared bed would have felt right, as would the night.

"When are you coming?" Her question was both tender and urgent.

"I thought you were coming." Hadn't she promised to come for a few weeks after the course she was giving at Oxford—weeks that made him both nervous and full of anticipation.

"Yes, but it's another month till then."

"I'll try to come the weekend after next."

She said nothing. When he was about to ask if there was a problem about the weekend after next, she said, "You sound different."

"Different?"

"Different from before. What's wrong?"

"Everything's fine. Maybe I partied too long after the premiere and got to bed too late and got up too early."

"What did you do all day today?"

"I did research in Heidelberg. I want to set a scene there." Nothing else occurred to him on the spur of the moment. So now he'd have to write a scene in Heidelberg in his next play.

She was silent again, before saying, "This isn't good for us. You there and me here. Why don't you write here while I'm still teaching?"

"I can't, Anne, I can't. I'm meeting the head of the Konstanz Theater and the editor of the theater publishing house, and I promised Steffen I'd help in the election. You think that unlike you, I can set things up any way I want. But I can't stop and just leave everything lying around." He was getting irritated at her.

"Election . . ."

"Nobody forced you . . ." He wanted to say that nobody had forced her to accept the teaching post in Oxford. But her field happened to be the rather narrow one of feminist legal theory, which meant that she didn't get tenure anyway, just teaching contracts. She could have broadened her field. But it was all she wanted to do, and the requests for her courses showed him

that she was good at what she did. No, he didn't want to get mean. "We have to plan things better if anyone wants something from either of us. We have to work out what we're going to take on and what we're going to say no to."

"Can you come Wednesday already?"

"I'll try."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

3

He had a bad conscience. He had lied to Anne, he had got angry with her, he had almost been mean to her, and he was glad the phone conversation with her was over. When he stepped out onto the balcony and noticed the summer warmth and the peace of the city, he sat down. Sometimes a car came down the street below the balcony, sometimes the sound of footsteps echoed up to him. He also had a bad conscience because he didn't call Therese to ask if she'd survived it all and enjoyed it.

Then he was tired of having a bad conscience. He didn't owe Therese anything. What he was concealing from Anne, he had to conceal from her, because she would react with such excessive jealousy. Earlier girlfriends hadn't been troubled when they heard that he'd shared a bed with another woman while he was off on a trip or visiting someone, so long as it was only the bed. Anne would be beside herself. Why must she make such a fuss about another woman? And that she should think he wrote the rules for his own life himself and was available anytime, while she had to obey the laws of her career—how could this not make him angry? She had chosen her path just as he had chosen his.

He was glad the phone conversation was over and yet he was already living in anticipation of the next. They had known and loved each other for seven years and had still not been able to give their life together a reliable form. Anne had an apartment and a teaching contract in Amsterdam that wasn't enough to live on but that she could set aside at any time to go teach in England or America or Canada or Australia or New Zealand. He would go visit her there and stay for sometimes longer, sometimes shorter periods. Between times she was with him for days or weeks in Frankfurt, and he was with her for days or weeks in Amsterdam. In Frankfurt he found her too demanding and she found him too petty, and in Amsterdam there was less tension, either because she was more generous than he or because he was more modest in his expectations. They spent a good third of each year together. For the rest of the time Anne's life was unsettled, a life of suitcases and hotels, while his followed a peaceful track—with events and appointments, the authors' union, and the political party, with friends and, yes, Therese.

Not that any of it was so important to him. He rejoiced over every event that fell through, every appointment that got canceled, every political invitation and demand that failed to make its way to his mailbox or his e-mail. But to drag himself away from it all and move to Anne in Amsterdam or with her into the wide world—no, it was not possible.

It was not possible, although he often suffered her absence like a physical pain. When he was happy and would have liked to share that happiness with her, when he was unhappy and could have used her comfort, when he was unable to talk to her about his thoughts and his projects, when he was lying alone in bed. For all that, when they were together they didn't talk much about his thoughts and his projects, and she

wasn't so sensitive when he wanted comfort nor as effusive as he would have liked when he was happy. She was a determinedly purposeful woman, and the first time he saw her, he saw this purposeful determination in her beautiful peasant face, with its many freckles and her red-blond hair, and he liked her immediately. He also liked her heavy, powerful, dependable body. Going to sleep with that body, waking up with it, finding it in bed at night—when they were together it was as wonderful as he fantasized it was when they were apart.

No matter how they longed for each other, no matter how good things were when they were together—they had destructive fights. Because he had come to terms with a life that was more separate than together and she had not. Because he wasn't as flexible and available to her as she felt he could be. Because she didn't make the compromises in her career that he felt she could. Because she spied around in his things. Because he lied, when small lies promised to bypass large conflicts. Because he could do nothing right. Because she often felt unrespected and unloved. When she got really angry she screamed at him, and he retreated into his shell. Sometimes when she was screaming he got an awkward, helpless grin on his face that only made her angrier.

