XIV

I made my decision before I was fully awake. This is characteristic of the most consequential decisions in life: they arrive not through any logic but through some obscured subterranean process. The mind, having done its dark work in the night, wakes to find itself already committed. Clearly, I would not answer his message.

The room was filled with a watery, pearly light—a light like the inside of a shell. A clock ticked deep inside the house, and near the window a column of dust spinning in the sunlight like a star cluster. Everything was unnaturally sharp. Even before opening my eyes, I felt it—an inward current, waiting to spread like the a crowd before breaking in applause. I lay very still, as if the slightest move could scatter the feeling. My body felt newly reset. My thoughts, sharpened and clear. I was acutely alive to everything: the sheets grazing at my ankles, the soreness of my eyes in my skull, the lights on the ceiling, floating in pale golds and Icelandic blues. He was in the room with me the way a ghost is—which is to say, completely. All over.

I closed my eyes—not to sleep, but to rehearse. The expression, when I'd see him. The one that says: *I haven't been thinking about you*, *I've been so busy this week*. Then the voice: its sexy, unrushed quality. And finally—last and most difficult—his name, which I rehearsed as one practices a foreign word, forming it slowly and with care, trying to soften its awkwardness; steady the betraying quiver in the voice. And so you practice saying it, over and over again, until the effort stops showing. *Bogdan. Bogdan. Bogdan.*.

I wouldn't rest until he was mine. Mine in the most unglamorous sense—in the real world—subject to its gravity, its consequences, its abrasions, its fatigue. In restaurants with harsh lighting and hard conversations, that begin badly and end inconclusively and leave a residue that takes a week to clear. I wanted the night expressway drives where there was nowhere to look but ahead, the supermarket trips, the accumulation of gluten preferances and petty disagreements, and long sundays that spread out in an ash sky and slowly work on the nerves. I wanted him in all that gritty texture of a life shared. Not a chapter. Not a fantasy. A life, with its boredom and its small catastrophes and its endless garbage bags. The problem was how to relocate him there.

Then I thought of the practical problem, which was also the moral problem, which was also the problem I had no relief from, no shelf on which to set it down and rest. His wife. She existed at the center of everything, the way a Buddha anchors a temple, power radiating out of her, influencing all the aspects of my life. No, I could not, I would not, think of destroying their marriage. It would be immoral, and I had no reason to believe I wouldn't be succesfuf if I'd try. I turned this matter over and over in my mind—obsessively. So, the question was: when would he divorce her?

In its later stages, love transcends emotion. Or rather, it begins as an emotion, a rearrangement of the neurological framework, a weeks-long experience of being not quite yourself in ways sometimes rapturous and sometimes deeply disconcerting, like reading while convulsing from a grimoire. But after this original possession, love requires a plan. Not a scheme—a scheme is love in the service of the ego. A plan is love in the service of the beloved. It asks that you subordinate the urgency of your

desires to something much more structured and enduring. That you learn to wait without withering, foster the capacity to sow—lay things down in soil you can't yet see the bottom of and trust that something will grow.

I sat there dreaming, motionless, for I'm not sure how long. Perhaps I went into a trance. Then the phone rang and my heart went off in a black explosion, thinking it was him.

"Yes?" I answered.

"I hope you got it sorted out last night." My mother's phone calls always begin in the middle, as though we've been arguing for some time before I pick up.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"You know what I'm talking about. Maybe God sent Dolly. To talk some sense into you. Have you thought about that?"

"No."

"Get your head in order. He's a married man. Do you intend on following your grandmother's example—build your life on waiting?" A brief silence—her breathing traveling impatient down the line. "Is Dolly awake?"

"I don't know."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

Another pause. "There's porridge with peaches in the microwave," she said. "I'll speak to you later."

The line went dead with a click. I was sitting with the dead phone in my hand, the house very quiet now, twisting a strand of hair around my finger, twisting and thinking, twisting and thinking, smiling, looking into nothingness, when, moments later, music blasted through the floor.

