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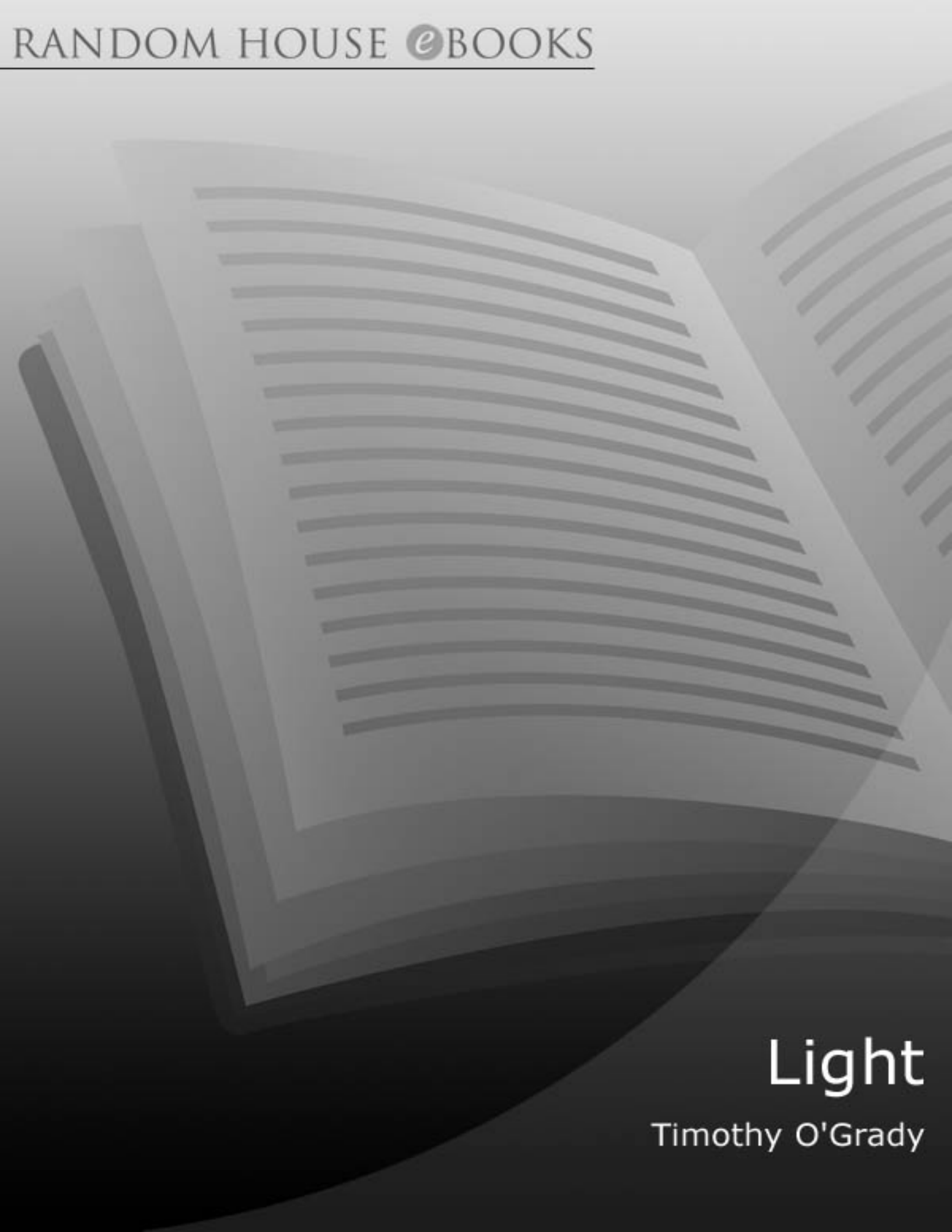

Light

Timothy O'Grady

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About the Author

Timothy O’Grady is the author of *Motherland,* which won the David Higham Award, and *I Could Read the Sky,* which won the Encore award. His book *On Golf* was published by Yellow Jersey in 2003.

