

IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS

A NOVEL

THOMAS E. KENNEDY



NEW YORK · BERLIN · LONDON

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Published by Bloomsbury USA, New York

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Portions of this novel were originally published in altered form in the *Literary Review* 47, no. 3 (2004), *New Letters* 60, no. 3 (1994), *Gettysburg Review* 5, no. 4 (1992), *Americas Review*, no. 6 (1994), and *Mediphors*, no. 11 (1998), and received honorable mention in two of the Pushcart Prize anthologies as well as the Eric Hoffer Award.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Kennedy, Thomas E., 1944–

In the company of angels : a novel / Thomas E. Kennedy.—1st U.S. ed.
p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-60819-016-4 (hardcover)

1. Torture victims—Fiction. 2. Angels—Fiction. 3. Chileans—Denmark—Fiction. 4. Copenhagen (Denmark)—Fiction. 5. Chile—Fiction. 6. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3561.E4277I5 2010

813'.54—dc22

2009016968

First U.S. Edition 2010

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in the United States of America by Worldcolor Fairfield

I look for a green gate
in the black depth . . .

—Rafael Alberti
(translated from the Spanish
by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno)

PART I

THE WOMAN WITH EYES
OF BLUE LIGHT

“Silence and screams are the end of my song.”

—Victor Jara, September 1973

1. A car door slams

The first time Nardo saw the woman with eyes of blue light, he woke from a dream in which the angels had forsaken him. He bolted from beneath the covers and huddled in the corner of his bedroom. It was dark. He did not know he was in a new land.

Through the window he could see stars trembling in the clear black night. It might have been the sky over Valparaíso. He listened for the sound of a car door slamming shut, footsteps on the wooden staircase . . . But there was nothing. Just tires sizzling past on the roadway and two or three young men talking loudly on the lake bank, staggering home from a Saturday night serving house. No angels. No woman with eyes of light. But he had seen her. Her gaze was cut into his mind.

Slowly he became aware of the sweat that soaked into the underwear he'd slept in, that wet his scalp, his temples. And the pain, of course. In all the usual places. Teeth, joints, head. Within.

But no one was coming up the stair. For here he was now. Far away. Delivered. And that, anyhow, was something. The angels had kept their word.

He remained crouching there for a long while.

Even if you live to go out and tell this, Nardo, no one will believe you. Do you think they will? No one will. No one outside of this room will ever believe the things that happen here, and the more you try to tell of what happened, the less they will believe. To make them believe, you will have to edit, to distill, to tell only the tiniest little portion of it, and when you tell only the tiniest little portion, why, then they will be inclined to think, after all, perhaps there was a reason for this, perhaps the police sometimes need to employ certain means and measures.

This was the frog-eyed one speaking, the worst of them, perhaps, one of the worst. He spoke quietly, meditatively, pausing to puff on a cigar while Nardo hung by one foot and one hand, and Frog-eyes pushed him, like a swing, holding

an imaginary conversation in which he pretended first to be Nardo—"Let me tell you," he said to the imaginary person Nardo was supposed to be informing about this, "let me tell you what these animales did to me, listen!"—and then he would reply, playing the role of the person Nardo was to have been telling, "Oh, come now, you can't mean this, surely you exaggerate. What do you take me for? This is too bizarre, really . . ."

Then he interrupted himself. No, my swinging friend, he said, and gave another push. Nardo could hear the cartilage that held arm to shoulder creak and pop. No, it will be worse than that. They will not even say nothing. They will seem to listen to you with the face of great sympathy and say nothing, but in their little heads . . . He circled his forefinger at the side of his own skull. In their little heads they will be thinking. This man is full of the shit. He is nuts. That is what they will think of your tales, my swinging friend. No one likes the little boy who tells tales out of class. And he removed the cigar from his lips and smiled, and Nardo began to scream even before the glowing tip pressed against his nipple.

2. The place of screaming

We had come so far. Yet any further step began to seem hopeless. He sat across from me, perfectly still, body aligned with the sharp angles of the chair, so immobile that his face might have been cut from a brown paper bag: two eye slits, a rectangular mouth that said nothing. Watching him, I became aware of the chair he sat in, how rigidly he conformed to its severe lines. I thought of a chair I had seen the weekened before, browsing with my wife in a department store, one with gently curving arms, a molded seat. Light and comfortable to sit in, springy. An Arne Jacobsen chair of deep lacquered green.

Alfonso Laurencic, who designed torture cells for the Spanish Republicans—the so-called cells of color—had claimed that red was stimulating, blue relaxing, while green evoked melancholy and sadness. I did not agree. The green of that chair was full of peace, of quiet hope. It

was expensive, too. The center's finance department could never approve its purchase. I decided I would pay for it myself. Perhaps it would help him to release the sorrow in his body, to set free the poisoned emotion coiled within him.

My gaze moved around the office, alert to other possible subtle obstructions, but the colors were soft and cheerful, the green of the potted palm calming to the eye, the bookshelf lined with multicolored spines of books, the dreamy Chagall prints on the walls.

