

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Martin Sloane

Michael Redhill

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Martin Sloane

a novel by

Michael Redhill



arrow books

For Anne and Benjamin

I have burdened you unduly, my dearest friend, with this long account of an enigmatical condition ordinarily kept to myself.

– HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL,
THE LORD CHANDOS LETTER

Make ready the room where you will live with me, for I shall have them bury me in the same chest as you, and lay me at your side, so that my heart shall be against your heart . . .

– EURIPIDES, *ALCESTIS*

IT WAS A lie that brought Martin Sloane to a picture house on O'Connell Street one night in the fall of 1936. (This was how I began, finding my way into his story, trying its doors.) He was eight, and it was the first time he'd ever gone anywhere by himself. It was a twenty-minute walk from his house and by the time he reached O'Connell, night had fallen and the wide boulevards were blazing with electric light. The hotel-lined street was busy with horse-taxis, news-hawks, chestnut carts; its café storefronts full of customers. Martin imagined that back at home the windows of his house were glowing orange with safe nighttime light.

He walked toward the cinema, the heavy coins in his pockets enough for the movie and a bag of steamed nuts. No one noticed him: although only a child, he was simply a part of what he walked through. A city dweller. Head up, cap clenched in one hand, he went down the middle of the thoroughfare, on the grassy strip that separated the two avenues. At that moment he thought his happiness complete, thought that it must have been like the happiness of being older, the way he imagined anyone might have felt, walking to the Grand Central Cinema at six o'clock at night to see the early show of *The Informer*.

In this he was in league with his father, who the previous week had walked over the river, in the middle of the workday, to see the picture. He'd come home red-faced with excitement.

You Irish with your bogeymen, Martin's mother had said.

They *must* see it, said his father.

Not these children, Colin. She is too impressionable, and he is too young.

The papers had argued back and forth over the film's merits, some saying it was scandalous and a temptation, others that it told a sore truth. It was the story of an Irishman, the drunkard Gypo Nolan, who'd sold out his friends to the British. Now it was as if the *Mail* and the

Herald were arguing in the Sloane kitchen over dinner and it soon became a forbidden topic of conversation. But his father had certain conversational gifts. He convinced Martin's mother that her objections were about picture houses in general.

No, Colin, she said, it is about this film.

You mean to say, said his father, that you don't object in *principle* to the viewing of motion pictures?

If they are wholesome, then no.

I don't believe it, Martin's father said, staring at her in disbelief. I thought for certain you were against the pictures in general.

Not at all, said Martin's mother, happy for common ground. Send him to see *O'Shaughnessy's Boy*, down at the Grand Central. It has that nice Mr. Beery in it.

And so, the following Sunday night, Martin's father gave him directions to the Grand Central Cinema, at the bottom of O'Connell beside the river, and there, Martin paid his half-shilling. And, following his father's instructions, he went in to the parlour beside the one showing *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* where people were gathering for the six-o'clock showing of *The Informer*.

When the lights went down, rain began to fall in the street. Martin sat in the darkness, the voices of the actors intermingled with the quiet pattering hiss outside the thin cinema walls, and he was transported by it all, by his illicit visit to the movie hall, by the sensuality of Gypo Nolan's drunken sin. The movie ended in heartbreak, the big man trying to outrun his fate, and when Martin went outside, the city had been transformed into mirrors of light. In the Liffey, the centre of town shone upside down in a cold radiance. He could see the buildings in the slickened car windows, on the street, against glistening rainjackets passing along the sidewalks, as if the whole place had sunk under the sea.

Martin's father was waiting in the car with the motor running in front of the cinema. He waved through his

window, swiping it with his forearm so he could see out. In the car, his father handed him a towel. So? he asked.

It was good, Martin said.

His father pulled out into the slow-moving traffic. The horses drove down through the streets with their heads lowered. Were you frightened?

No. But I think we shouldn't have lied.