ALSO BY TIMOTHY O'GRADY

Fiction

Motherland
I Could Read the Sky
(with photographs by Steve Pyke)

Non-Fiction

Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution
(with Kenneth Griffith)
On Golf

For Aoife O'Grady

Timothy O'Grady

LIGHT

VINTAGE

The longing to behold harmony is the source of the physicist’s inexhaustible patience and perseverance.

Albert Einstein

PART ONE

1

In the Café Voltaire

I MET HIM under the green awning of the Café Voltaire in a corner of the Stary Rynek in Krakow during an early evening in the month of September in the year when my sister Renata took ill and a train out of Gdansk went off its rails, leaving forty-two dead. Already the air was cooling after a hot summer. He was wearing a long black cashmere coat with the collar turned up. His hands flew about like startled white birds when he spoke. In his eyes I could see many things – curiosity, panic, irony, qualities of both empathy and aloofness, an intelligence that may not have been instinctive enough to be truly useful to him. I do not believe that his face had met with a razor for at least three days. On his lap was the book *Physics and Philosophy* by Werner Heisenberg.

I had come to the Stary Rynek to listen to the trumpet calling from the high steeple of the Mariacki church and to take a glass of Zubrowka. In the morning I had travelled to Krakow and passed the afternoon with my sister while she waited for the morphine that would remove the pain of the disease that was eating her bones. In the evening I was to return to her, but now I was taking a Zubrowka. To think of the cities of the world where I have searched for this pale green drink!

He was at a table in the corner, the wind blowing around him. If you look at the men who sit alone in the cafés of this

square you will find them motionless and composed, their backs like washboards as they lean into their chairs, their eyes blinking as slowly as tortoises', their fingers just touching the sides of their drinks which rest on the tables before them. I was among them in my green woollen jacket and English hat, all of us timid and decorous, all of us liking to think of ourselves as enigmas, all of us knowing each other's fraudulence. None of us could keep our eyes for very long from the turbulent man in the long black coat who sat alone at a table in the corner. He was a small cyclone, the red wine leaving his glass in great gulps, his tapping foot, his reading of Werner Heisenberg and the little notes he made in the margins of the book having the look of a desperate race against time. Who or what had forsaken him? With what instrument had the world cut the lines into his face? I thought, Young man, why is it you carry about you the look of an abandoned church?

In April I reached seventy-two years. I have swum great distances in the pale blue waters of the Pacific. I drank wine from a goatskin in the streets of Tijuana. I picked cherries with Mexicans in the orchards of Oregon. I saw a man bisected vertically like a block of cheese by a sheet of metal that fell from the sky. I look now at these scarred hands stained brown by the years, at these feet which ache in the morning. These are the days when I ride the rails of Poland and pay visits to graveyards or to those soon to make their homes in them. I can sit in a chair and for two hours listen to the conversation of my neighbours' children through the wall. I persuade myself that I have a special interest in international athletic competitions and read accounts of them in the newspapers. At night, alone in my bed, I wait for a sleep which rarely comes. Pictures from long ago drift in. There is father in his tram conductor's uniform, snow on his hat, buttons polished, his tie a little

askew as he reaches out for me when he comes from work through the door of our home. There am I, arm outstretched, eyes closed, wine running down my neck and on to my shirt. Beside me a mountain man from Zakopane. About what were we laughing? And there is Renata at eighteen with a look which says she will not be denied. I think of her coquetry and her schemes, of her rapturous face as she rode our uncle's mare through the high trees of Puszcza Piska, of the cold and hungry way she stared from her bedroom window. Now she takes her food from a spoon held by another's hand.

If I have anything at the end of seventy-two years, it is time. Truly I am not taking so badly to old age. I have not as yet an exclusive obsession with the observations of doctors. I like to take my bicycle and search for mushrooms in the forest. I go to the library and read the encyclopaedias. I take pleasure in the feeling of the sun on my back. I think to myself, Will my sense of taste increase while my eyesight diminishes? Sometimes I set myself tests. Sometimes I provoke my tongue with an anchovy.