But the wounds from their fights healed faster than the pains of longing. After a time all that remained of the fights was the memory that there was something there, a hot wellspring that bubbled up again and again, hissing and steaming, and that could even scald and burn them to death if they fell in. But they could avoid falling in. Perhaps one day it would even turn out that the boiling wellspring was only an apparition. One day? Perhaps even the next time they came together, with such longing and such joy!

4

He didn't fly on Wednesday, not till Friday. As he was eating dinner on Monday at the Italian restaurant around the corner, a man sat down next to him who had ordered a pizza and was waiting to pick it up. They fell into conversation, the man introduced himself as a producer, and they talked about material and plays and films. As they left, the man invited him to come have coffee in his office on Thursday. It was his first encounter with a film producer; he had been dreaming of movies for a long time, but had no one to offer his dreams to. So he changed his reservation from Wednesday to Friday.

He didn't fly to England with a contract for a treatment or a screenplay in his pocket as he'd hoped. Nonetheless the producer had invited him to write an outline for one or another of the pieces of material they'd discussed. Was that already a success? He didn't know, he was totally ignorant of the world of film. But he was in a good mood as he sat in the plane and in a good mood when he arrived.

He didn't see Anne and called her. An hour from Oxford to Heathrow, an hour at the airport, an hour to get back—she had to finish an essay and had stayed at her desk. Surely he didn't want her to have to spend the whole evening working. No, that's not what he wanted. But he thought she could have started the essay sooner. He didn't say so.

The college had provided her with a small duplex apartment. He had a key, opened the door, and went in. "Anne!" He climbed the stairs and found her at her desk. She stayed seated, wrapped her arms around his stomach, and leaned her head against his chest. "Give me another half hour. Then we go for a walk? I haven't been out of the house for the last two days."

He knew it wouldn't be a half hour, unpacked, settled in, and made notes on his conversation with the producer. When they were finally walking through the park by the Thames, the sun was already low, the sky was glowing a deep blue, the trees were throwing long shadows on the shorn grass, and the birds had stopped singing. A mysterious stillness lay over the park, as if it had fallen out of the bustle of the everyday world.

For a long time neither of them spoke. Then Anne asked, "Who were you with in Baden-Baden?"

What was she asking? The night in Baden-Baden, the phone conversation the next evening, the little lie, his bad conscience—he'd thought all that was behind him.

"With who?"

"What makes you think I . . ."

"I called Brenners Park-Hotel. I called a lot of hotels, but in Brenners they asked if they should wake their honored guests."

Which side of the bed had the telephone been on? At the thought that she might have told them to put her through, he panicked. But she hadn't told them to put her through. How did they speak in Brenners Park-Hotel? Should we wake our honored guests? "Our honored guests—they say that whether it's a question of more than one person or just one. It's an old-world form of expression that high-class hotels consider distinguished. Why didn't you ask to be put through to my room?"

"I'd had enough."

He put an arm around her. "Our verbal misunderstandings! Do you remember when I wrote to you that I wished we could smoosh up together and you thought I wanted to schmooze with you and talk all sorts of stupid gossip? Or when you said to me that in principle you'd come to our family reunion, and I thought you were saying 'basically, yes,' when all you meant was that you'd think about it?"

"Why didn't you tell me that you were in Brenners Park-Hotel? I asked them if they were full and they said yes. So you must have booked ahead. Other times you tell me where you're spending the night when you know in advance."

"I forgot. I booked weeks ago, and just got into the car on Friday and didn't look at the paper stuff with the address and the time of the performance and the reservation till I got to Baden-Baden. Because I was late getting there, all I had time to do was check in and change my clothes: I couldn't call you. After the play and the party I didn't want to call and get you out of bed."

"A four-hundred-euro room—you don't normally do that."

"Brenners is special, and a night there is something I've dreamed of for years. I . . ."

"And the fact that you made a booking for this old dream of yours is something you forgot? Why are you lying to me?"

"I'm not lying to you." He told her about the stress of the last weeks, about the various other things that had slipped his mind, even things that mattered to him and he would have liked to have done.

She was still mistrustful. "Brenners was your dream, and you get there so late and leave so early that you have no time to enjoy the hotel? It makes no sense!"

"No, it makes no sense. But then I haven't been making much sense to myself these last few weeks." He went on talking about stress and pressure, contracts and appointments, meetings and phone conferences. He talked himself into a picture of his life in the past weeks that was exaggerated but not entirely unfounded, and that Anne had no right and no cause to disbelieve. The longer he talked, the more certain he became. Wasn't it outrageous that Anne mistrusted him baselessly and unjustifiably and had doubts about him? And wasn't

it laughable that she was knocking herself out about a night with a woman he hadn't had sex with and didn't even feel really close to? Knocking herself out in a park that was filled with the warmth of summer and the still of the evening and lay spellbound under the light of the first stars?