I suppose we could leave the country now, said his father, and he laughed to himself. This was one of the things Martin did not understand about adults, this laugh he sometimes heard. Let's not call it a lie, though, his father said. Let's call it a secret.

Now they were driving up Berkeley Street. His father's favourite sweet shop was here, and as they drove past it they could see the windows were fogged and there were people inside. We could both use a cup of chocolate, his father said. To warm up.

Donnellan's was popular with everyone, and Martin's father kept his face averted from the other customers. He ordered two mugs of chocolate and a fruit bun for them to share, and when he came away from the register, a table was open in the window. They sat, and his father asked Martin to tell him the whole story of the film.

But you've seen it, Martin said. You already know how it goes.

I *have* seen it, said his father. But I want you to tell it me, the way you remember it.

Martin thought back to the beginning of the story and began telling it, and as he told it, it was as if he were seeing the film all over again, except that the Grand Central was in his mind, his mind was the cinema. He told of Gypo Nolan's betrayal of his old friend, turning him in to the British for twenty pounds. The shock of watching the betrayer spend the money on drinks, and fish and chips. The way he teetered back and forth between remorse and pride. Then the trial, the lies Gypo told to cover himself, endangering

even a neighbour, and afterwards, the mad run from justice. How it had electrified Martin to watch it, even the horror of Gypo, dying in the church at the feet of his victim's mother. *Frankie, your mother forgives me!* Certainly, in the end, Gypo had regretted his actions, but regret is not enough for the people around you, Martin had thought, people have to see that crime is paid for. In this way, life was not like religion, in which, as far as he understood, sorrow in your heart came first.

That was it, his father said when Martin was finished. He nodded and fingered his chin. That was very good. Now, tell me what it was about.

About? Martin thought for a moment, not sure of what to say. It was about not lying.

Stop worrying about that, said his father. If I say something's okay, it's okay. Now what was it *about?*

Martin chewed on a piece of candied peel, rolled the bittersweet scrap around in his mouth. It was about being kind to others, he said.

It was, a little. Something else, though.

He could come up with nothing. He felt his face begin to burn and he tried to think what Theresa, who was quicker of mind than he was, would have said. He knew she would be thinking of what their father might have wanted to hear, and after another moment, Martin said: It was about you shouldn't drink when you're flush.

No, Martin. His father looked disappointed. He tipped back the end of his chocolate and picked his hat off the table. He left a coin.

The two of them walked back to the car in silence, and Martin searched his mind for the hidden meaning of the film, but he was so distracted by the anxiety of disappointing his father that he couldn't think. Finally, driving up past the canal, his father spoke quietly.

Would you say it was about having a home?

A home, said Martin, agreeing gratefully.

Gypo doesn't merely turn in a friend, Martin. He gives up the only thing he belongs to, thinking he will go to America with his blood money. But instead, he remains, and he is lost in the only place he has ever belonged. That is as good as dying.

But he does die.

Yes, said his father, mercifully, he dies.

They turned down to where they lived. For his whole life he had passed these houses, walked over the stones in these streets. Every night, the lights in the distance would appear between these same houses, slanting down alleys. He had never known any other place than this. His father had always said that every star had its place in the sky, every person theirs on Earth. Except you could not take a star out of the sky. People, though, he'd said. People vanish from the places they should be, people go to darkness all the time. Outrunning their fates.

And that had been Gypo Nolan's lot.

Molly was still holding the box called Grand Central in her hands, staring at it as if the movie were playing deep inside it.

How was that? I asked Martin.

Just about perfect. Except the candy store was called Goldman's. She reads me like a book, he said to Molly.

She laughed. I can't see you as a book.

He turned back to me. And the Grand Central had little pinlights stuck into their ceiling, so that when the room went dark, you could see above you a little pretend night sky. He raised his hands above his head and waved his fingers toward the ceiling.

Just like the one you'd see on a clear night over Dublin, I said.

Yes, said Martin. Just as if the roof had been lifted off.