When I went to the Café Voltaire that evening I knew nothing of Werner Heisenberg or of the world which he struggled to understand – that tiny world of atoms and their particles that makes up all that we can see. But then that evening in Krakow the young man spoke of love and ruin and physics. How unlikely it all was, and yet how compelling. So now before I wake I am already dreaming his story and when I sit in the library I read not about generals or the great religions or the rivers of Africa, but rather about light and momentum and the structure of the atom. I look for him, for how he moves in this strange world of the infinitesimally small looking for an answer.

'When I lost her, I began to read about physics.'

That was what he said. Strangely, I understood him.

* * *

There are events which detonate in memory and reveal with their light what went before as well as the moment itself. It is as though time itself begins to slow as the moment approaches. I remember seeing Angelina for the first time as she turned a corner of the stairs in the house where my colleague Pawel had lodgings in Berlin. I remember her hand on the dark wooden railing, the folds in her grey dress as they followed the lines of her loins, her downward glance and look of private amusement, the dark hair falling around the sweeps and hollows of her neck. That was a single moment in the course of a dark German night in November 1955 – the only moment that mattered after all, for thereafter nothing was as it had been. But I remember also the seconds just before – the man in the blue metallic suit who passed by slapping his newspaper on to his open palm, the smell of his cheroot, the piercing call of the red parrot which the caretaker kept in a cage in the hall.

In the Café Voltaire that evening a gust of wind rose and blew out the candle by which the young man was reading his book. I remember the feeling of eagerness and servility with which I rose from my chair. I remember reaching for the lighter in my jacket pocket. I remember a thin man at a neighbouring table lifting his spectacles on to his nose and looking at us, a bicyclist ringing his bell, a Russian prostitute standing under the arches helpless with laughter. I lit the candle and the young man looked up at me. He could have thanked me for the light and returned to his book, but instead he extended a hand and invited me to sit. The men around us watched, as still as rooks on a fence. He called out to the waiter for a Zubrowka and more wine. There was in his gestures something which seemed to tell me that in the anonymity of our short encounter discretion would not be necessary. The candle flame in the green

glass flickered in the wind and he moved out of its range. In the shadows he seemed composed of shades of blue and quicksilver, like fire or ice or something mined from the earth. I could not immediately find him. Then he reeled around again and leaned forward into the light and began to speak. He spoke for eleven hours through that night of the woman he loved and lost and never really knew. He barely paused in the telling. What did I see when the light struck his face? His pain, his amusement.

What was his name? He said it once, but I didn't catch it. I shall call him M., for Michal, a name I have always liked, though of course it could not have belonged to him.

'I watched her,' he said. 'I could never get used to her. I'd have watched her all day if it weren't so embarrassing. I knew I was living the days of my life and I wanted to keep them with me. That was bad luck, for I did it too well. I know her voice, her movements, the grain of her skin. I think I know what's inside her. But I don't know the facts. She didn't speak in facts. She made up things, about people sitting at another table, about me, I suppose about herself. I went along with her in this. She liked doing it. It was a kind of … what? Maybe a kind of seduction.

'Suddenly she vanished. I don't know why. I've been trying to find her. I've driven all around Europe looking for her. I'm heading for Finland now, a city called Turku. There might be something there. But really there's no trail. There are only her stories.'

He turned away and I heard him laugh into the darkness. 'Ridiculous,' he said. He took a drink of wine, and then his face entered again the pool of light.

'Did you ever read classical physics?' he said. 'It's so wonderfully clear and knowable. Everything written down in simple, indisputable numbers. There was a time when they believed that nothing could escape these numbers –

not the past, nor the present, nor even the future. As long as they had the formulas and the data, they believed they could know absolutely everything. Nothing could get away from them. They had the feeling of absolute clarity. Imagine. Nothing was uncertain.'