The silence continued. I watched him. He was dressing with more care now, I had noticed. No longer the dark, colorless garments, not black or gray or brown, an indistinct mix, like spillage, shades and styles that seemed to suggest a desire to be invisible, clothing that seemed to say, *I am no one. No reason to look at me. No reason to see me.* Now he was neat, elegant even. A shirt of deep clear blue, squarely knotted brown wool necktie, dark green Irish tweed jacket with hand-stitched lapels. And his arm, unfrozen now from its bent immobility, hysterical paralysis. That has been our triumph. It seemed to me he must have been fully aware of the progress we had made together, but still he sat there and stared at nothing, motionless.

What question could I pose to break the ice of his posture? *Why did you scream?* It was in the grip of that screaming, that terrible screaming those weeks ago, that he began to flail his arms, clawing at the air with both hands, reclaiming the movement of his paralyzed arm. A dramatic change. I had been trained to consider dramatic change suspect, but this was a genuine, and seeming permanent, dramatic change.

I still did not know what he had seen, what memories had induced his screaming. He told me so little, just bits of it, glimpses, some few details, the man he called Frog-eyes, who closed the door on his hand. He had had to invent names for them all because it was not permitted for detainees to know the names of their keepers. Frog-eyes. Tweedsuit. Flatnose. Mustache. Frog-eyes was the one Nardo had had most contact with, and slowly I began to feel I knew that nameless man. I felt in myself a desire *not* to know him, *not* to witness. The thought occurred to me that were I to look into Frog-eyes's face, so to speak, were I to come to *know* him, the knowledge would sear me like acid.

I thought again about something one of the other survivors once told me in response to a question I posed about what had been done to him. *You do not want to know the answer, my friend, he said to me. Just to know the answer to this will damage your soul. Maybe forever. Better change jobs. Become a fireman. Save people from burning rooms; it is safer.*

But I had to return to that place with Nardo, the place of the screaming, had to help him relive those memories. I was afraid, too, but I had to go there with him.

“How is the arm?” I asked. A circuitous approach.

Without turning his eyes from the nowhere on which they were focused, he lifted the once dead arm, extended one finger, flicked it against his cheek as if shooing a mosquito, lowered it to the wooden arm of the chair again.

I waited. He waited.

“Tell me where you are, Nardo. What are you thinking?”

His eyes contracted visibly. He saw something. I could see that he saw something far away from us but alive still, inside him.

“Tell me, Nardo.”

But he said nothing.

3. Source of the fertile God

Fresh air scented with the sap of newly clipped grass drifted in the window. Through the gentle angle of the blinds, I could see midmorning sunlight on green leaves and, across the road, the great looming beast of the State Hospital. Fronds in the potted palm beside my bookcase drifted in the breeze.

Last time, Nardo announced that he would not return. I could not know if he meant it or not, so I have reviewed my notes, preparing for his visit as usual. I have replaced the straight-backed chair with the more comfortable Arne Jacobsen model that suggested nothing of a state facility. Nardo's experiences with state facilities have, to say the least, not been conducive

to trust. The new chair is a deep, cheerful green. I defy Alfonso Laurencic and his sick research. The chair was very expensive. *For your clinic?* my wife asked. It must have been difficult for her to understand, especially when I suggested we wait until the end of the summer to buy the children's new shoes, but she was patient with me.

I had to make Nardo understand the difference between interrogation and anamnesis, and this was not an interrogation chair. Together we had to dredge through the memories, the emotions behind the memories. He seemed to remember most of what had happened, but I had to help him fill in the blanks and especially to remember what he had been feeling in order to free him of it. To begin to free him back to who he was before, a man who read, taught, who held convictions he valued more than his own safety.

An idealist? Naive? Self-destructive? Tempting his own ill fate? Perhaps he had to be helped to see himself more clearly to avoid those traits that led him into that hell—but this was a fine line to tread; on the other side of it lay the game of blaming the victim, punishing the wronged instead of the wrongdoer.

I remembered what Nardo had told me the other day in an unguarded moment about the things he was accused of teaching. *I just taught them*, he said. *They existed and they were beautiful and true, and so I taught these things to the children so that they would know they existed, too. I did not think about it. I did not think. Now I think. So they have won.*

But I thought it was not so simple. I knew that his father had died in the stadium with Victor Jara when Nardo was only a teenager. What our fathers do, the fates they choose and that choose them, drive us as surely as Oedipus toward our own fate, whether we run from it or not. That is what a man must understand.

I could not contain my smile when Nardo appeared at the door of my consultation room right on time for his appointment. I rose, beaming. To hell with professional objectivity! I was glad he had come! He nodded formally, looked at the new chair. He touched the smooth green line of its back. "A beautiful object," he said, and sat.

I could see something new. I waited. Then, "How was your week?"

“Weak.”

It took a moment for me to catch the pun. “The weak week of a strong man.”

His face registered nothing. He reached to the name plaque on my desk, held it before his eyes. “Dr. T. Kristensen. Son of Christian.”