Molly put the box back down on Martin's workbench. She laid it down so gently it didn't make a sound. Did your

mother ever discover he'd let you go?

He got away with it, he said. It wasn't the worst thing.

What was?

Martin raised his eyebrows at her, surprised that someone who'd known him only eight hours would ask such a question. Molly leaned against the bench, waiting him out. In the years I'd known her, she'd always been the kind of person who could expect answers to her questions, no matter how brazen. That was her effect on people; resistance was futile. But after a few moments of the two of them pointing their mandarin smiles at each other, she lowered her head and her black hair fell over her eyes.

It's been a great day, she said. But maybe I should let you both go.

Martin moved around her and started collecting the boxes she'd pulled down from his shelves. Maybe Jolene can run you to the bus station, he said.

She watched him slide the artworks back into their cubbyholes — Pond, Linwood Flats, The Swan. Did your father ever see these? she asked.

He pushed Crossing into place. It was a box that put the viewer in the sky over a ship crossing the ocean. A woman's face was painted on the deck, and where the smoke from the stacks washed across the glass front of the box, a man's face seemed to hover. I wish he had, he said.

Well, at least he's in them. It's not a bad place for a person's soul to end up.

No, said Martin, pushing the last box flush against the others. I suppose it's a good place to be.

Bloomington

I.

THE SWAN, 1950. 6" x 14" COLLAGE. PAPER, SEQUINS, FOUND IMAGES. PRIVATE COLLECTION. DEEP IN A FOREST THE SNOW IS FALLING. BEHIND THE BARE TREES, A SWAN DRIFTS ACROSS A FROZEN POND.

SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE in a connected world in which every one thing is cognate with every other thing, the bell tolling for you, for me. In this kind of world, orders are revealed within our own order, our beginnings woven with other beginnings, endings with endings. In this way, life is seen to rhyme with itself. For a long time this was my own religion.

But now, if I go all the way back to my own birth, I find only disconnected memories. A dusty shag carpet, a writing pad by a phone, an orange wall. I think I can recall an early dream: bedroom curtains opening on a carousel? Later, my mother in gardening gloves, smelling like soil, or my father undoing her shoes for her when my brother was in her stomach. A banana-seat bicycle, a bumpy road between two towns, jackdaws creaking in the air over gravestones. Some time later, a piano brought down from Syracuse, the one my mother played as a girl.

But this childhood narration doesn't rhyme with anything. Not even with itself, for what could a dusty carpet have to do with gardening gloves, or a piano with gravestones? So many times in thirty-five years, I've known the feeling of that little girl I once was being erased. The girl followed by the young woman who was then given the hook for another, later, woman. I feel only a rough kinship with them, like they are co-conspirators in what has become of me. A lifetime of versions. But the little girl? She's gone. I don't have her. It's only when you're old enough to understand that the past is gone forever that you begin to store your own life, and like most children, at least as I recall, I thought I would be eight forever. Or eight and taller, eight with hips, eight with boyfriends. Never anything but eight.

I probably didn't start keeping track of my own life until I left my childhood home. Then I'd lie awake in my dorm bed testing to see if I could remember how all the doors in the house I no longer lived in opened. Which ones swung easily on their hinges, which had a sticking point you had to tug it

through. Which doorknobs were loose, which stiff. The folding closet door in my bedroom that slid open on a track and then came off the track and swung free. I thought to myself, once I'd forgotten the doors of my childhood home, my childhood would truly be over.

Martin Sloane was fifty-four when I started writing to him, fifty-six when we became lovers, now that's the thing that seems shocking, the raw fact of that. Before then, I had a clear vision, so I thought, of the kind of person I would eventually love. It would be someone a little like me. Like me, but with improvements. Someone more open, someone a little smarter, a little stronger emotionally. But someone who'd fit in back at home, should I have ever wanted to return. After meeting Martin, I went down my list. He *seemed* more open, but I couldn't really tell. He *was* smarter, but emotionally stronger? Did I really want that tested? Did I want to *lose* that test?

