

Kim  
Echlin

Emma  
Hooper

Reif  
Larsen

Helen  
Macdonald

# UPFRONTS

HAMISH HAMILTON V5



Hamish Hamilton

# Upfronts



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UNDER THE  
VISIBLE LIFE

Kim Echlin



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## *Mahsa*

What she is I am. My mother ran away with my father from Lashkar Gah when she was eighteen and gave birth to me in Karachi, the pearl of the Arabian Sea. She liked to make us laugh with her Pashto-Urdu-American jokes and her proverbs and idioms in English. Her name was Breshna Najibullah. She had bright grey eyes that were interested in everything, especially in me and my father. She wore her long hair loose and she had a half-moon scar on her chin from a fall as a child. It looked like a little second smile. She moved with great energy, and gracefully.

My father was an American water engineer who came to Afghanistan to work on the dam projects and he liked Super 8 home movies and playing piano. His name was John Weaver. He bought our piano from Hayden's and he used to say with a shrug, I only play party music but your mother likes it. He filled up our living room with "Blueberry Hill" and "Be-Bop-A-Lula." When I was three, I have been told, I began to copy him, picking out tunes. He showed

me how to find the chords on the bottom and after that it was easy. I made up my own songs and I liked to do this and spent a lot of time at it. I do not remember ever not being able to play.

From the beginning my parents were teetering on their own brink. I did not have them for long. They were murdered when I was thirteen.

Their favourite place to go dancing was the Beach Luxury Hotel and my father's eyes were always on my mother. He was handsome in an American way, with his shaved-smooth face and his hair short and parted to one side. There was a little stoop in his shoulders that was from tallness not humility, and he was enthusiastic to see or try anything new. He liked to wear a narrow tie, unusual in the heat of Karachi. I sometimes tied one of his ties around my own neck so that I could pretend to be him.

The timbre of his voice was gentle as if he were leaving lots of room for me to think, which he was. He spoke slowly but not stiffly and he pronounced his consonants clearly which he said was useful to people who did not know English. He said, When I try to understand other languages it helps if people speak slowly.

My mother laughed and said, John, you only know how to speak American. It won't matter how slowly a person speaks.

He said, That's nonsense, I speak English and I know how to say thank you in Urdu and Pashto and Goan, listen, *shukriya-verra-much-indeed venerable wife-ji*.

There's no such thing as Goan, she said.

Then he sang the Troggs song "Love Is All Around" and took her in his arms to dance. He stopped singing and put his face in

her hair and he kissed her neck and they stopped dancing for a moment and then he said, That's Goan.

They did not mind me seeing how much they loved each other and they liked to tell over and over the story of how they met in western Afghanistan on the Helmand River that rises from the Hindu Kush. My mother's eyes were soft and bright like winter mountain stars when she said, He asked me to dance in Pashto. He said if I was married his grave would be his wedding bed. Your father was full of hullabaloo.

I repeated, Hullabaloo, because I liked the rolling sound of it.

She looked at him to see if he was delighting in us.

She may mean baloney, said my American father to the ceiling fan because there was no one else in the room.

It did not matter if we said hullabaloo or baloney, it was love that he was full of. He said, I could no more not love your mother than stop locusts.

I CALLED MY MOTHER MOR, which is Pashto, and I called my father Abbu, which is Urdu, and when I wanted to tease them I called them Ma and Pa which I learned in an American book. Abbu laughed when he heard that and said it made me sound like a hillbilly, but Mor and I did not know what that was.

My name is Mahsa which means like the moon, and my family name was Weaver-Najibullah which Abbu said was a mouthful but Mor said, She will need both our names one day. The girls at my school had all kinds of names, Moslem and Christian and Hindu, but mine was the longest. My father mostly called me Porcupine

because when I was a baby my mother sang, Do you know what the porcupine sang to her baby? O my child of velvet.

Abbu used to tell me, You have my big hands and your mother's beautiful eyes and you will someday be as graceful as she is and touch a man's heart and I hope he will be a good man.