5

Eventually the energy ran out of the argument the way a car runs out of gas. Like a car it faltered, juddered, faltered again, and came to a stop. The two of them went out to dinner and made plans. Did they have to spend the weeks when Anne could come to him in Frankfurt? Couldn't they go to Sicily or Provence or Brittany, rent a house or an apartment and write with their desks next to each other?

In the apartment they took the mattress off the worn sagging bed frame, laid it on the floor, and made love. In the middle of the night he was woken by the sound of Anne crying. He took her in his arms. "Anne," he said. "Anne."

"I have to know the truth, always. I can't live with lies. My father lied to my mother, he cheated on her and he made promise after promise to my brother and me that he never kept. When I asked him why, he got mad and yelled at me. During my entire childhood I never once had solid ground beneath my feet. You need to tell me the truth so that I've got solid ground beneath my feet. Do you understand? Do you promise?"

For a moment he thought of telling Anne the truth about the night in Brenners Park-Hotel. But what a drama that would produce! And would the truth outweigh the fact that he'd lied to Anne for a whole hour, no, two? And wouldn't a belated acknowledgment about the night with Therese give it more

weight than it actually had? In the future, yes, in the future he'd tell Anne the truth. For the future he could and would promise her that. "It's all fine, Anne. I understand you. You don't have to cry. I promise I'll tell you the truth."

6

Three weeks later they drove to Provence. In Cucuron they found an old, cheap hotel on the market square where they were able to rent the big room with its big loggia on the top floor for four weeks. They wouldn't be served breakfast or dinner, and there was no Internet, and the beds were made only haphazardly. But they got a second table and a second chair and could work side by side in the room or on the loggia, just as they had pictured it.

They began assiduously. But as the days passed, work seemed less and less urgent and less and less important. Not because it was too hot; the thick walls and ceilings of the old building kept the room and the loggia cool. Work—she was writing a book on gender differences and equal rights, and he was working on a play about the financial crisis—just didn't fit. What did fit was sitting outside the Bar de l'Étang by the rectangular walled village pond, drinking an espresso and gazing into the plane trees and the water. Or driving into the mountains. Or discovering new varieties of grape at a vineyard. Or laying flowers at Camus's grave in the cemetery at Lourmarin. Or strolling through the town of Aix and catching up with e-mails in the library. The stroll would have been nicer without the e-mails, but Anne was waiting for confirmation about a job and he for a contract for a play.

"It's the light," he said. "In this light you can work in the fields or the vineyards or the olive groves, and maybe you can

even write—about love and childbirth and death, but not about banks and stock exchanges."

"The light and the smells. They're so intense! The lavender and the pines and the fish and the cheese and the fruit in the market. The thoughts I put into my readers' heads—what are they compared to these smells?"

"Yes," he laughed, "but with these smells in your nose, who would want to change the world anymore? Your readers are supposed to change the world."

"Are they really?"

They were sitting on the loggia with their laptops in front of them. He looked at her, astonished. Didn't she want to change the world, and didn't she write and teach so that her students and readers would want to change it too? Wasn't that why she had refused to make compromises and tailor her career to the requirements of various universities? She was looking out over the roofs, and there were tears in her eyes. "I want a child."

He stood up, went to her, squatted down by her chair, and smiled at her. "That can be arranged."

"How would it be supposed to go? Given my life, how can I have a child?"

"You come live with me. For the first few years you stop teaching and concentrate on your writing. After that, we'll see."

"After that no university will invite me to come. They invite me because they know I'll be available. And I'm not as good a writer as I am a teacher. I've been working on my book for years."

"Universities will invite you because you're a great teacher. And so that they don't forget you in those first years, maybe it's no bad thing if you write a couple of essays instead of the book. You know, in a couple of years the world is going to look quite different again, and there will be new professional possibilities and new courses of study, and that means new jobs for you. So many things are changing so quickly."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Everything is also being forgotten so quickly."

He put his arms around her. "Yes and no. Didn't you tell me the dean at Williams invited you because the two of you were in the same seminar twenty years ago and she was so impressed by you? People don't forget you that quickly."

That evening in Bonnieux they found a restaurant with a terrace and a wide view over the countryside. The large group of Australian tourists taking up most of the tables with their joyful chatter left early, and they were alone in the darkness. Under her astonished questioning gaze, he ordered champagne.

"What are we toasting?" She twisted the glass between her thumb and forefinger.

"Our wedding!"