The problem of what other people would think was more serious (I dreaded the gossip) but in the end it was more easy to deal with. By the time I couldn't live without Martin, it didn't matter what anyone thought.

The first time we met in person his face surprised me. Although he was thirty-five years my senior, his face was smooth, his short mussed hair jet black with only flecks of silver. (I was to have more grey in my hair by the time I turned thirty.) His nose was too big for his face, and his eyes were as dark as his hair. His face made me think of the busts of dead men, the illusion of living eyes made by holes in the stone. So that from one angle, they would seem pitiless, and from another, they'd spring to life.

He'd just walked off the bus in Annandale, where Bard College was. I was waiting with a car I'd gotten from Rent-a-Duck, a rusted-out VW bug with a pipe for a gearshift and a steel plate over a hole in the floor. He was lugging his artworks in a plain old garbage bag, and I rushed over to

him and forced him to put the bag down and let me stack the artworks, so they could be carried, tower-like.

Just dump them in the back, he said.

Let me be in charge of them. You're a guest now.

If anything breaks, I'll fix it. We'd gotten to the bug. This is a great little car, he said.

They were out of Jaguars. I put down the boxes gingerly to unlock the trunk. The lid had to be propped up with a stick. Then he began plunking them in, like they were groceries. He put the last one in and took the stick out, and the lid slammed shut. I'd watched him with paralyzed wonder.

You can't treat them like they're permanent. He went around to the passenger side. They'll get ideas. He tried to put the seatbelt on, but the business end of it had been melted into a glob in some previous disaster. This is going to be an adventure, he said happily.

I started down the country road that wound between towns, one side a river, the other a forest.

Can I work the shift? he asked.

What do you mean?

You say *shift*, I change gears.

Do you know how to drive?

No. But when I was just a kid, my dad had a Saloon car and once we drove it from Dublin to Galway and part of the way I sat on his lap and shifted the car. So I have that part down good.

Did you travel a lot with your family?

Just that once. So, you tell me when, all right?

You're not sitting on my lap.

I can do it from over here.

Shift, I said. And so we drove the eight miles back to Bard, me calling the shifts over the labouring engine, and Martin trying to get the gear into the right position, until we were on campus and he jammed it in reverse as I was trying to get him to gear down. I heard something big and metallic drop down and smack the road and the car leap-frogged

over it and we both flew out of our seats and hit our heads on the roof. The car came to rest in some grass. We sat there panting as people I knew gathered around.

Well, this is Martin Sloane, I told them, getting out. He's going to have a show at the Blithewood. Martin was still sitting in the passenger seat, looking at his palms, dazed.

My friends helped him out, introduced themselves; some of them knew he was coming, knew how hard I'd worked to get him to town. Then everyone took a box and we all crossed the field to the gallery, the glass fronts catching and reflecting the light at odd angles so the little crowd looked like a broken mirror spreading across the green. Martin glanced back at me and laughed.

You having fun now? I said.

You think we'll see any of those again?

You obviously don't care.

He made an Oliver Hardy face and shrugged, then got in step with me and linked his arm in mine. I like your friends, he said.

I tightened my arm, my heart whacking against my ribs, and I pulled him against my side. I like you.

But I crashed your car.

That you did.

Bard College was close enough to my hometown of Ovid but far enough away that no one from there could walk to it in half a day. The campus was a pastoral green hidden in the woods. Grassy patches, whitewashed buildings, a chapel in the trees. Towering maples clenched in brilliant vermilion down the main drives. The big athletic field with its unmown edges reeking of springtime through the summer and fall.

I'd been assigned one of the smaller dorms at the edge of the playing field, more a cabin than a dorm, with an angled rooftop and a jumble of windows, called Obreshkove House. I was on the second floor, with a window pointing out to the forest, where I sometimes saw deer in the gloaming. Molly

Hudson was my suitemate; she'd arrived on the first day of school while I was out registering for classes. She liked me, she later explained, on the evidence of my bookshelf, and alphabetized her own books in with mine, a gesture that touched me.