Like you, I thought.

He said, Where your Mor comes from, women are protected from lions and the likes of me. But I saw something in her eyes so I took a leap, and I sent her love notes and I asked, Are you promised to anyone? Are you married?

The bird sees the grain not the snare. My parents were in love and they did not wait.

In Lashkar Gah my father wrote a report that the underground water from the karezes was too salty for vineyards and orchards, that the soil was good only for pea shrubs and poppies. No one wanted to hear this. Abbu had already been accused of being a communist in America. Now he was criticizing the American projects and he was speaking to a Pashto girl and the Pashto men were outraged. John Weaver, the honest water engineer, was offending everyone.

He said, Porcupine, sometimes the truth gets you into trouble.

He hid Mor in the back of an American supplies truck as far as the border and paid a guide to help them cross into Pakistan on foot. Mor was pregnant. They slipped into Karachi, the Bride of Cities. In those days it was a green place where men washed the streets at night and people took trams from the Empress Market to Keamari. In those days backpackers from America and Europe wore jeans and played rock and roll on cassette tapes on the beaches.

Mor was eighteen and Abbu was five years older and sometimes they talked with the young travellers and listened to their music. Abbu took a Super 8 movie of Mor sitting with them, holding me in an Afghan-style baby sling. She is smiling and young and prettier than European girls. Abbu used to joke, I was always afraid your Mor would run away on the hippie trail.

In Karachi they had gone to the only person they knew, Mor's grey-eyed uncle, Barak Dilawar. He was the first man in our family to learn to read and to leave Afghanistan. In Karachi he met a Pathan wrestler who told him that he could get a job at the Beach Luxury Hotel which employed Bengali cooks and Sindhis and Punjabis, local Urdu speakers and Baloch people. The man told him, Mr. Avari is looking for all good workers. Come.

Uncle was impressed by the graceful and spacious buildings and the long dormitories on each side for the hotel workers, where troops had lived during the war. He had never imagined living in such opulence. With his reading and his wrestling strength he was hired and he rose quickly to become the night manager at the front desk of the Beach Luxury Hotel.

According to our tradition, Uncle had to offer them *nanawatai*, or sanctuary, until they got on their feet. Abbu and Mor stayed with him only until I was born and then we got our own home in a part of Karachi called Saddar Town near St. Joseph's Convent School, which I attended. I learned to read left to right and right to left, in English and Arabic, and I could decipher Nastaliq. I took in languages easily like Mor did and Abbu said, You have ambidextrous eyes that go back and forth like a carpet weaver's

shuttle. Abbu taught at the university and Mor with her polyglot tongue got office work at the Pakistan International Airlines and wore a uniform designed by Pierre Cardin.

Abbu was proud of her and said, That's jim-dandy. PIA is the first airline to fly the Super Constellation and to show in-flight movies. Then he winked in his American way and said, Maybe your Mor could get us some tickets. Would it not be good to watch movies in the sky?

But I liked going to movies with them on the ground, at the Paradise and the Nishat. After we saw *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Abbu said to Mor, See, America ain't so great, and we corrected his grammar though he did it on purpose.

Mor liked *Barsaat Ki Raat* with qawwali music about the policeman's daughter falling in love with a poet who sings, In all my life I'll never forget that rainy night, for I met a lovely girl that rainy night.

I saw *Casablanca* so many times with Abbu that we memorized the words. Abbu played the piano and pretended to be Sam, and I always said to him, Here's lookin' at ya, kid.

I began to have my own tastes too. I liked dancing the twist with my friends and I liked Chubby Checker, and I especially liked Sam Cooke singing "Twistin' the Night Away." When I practised in my room Abbu came in and smiled in a way Mor called fond and said, You're turning American.

Mor and I spoke Pashto. I remember sitting in a big chair looking at our chinar tree, listening to her tell the love stories of Layla and Majnun, of Antara and Ablā. When I was afraid of anything Mor

said, No matter what anyone says, you think, Though I am but a straw, I am as good as you. And she reminded me over and over, Never forget that your grandmother knew only Pashto, and only to speak it. Can you imagine what it is to not read?