One by one the men of the Café Voltaire returned to their homes that night and the last waiter sat in a chair and listened forlornly to the radio. From there we went to Krzysztofory, with its students so grave and important over their chessboards, and then to Pod Baranami. At the end we made our way like men maimed in war down the stairs of a bar unknown to me where the walls were painted black and where the music sounded like rain falling into a barrel. At this point the light of the following day could not have been far away. Through all of it – the Czech baritone shaking the walls of Pod Baranami, the girls with their little shorts and long boots flitting like mayflies around the dancefloor – he drank his wine and told me about that woman of transcendental beauty who transfixed him and left him broken into tiny pieces, as tiny, it seems, as the pieces of atoms. He drank the last glass of wine, he arranged his long white fingers around the empty bottle before him, and he said,

'Her hair was fair, a pale, muted gold. She parted it in the middle and it swept in around her neck under the line of her jaw. It was a little shorter in the back. She was very careful about the way she fixed it. Her eyes were green. Everything in her face moved slowly, the drop of her eyes, the way her lips parted. Her voice was very soft. It seemed to fold around you like an embrace. She had a gift for thinking logically. She knew remedies for things. Her laughter could be out of control. She told stories. But these things aren't any use. They don't bring her here to you. I don't know how to do it. Her beauty shook me. I couldn't

get used to it. People stopped to watch her pass. Children especially. Her eyes were a little too prominently set. If she was off her guard and thinking about something they could look cold. But you also felt that there was a whole world there, that if you went down into it you might never come back. She was slender, graceful. Very elegant in all the things that she did. But her feet were long and flat. Sometimes she seemed to be walking on small skis. She didn't like the way she walked. I don't know how to do this for you. It's like trying to describe colour. It was all the things about her that made her a woman. Her silence. The softness of her voice. The slowness of her movements. She had mystery. She had it the way some people have good eyesight, or long fingers. I tried to get behind it but I couldn't separate the elements. Here. Look at these photographs. One of her on a boat, one in winter, and then this one. Just look at her face. Can you get it? She made me think of miracles, genius, wondrous things. She could make the rest of the world go away.

'With her I was alive. Everything around me seemed newly made. I miss the way she could make me feel this way and see these things. I miss the world she made for us. And I miss her beauty, like it was a separate person.

'I drive around in my car looking for her. There aren't many places left. I sit in hotel rooms with a glass of whiskey and I think about her. I try to put together the pieces of the story. I try to think of what she could be feeling. But I can't get it. Why did she go? Was it real? Did it happen at all? She seems to be around me sometimes then. I get the feeling of being near her skin, her voice seems to come out of the stones. Then I see her face.

'I go to bed with this and I wake with it. Sometimes I think I should destroy it. Sometimes I try. But I can't do it. It was a gift I got. I never had anything like it. Maybe it's something you get only one time in your life.

‘I lost myself when she went away. I can’t get hold of the idea of who I am. If I look in the mirror I seem to see the wrong face. And the sounds I make seem wrong. I look into the windows of places and I see people talking and laughing. They’re moving around. But I don’t seem to have anything to do with them. Nothing is familiar.’

The night was at its blackest when finally we came up out of the cellar we had found when everywhere else was closed. Inside, the lights had come on, the grille come down over the bar. There was that sound a little like night insects as the till printed out a record of all the money that had been taken. The girls with the slender bronzed thighs and the expectant looks were putting on their coats, their eyes narrowed now. They look so different when the night comes to an end.

We had passed through drunkenness by then. I remember him calm and clear as we stood facing each other in the street. He had emptied himself yet again of his story, as sinners do to their priests. He did it whenever he could, with whomever would listen. His eyes were bright under the lamplight. He shook my hand. He thanked me. He apologised for his long speech, an apology he said he had grown accustomed to making. I have the self-absorption of a child with an earache, he said.

Here in this room there is that same deepened darkness of the hour before dawn. I hold my finger up to the tip of my nose but I cannot see it. This is an hour well known to those of us who are old. I open the curtain and look out the window. Nothing moving. In the faint glow of the streetlamp the grass looks grey and the building opposite as though it’s been painted on the air. Somehow I am also on a street in Krakow in September. More there than here. It’s like the held frame of a film. Then it moves on.