She was well prepared for college, and determined from the start to run our social lives with ruthless efficiency. I've bought us a little fridge, she announced on the day we met, in case we want to have cocktails with the friends we're going to make. She opened the door to the fridge to reveal four cocktail glasses frosting underneath the ice-element, and beneath them a loaf of bread, a small bottle of mayonnaise, and a single packet of corned beef. For anyone who comes over peckish, she said.

I stood in the doorway, looking suspiciously on her good sheets and her fabric-wrapped clothes hangers. How old are you, Molly?

Nineteen, she said. Today. Just squeaked into the class of '88.

She had no doubt that she was already the centre of a coterie that didn't exist yet. Coming from a grief-darkened house (since the death of my mother, almost ten years earlier, my father had remained in a state of evergreen loss), I suddenly realized that a bright room on the edge of a forest was the perfect coming-out for me — a gradual emergence from sadness into a new life, fronted by one of the daughters of Syracuse. Molly was enrolled in a general arts program, but her father — an important attorney in that city — had made her promise to declare law as her major by the end of her sophomore year. They'd shaken on it, a "gentleperson's agreement," she put it, and one she was to keep.

I stood back in a kind of awe as I watched Molly adapt to the rituals of freshman life. She joined clubs, started petitions, put graffiti forward as an important grassroots expression of discontent. (She reversed this position when

she entered an eco-feminist phase for three months in second year, declaring that spraypaint was an ejaculatory rape of the environment.) Naturally, she also began blazing sexual trails, ones I couldn't follow due to an inborn shyness, and a rational bent of mind that was still working over the mechanics of sex. While Molly was mapping sensation, I worried where my eventual caring, expressive, gentle partner would put his knees. A parade of paramours began tramping through our suite as Molly (so I believed) methodically made love to our freshman year in alphabetical order. The sounds of sex — quiet, musical, desperate, or exquisite as they were — became the general music of those rooms. She never seemed to settle on anyone, which I took as a sign of incredible impartiality, but she surprised me late one night with the sound of her weeping. Moments before, I'd heard another of her lovers quietly close the door on his way out. I crept into her room, my housecoat cinched around my waist.

What did he do?

He left, she said.

I went to sit on the end of the bed. The air in her room smelled bearish. They all leave, I said. I thought you didn't like them staying over.

I don't. She was holding a pillow tightly over her belly. But I want them to come back. And with that, she lowered her face into the pillow and started crying again. I waited, bewildered, unaccustomed as I'd always been to giving comfort. I don't think I was a cold person then, only that grief undid me. After a moment, she raised her red-streaked face and gamely smiled. Men like to leave me, she said.

At least they like you. I can't get anyone to look at me.

Looking's the problem, said Molly. They don't care about anything they can't see.

I moved closer, tentative, and put my hand on hers. Then they're really blind, I said.

I suppose that's the moment we became friends, rather than roommates; the moment the future started to get written.

The first-year classes at Bard were like panning in a river: they sifted people into groups, and before long it was easy to see the aggregates forming: the athletics groups, the drama people (with their little moustaches), the ghostly druggies, the frat boys. In the ranks of the English majors, I wasn't sure where I fit in. I was neither welcome nor spurned by my classmates, but this was only because the rigours of reading left little time to develop social graces, and many of us were lonely. Relationships of a kind sprang up when you discovered someone in class held your opinion, although you might only discover this in the form of a well-rehearsed answer to one of the prof's questions in a room of two hundred other English majors. "I liked what you said about *The Faerie Queen*" would be a safe opening gambit, but on the whole, the first-year English students were a raccoon-eyed, oily-haired group, whose interests (at least through to December) were restricted to epic poems declaiming the rewards of clean living. Without Molly at cocktail ground-zero, I wouldn't have made any friends that first fall.