I did not care. I did not care in four languages. Mor said the same thing every day.

THIRTEEN YEARS AFTER Mor and Abbu arrived in Karachi, I was in bed, listening to Mor weeping and pleading with Abbu. She said, We have lived here long enough. My father is dead and there is no one to stop my brothers. Let us go now to America.

Stop them from what? I wondered.

Abbu said, We never bothered them.

She said, John, the sun cannot be hidden behind two fingers.

But we are far away.

Far away from what? I wondered. I heard him move close to her. I imagined his arms around her.

She said, You do not know my brothers.

Then someone closed a door and I could not hear so I fell asleep.

We are going to go on a trip to America, said Mor to me in the morning. Will it not be good to see where your father comes from? Perhaps we will finally find out what is a hillbilly.

I did not want to leave my school and my friends and my only home but I also imagined flying in an airplane and seeing for the first time American teenagers dancing the twist. And maybe getting some saddle shoes.

Two weeks later Mor's half-brothers appeared in Karachi. One went to the university, shot Abbu, and left him on the steps to bleed to death. The other went to the PIA offices. There were two shots. One in Mor's chest. One in her head. My uncles were not arrested, only questioned and released to disappear back to Afghanistan. This is the unsayableness of my life.

We have a proverb: Me against my brothers; me and my brothers against my cousins; me and my brothers and my cousins against the world.

Family can kill family to make things right.

Why was I not killed? The murder of my parents began my unrootedness. I had no home to return to. I could not fathom how my own family could kill my beloved Abbu and Mor.

The day before he was shot, Abbu had taken me to Clifton Road to a little shop where anyone could make a record for ten rupees. I played a tune I made up and then I played "Autumn Leaves" for the other side and they pressed it into a little 45 record which had in the centre a yellow disc called a spider that popped in and out. The woman printing the label asked what was the title of my tune. I had not thought of a name so I said, That is called "Abbu's Song," and his face flushed and he put his long arm around my shoulders and said, Thank you, Porcupine. That is the best gift I ever received. In this way I learned how important my music could be. I do not know what happened to that record. It is lost to me, just as the Karachi I grew up in disappeared.

## *Katherine*

They took me away from Ma. I was three months old and she was in the Belmont reformatory because she got put away for living with my Chinese father, Henry Lau, in a garage on Barton Street in Hamilton, Ontario. The year was 1940. They said she was incorrigible. A woman could get arrested for not using the Ladies and Escorts door at a tavern, much less sleeping with a Chinese migrant worker. *Ching chong Chinaman sittin' on a fence, tryin' ta make a dollar out of fifteen cents.*

Ma said, Henry had already left for work the morning they came for me. I heard a knock and men shouting, We know you're in there, and when I opened the door I saw two policemen standing behind my father. He was drunk and his jaw was clenching the way it did before he took a swipe at me. I wondered why he'd bother coming all the way from Toronto. He left my mother and me when I was thirteen years old and he had been living with another woman.

He was acting all affronted and saying, Yellow kisses. Who do you think you are?

The police drove me back to Toronto. I sat in the backseat and there was a mesh metal screen between us. I felt like I was already in prison and now I knew I was in real trouble. They took me to a basement cell in the courthouse. A girl social worker came and interviewed me and asked me why I would run off with a Chinese and how far did I go in school and how old was I, and was I pregnant.

I was eighteen and I had only been with Henry, but I was worried about getting him in trouble for me being a minor so I pretended not to know who the father was.

Ma lit a cigarette and said, The social worker asked for the fellows' names so I had to say I never knew their names and then the social worker looked disgusted and asked, How many? Three sounded more believable than two so I said, Only three.