She kept twisting it. Then she looked at him with a sad smile. "I always knew what I wanted. I also know that I love you. Just as I know you love me. And I want children and I want to have them with you. And children and marriage go together. But today's the first time we've talked about it—give me a little time." Her smile brightened. "Shall we drink to your proposal?"

7

A few days later they went to bed in the afternoon, made love, and then went to sleep. When he woke, Anne was gone. A note told him she'd driven to Aix to check her e-mails at the library.

That was at four o'clock. By seven he was surprised she still wasn't back, and by eight he was worried. They had brought their cell phones with them on the trip, but switched them off and left them in the chest of drawers. He checked, and there they were. By nine he couldn't stand it in the room anymore and went to the village pond where they parked their car.

It was standing where it always stood. He looked around and saw Anne; she was sitting at a table outside of the dark, closed Bar de l'Étang, smoking. She'd given up smoking years ago.

He went over and stood in front of the table. "What's the matter? I was getting worried."

She didn't look up. "You were with Therese in Baden-Baden."

"What gives you . . ."

Now she looked at him. "I read your e-mails. Booking a double room. Arranging to meet Therese. Your greeting afterward: It was lovely to be with you, and I hope you survived the trip okay and everything was fine when you got home." She was crying. "It was lovely to be with you."

"You went spying in my e-mails? And do you go spying in my desk and my closet? Do you think you have the right . . ."

"You're a liar, you're a cheat, you do whatever suits you—yes, I have every right to protect myself from you. I don't get the truth from you so I have to find it myself." She was crying again. "Why did you do it? Why did you do that to me? Why did you sleep with her?"

"I didn't sleep with her."

She screamed at him. "Stop lying to me, will you just finally stop lying. You take this woman to a romantic hotel and share a room and a bed with her, and you take me for a fool? First you think I'm too dumb to see through your lies, and now you think I'm so dumb I'll let myself be talked out of the truth? You motormouth, you fucker, you piece of shit, you . . ." She was shaking with outrage.

He sat down facing her. He knew he shouldn't care if windows opened and people looked out and ridiculed them. But he did care. Being screamed at was humiliating enough; being screamed at in front of other people was a double humiliation. "May I say something?"

" 'May I say something?' " she imitated him. "The little boy

is asking his mummy if he can say something? Because his mummy is always suppressing him and never allows him to say a word? Don't play the victim! Just finally take responsibility for the things you say and do! You're a liar and a cheat—at least you can admit it!"

"I'm not a . . ."

She struck him on the mouth, and seeing a revulsion in his eyes that shocked her, she kept on screaming. She leaned forward, her spit hit his face, and when he recoiled it only made her louder and more enraged. "You piece of shit, you asshole, you piece of nothing! No, you can't say something. When you talk, you lie, and I've had it with your lies, which means I've had it with your talk. Do you understand?"

"I . . ."

"Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what? That you're a liar and a cheat? That you and other women . . ."

"I don't have other women. What I'm sorry about . . ."

"Go fuck yourself with your lies." She stood up and left.

At first he wanted to follow her, but then he stayed sitting. He suddenly remembered the trip in the car when a girlfriend revealed to him that she had other men besides him. They were driving on a winding road in Alsace, and after her admission he simply drove straight ahead off the road and onto a forest path and off the path through the bushes at a tree. Nothing happened, the car just stopped. He put his hands on the steering wheel and his head on his hands and was sad. He had no desire to attack his girlfriend. He hoped she'd be able to explain what she'd done in a way that he'd understand. That he could make his peace with. Why wouldn't Anne have it explained to her?

8

He stood up and went to the pond. It began to rain; he heard the first drops splashing gently into the water and saw the surface ripple before he felt them. Then suddenly he was wet. The rain rustled in the plane trees and on the gravel, pouring as if to wash away everything that didn't deserve to exist.

He would have liked to stand in the rain with Anne, put his arms around her from behind and feel her body under her wet clothes. Where was she? Was she outdoors too? Was she enjoying the rain the way he was, and did she understand that their stupid quarrel should just be washed away by it? Or had she ordered a taxi and was packing her clothes in the hotel?

No, when he came in, her clothes were still there. She wasn't. He took off his wet clothes and lay down. He wanted to stay awake, wait for her, talk to her. But the rain was pattering outside and the day had made him tired and the fight had left him exhausted, and he fell asleep. Sometime in the middle of the night he woke up. Anne was lying beside him. She was on her back, arms crossed behind her head, eyes wide open. He propped himself up and looked at her face. She didn't look at him. He lay down on his back too.