I took up racquet sports in the hope of meeting people on my own, and learned that panting and sweating was not the way to do it. Then Molly decided to sign us up for sculpture in our second semester. Mrs. Borovin, our teacher, arranged for the class to see a sculpture expo in Toronto that March. I'd never been to Toronto, even though it was only five hours north of Ovid, and I'd hardly even had a sense of it or Canada. The country above us always struck me as storage space, like an attic, so the revelation that there was art there was interesting, although odd. I have no memory of crossing the border in our old school bus, nor of coming into

the city. I don't remember the March weather, nor the look of the people, or even what the buildings looked like.

The art was boring. Blotchy clay sculptures of men in motion, or women with breasts so heavy the statues had to be braced to the gallery wall with strips of metal. Mrs. Borovin stood us in front of one dull bronze or miasmic fabric draped over steel mesh after another, and talked the class through the basics of three dimensions. I drifted away, and eventually into the street. There was another gallery beside, smaller, with only a couple of what appeared to be display cases on the walls. I was surprised to find that the cases themselves were the artworks. Wood-framed boxes with glass fronts behind which some antic arrangement of things gave off a feeling of intense nostalgia. I had never felt anything from art (so I realized then): I was more interested in the brush stroke, the way the canvas was stapled to the frame, or the evidence of a pencil line erased. But here, I was distracted toward another place. The boxes contained bereft little worlds — a sand-filled teacup, a broken clay doll. One (it appeared empty) had a little drawer at the bottom with a jewelled handle, which, when you opened it, revealed a handwritten story pasted to the bottom. *For the rest of time, it said, it was as if the little place was getting smaller and smaller, although they could still see it, a dot on the horizon.* I closed the drawer and looked again into the space above it, and finally saw, against a backdrop of greyish blue, an almost infinitesimally small pebble with an even smaller pine tree — carved out of the broad base of a single pine needle — standing on it. Another box, embedded right into the wall, featured a front made out of wooden slats, and peering past them, I could see the backs of four birds — two large, two small — in a miniature living room. It took me a moment to realize I was looking down onto them from above, like a god in their ceiling, their smooth brown forms among the furniture a family settling down after supper. Another had a blue

curtain drawn shut over the contents, with handles coming out of the top of the box to open them, but I was afraid to touch it.

The one I found hardest to turn from was a box on a pedestal, made of glass on all sides, which was filled with a viscous blue fibre draping down from the top. It was difficult to see what was suspended in the middle of the space, and I had to stand for a while on each of the four sides, collecting the visual information, until it resolved into something identifiable. It was a mermaid. Her body hung limply curved, her hair draped on each side of her face, loosely falling into the depths, and her tail curving on the other. I startled when I realized what it was. It was called "Sleep" and I was overcome with greed. I wanted it like nothing I had ever wanted before. It was like the way a lover hungers for the body of the one desired: I wanted no one else to ever see it again except for me.

I crept over to the man at the desk, palms sweating, heart racing, and I told him I wanted to buy it. He folded his newspaper and looked at me over it.

I don't think you can afford it. How old are you, anyway?

What does that have to do with it?

You can't just go buying artwork like it's candy.

If I can afford it, it doesn't matter why I'm buying it.

Tell me how old you are.

Twenty, I lied.

Well, come back when you're forty, and we'll talk. He returned to his newspaper. I got out my purse and unzipped the billfold. I had ninety dollars. I took the money out and went over to his desk, slapping it down under my palm.

That's all I have. You tell me what I have to do.

I already told you. Not for sale.

I'm leaving a deposit.

Look, honey, you're not even old enough to vote where you come from —

Excuse me, I said, but the voting age is eighteen where I *come from*, and I very much plan on voting in the next election, thank you very much.

Why don't you just take a program and vamoose, he said. I'll sign it for you if it makes you feel any better.

Why? Are you the artist?

No, I'm the gallery owner. It's as close as you'll get. He shoved the money back across the desk.