I was terrified in the cell and I kept thinking my mother would come and get me out to spite my father but she did not come. She was always busy running the rooming house and she was afraid of my father and I suppose she did not like me living with Henry either. When I was a kid and we saw Chinese men carrying laundry past our house on Parliament Street, she used to tease me that they would steal me and put me in one of their bags. It was illegal for them to employ a white woman, and they weren't allowed to bring their wives here. It was a miserable life and I felt sorry for them. When I left for Hamilton with Henry, Ma said, You've always had a brass neck.

In the morning they took me upstairs into a courtroom that was the fanciest place I had ever been. Behind the judge's head was a carved wooden picture of two women holding hands. The judge looked down on me from his big wooden chair and I recognized the younger police officer who arrested me and he seemed embarrassed to see me again. I mouthed Hello to him but he pretended not to notice. He told the judge I was wearing pyjamas at the time of the arrest.

Everyone wears pyjamas. Why would he have to say that?

The judge asked if I was pregnant and how far gone, and I said we were saving up for the marriage licence which was true. Then the judge said, Jenny Goodnow, your father is acting in your best interests.

Ma bounced her foot when she told this part of the story, and fiddled with the enamel flip-top lid on her little Ronson pocket lighter making the flame shoot up and down. She said, That was supposed to be my best interests? To be put away by a judge and my own father because I was pregnant? Because my boyfriend was Chinese? That is supposed to be fair? I came out of the court and the matron said, She got eighteen months. Get her ready for Black Maria.

It sounded like spiders. It sounded like something Catholic.

What's Black Maria?

The court van, she said. They should let you girls get on with things. Why you go with foreigners is a mystery to me.

Ma's best friend at Belmont was a girl called Violet. She was sixteen, and she already had a baby and she was pregnant again.

Violet used to get the other girls to give her and Ma their supper milk because she said pregnant girls needed it. After she had her baby Violet was transferred to the Hospital for the Insane in Cobourg. The judge said immorality was a symptom of insanity even though her doctor said she was not insane. They took both her children away for good and gave her shock treatments. Ma said, They might as well have killed her.

I was born in the Toronto General Hospital. They kept me away from Ma but she was screaming she wouldn't give me up. Finally a nice nurse, not a mean one, brought me to her and showed her how to put my lips to her nipple. Ma said the best part was she finally got to look at me and she could see Henry's almond-shaped black-brown eyes.

Your eyes always remind me of secrets, she said. Then she added, Good ones.

After three months at Belmont, they took me away from her again and put me in a children's home for nine months and when I turned a year old they put me with a foster mother because I was not trying to walk or talk. What's the point of talking if no one is listening? And the Children's Aid worker was still trying to get Ma to give me up. She said, Most girls who aren't married give up their babies. Yours'll be better off.

Ma said, I'm not giving her up. I'm going to marry the father and move back to Hamilton.

He doesn't seem to be very interested.

How could he be? He doesn't know yet.

So the first thing she did when she got out of Belmont was

take the bus to Hamilton and find Henry Lau who did not know where she had been for eighteen months. They got married on January 26, 1942, at the city hall in Hamilton. There is a single black-and-white photograph taken on their wedding day that she kept in a children's workbook where she practised writing Chinese characters. Henry Lau is wearing a fedora tilted low over one eye. I used to stare at it trying to get an idea of who my father was. Ma always found him handsome but I thought, Why are his eyes averted? Ma said, The photographer was in a rush.

Ma is wearing a dress nipped in at the waist, the same dress she wore the night she met him. Even after a baby she was skinny. The dress looks white in the photo but she told me it was light blue. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, and a silver sixpence in my shoe.

Your father liked that rhyme, she said. She showed me how to write some characters—加拿大 for Jia-na-da, and 爱 for love. She knew the numbers up to twenty. She used to say, Can you imagine? You need three thousand characters to read a newspaper. The wedding photo was taken somewhere near Barton Street. There are steel mills behind, probably the old Dominion Foundries. Wispy snow blows around their ankles on the sidewalk like pretty little snake-ghosts. Ma's face is not open like I imagined the face of a happy bride should be. She is turned from the camera, toward him, and her lips are not loose and smiling but tight.