“You are welcome to use my first name if you prefer. Thorkild. Source of Thor.”

“Source of the fertile God.”

“My parents played both sides.” I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. Anything said can break the spell of objectivity, blur the necessary border between us. Now he had an opening, might ask which side I was on, and we would be back into the pointless ideological fencing on which we had wasted so much time earlier—even as I myself had to confront the daunting question of which side I would have been on if I had been born there where Nardo came from: the dangerous side that sought democracy or the easy side that protected privilege?

But Nardo let it be. He put the plaque back onto my desk and said, “I think I will just to call you doctor.”

“Fine. Tell me about your week.”

“I met a woman.”

“Ah!”

“A Danish woman. See, the black-heads come and steal your womans.”

“Is that what you feel people think?”

“Some do.”

“What *you* think is what matters.”

“Well, anyway, I lied. I did not meet a woman. I *saw* a woman. And she smiled at me. A beautiful smile.”

“Next time you can say hello.”

“Hello,” he said. “Hell. O.”

His gaze was nowhere again, in some pit of hopelessness, perhaps, where even the faintest glimmer of hope served to remind him there was no hope, only an abyss. I watched him, waited to catch his eyes, but he was better at waiting.

I took a breath. It would be so much easier just to chat, but that was not what we had to do. “We have to go back,” I said.

He remained silent. Then, “Back to the future.”
“No. Back to the place of screaming.”

4. Because I do not know the names of things

El Domingo. Sunday. Nardo finished his work early and climbed down the wooden staircase from his little second-story apartment to stand outside his gray-stone building, on the bank of one of the street lakes. He looked at the sky above the low buildings on the other side of the murky water, looked to his right and left along the lake bank, at the green chestnut trees stirring in the breeze that drifted in from the eastern side of the city. A swan gliding past glanced at him to see if he had bread. He shook his head with a smile of apology. *Not today, my friend.* And set out to explore the streets of this new city, this new land, in search of his hunger.

He fancied he was looking for her, a woman whose name he did not even know but whose eyes had met his one afternoon in the café across the lake. Eyes like blue fire. Warm of life. He had seen her three times, and once she had smiled at him. If only he could remember what one said to a woman, he thought surely he would speak to her. He wished he could learn about her, could know her name, so that he could think about her more clearly, prepare himself in case there was to be some meaning in this.

For a few blocks, he followed the lakes that banded a crescent of Copenhagen’s perimeter, trying to see what was around him. At the first traffic light, he turned left, in toward the center, crossed to stroll across the expanse of the botanical gardens, blooming now with flowers whose names he did not know, came out on the other side at the old northern gate of the city, torn down years ago and rebuilt as a metropolitan subway station. He had seen a picture of the old gate, a sketch, in one of the books he borrowed from the library. The gate to a walled city, now open. His own apartment would have been outside the walls, open to attack, but the old city grew outward now, north and south, westward toward the water—what water?—eastward toward another island. A city of islands.

Past the station, in along a narrow pedestrian street, he turned, his hands clasped at the small of his back, looking. The walk was flanked by banks and shops, a butcher with a gilded steer head above its window, the wide face of a liquor store with its many bottles, a little shoe shop. He crossed a broad square that his books had told him was once the place where the coal was delivered, piled high here and guarded by men with pikes. He gazed into the sadness of closed shop windows, dress mannequins alone in their shadows. Obliquely he gazed into the faces of the Danes he passed on the sidewalk, at the strange long words on street signs that he had to read letter by letter to construct what he could rarely be certain was their correct pronunciation or meaning. His lips formed words of his own: *Por no saber los nombres de Cosas, no los expreso*. Because I do not know the names of things, I do not express them. The words of a Spanish explorer in the new world—the old new world that he had left behind. Worse, without the names, without words, he was not certain he could see at all. What does a tree look like whose name you do not know? A flower without a name might be invisible.

A man without a name is a stranger.

At home now, the summer night would be alive with sounds whose names were so familiar, he needn't even think them: birds crying out, the movement of leaves, tall ferns, the dark filled with sounds of insects and frogs. But he was not home. There was no home.

He walked boulevards, *allés*, narrow winding streets whose cobblestones sounded sharply beneath the leather heels of his low boots, along the curving facades of buildings that had stood since the last great fire in 1795, before his own *flaco* string bean of a country had finished driving the Indians south, then freed itself to redefine liberty as the freedom to acquire, always punishing not the wrongdoer, but the wronged.

Stopping to gauge his bearings, he found himself by the central canals, standing beneath the equestrian statue of Bishop Absalon, the founder of the city a millennium before. The bronze bishop, lofty on his horse, wielded an ax. A bishop with a weapon. But Nardo had read in his history of the city that Georg Brandes, a Danish thinker of a hundred years before, had said that with an ax you can also build. Who was the poet who said, I do not create, I destroy—I cut through ice?