"The feeling that I can't contradict a woman, that I'm not allowed to refuse her anything, that I have to be alert and anticipate what she wants and flirt with her—I think it's all to do with my mother. I feel it all the time, and I behave that way automatically, whether I'm attracted to the woman or not, or whether I want anything from her or not. As a result I create expectations that I can't fulfill; for a time I try to fulfill them anyway, then it becomes too much for me and I sneak away,

or the woman has enough and retreats. It's a fool's game, and I ought to learn to leave it alone. Should I talk to a therapist about me and my mother? Whatever—the game reaches its limit before it leads to sex, it doesn't even lead to preliminaries. Maybe I put an arm around the woman or squeeze her hand, but that's all. Maybe the limits have something to do with my mother too. I don't want to owe the woman anything, and if I slept with her, I'd owe her something. In my whole life I've only slept with women I loved or had at least fallen in love with. I don't love Therese, nor am I in love with her. It could be lovely with her, light somehow, undemanding, relaxed, in a way that things almost never are with us. But I've never asked myself if it was a possibility or if I wanted to leave you and live with her.

"That's one thing I wanted to say to you. The other is that . . ."

She interrupted him. "What did the two of you do the next day?"

"We went to the art museum in Baden-Baden, and a winery and the castle in Heidelberg."

"Why did you call her from here?"

"What gives you . . ." He realized that he'd started to say the same thing when she'd asked him about the trip with Therese, and that he was being interrupted the same way.

"I saw it on your phone. You called her three days ago."

"She had a biopsy because there was a suspicion of breast cancer, and I asked her how it went."

"Her breasts . . ." She said it as if she were shaking her head. "Does she know you're here with me? Does she have any idea we're together? For seven years now? What does she know about me?"

He hadn't concealed Anne from Therese, but he'd left things vague. When he went to see her, he was going to Amsterdam

or London or Toronto or Wellington to write. He mentioned seeing Anne there, and didn't rule out the possibility that he was living with her there, but he also didn't make it clear. He didn't tell Therese about the difficulties he had with Anne, and told himself that that would be a betrayal. But he didn't ever talk about his happiness with Anne either. He told Therese that although he liked her a lot, he didn't love her, but he didn't tell her he loved Anne. On the other hand he hadn't kept Therese's existence from Anne either. Though he also hadn't told her how often they saw each other.

It wasn't right and he knew it, and sometimes felt like a bigamist with one family in Hamburg and the other in Munich. Like a bigamist? That was too severe. He wasn't presenting anyone with a false picture. He was presenting sketches rather than pictures, and sketches aren't false, because that's all they are—sketches. Luckily he'd told Therese that Anne was going to be in Provence too. "She knows we've been together for years and we're together here. What else she knows—I don't talk about you much to friends and acquaintances."

Anne didn't respond. He didn't know if this was a good sign or a bad one, but after a time his tension eased. He realized how tired he was. He struggled to stay awake and to hear whatever Anne might say. His eyes closed, and at first he thought he could manage to be awake even with his eyes closed, but then he realized he was falling asleep, or rather, no, that he'd already nodded off and then woken up again. What had woken him? Had Anne said something? He propped himself up again; she was lying beside him with her eyes open, but still didn't look at him. The moon was no longer shining into the room.

Then she spoke. There was the gray light of dawn outside, so he must have gone to sleep. "I don't know if I can get over what happened. But I know I won't be able to get over it if you

keep trying to fool me that it was all nothing. It looks like a duck, it quacks like a duck, and you want me to believe it's a swan? I'm sick of your lies, I'm sick of them, sick of them. If I'm going to stay with you, then it's got to be the truth." She pushed back the covers and got up. "I think it's best if we don't see each other again till tonight. I'd like to have the room and Cucuron to myself. Take the car and go someplace."

9

While she was in the bathroom, he got dressed and left. The air was still cool, the streets still empty, not even the baker or the café were open yet. He got into the car and drove.

He went to the mountains of Luberon and when the road forked or came to a crossroads, he simply took whichever one promised to lead higher into the mountains. When it had nowhere further to climb, he parked the car and followed the well-worn, overgrown wheel ruts along the ridge and down the far slope.

Why didn't he just say he'd slept with Therese? What was it in him that fought so hard against this? That it wasn't true? He had had no trouble lying otherwise, when it was to avoid conflict. Why was he finding it so hard now? Because otherwise he was making the world only a little more pleasant whereas now he would be making himself look worse than he was?

He suddenly remembered how his mother, when he was a little boy and had done something he shouldn't, would give him no peace until he confessed the bad desires that had driven him to the bad deeds. Later he read about the ritual of criticism and self-criticism in the Communist Party, in which anyone who'd deviated from the party line was hammered at until he repented of his bourgeois tendencies—it was what his mother

had done with him and what Anne was doing with him now. Had he sought his mother in Anne and found her again?