Why aren't you holding hands?

Wasn't he good looking? she said. He lined the walls of our place with brown parcel paper to make it cozier. It was like living

inside a present. He was the first person I ever saw cook garlic. He used to tape newspaper on the walls around the stove to catch any splatter, and he always kept his shirt tucked in, even at home. The night before I got arrested I lit candles at dinner and he said it made him think of temples and spirits. I was going to tell him about being pregnant that night but I held back because I thought I'd buy something for a baby and leave it around and see if he guessed. I wanted to have some fun with it.

She handed the photo to me and said, Us holding hands was not acceptable in those days. A lot of things were not acceptable then. I used to walk so my shoulder touched his through our coats.

Ma got a job in the coffee shop at the Royal Connaught Hotel on the corner of King and John in Hamilton and rented our basement apartment in a little clapboard house in a respectable neighbourhood on Mountain Brow from old Mrs. Rose and her grown-up daughter Lily whose young husband was killed in the war. Their shoes click-clicked above us every night and Ma used to make fun of them but we always had Sunday lunch together upstairs in their dining room. Lily called us the four dames and she taught me to play hearts. Ma was afraid Mrs. Rose would not rent to Henry, so she said he wasn't around right now. After the war people did not ask too many questions. Better to marry and divorce. She had to beg a credit union to give her a bank account where she could cash her paycheques. Most banks wanted a husband or a father to sign a girl's account.

Ma said, I was frantic when I first got out. I had no money and I needed to find work and a place to live and a way to take care of a

baby. They did everything they could to make me give you up but I fought tooth and nail for you.

She was long limbed and she painted her fingernails and toenails and lips all the same shade of red. She was so thin her own mother used to say, You look like a washboard. She smoked more than she ate and her cigarette butts were always smeared with red lipstick. I'm built lanky too. In anything scoop-necked you can see the bones on my chest and around my shoulders. I gave up trying to look sexy because you need flesh for that. My skin's not as white as hers. Ma always said burnished and she meant it kindly. On her day off she put cotton balls between her toes and she twisted her hair into big spiky rollers. She smelled of stale smoke and Nivea cream. She tied a scarf printed with little Scottie dogs over her hair when she was setting it, and she balanced her burning cigarette on an ashtray shaped like a music note and she waved her fingers in the air to dry her polish quicker while her toes set. I got my height from her. Her hair was chestnut and she said it thinned out when she got pregnant but I think it probably thinned out when she was in the reformatory because they kept the girls hungry. The visiting doctors did experimental treatments on them for venereal disease and if any girl complained about waiting in line half-naked, or squirmed during the internal cauterizing, the matrons made her sit in a closet. Ma got locked in a closet for a full day because they forgot she was in there. I think that would thin out your hair. My hair is poker straight and black. When I was sixteen I permed it out big and wild and I've always kept it that way. Some people think it makes me look half black or something. I have large hands and large feet that go with my

tallness and Ma said those hands must come from her mother's side of the family who, way back, were big-boned Irish potato farmers.

Before I was two, my father left a folded piece of paper with neat printing for Ma at the hotel:

Dear Jenny,

Life here too hard, I must go back. I never forget you.

Your husband, Henry

The people who condemned Ma lived scot-free—her father, the social worker, the police officer, the judge. But Ma got herself a respectable job in a good hotel, her own apartment and a bank account. We had one of the first televisions on the street. She always talked about being independent, as if it were some kind of specialized state not available to most women. Our neighbour Nan took care of me when I was a baby and Ma worked double shifts on weekends to pay her. Nan used to say, *What's one more?* I don't have any other way to get my own money, and she helped us a lot. I think she secretly envied Ma working. Her job was taking care of me and three sons, Mac, Eddie and Little Johnny, and her husband who was Big Johnny and worked shifts in the mills rolling steel. They had tin foil on the bedroom window so Johnny could sleep in the daytime and us kids had to keep quiet. Nan was the family Ma and I did not have. Little Johnny was a few years older than I was but I always seemed to be organizing him and Ma laughed and said, *Just like a girl, trying to run things.*

Nan said, *You're lucky you got a girl.*

One time they were drinking instant coffee at Nan's Arborite table when I heard Ma say, Getting married didn't work for me. The deck's stacked against a married woman.