I ran downstairs, then stopped. Dolly was dancing with the broom. Or rather she was doing something *to* the broom—something the word dancing only partially, and somewhat euphemistically describes. Humping, more likely. In the background, at a volume I felt in the back of my teeth: *it's not right, but it's o-kaaay, I'm gonna make it anywaaay.* This requires an illustration. She was dancing the way one dances in the total privacy of one's skull, which is to say without aesthetic consideration of any kind, without apology, without the subtle adjustments that the presence of a witness always induces onto human behaviour. I have rarely been so conscious that I was seeing something I wasn't meant to see. On the stove, three pots were boiling in unison, working themselves toward a climax of their own, the whole kitchen in a state of loud, chaotic productivity that ought to have been catastrophic but looked, somehow, entirely under her control. I watched her for a while, in the mirror of the living room which exposed parts of the kitchen.

Then, in a movement of extraordinary swan-like grace, she put the broom in its corner and tended to the pots. The transformation was instant. One Dolly vanished and another one emerged, without a visible transition. Now she was carefully assembling a tray. My mother's tray. The silver one, the one she produced on the specialest occasions, kept wrapped at the back of the dinner cabinet. Dolly had found it and was now loading it with: cheese, prosciutto, cherry tomatoes, my peach porridge. She had also found the blue china. I had not seen that china since I was a girl. Then she carried the tray to the end of the dining table, sat down, and began to eat. As opposed to last night, today she ate the way royalty eats in Baroque paintings—with a kind of absolute tutelage of the act: gently, protocolary. I nearly laughed out loud at this. She looked just like a very convincing lunatic auditioning, with complete seriousness, for the role of Queen of Ireland. Whitney was still going: *I'll*

be fine, I'll be fine, I'll be fiiiiiiiiiiiine. Outside, a pigeon landed on the window ledge, peeked in for a moment, then flew off. I finally stepped into view.

"Good morning, Dolly," I said.

The music cut out. The kitchen was suddenly very quiet and full of morning light.

"Morning, little doll!" she chirped.

I pulled out a chair and sat in front of her. She nudged the tray towards me, eyebrows raised in invitation.

I said: "No, thank you," to which she shrugged and continued to eat.

"How'd you sleep?" I asked.

"Like a dead bear."

"Huh."

"Did I snore?"

"Not that I heard."

"All my boyfriends used to say I was a light sleeper." I smiled. "I'm sorry about last night," she said. "I am—I'm sorry—you didn't need be involved. And I know you're too polite to say it which makes it worse somehow, it makes it—Look, the thing about your mother and me—and I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to sit here in her house, at her table, eating her food and—though actually, you know what, maybe that's exactly the right way to do it! She'd hate it!" A short laugh. "The thing is we were just very different people. From the very beginning, even as children we were—she wanted things I didn't want and I wanted things she couldn't understand and we never, not once, managed to find the five minutes it would have taken to just say it plainly. Just say: I don't understand you, and maybe I don't like you, but you're my sister and that's—that's enough." She put her fork down. Picked it up again. "We came from the same place, same room, same parents who were—well, not entirely—the point is she made one thing out of it and I made something completely—it's extraordinary, really, if you think about it—but she always knew what she wanted, that was the difference, she always knew, even at seven years old she had this quality of absolute bloody certainty about how things ought to be done, and what things ought to look like, and who ought to sit where. Maddening quality in a child. And I was—I was the other one. The one who didn't know anything. Who kept asking questions that weren't the right questions, and getting the bad grades, and going places that—God, the places I went. She'd have died. Well, she did die, actually. Yes, she is sort of dead, don't you think?"

"I don't know, Dolly," I said, trying not to laugh. "What about grandma? Did you actually— "

"Not that again. I don't want to puke."

"But she *was* your mother, Dolly."

"She was a black cloud that rained on me for forty years. And when they buried her I thought: right, that's done. But ten years later and she still gets up in the morning with me. Puts on her coat. Follows me around. Raining . . . always raining over me."