So, no false confessions. Break it off with Anne. Didn't they fight far too much? Wasn't he sick of her screaming at him? Sick of her spying into his laptop and his telephone and his desk and his cupboard? Sick of her expecting that when she needed him, he'd have to be there for her? Wasn't Anne's intensity too much for him? Lovely as it was to sleep with her—did it have to be so weighted with feeling and meaning? Mightn't it be lighter, more playful, more physical with someone else? And the traveling—at first there had been a certain charm to spending three or four weeks in the spring at some college in the American West and the fall at a university on the Australian coast, and in between several months in Amsterdam, but now it was actually a chore. The rolls with fresh herring you could buy from street stalls in Amsterdam were delicious. But beyond that?

He passed the foundations of a stable or a barn and sat down. How high in the mountains he was! In front of him a slope covered in olive trees tilted downward toward a flat valley, behind it were low mountains, and behind those was the plain with its little towns, one of which was Cucuron. On clear days could one see the sea from here? He heard the chirping of cicadas and the bleating of sheep, though he was unable to spot them when he looked. The sun rose higher in the sky, warming his body and releasing the scent of the rosemary.

Anne. Whatever it was that was wrong with her—when they made love in the afternoon, first in the bright daylight and then again as dusk fell, they couldn't get enough of looking at each other and touching each other, and when they lay side by side, exhausted and satisfied, talking came quite naturally. And how he loved to watch her swim, in a lake or in the sea, compact and strong and as supple as a sea otter. How he loved to watch her playing with children and dogs, oblivious of herself

and the world, given over to the moment. How happy he was when she focused on a thought he'd had and lightly but surely touched on the point where he'd got carried away. How proud he was when they were together with his friends or hers and she dazzled with her mind and her wit. How safe he felt when they were holding each other.

He was reminded of a report about German, Japanese, and Italian soldiers in Russian prisoner-of-war camps. The Russians tried to indoctrinate their captives and also induct them into the ritual of criticism and self-criticism. The Germans, accustomed to leadership and robbed of it, went along with the ritual; the Japanese preferred to be killed rather than collaborate with the enemy. The Italians played along, but didn't take the proceedings seriously, cheering and clapping as if they were at the opera. Should he too play along with Anne's criticism and self-criticism session, without taking it seriously? With laughter in his heart, should he admit whatever she wanted to have admitted?

But admitting it wouldn't be the end of things. She would want to know how it could have come to that. She wouldn't rest until she'd found out what was wrong with him. Until he'd seen it too. And the insights thus won would be put to use again and again as explanations and accusations.

10

Only now did he notice how far he'd walked and how long he'd been sitting on the wall. On the way back he kept expecting at every bend of the path to find the road beyond and his car standing there, but there would be another bend and then yet another. When he finally did reach the car and looked at his watch, he saw it was noon and he was hungry.

He drove further into the mountains and found a restaurant in the next village with tables out on the street and a view of the church and the town hall. There were sandwiches, and he ordered one with ham and one with cheese and wine and water and a café au lait. The waitress was young and pretty and took her time; she calmly enjoyed his admiration and explained what kind of ham she could fetch from the butcher around the corner and what kind of cheese she had. First she brought the wine and the water, and before the sandwiches reached him he was already a little drunk.

He remained the only guest. When the carafe of wine was empty, he asked if there might be a bottle of champagne somewhere in the cellar. She laughed, gave him a pleased and conspiratorial look, and when she bent forward to clear the plates from the table, the neckline of her blouse revealed the top of her breasts. He looked after her and called, "Bring two glasses!"

She laughed. Pleased that he stood up and pulled the chair out for her. Pleased that he popped the champagne cork with a bang. Pleased that he clinked glasses with her. Pleased that he asked such careful questions about what life as an attractive woman was like in a godforsaken mountain village. In the summer she helped her grandmother in the restaurant. Otherwise she studied photography in Marseille, traveled a lot, had lived in America and Japan and published already. Her name was Renée.

"I close up between three and five."

"Do you take a midday nap?"

"It would be the first time."

"What could be nicer at midday than . . ."

"I know what could be nicer." She laughed.

She looked at the time. "Today I'm closing the restaurant at two thirty already."

"Good."

They stood up and took the champagne with them. He followed her through the dining room and the kitchen. His head was swimming from the champagne and the prospect of sex, and as Renée climbed the dark staircase in front of him, he could have ripped the clothes from her body right then and there—but he had the bottle and the glasses in his hands. At that moment Anne and her quarrel went through his head—wasn't there a principle that if one is condemned for an act one has not in fact committed, one cannot then be punished as and when one actually commits it? Double jeopardy? Anne had punished him for something he hadn't done. So now he was allowed to do it.