It's not that bad, Jenny.

I was hanging back by the counter and they hadn't shooed me away so I asked, Hey, Nan, how'd you meet Big Johnny?

They both looked around because they hadn't noticed me I guess. Nan laughed and said, I grew up beside Johnny.

Nan, will you do my Tarot?

Not for you yet, she said. You're too young. I'll do your ma's if she wants.

I liked watching it and I hoped the High Priestess would come up because I liked the blue gown and the crescent moon at her feet.

As she was laying out the cards I said, I hope you get the Priestess.

Nan said in her low, mysterious voice that she always used for Tarot, You can't control fate.

Ma said, Get money for me. I want to start my health food store.

I wanted admission to their grown-up women life. I played with the boys but they did not talk much. I hung around and listened because I never knew things about Ma like she wanted money and a health food store. I thought she liked our life. Why didn't she tell me what she wanted?

Ma's solution about a lot of things was to lock up her heart and keep her real self hidden. How many women have done that to protect their children? To make their own lives possible?

Nan started turning over the cards and I said, Find out when my father's coming back.

I saw the look between them and I felt the moment ruined and I did not know why because we had been having fun. Ma said in her firm voice, He's working in China, Katie. Don't you worry, he'll be back.

After that Nan rushed and turned a few cards and saw lots of money in Ma's future and then she said, Do me a favour, Katie, and go see what Little Johnny's doing.

There is a tone in women's voices that stops their children pursuing. I was secure with Ma and Nan and I accepted their silences and diversions as the way things had to be. I liked living on Mountain Brow and I was good at school and I liked going to the big library with the wide stone steps downtown and meeting Ma at the Connaught and taking the bus home with her. When she tucked me in at night she said, *Sometimes in the winter and sometimes in the fall, I sleep between the sheets with nothing on at all.* I liked our cozy apartment and our Sunday lunches and card games with the dames upstairs and playing on the street with the boys all through the long springs and summers and autumns of my growing-up years, free to do what I wanted, free to stay outside until the street lights came on.

ETTA AND OTTO  
AND RUSSELL  
AND JAMES

Emma Hooper



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ONE

*Otto,*

The letter began, in blue ink,

*I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back.*

*Yours (always),*

*Etta.*

Underneath the letter she had left a pile of recipe cards. All the things she had always made. Also in blue ink. So he would know what and how to eat while she was away. Otto sat down at the table and arranged them so no two were overlapping. Columns and rows. He thought about putting on his coat and shoes and going out to try and find her, maybe asking neighbors if they had seen which way she went, but he didn't. He just sat at the table with the

letter and the cards. His hands trembled. He laid one on top of the other to calm them.

After a while Otto stood and went to get their globe. It had a light in the middle, on the inside, that shone through the latitude and longitude lines. He turned it on and turned off the regular kitchen lights. He put it on the far side of the table, away from the letter and cards, and traced a path with his finger. Halifax. If she went east, Etta would have three thousand, two hundred and thirty-two kilometers to cross. If west, to Vancouver, twelve hundred and one kilometers. But she would go east, Otto knew. He could feel the tightness in the skin across his chest pulling that way. He noticed his rifle was missing from the front closet. It would still be an hour or so until the sun rose.

GROWING UP, OTTO had fourteen brothers and sisters. Fifteen altogether, including him. This was when the flu came and wouldn't go, and the soil was even dryer than usual, and the banks had all turned inside out, and all the farmers' wives were losing more children than they were keeping. So families were trying and trying, for every five pregnancies, three babies, and for every three babies, one child. Most of the farmers' wives were pregnant most of the time. The silhouette of a beautiful woman, then, was a silhouette rounded with potential. Otto's mother was no different. Beautiful. Always round.