I took one of the programs, then saw the show's manifest tacked to the wall beside the door and took it down. There were a couple of red dots beside some of the pieces, but "Sleep" was still unsold.

This says "Sleep" is \$180. Ninety's enough to hold it, isn't it?

That's a typo. It's \$1,800.

I stood in the doorway staring at him, then took the money out again, folded it, and wedged it into a space between the doorjamb and the wall. That's my deposit. I'll come back with the rest. And I'm taking this. I waved the manifest at him as proof.

Daringly, so I thought, I wrote to the artist when I returned to Bard. I told him about my experience looking at his art, plying my adjectives, and I asked him to wrest, if he could, the thing I loved from Mr. Sullivan. I suggested perhaps he needed someone not quite so allergic to money representing his work. But Martin surprised me by writing back and returning my deposit, saying it was he, not Sullivan, who'd asked the gallery not to allow any sales to individuals. He was skittish about private persons owning his work; he wanted to be able to visit it.

This admission lit a fire under me, and I wrote him to say I still wanted "Sleep," and he could come any time and see it. He didn't bend, but he continued to write me, and over the period of a year or so, I gradually forgot about the artwork that had so moved me and began to want to see *him*. So I

began to machinate a way for him to come to Bard. I asked him to send some slides of his artworks, and I approached a pliable curator at one of the campus galleries with them, a wraithlike woman named Mrs. Vankoughnet. It was as easy as that.

Done, I wrote back to him in October of 1985.

You're due next April. Now we should talk about where you'll stay. There are a couple little hotels just outside campus, but since you'll probably only come for the opening, why don't you stay in my dorm? Obreshkove's an open easygoing place and you have a nice view of the field and some big metal sculptures. My roommate says she'll probably go visit her parents that weekend, anyway. You'd like Molly, but she's quite a boy magnet. I showed her the slides, by the way, and she likes your work too, so I'm sure she'd jump at the chance of having a great Canadian artist sleep in her bed.

Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm single. I just want you to know in case your wife is anxious. What I mean is, I don't want anyone to be uncomfortable with the fact that it's a single college junior setting all this up. Anyway, I think people should be upfront. Is this too personal? So far, I should say, you've been very adept at appearing quite personal in your letters but upon rereading them, I can see you've actually told me nothing about yourself. Is there anything to tell? I remember reading Flaubert somewhere saying that you had to be orderly in your life so you could be violently original in your work. If he's right, you must be as interesting as sawmill gravy in person. Still, why don't you tell me the basics? The name of your wife and children, for starters? (If you have any . . .)

My uncle says I am being a mover and a shaker by getting you down to Bard. Is that how you see it? Are Canadians like the English? If so, I've been pretty pushy in terms of how you guys are.

God I really like you. I was just realizing this. Your letters get better when I reread them. I hope you will let me take you to my favourite cake and tea joint when you get to Bard (although this place is in Rhinebeck — a little hole-in-the-wall of a town near here) and we will talk about all kinds of things. Last time you wrote you said that you thought collage was a nostalgic impulse. I think you're wrong. Can we argue about this? Kurt Schwitters would laugh up his sleeve at you for saying that. His collages are like writing letters. Letters are collages, aren't they? Educations are collages, too. That's why they call it college har har. The café I'm taking you to is called the Blue Chair. They have chocolate chip cookies as thick as your fist. Write me soon.

After crossing the field in a small army of hands, the boxes made it safely to the gallery. Mrs. Vankoughnet seemed

impressed with Martin and shook his hand as if he were already important. She gave him some documents describing the gallery's obligations to him, and vice versa, but he wasn't interested in them, and two days later, when it turned out he was to have signed them, they'd vanished.

Bringing Martin to campus gave me a kind of celebrity that had previously been Molly's, and I basked in it. For the rest of the first afternoon, fellow students from the fine arts programs followed us around like trained geese, asking Martin questions in little embarrassed voices. No one knew how famous or unknown he was (the truth was closer to the latter), but the fact of his being from another country made him authentic in the eyes of students who'd grown up in cow-towns all around the state. They formed a semicircle around him, drifting back as we walked through them.