Renée laughed a lot in bed too. She laughed as she took out the bloody tampon and set it on the floor next to the bed. She made love as functionally and skillfully as if she were playing a sport. Only after they were both exhausted did she become tender and wanted to kiss him and be kissed by him. The second time she held him tighter than she had the first, but afterward she soon checked the time and sent him away. It was four thirty. Her grandmother would be back soon. And he wasn't to come back; in three days her time in, what had he called it, her godforsaken village in the mountains, would be over.

She accompanied him to the staircase. From downstairs he looked up one more time: she was leaning against the banisters, and in the darkness he couldn't read the expression on her face.

"It was lovely with you."

"Yes."

"I like your laugh."

"Get going."

11

He would have liked a summer storm, but the sky was blue and the heat hung in the narrow street. As he got into the car he saw a Mercedes pull up outside the restaurant and an old couple get out. Renée came through the door, greeted them both, and helped them carry groceries into the house.

He drove slowly in order to keep Renée in his rearview mirror for a little. He was suddenly overwhelmed with a powerful longing for another life, a life with winter in the city by the sea and summer in the village in the mountains, a life with its own unchanging, reliable rhythm, in which one always drove the same routes, slept in the same bed, met the same people.

He wanted to walk in the same place he'd walked that morning, but didn't find the spot. He stopped at another one, got out, couldn't decide about walking again, but sat among the bushes, plucked a blade of grass, propped his arms on his knees, and put the grass between his teeth. Again he was looking out over slopes and low mountains into the plain. His longing wasn't swirling around Renée or around Anne. It wasn't about this woman or that, but about continuity and reliability in life itself.

He fantasized about giving them all up, Renée, who didn't want him anyway; Therese, who only liked the bits of him that were simple; Anne, who wanted to be conquered but not to conquer herself. But then he'd have nobody left.

He'd tell Anne that evening what she wanted to hear. Why not? Yes, she'd always take what he said and make use of it later. But so what? What harm could it do him? What harm could anything do him? He felt invulnerable, untouchable, and laughed—it must be the champagne.

It was too early to drive back to Cucuron and Anne. He stayed sitting and looked down at the plain. Sometimes a car passed, sometimes it honked. Sometimes he saw something flash down on the plain—the sunlight catching the window in a house or the windshield of a car.

He dreamed about summer in the village in the mountains. He and Renée or Chantal or Marie or whatever she would be called would move up there in May and open up the restaurant, not for lunch but just for guests in the evening, two or three dishes, simple country cooking, local wines. A few tourists would come, a few foreign artists who'd bought old houses and renovated them, a few locals. Early in the morning he'd drive to the market for supplies, early in the afternoon they'd make love, in the late afternoon they'd go to the kitchen together and prepare the food. Mondays and Tuesdays they'd be closed. In October they'd close the restaurant, lock the shutters and the door, and drive back to the city. A gallery or a bookshop? Stationery? Tobacco? A shop just open in winter? How would that work? Did he even want to run a shop? Operate a restaurant? They were all empty dreams. Love in the early afternoon was what counted, no matter whether it was in a town by the sea or a river or in a village in the mountains or on the plain.

He looked down at the plain and chewed his blade of grass.

12

He reached Cucuron at seven, parked the car, didn't find Anne outside the Bar de l'Étang, and went into the hotel. She was sitting in the loggia, a bottle of red wine on the table and two glasses, one full and one empty. How was she looking at him? He really didn't want to know. He looked at the floor.

"I don't want to say much. I slept with Therese and I'm sorry and I hope you can forgive me and we can put it behind us, not today, I know, and not tomorrow, but soon, so that we can stay good to each other. I love you, Anne, and . . ."

"Won't you sit down?"

He sat down, went on talking and kept looking at the floor. "I love you, and I don't want to lose you. I hope I haven't already lost you because of something so insignificant. I understand that it's really significant to you, and because of that and because I should have known it, it should have been significant for me too and I shouldn't have done it. I understand that. But it really is insignificant. I know that . . ."

"Settle down. Do you want . . ."

"No, Anne, please let me say it all. I know men keep saying, and women say it too, that a little infidelity is meaningless, that it just happens, that it's a fleeting opportunity, or loneliness, or alcohol, that it leaves nothing behind, no demands. They say it so often that it's become a cliché. But clichés are clichés because they're true, and even though infidelity is sometimes something different—often it is nothing, and that's how it was with me. Therese and I in Baden-Baden—it was meaningless. You may . . ."

"Can you . . ."

"In a moment you can say whatever you want to say. I only want to say that I understand if you don't want someone to whom a little infidelity means nothing. But the part of me to which a little infidelity means nothing is only a small part of me. The larger part of me is the one to which you mean more than anyone in the world, which loves you, with which you have been together for years. And before Baden-Baden I never . . ."

"Look at me!"

He looked up and looked at her.