Nardo looked now across the canals to the green copper dome of the parliament building, the five-hundred-year-old winding wall of the mint, beyond to the Long Bridge (which was not very long), over to the next island, Amager, stretching out flat along the waterline to the airport, not visible from here, toward the great new bridge that led north to another country—Sweden—yet farther in the other direction, south, over farmlands toward the little fishing city an hour away, which he had visited once by bus, called Dragør, a name that he could not fit into his mouth, a sound that spilled down the throat.

He wished to incorporate a sense of the city's expanse into his heart so that he might know where he was at any moment in relation to the rest of the city and to the land around it, but he could not quite succeed in doing so. The city was not big, but it coiled and twisted. He was continually surprised to learn that two points he had thought distant from each other were, in fact, back-to-back. This was a city built by start and stop over a thousand years. Behind him and to his right—was it west?—was the snaking street that led to the Town Hall, the center of the city, nothing taller than a dozen stories but most buildings lower so there was a big sky and green parks scattered everywhere like patches of raw nature, grass and trees and dirt paths, but also dotted with the civilization of sculptures he did not understand—a dying Gaul, a lion attacking a deer, satyrs drinking wine, the long pedestrian street with its department stores and fancy shops and fountains with bronze storks, a bronze virgin with water springing from her breasts, or some northern god or goddess plowing a fountain from a pond. And west of the center, past the central station, the narrow streets where women sold themselves, and boys, too, where men and women put needles in their arms and legs, seeking for a little time the peace of oblivion, and beyond that, where Pakistanis and Turks lived, selling vegetables and fruit. But behind him to his left—north? yes, north—were also other races who sold greens and halal lamb and lived alongside Danish students and young well-to-do businessmen. It was not to comprehend.

He turned back, retraced his steps, sat to take a coffee at an outdoor café on Coal Square where Søren Kierkegaard once lived, preparing words that would define the consciousness of Nardo's father's generation: to decide one's own essential nature with action.

Words. Like the ones that ended him here alone in the chill summer air of this northern capital that had been shelled nearly two centuries before by the British, his great-grandmother Norton's people, who would marry an Irishman, give birth to a mother who would mother the girl who married Nardo's father. The family of man and its betrayals.

Beautiful women crossed the square in sunshine, and he watched carefully, but none had the eyes of blue light. Couples pushing prams, vital young men with blue eyes and good teeth. A man ran past pushing a jogger baby carriage that glided along before him—ingenious! A very old couple, arm in arm, supported each other across the square. Surely, he thought, they had seen the last great war here, perhaps remembered gray green German uniforms on these streets, remembered their own flag, a white cross on red, supplanted by the jagged black Fascist wheel on that same red field. The red of my own flag, too, he thought, is for the blood of patriots. All flags are red with blood. *Sangre perdida*. History exonerates no people. We have all betrayed one another. Only the animals live in innocence, eating grass, eating flesh, but only to stay alive.

His stomach growled. He was hungry now at last and could stop thinking. To be hungry was a blessing. To be hungry and have food. Hunger was optimism. His small booted feet led him through the upside-down season of this country back to his own quarters by the lake. He should be glad. At home now, there would be the winter rain, endless and cold.

But there was no home.

Light sparkled on the lake as he ate. Watching the street and banks below his window, he cautiously registered the fact that his restless eye was not guided by dread.

Perhaps at last peace had begun to open her heart to him. He cautioned himself not to prepare a welcome place for such thoughts. Instead he chewed—shallowly, where his remaining teeth registered pain—and let the juices of the fried meat nourish his senses, his thin body, his trembling hands.

The sound of children screaming in the street stirred uneasiness. Emotion? The only emotion he felt was a half-slumbering memory of terror that sometimes woke abruptly in sweat, roused by the sound of a car door smacking shut, rapid footsteps on a staircase, interminable moments

before the pounding on the door began, and in his ears the screaming the doctor so enjoyed taking him back to.

Sería bello ir por las calles con un cuchillo verde y dando gritos hasta morir de frío. Beautiful it would be to run through the streets with a green knife screaming until I died of cold.

Let Neruda speak for me and leave me in peace, doctor. It is Sunday. It happens that I am tired of being a man. Of being a person. I am tired. That is all I feel now.

The other emotions were buried with the dead ones he once loved, who unlike him had not survived. Survivors they were called now, those who had lived through this plague. "The plague of the twentieth century" they called it at the rehabilitation center. The word *victim* was avoided now, with its reek of reverse blame, blaming the victims. To be called a survivor was to be congratulated, acknowledged as triumphant. A victim was a marked person; a survivor was an individual of resource, strong.

One question, Dr. Kristensen: How much of a survivor, in fact, survives? How much must remain of a survivor for him also to be called a man? Some of us who are still present and accounted for perhaps are *desaparecido* nonetheless, invisible pieces missing from the whole. You tell me to remember. All over again. To remember. Perhaps there is nothing left there, doctor. Perhaps it is all gone. Perhaps all that is left is the screaming. Empty screaming to fill empty ears.