Where do you get your ideas?

I don't think I have ideas, Martin said, and everyone laughed, as if he were joking. I don't, he repeated.

But, said one of the girls, there *are* ideas in your art.

I don't do it on purpose, said Martin.

Are you a surrealist? said a tall printmaker with a shaved head.

No.

Would a surrealist *admit* he was a surrealist?

Yes.

You idiot, said someone else. It was the Dadaists who went around saying they weren't anything.

The little crowd started buzzing. No, said someone else, they admitted they were Dadaists! They all pretended they didn't care about the art world, but they were *soooo* big on making sure everyone spelled "Dada" right.

Go ahead, spell "Dada" wrong for me.

I pulled Martin away from them. Let's have supper somewhere else, I said.

I want one of those cookies you've talked about.

We left the freshmen behind, waving their arms.

I made him wait outside the dorm while I changed, then got into a borrowed car in an agonized-over dress that rode up every time I clutched. Keep your hands off, I said, then pointed to the gearshift to clear up any confusion. I'd borrowed a car from a friend who hadn't witnessed the fate of the other one. Martin sat quietly in the passenger seat, his hands folded over his legs. For the first time since he'd arrived, there was an uncomfortable silence, an appropriate silence for two people who hardly knew each other, and the feeling that I was out of my element briefly took hold. Then I nervously started rambling, shooting in the dark for subject matter that he might want to add his two cents to: the benefits of small schools over large ones; the problems of teenage pregnancy; some thoughts on the differences between Americans and Canadians in which some ideas of the colour of currencies were forwarded, and finally, a short tractate on cows and weather.

Finally he said, I'm not actually Canadian, as you know. I still think of myself as Irish.

You don't sound Irish, though. I mean you don't have an accent.

I was convinced of the importance of not having one when I was growing up in Montreal. But hiding it made me feel all the more Irish. Like a man who gets home from work and puts on a dress.

Huh? I said.

I just mean I wanted to fit in.

Did you speak French?

Seulement un peu.

I've always wanted to.

Funny, he said. That's what they say up there too.

I took the turn for Rhinebeck, and we drove down the town's little main street, with its churches and gas stations. This looks just like where I grew up, I said. A little blot with people living on either side. He looked through his window and nodded. How long ago did you leave Ireland?

Forty-five years, six months, fourteen days, and seven hours, he said, then turned to look at me. I must have been trying to keep a straight, sensitive composure and failing, because he laughed. It was around forty-five years ago. I was eleven, he said.

We went into Bella Notte and the waiter brought us a wine menu without carding me, so we ordered a bottle and toasted each other. The scent of the wine filled my head like a sound, and after a glass, my courage returned.

Let's go back to this no-ideas idea, I said. You really think your work doesn't *mean* anything?

Well, it must mean something, it's just that I don't think about it. I mean, it doesn't matter to me.

But aren't you interested in what people see in it?

No.

I tilted my head at him and narrowed my eyes. Okay, I challenge.

What?

It's what you say in Scrabble when you think someone's made up a word. That made him laugh, and he covered his mouth, muffling the sound. It was strange how he seemed at one moment completely open and the next was concealing everything. The laugh had the effect of looking like he'd been caught in a lie and I pointed an accusatory finger at him. Aha! So you just don't want to talk about it.

Not so, he said. It's just that if I was any good with words, I'd *put* it into words. But I'm not. So the way I feel is the way my work looks, and that's its meaning, or as close as I can express it. And what other people think about it is, again, a step away from what it "means" because they're describing something, and —

You're no good with words.

Yes. He finally exhaled and looked down, smiling, and stared into his soup. He looked fantastic to me, sitting there as real as anything, with his almost-messy hair, his dark blue shirt open at the neck. Sometimes, if he turned just