He walked away. I watched his back, the black coat billowing a little. I saw a flag grey with age stirring on a wall. He looked up at the buildings to either side of him as though interested. Then he rounded a corner and was gone.

I stood in the street. I heard his footsteps moving towards the car that was his home. Celibate footsteps, I thought. He'd driven across Europe looking for a phantom. What will become of him? Can the physicists help him? Can I? I looked at our national flag. Forgotten there by an attendant who was to have brought it in for the night. Forgotten there probably every night. The Heart of Europe, we call ourselves. Here we have been flayed to the bone and then broken. Then broken again. Perhaps it's a privilege to have seen so intimately the very worst that man can do. It distinguishes us somehow. But in certain moments M.'s suffering is not lighter. I know some of the colours of this spectrum. When a woman leaves you when you do not wish her to it seems she spits into your soul.

And just as I turned to take home with me all that I have heard through this long night the thought of Angelina hit me like a mad wind. It staggered me. I should have expected it. But I never do.

Days pass. The nights come in just a little earlier. Someone else, it seems, is performing my actions. I get up, stretch. I pass through the verse of a song in a whisper. I leave the trace of my breath on the window when I look out. I go to the kitchen and swallow a spoonful of oil for I am told that it can help ease the pain in my bones. Look how I am. My knees have no spring in them. Little pouches of skin like the coin purses of old women hang over them where the muscles have collapsed. The skin is so pale you'd think there was no blood running under it at all. But in my head I am as I have been for nearly the past half-century – since

that day in the hotel room in Erfurt, Germany, when I became myself at age twenty-four. About this I will say more later. Now I think of M. and his lost girl. I seem not to be able to avoid thinking of this and I do not entirely know why. I try to see him in his German car, the green lights of the driving instruments moving over his face. He beats out a rhythm on the steering wheel. He shifts a little in his seat. He turns on the radio and passes through a succession of sounds which have no meaning to him. He carries clothes and documents and a little food. Sometimes he stops in a bar. Sometimes he goes into the back of his car and lies down and goes to sleep. He would like to think with purpose, to focus his mind, but the little Czech cars which sound like mowing machines, the whoosh of the trees, the small vacant towns all distract him. Inside him, nothing is at rest. This is a pain that nothing has prepared him for and that nothing can stop. His head aches. He cannot eat. Waves of uneasiness fall over him. He hopes that time will cure him, but he fears that it may not. If he thinks of her lips moving over his, the warmth of her breath, the look of her as she rises from bed in the morning, he may not be able to stop himself from weeping.

Why am I doing this? I have listened to stories of actual human wreckage all through my life and remembered little in the morning and nothing at all just days later, not the facts nor the faces as the stories were told. Why does his persist? It must surely have to do with what happened with Angelina near Miedzyzdroje among the sand dunes of Wolin Island in the summer of 1956. Two stories, his and mine, hideously twinned – the disappearance of the women inexplicable, the ending absolute, the rapture something we had never known before and never would again. So I look at him not only with pity, but a pity felt by one whose wound has been the same.

But there is something else, no? Something that connects me to him. What is it? Something in his eyes –

their nervousness, the ruin they carry, the excitement. I hesitate here. It seems so foolish, so grandiose. But who is listening anyway? I had the feeling that what I saw was myself looking back at me. We are of different times, different worlds. We would not know how to live each other's lives. That is clear. But listen. People are born into this world and if they have the fortune are then born again when finally they discover who they are. This can happen slowly, like the healing of a wound, or as fast as a slap you do not expect. But whatever way it happens and at whatever point in your life it comes to you a lens is formed and it is through it that you will look at the world for ever more. Can it be that the flame that passed through me in the hotel room in Germany when I was twenty-four years old also passed through him somewhere else, that though he is from the West and I from the East we were somehow delivered into the world and marked in the same way? Is that what I saw in him, a birth in common with mine? And the ache I felt as I listened to him, was it recognition, nostalgia? For I too became lost once.