He dipped his hooked, broken nose into the bell of the glass and inhaled the earth smell of the grapes, then flooded his tongue with wine, and uneasy questions disappeared.

I am free now, he thought. The others are gone, but I have found my center. Alone.

And even as that thought found him, she turned the corner below, stood on the street beneath his window, waiting for a truck to pass so she could cross to the lake bank. He felt yearning and happiness, an invasion of his solitude that he welcomed and dreaded. He felt her beauty as delicate tendrils of root that clutched the earth of his consciousness.

She grew smaller as she took the path along the narrow edge of the lake across Fredens Bro, the Peace Bridge, and he guessed she might be headed to the café on the other side where he had seen her before.

She had met his eyes so warmly, smiled, scared up a smile onto his own lips. Without meaning, of course, a passing glance, the Danish smile they were all so proud of. Part of the gross national product. Blue eyes and Danish smile. They marketed it, a commodity each of them possessed. Could it ever be trusted?

She was, of course, too young for him. No doubt. And how did one do it again? Say something, anything. Tell her “hello,” Dr. Kristensen said. Let one word lead to another until some manner of contact was made, some . . . what? Never mind. Perhaps you will speak to her one day. Perhaps you will not. But whether you do or whether you do not, you will not daydream like some stupid boy, will not allow hopes to build that can only fail.

He wondered what her name might be. If only he knew her name, he would feel better.

The light of sunset slanted through his windows, reddening his eggshell walls, the paintings he had collected in his time here, an Italian artist named Giancarlo Savino whose paintings had no names and depicted, it seemed to Nardo, souls disconnected from their bodies, angels of some sort, large dark eyes peering out from a place that is matterless to a place of matter.

These pictures were important to him; he had denied himself necessities to purchase them, slowly. He was interested in angels. He had read that angels are interested in human beings, and he knew this to be true. He dreamed recently of an angel that sat on his head like a hen on an egg. It was a passionate, sexual dream, and he emitted seed in its thrall—the first time in longer than he could remember. He had music about angels, too, and literature. He collected these things in tribute to a memory that was perhaps the only remaining substance at the core of his being. He could tell a story about angels, but he wished not to. Márquez had said that to tell a story, you must be a hypnotist. You must make the listener forget everything but the story you are telling him. Nardo had no story he wished to tell.

His Irish mother had taught him a love of reading. He carried her name now, Greene, for the distance its English syllable gave him from the past, from his father’s name. He was Bernardo Greene now. Bernardo

for Bernardo O'Higgins, the Irish-born viceroy of Chile, a leader of the Chilean revolt, first president of the republic in the early 1800s. Named for a revolutionary: Thank you, Father.

Nardo had read that there was a current fashion among the young people of Denmark, and perhaps elsewhere as well—he no longer knew what was original here in this little country, what was assimilated from without—to change their names, to consult numerologists and mystic counselors who helped them select new names for themselves, dropping those their parents had given them at birth or baptism, dropping the names of their fathers or their mothers, selecting names whose numerical composition of letters, whose sound, might deliver them to a new reality. And if those changes did not help them, they chose another. A grappling with surfaces, it seemed to him.

Nardo's father had been "pure" Chilean with a touch of Indian that Nardo carried in his own face. Nardo had dropped his name for practical reasons; best not to carry it beyond the life he had escaped. So even if his English was weak, he wore his mother's Irish name like a mask over his Indian face. His father's name was a mask, too—a mask of ideas Nardo had shed as soon as he realized how deadly serious it was taken. His father had taught him about ideas, about dying for an idea. Taught by example. A choice he once thought noble. Now his choice was escape, although he was not certain that was a good choice, either. Perhaps in evading the danger of ideas, one evaded a truer life than that of survival. Perhaps it was better to die, as so many others had. But they had not chosen their death. Death had chosen them. No. Men serving simple policies of greed had chosen them to die. Hands that signed papers chose them without ever knowing their names or faces or personal histories. Unimpeachable as the sentiment of grass, of trees. Did the trees bear witness beneath the crust of their bark, within the heart of their sap? Did they cry out beneath the blades of ax and saw, in the agony of flames that warmed the bodies of men? Did grass rejoice beneath the dance of joyous feet? Or did it snap and bleed?

These thoughts made his head ache, so he refilled his glass of Merlot and lifted it to his lips, gazing out at the lake, though he saw not the lake but his mother.

His mother's name had been Angela. A teacher and a poet; she did not live to know her only surviving son's fate, but he remembered well the poem she wrote about the child who died before he spoke, before he had a name, Nardo's younger brother. She would go out on the cliff at night, over the crashing waves of the Pacific, calling, but he died without a name, and all she could hear in response was the answer of silence and of the blue dark night, and he thought it was good that she had died before she could know all the things that were to happen. He wondered if she did know anyway, wondered if she were a spirit in the ache of the wind sometimes, even here, when the air wrapped about the walls of his building with a moaning force that lifted the waters of this little lake as though it were a sea.