I confess I didn't expect to find, in Dolly, the kind of female company I spent most of my life avoiding: sheer complicit female company, the complicity of women which is a kind of complicity in having endured unendurable things, in the shared grammar of damage that women learn among themselves, which men are not equipped to learn. The knowledge that certain things are hard and have always been hard and will continue to be hard, and that this isn't a tragedy but among the given conditions of life. Dolly had this. She had it in the way certain people have a thing they were born with and have never thought to question it. A vocation for pain.

"Dolly, may I ask you something?" She nodded vigorously, eyes bulging, cheeks rounded with food. "Do—do you remember your first love?"

"My first love?" I nodded. "My first love—hmm—why do you ask?"

"Well, isn't our first love most important?"

"Don't know. I suppose it depends on the meaning we give it."

"What good is love without a meaning?"

"Eh, people love what they're equipped to. Most just love a pretty face. Or a pretty cock. Ha!"

I felt that treacherous little red tide climbing in my cheeks. She pressed her lips together, eyes squeezed in thought: "My first love—" and she thought for a while, before opening them wide: "Oh! But of course! Why it was ol' Tibi!"

"Tibi?! Tibi as in . . . grandma's con-cu-bine?" My grandaprents had split when my mother and aunt were sixteen.

"Mhm."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Oh, yes. Oh, what a sweet old man he was. He used to bring me icecream from the corner shop. Every day. Hoist me on his knee as I'd eat it. Who else can say they ate icecream everyday back then? No one. It was a luxury. Raspberry ripple, I remember, with those pink little veins melting over the cone." She made cute little flowing gestures with her fingers. "He really loved me, you know. My parents of course had no real interest in me. Think they hardly even saw me. But uncle Tibi saw me. And I—well I suppose I—the thing is I don't think any other man has looked at me, or even touched me the way he did. No, no, no—not like that. Gosh, why do people have to sexualise everything? It was all so pure and childish, barely barely touching, like the swoosh of a breeze, and he only did it when it was very very dark, like he wasn't even there. And we used to talk for hours, you know, about everything—birds, clouds, puberty—as if we were the same age. And I could only think of him for a very long time, even before I met Andreas, I couldn't get him out my mind. Then, one day, I came home and he was gone. Your grandmother was sitting in her room, crying, with a picture on her lap, and when she saw me, she slammed the door in my face. She was very angry."

"Have you spoken to a psychologist about this?" I asked, extremely concerned.

"About what? About the only soul who ever showed me a scrap of kindness? Don't be silly. Light shines in odd places."

For a second, she looked like she was drifting elsewhere, smiling with an openness that his memory seemed to awaken. No doubt, she was under a kind of self-preserving spell. She had probably spun it around herself to shield her from a dangerous truth. There are truths you don't come back from. The mind, with its genius for survival, finds ways to protect you from them.

"What about you?" said my aunt. "Met your first love, little doll?"

"Y—yes. Yes I have, actually."

"Thought you might have."

"Why is that?"

She bent her head to the side with a funny little grimace. "Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

I shook my head.

"You look terminally ill."

"Do you have any advice?" I said.

"Walk off a cliff."

"Come on, Dolly, try and be serious."

"How old is he?"

"Forty-two."

"Ha!" She gave a short, delighted bark. "The father wound," she said, chomping on her omlette.

"I don't have a father wound," I replied.

"Please. The Pope's got a father wound," she said mildly. "It's the founding myth of the West."

"Don't give me cliches, Dolly. I get enough of them from my mother."

She refilled her tea. "I'm not talking about your actual father. I mean, what's there to say? We all know him. I'm talking about the *structure* of a father." She pressed her lips together. "Look. The Father isn't just a person. He's a function: authority, distance, recognition. When that function is unstable, well—" chomp, chomp, chomp "—the soul goes looking for it."

"Didn't take you for a psychoanalyst."

"Psychoanalyst, tarotist—potato, patato."

"He sees me, Dolly," I said after a long silence.

"Mm." She chewed. "Or you're just the most interesting mirror he's found."

"I don't see the difference."

"The gaze." She reached for a tomato, bit it, made a face. "God, these are awful. Who bought these?" She put the rest of it down. "The mystics—being *seen* is the whole point of the individ—" She waved her hand, knocking over the salt. "Never mind. You understand me."