Now the world is his enemy. He feels alone on the dark roads. Even the thought of food makes him sick. His time with that woman of elegance and stories has made him forget who he is. Maybe the cruel truth is that this self which he once discovered will stay lost to him for ever. But it is there for him, nevertheless. It endures. This much I know.

It is when I am dressing and reach into the pocket of my jacket for a pencil that I find there M.'s photographs of his beautiful girl. Idiot! I have the urge to run out and find him. I try to think of a way of getting them to him. It happened when we were leaving that final bar after he showed them to me and I lifted them from the table rather than him. I was just a step behind him as we moved through the people

but he didn’t hear me as I held them up and called to him. So I put them in my pocket. I only wanted to keep them safe until we got up the stairs and out into the open air. Then there was the ceremony of farewell. I have all three of them, all that he had with him. Double idiot! Drink on top of old age and then a person can’t think at all. Well, at least me. How many times each day did he look at them?

2

Hanna

M.'S STORY HAS taken up residence in my mind. I can feel it moving and there is a pressure inside my head. But I do not quite know what it is. It is a kind of organism hidden from me by a bank of cloud. I try to clear this cloud and coax it out. I want to see it. But it remains just a pressure, with the colour grey.

Each day I try to get out before noon and take a turn through the streets looking at all the people. Already the weather has turned and I've locked my bicycle in the janitor's shed. I walk for three kilometres through this city where I have no past and then I call in to Mrs Slowacki's shop. I buy bread, a block of white cheese and a nice ripe tomato. I smile at Mrs Slowacki as she hands me my change and tells me that at our age we need to be eating prunes.

I return home and prepare my food. If there is a bite in the air I will take a bowl of soup. I place my food on a little metal tray and sit before the television watching the breakfast news which arrives by satellite from America. So many doctors offering remedies, so many lawyers with opinions, so many women doing exercises! I lie on the sofa and M.'s story turns like a troubled sleeper in my mind. I listen to the birdsong and the shouts of children and the sighing of lorries. I call Renata. I go to the café. I go home again and get into my pyjamas. I offer a short prayer and I

go into my bed hoping that I will sleep. Always his story, insistent yet out of reach.

Sometimes I have awakened from a dream and felt a great thought form in my mind. Sometimes I have run to the table to write it down. I cannot describe how terrible was the banality which the morning light would reveal when it fell on those pages. Now the nights are cold in Poland. I do not like to leave my bed in the mornings. Still less do I like to leave it at night when I feel the call of nature. But words which I do not understand form in my mind and will not go away. Cherries. Air. Baboon. Sea. What is that? They push through the clouds, they rap like a bailiff's knuckles on my head. I look at them. Whenever they seem to reach an end they start again at the beginning. Nothing can move them. Finally I know that sleep will not come until they are taken from my mind and let out into the world, towards M.

One evening last summer when I was in Krakow visiting Renata a man in a black suit was singing like a wounded animal beside the Mariacki church. A sign at his feet said FORMER PROFESSOR OF FRENCH LITERATURE. I stopped to watch him. He sang nearly to the end of a verse, slowed and then halted. He pinched his nose, grimaced, and began again, but once more wound down and stopped. He looked all around the sky and then began for a third time. I dropped fifty groszys into his cup. He gripped me by the arm before I could pass. 'Give me two zlotys and I'll tell you a joke,' he said. I told him I did not think a joke would suit me that day. 'Well, give me one zloty and I'll tell you something you may not know.' I gave him the money. He looked a little surprised. I don't think he had anything ready. His Adam's apple went down into his throat like a bucket into a well. Then he spoke, his eyes wide. 'You must know your song well before you start singing,' he said, and

his head swooped around and away from me like a diving bird.

M. was dreaming. The sun had turned the surface of the sea bright blue and chrome. The wind was blowing. He was standing in the bow of a round-bottomed boat, eating cherries. The currents in the air carried the smell of pine trees. A baboon was trying to reason with him. He was very happy.

A roar like the foghorn of a liner crashed through his head. The earth shook. The red dust of Spain swirled around him and caught in his throat.