His leg had stiffened after sitting too long. He limped from the window, empty glass in hand. The ache was echoed in his lower back, his kidney, which still sometimes passed blood, the elbow and wrist and hand of his no longer dead arm, the arm they suspended him from and slammed the door on, the arm that the Danish doctor, Thorkild Kristensen, had coaxed life back into. But even now it ached as he lifted the wine bottle and discovered in his mind a thought: I do not even know her name, the girl who smiled at me.

Could she know how I think of her? Could she feel my yearning, like a force trying to find her? Could her life be waiting, as mine does? He felt the danger of desire rise in him again, and the anticipation of the next glass of wine was already sour on his tongue, so he jammed the cork back into the bottle.

He tied a brown woolen necktie at the throat of his dark shirt, shrugged on his jacket, donned his gray beret. From the kitchen he gathered the ends of bread that had gone stale, packed them in a plastic bag, then let himself out, double-bolting the door behind him with two keys.

All but a sliver of red sun had disappeared behind the low blue buildings across the lake, but the vault of the sky was still yellow, as if the day would never end.

He crossed the road, walking slowly along the narrow end of the lake. He paused to dig into his plastic bag. As if on command, swans and ducks and divers came paddling from all corners of the lake toward him.

Seagulls gathered screaming and circling above his head. Pigeons strutted on the bank around his feet, eager for the spillage. He chuckled at how cheap it was to gather an audience here. For nothing more than crumbs of old bread. He broke off bits of the crusty ends and distributed them, favoring the slower, weaker, smaller birds, ignoring the aggressive seagulls in their diving, squawking frenzy. They got more than their share anyway.

Then he deposited the plastic bag in a refuse can, dusted his palms, and continued across the lake, away from the language class he should be attending, through the chill, light, northern summer night, toward the café on the other side of the lake where he had seen her before, the woman whose name he did not know.

5. A little time the leaves are green

Michela was early again. It took only fifteen minutes to walk from her apartment in the center, across from the green expanse of the King's Garden and Rosenborg Castle, past the National Art Museum, to the banks of the street lakes. But she always thought it would take longer, so she always left too early.

Now she crossed the bridge through late afternoon sunlight, wondering why she always put herself into this position. Always the first one there, waiting for him, or whomever, to show up. Why couldn't she be late just once, let Voss sit and wait for her? It was like some kind of disease with her, a psychological warp. Hurry hurry hurry, wait. Too many years of Little Miss Nice School. Used to drive her ex-husband to fits. How many times had she nagged him to be ready for a dinner or a party, only to arrive so early that they had to circle the block a few times so as not to ring their hosts' doorbell while they were still frantic, snapping at each other, in the kitchen?

Midway across the bridge, she paused to gaze down the sloping grass bank at the lake, rippling in the sunny breeze. Tatters of cloud shadow skimmed its surface, and she thought it must have been her teachers who

did this to her. That dread of being late to class, everyone looking as her eyes made a panicked search for an empty chair, the dry acid of Frøken Jespersen's or Herr Carlsen's commentary placing her at the center of all attention until she was finally seated: *How nice of you to honor us with your presence today, Michela Ibsen. I do hope we're not interfering with your other activities, Frøken Ibsen.* The boys smirking, eyeing her breasts while she searched for a place to sit. She hated her breasts.

The chestnut flowers along the bank stood like off-white candles amid the summer green leaves of the trees. A green Michela now filled her eyes with. So short a time, this green, and changing every day, deepening with summer, yellowing to autumn.

What was the poem?

A little time the leaves are green
Then yellow, falling to the earth,
And turn to dust.

It was a very old poem she remembered from her gymnasium literature class. She had written it carefully on a strip of paper she carried in her wallet for years. The paper, too, had yellowed and torn and was now who knew where. And no one knew who wrote those lines that had lodged in her heart as a teenager, a quarter century ago, twelve hundred years or more after it had been written by someone whose name no one remembered.

Children in T-shirts ran screaming on the lake bank outside the Café Noir, and a tall gray building alongside loomed up above the café roof. How she dreaded that place, its tall gray walls. And behind tall gray windows, her mother and father had their rooms now, his two floors below hers. Mother would be sitting up in her bed, or in the little armchair by the vanity table, staring out the window or into the mirror, it didn't matter which, having conversations with dead faces only she could see, including her dead husband, who was, in fact, alive, two floors beneath.

She paused outside the glass door of the café, twenty minutes early for her meeting with Voss, who would anyway be twenty minutes late.

Instead of entering the café, she strode farther down the embankment to the tall gray building and went in through the concrete gateway. A

woman behind the information window looked up from her newspaper, saw Michela, and nodded. In the little gift shop, Michela bought a bunch of tulips for her mother and rode up in the elevator with a ruddy-faced old man wearing a dusty, striped bathrobe. She smiled at him, and his thin purple lips moved against each other. He clicked his tongue. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Isn't it . . .?" but could find no name because they had never even seen each other before.

She nodded, smiled, stepped off at eight, the top floor, but he remained inside, his face still puzzled and expectant.