"It's fine. I called Therese and she confirmed that nothing happened. Perhaps you want to know why I didn't believe you and yet I believe her—I can tell better from a woman's voice whether she's telling the truth or lying than I can from a man's. She felt you weren't honest with her or with me, and if she'd known how long you and I had been together and how close we were, she wouldn't have wanted to see you so often. But that's another story. In any case, you didn't sleep together."

"Oh!" He didn't know what to say. In Anne's face he saw hurt, relief, and love. He ought to get to his feet, go to her, and hug her. But he stayed sitting down and just said, "Come here!" and she stood up and came to sit on his lap and lean her head against his shoulder. He put his arms around her and looked out over her head at the rooftops and the church tower. Should he tell her about his afternoon with Renée?

"Why are you shaking your head?"

Because I've just decided not to tell you about the other little infidelity this afternoon . . . "I was just thinking that we almost . . ."

"I know."

13

They didn't say any more about Baden-Baden, or Therese, or truth and lies. It wasn't as if nothing had taken place. If nothing had taken place, they would have felt free to fight with each other. But they were taking care not to bang into each other. They moved cautiously. They did more work than they had at the beginning and by the end she had completed her essay on gender differences and equal rights, and he had his play about two bankers sitting trapped in an elevator for a whole weekend. When they had sex, each of them remained a little reserved.

On the last evening they went again to the restaurant in Bonnieux. They watched from the terrace as the sun went down and night came. The deep blue of the sky darkened to absolute black, the stars glittered, and the cicadas were loud. The blackness, the glitter, the noise—it was a festive night. But their imminent departure made them melancholic, and on top of this the star-strewn sky reminded him of moral law and the hour with Renée.

"Are you still holding it against me that I didn't tell Therese more about you and you more about Therese?"

She shook her head. "It made me sad. But I don't hold it against you. And you? Do you hold it against me that I suspected you and used blackmail? Which is what I did, I blackmailed you, and because you love me, you allowed it to happen."

"No, I don't hold it against you. It makes me anxious that things escalated so fast. But that's something else."

She laid her hand on his, but instead of looking at him, she looked out across the countryside. "Why are we this way? . . . I don't know what to call it. You know what I mean? We've changed."

"Changed for the better or for the worse?"

She took her hand out of his, leaned back, and looked at him sharply. "I don't know that either. We've lost something and we've won something, haven't we?"

"Lost our innocence? Won some kind of sobriety?"

"And if sobriety is also the death of love, and without some faith, pure and simple, in the other person, things can't go on?"

"Isn't truth, which you said you need as the ground beneath your feet, always sober?"

"No, the truth I mean and the one I need isn't sober. It's passionate, beautiful sometimes, and sometimes hideous, it can make you happy and it can torture you, and it always sets you free. If you don't notice it at first, you will after a while." She

nodded. "It can really torture you. Then you curse and wish you'd never encountered it. But then you realize it's not torturing you, what's doing the torturing is whatever the truth is about."

"I don't understand." The truth and whatever the truth is about—what did Anne mean? At the same time he was wondering if he should tell her about Renée, now, because later would be too late. But why would later be too late? And if later was okay, why have to do it at all?

"Forget it."

"But I really want to know what . . ."

"Forget it. I'd rather talk about how things are meant to go from here."

"You wanted some time to think about getting married."

"Yes, I think I should take some time. Don't you need time too?"

"Time out?"

"Time out."

14

She didn't want to talk about it. No, he hadn't done anything wrong. Nothing she could name. Nothing she would want to talk about between the two of them and a couples therapist.

The food came. She ate enthusiastically. He felt queasy, and poked around the dorade with his fork. When they were lying in bed, she didn't push him away but she wasn't hungry for him either, and he had the feeling she didn't need time anymore, she'd already reached a decision and he had already lost her.

The next morning she asked if he'd mind taking her to the airport in Marseille. He did mind, but he took her and tried to

say goodbye to her in such a way that she'd see his pain as well as his readiness to respect her decision, and would remember him fondly and would want to see him again and have him too.

Then he drove through Marseille, hoping he'd suddenly see Renée on the sidewalk, but knew he wouldn't stop. On the highway he thought about how life in Frankfurt would be without Therese. What he would work on. The contract for a new play that he'd been hoping for hadn't come. He could set to work on the outline for the movie producer—but he could do that anywhere. Nothing, in fact, was pulling him toward Frankfurt.

What had Anne said? If you encounter the truth and it tortures you, that isn't what's torturing you, it's whatever the truth's about. And it always sets you free. He laughed. Truth and whatever the truth is about—he still didn't understand. And that the truth sets you free—maybe it was the other way around and you had to be free in order to be able to live with the truth. But nothing spoke against trying out the truth anymore. Somewhere up ahead he'd leave the highway and take a room in a hotel, in the Cévennes, in Burgundy, in the Vosges, and write about it all to Anne.