He woke up in a lay-by. He could not quite get the picture. Everything in his limbs was heavy, the warm webbing of sleep still holding him. He saw the back of a lorry as it receded from him into the settling dusk. He remembered that his father was now a frail figure lying in his bed in Ireland and that he was about to begin work as an interpreter in the trade delegation in Barcelona. He had been travelling for two days, and now he was just thirty kilometres from his destination.

He drove into a small town he had never heard of before. He bought a newspaper and chocolate. A man in a wheelchair sold him a ticket he said could bring him a fortune. The last of the day's light ran like water from a broken dam down the street where he was standing.

He turned from the man. Across from him was a bar. He moved back towards his car, but then stopped. The element of chance in this moment was high. He could see nothing except the particles of dust in the flooding light.

He crossed the street and went through the bead curtain of the bar into the darkness and the smell of stale beer and agriculture. He waited for a moment until his eyes adjusted to the change of light. He saw a man – he seemed a giant – standing before an electronic poker machine, blue and

green light passing over his face as though through sea water. There were more men at the bar, heavy and still. On the television was a programme about the wild scavenger dogs of Africa.

He sensed something luminous to his right, and he turned. This was when he saw her. He sees her now in his long night, his tyres singing like wasps on the wet Central European roads. She was behind the bar in a single pool of light, standing very still and looking right at him. The men and their aromas and the African dogs faded away into the void. She was dressed very demurely in a kind of alpine pinafore and a white blouse trimmed in pink and buttoned to the neck. Everything immaculately pressed. Pale golden hair. She was almost off balance, with her hand raised as though she had stopped in the midst of doing something, her mouth open a little, the light glimmering on her lower lip. Her eyes were wide and green and they seemed to be asking him for something. His mind at this moment was empty. But he felt something strange and powerful, a deep visceral explosion, warm and breathtaking, that sent its waves out to the ends of his limbs and upwards in a column into the core of his brain.

He did not recall what it was he intended to do in this place. He was still held somehow in the dream of the boat. He sat with the men at the bar. She took a step towards him and stopped. Then she continued. She did not look away from his eyes. She leaned towards him. She took his order. ‘Caña,’ she said after him. A small beer. She had a slight accent which he could not place, a voice full of music and intimacy that moved through his head like a vapour. He could feel her breathing. What was she thinking? In that moment it seemed that everything was possible.

On the morning that M. set off on his journey he sat on his father’s bed and took him up in his arms and held him. He seemed light as a cloud. Could it be that he would not see him again? He had not thought this before, but now the

idea possessed him. ‘Are you afraid of anything?’ M. asked him. He looked at his father’s eyes. They were large and round and already they seemed half in another world. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m not afraid of anything.’ He did not say this to reassure him. He said it as if M. were not there.

He sat at the bar and he watched her move – the way she leaned forward to open the bottles of beer, the way she held her hands up and shoulders back as though surprised when she punched the numbers into the till, the turn of her ankle when she stepped forward. She stopped for a moment to take an order, her hands leaning on the bar. A beam of light fell on her ring finger and he saw a slender gold band. It had not occurred to him that she could be married. He thought it tragic and unjust. He did not wish to think of the man who gave her the ring or the ceremony where it happened, but he could not stop himself. He pictured him lying across a sofa with his boots undone, her on the floor looking up at him in awe. Now there in the bar M. saw her hair fall across her left eye. Had the man across from her told her a joke? A smile broke over her white teeth, a smile full of the knowledge of folly and of pleasure. He thought, The man who is loved by this woman is blessed. But he did not wish him well.

He stayed in the bar that night for four and a half hours. He did not think of the man from the trade delegation in Barcelona who had prepared a bed for him. He placed her gold ring away outside his consciousness. He felt there was nothing greater than his need to gain knowledge of this woman whose name he did not know. She tended to the men. At times she became very still and turned to him. Or she would speak rapidly to him in a voice just louder than a whisper. She gave him the impression that she wanted nothing from this night except to be with him, but that something she could not express to him held her. She told him very little about herself – something about a boat out of the Baltic, a dart thrown at a map which pierced the name