"No, I genuinely don't. Are you drunk?"

"You just told me he sees you. The gaze is sacred in mystic traditions. To be seen by God. To be known com-ple-tely."

"You think I've made him into God." I felt irritation rise in me. "You're assuming it's pathological."

"Ugh, I can't stand that word." She set her fork with an elegant click. "Why must everything interesting about a person be pathological? Why is that our first instinct?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I'm assuming it's *allegorical*." She let that sit for a moment. "Meaning: the story you are living is also about something else. Something larger. Something that's been true long before this man came into your life and will remain true after." She tapped the table three times with her finger. "Pathological says: here's the problem, here's the pill, next patient. Allegorical says—" she opened her hand "—what's this really about?"

"Where do you know all this from?" I asked, unable to disguise my admiration.

"Sweet girl, have you never read Jung?!"

"No."

"Of course you haven't." A pause. "How could you? You're still so young, and sweet, and . . . unhurt." She drew a breath before speaking again: "Tell me—does he describe you as unusual?"

I didn't answer.

"As precocious? Wise beyond your years? Someone who *understands* him in ways, say, other women can't?"

"He says I'm rare."

"Of course you are. The High Priestess. Now that's a sad bitch."

"What?"

"Clever girls—interior, perceptive, too much going on inside you know? They're the High Priestess. And then some older man perceives it and says, 'My God, you're so *rare*, so *unuuuusual*,' and it feels—I know *exactly* how it feels, I've felt it myself twice—it feels as though he *invented* you. As if he's the first person who ever truly saw you. But it's not you he sees. It's himself. His unused depths. His wasted youth. His buried . . . myyysticism."

"You think I'm naïve," I said.

"Nonsense. You found a door that opened. That's all. You walked through it, and the room on the other side was *you*—some version of you that you didn't know was in there, and now you have made the very human, very catastrophic mistake of thinking that the door and the room

are the same thing. That without him, the room—" she made a gesture, a vanishing, "—ceases to exist." She shook her head. "The room was there before the door opened. The room will be there after. He is the door. *You* are the room. And the room is the entire point of the story. Do you understand what I'm saying? My second boyfriend was an architect, actually. Tremendous father wound."

"But I love him, Dolly." I heard the thinness in it as I said it. "I love him so much—"

"I know you *think* you do," she said. "But you just love the part of you that comes alive when he looks at you."

"What part is that?"

"The unloved part," she said looking toward the window. "Then—well—he looks away and you disappear a little."

I swallowed against a sudden constriction.

"You asked for my adivce. Here it is. Ask yourself: are you relating to him as a man or as a tower?"

"A tower?"

"You know—the Tower?" I said nothing. "God, hasn't your mother taught you anything? A teacher-. A guide-structure. Look, towers hold you. But they can also crush you. The thing is that from inside, for a very long time, the two feel the same."

"Did Tibi…" I began, more cautiously now, "function as a structure for you?"

"He functioned as attention," she said. "That was the whole of it, really. That was the—" she stopped. "You don't know what that does to a child. When someone simply *looks* at you. Really looks. My mother used to look straight through me, as if I were a smudge on the window and she was trying to see the garden. My father thought I was a remote control. Only time he'd talk to me was when he wanted me to change the channel." She went quiet for a moment. "'I used to save things up. Things that happened to me during the day. Little things. Something funny the teacher said. A bird I'd seen. I'd save them up like—like I was collecting them in an apron, and I'd give them to him and he'd laugh, or he'd ask me about it, and that was—" She pressed her lips together, turning her ring slowly on her finger. "They give you the words for it later. You know the ones. Exploitative, victim, abuse. And I tried them. God knows, I sat with them and I tasted them. But the thing is —" tears came without a change in expression, which was somehow worse than if she'd crumbled "—the thing is I never felt like a victim. I wasn't pinned. I wasn't dragged. I felt *chosen*. Worshipped. And that's the part they can't give you a word for, isn't it. Because if I was a victim, then I was also the happiest I have ever been in my life. Both things. At the same time. And when they ask you to give up the first thing, they never tell you that you have to give up the second thing along with it too."