The door to her mother's room was open. Mustering cheer, Michela called out, "Hello, Mother!" startled again, as always, by the wild white hair, the shrunken face, lips stitched with wrinkles.

"No," her mother said, her voice vague, and looked at Michela, her eyes swimming like blue fish behind the heavy lenses of her spectacles. "Your mother looked in yesterday," she said, "but went out for a walk with Aunt Ida. I've been waiting here ever since. I just don't know what to make of that."

Aunt Ida had been Michela's mother's baby sister, a countess by her last marriage to a bankrupt nobleman. Ida had been Michela's favorite aunt, full of fun and play. Michela used to visit her, and they would dress up together in costumes when Michela was a girl. Her aunt would read to her, laughing and laughing as she did the different voices. The year before she turned forty, she took too many pills and went to sleep, and it occurred to Michela suddenly that she now had been on the earth a year longer than the dear, sweet aunt who had been dead for over thirty years. Michela's mother used to tell her how she resembled Ida, fear in her eyes as she told her.

In the small white bathroom, Michela filled a metal vase with tap water and arranged the tulips. "See, Mother! Pink tulips! Your favorites!" She placed the vase on the window ledge in a sphere of sunlight.

"Your uncle brought those," her mother said.

Michela hummed. "Nice of him." Then she asked, "Shall we go out for a visit, Mother?"

The old lady's face went still. "Yes," she whispered, and Michela heard in her tone fear that this little promise might be broken, and she felt guilt

because it had been many days since, and it was getting harder and harder for her to come here, to render these little pleasures to an old woman and an old man she knew were her mother and father only by repeating the fact to herself. In the sorrow of her mother's eyes, she found resolve: Voss would just have to wait for a change.

Then her mother's lips pursed slyly. "Where?"

"Down to six."

"To see *him*? The fraud?"

"Let me brush your hair and do your face, and you can wear your good pearls."

"And the brooch?"

"Of course. What a good idea!"

As Michela brushed and pinned the thin white hair and rouged her cheeks and lips, held each brittle finger, painting on mauve polish, nail by nail, her mother hummed the song that seemed always in her mind now, from her days as an *au pair* in Paris nearly seventy years before. "*Grand Amour*," she hummed, then paused to speak into the mirror to someone about a Bornholm vase that she said had disappeared, although she suspected it had been stolen or *accidentally* broken.

"No doubt by the dark girl who comes to clean. If you could call that cleaning. I'll bet she sold it," she whispered. "I'm not saying she is a Negro, but she is very dark."

"*Mother!*" Michela chided. Expressions of bigotry had always evoked a sharp word in her home, but her mother was already back to the subject of the vase that was not there.

"It was given me by Mother's mother after her holiday. That was long before the Russians came. They raped a girl, you know," she whispered, talking again directly to Michela. "And she had to *keep* the baby."

Abruptly her expression changed and she said matter-of-factly, "Your brother is a horse now, you know."

"I have no brother, Mother."

"Well, that's because you ate him. You always were a greedy child."

In the mirror, the reflection of the blond duty nurse passed outside the open door to the room, and Michela's mother cried out, "Oh, look! It's Michela! Why didn't she stop to say hello?"

Michela kissed her mother's neck. "She's right here, Mother."
And her mother's thin rouged lips went slack. "She is?"

The old bathrobed man was still in the elevator when Michela rolled her mother's wheelchair in.

"Good afternoon, Fru Lise!" he said with hearty warmth, his ruddy face brightening. "How nice to see you again! How lovely you look today!"

Michela's mother pursed her mouth with irony and rolled her eyes. When the old man looked away again, she tapped her temple quickly, furtively, and glanced into Michela's eyes.

"Are you still hanging around, Herr Kragh?"

"I like to watch the reflections," he explained, gesturing at the unpolished brass of the sliding doors where their three images shimmered dimly. "See how elegant you look there, Fru Lise!"

Michela's mother sniffed. "Flatterer!" she said, but a smile played on her lips. The old man's face was as tender as a child's.

On the sixth floor, Michela tapped at her father's door and peeked in. He lay there as always, half propped up against the headboard, his right hand clutching the little trapeze above his bed, strings of sinew taut in his scrawny arm. The room stank of cancer. He looked up from a slim paperback book in his left hand, held open by his thumb, and his one good eye crackled in his wasted face.

Michela rolled her mother's wheelchair briskly through the doorway, announcing, "Look who's come to visit with you, Father!"

His eye lightened. "Don't you look lovely, Lisa!" he said, his words thick in his toothless mouth. "Michela, doesn't your mother look lovely?"

Her mother sniffed. "It smells in here."

Michela's father said nothing, only glared from among the turned tables of his consciousness, clinging to the trapeze with his right arm, amid the reek of his dying. He jiggled the book in his free hand as though he might fling it.

"Who is *he*?" her mother asked, tipping back her head to look up at Michela behind the wheelchair. "Is he the fraud?"

"Oh, that's good," her father muttered in his gravelly voice. "You really have the power now, don't you? And you use it."

“Yes,” said her mother mildly, so that Michela wondered for a moment if it was all an act, a way to justify her rejection of him, a screen of confusion to hide behind. She tried to signal to him to be easy, but her mother whispered loudly, “He needs a bath. He looks like a sack of potatoes. Do we have to stay here?”

“No!” said her husband in a phlegmy bark. “Feel free to go!” The exertion left him gulping for air, his frail chest heaving, bald now, Michela saw through his pajama lapels; gone the curly red hair she had always thought so beautiful and that her mother had made faces about. The skin was now puckered, bald-white blotched with purple.

“Dad!” Michela pleaded, hoping to make him recognize that his wife’s mind was gone, for his was strong enough to see that.

But he cut her off, snapping, “Weak! Weak and simple. As always. A woman’s love is weakness.” And, “Look!” he added. “She’s even smiling. This is how it is in Denmark now, by God! Smile and smile and cast the bullets!” Holding up the book alongside his face, as though to witness, he smiled poisonously and hissed, “Pernicious woman! Frailty!”

Now his wife was looking elsewhere. Her smiling face was aimed toward the window, the yellowing sky. “My view is better than this.”

Michela punished her father with silence, let it extend until she could no longer bear it, then asked, “Do you need anything, Dad?”

“Yeah!” he snapped. “About thirty meters of intestine and a new asshole!”

She chuckled despite herself and was surprised and relieved to see in the turn of his lips that he appreciated her appreciation of his irony. She admired that he could muster even that much of a smile, even that much irony. His strength was not depleted. Yet perhaps that was not good either, she thought, observing how desperately he clung to the trapeze suspended above his bed. She moved closer and sat on the edge. Her fingers touched the taut strings of muscle in his right arm. She stroked the papery, veiny skin on the back of his hand that was clenched around the bar of the trapeze. This close, the smell was very bad. “Don’t you get tired holding on like that?” she asked softly. “Why don’t you let go? You’d sleep better. You’ve earned it.”

“What rubbish!”

“Are you afraid?”

“Afraid of *what*, for the sake of the devil and Christ in heaven!”

"I'll be here for you."

"Rubbish," he muttered, but more softly now. "Pure and simple rubbish."

But she knew him too well. She could see the cracks in the facade. The tremor of a dessicated eyelid, his thin, collapsed lip. "You've always been so strong, Dad. You don't have to anymore. You can relax now. Your arm will get all cramped if you don't let go of that. Let yourself relax."

Staring straight ahead, he slowly, laboriously, began to clear his throat, and she knew it meant he wanted to speak, to ask something, and she knew she had to wait. Her mother silently studied her own hands now, turning them over and over before her eyes in a snapping movement, as though she expected the side not visible to change character while it was out of sight, as though she might catch it in the act of transformation.

Finally, the long, slow process of throat clearing was completed. He had smoked nonfilter cigarettes, twenty or thirty a day, Cecils, for nearly seventy years, but the cancer was not in his lungs, and he still smoked, she could see from the heaped ashtray on his bedstand, the half-empty green pack of cigarettes.

"Will you give me an honest answer to a serious question?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Do you believe in . . . in ghosts?"

"*Ghosts!* Have you seen a ghost?"

"I asked for an answer, not a question! Do you believe there's another life after this one?"

"That's your question? Well, the answer is, Yes."

"Simple as that?"

"Yes."

"Jesus and all the rest of it?"

"Yes."

He lumped up his mouth and grumbled, "Heaven, too, and all the rest of it?"

"Yes. Does that answer your question? Yes."

"That wasn't the question."

"Well, what is the question, then?"

He jerked his forehead upward. "Do you think I have any chance of going . . . up there? Or will I go *down?* Below?"

“*Nay*,” she said with purposeful gruffness. “You probably deserve a quick trip down, but even Satan must draw the line somewhere as to who he’ll let in.”

The watery red eye turned to her. What a beautiful brown his eyes had been. She held her mouth in the only kind of ironic smile he would be able to believe, and the grumble in his throat she recognized as laughter. “I said it was a serious question.”

“And I said the devil won’t have you, so Christ will have to take pity.”

“You,” he growled breathlessly. “You’re just like me. Stubborn!”

“Only when I’m with you. You taught me everything I know.” And she bowed forward into the stench and touched her lips to his forehead. She glanced at the title of his book. *Hamlet*. Of course. *Hamlet* and the trapeze. “Still reading that play, Dad?”

“*Yes!*”

“It’s so short, how long could it take you to read it?”

He glared at her. “Until I know which part I played.”

“Dad, why don’t you start writing again? Why don’t you let me bring you some other books? Why waste all your time comparing your life to some play?”

“Some play,” he mocked. “It is the *only* play. This play is about my life. You’d know that if you would pick up a decent piece of literature yourself once in a while!” And she saw in his eyes that he could see in hers he had gone too far. Gruffly he tried to tip his harshness back toward affection. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. Make some use of it!”

“I think I’ll make use of my feet just now, Dad. Have a good day.”