Still, the other farmers and their wives were wary of her. She was cursed, or blessed; *supernatural*, they said to one another across postboxes. Because Otto's mother, Grace, lost none of her children.

Not One. Every robust pregnancy running smoothly into a ruddy infant and every infant to a barrel-eared child, lined up between siblings in gray and off-gray nightclothes, some holding babies, some holding hands, leaning into the door to their parents' room, listening fixedly to the moaning from within.

ETTA, ON THE OTHER HAND, had only one sister. Alma with the pitchblack hair. They lived in town.

Let's play nuns, said Etta, once, after school but before dinner.

Why nuns? said Alma. She was braiding Etta's hair. Etta's just-normal like a cowpat hair.

Etta thought about the nuns they saw, sometimes, on the edges of town, moving ghostly-holy between the shops and church. Sometimes by the hospital. Always clean in black and white. She looked down at her own red shoes. Blue buckles. Undone. Because they're beautiful, she said.

No, Etta, said Alma, nuns don't get to be beautiful. Or have adventures. Everybody forgets nuns.

I don't, said Etta.

Anyway, said Alma, I might get married. And you might too.

No, said Etta.

Maybe, said Alma. She leaned down and did up her sister's shoe. And, she said, what about adventures?

You have those before you become a nun.

And then you have to stop? asked Alma.

And then you get to stop.

## TWO

The first field Etta walked across the morning she left was theirs. Hers and Otto's. If there was ever dew here, there would still have been dew on the wheat stalks. But only dust brushed off onto her legs. Warm, dry, dust. It took no time at all to cross their fields, her feet not even at home in the boots yet. Two kilometers down, already. Russell Palmer's field was next.

Etta didn't want Otto to see her leaving, which is why she left so early, so quietly. But she didn't mind about Russell. She knew he couldn't keep up with her even if he wanted to.

His land was five hundred acres bigger than theirs, and his house was taller, even though he lived alone, and even though he was almost never in it. This morning he was standing halfway between his house and the end of his land, in the middle of the early grain. Standing, looking. It took fifteen minutes of walking before Etta reached him.

A good morning for looking, Russell?

Just normal. Nothing yet.

Nothing?

Nothing worth noting.

Russell was looking for deer. He was too old, now, to work his own land, the hired crew did that, so instead he looked for deer, from right before sunrise until an hour or so after and then again from an hour or so before sunset until right after. Sometimes he saw one. Mostly he didn't.

Well, nothing except you, I suppose. Maybe you scared them away.

Maybe. I'm sorry.

Russell had been looking all around while he spoke, at Etta, around her, above her, at her again. But now he stopped. He just looked at her.

Are you sorry?

About the deer, Russell, only about the deer.

You're sure?

I'm sure.

Oh, okay.

I'm going to walk on now, Russell, good luck with the deer.

Okay, have a good walk. Hello and love to Otto. And to any deer if you see them.

Of course, have a good day, Russell.

You too, Etta. He took her hand, veined, old, lifted it and kissed it. Holding it to his lips for one, two seconds. I'll be here if you need me, he said.

I know, said Etta.

Okay. Goodbye then.

He didn't ask, where are you going, or why are you going. He turned back around to face where the deer might be. She walked on, east. In her bag, pockets, and hands were:

Four pairs of underwear.

One warm sweater.

Some money.

Some paper, mostly blank, but one page with addresses on it  
and one page with names.

One pencil and one pen.

Four pairs of socks.

Stamps.

Cookies.

A small loaf of bread.

Six apples.

Ten carrots.

Some chocolate.

Some water.

A map, in a plastic bag.

Otto's rifle, with bullets.

One small fish skull.

SIX-YEAR-OLD OTTO was checking the chicken wire for fox-sized holes. A fox could fit through anything bigger than his balled fist, even underground, even up quite high. He would find an opening and press his hand gently against it, pretending to be a fox. The

chickens would run away. Unless Wiley, whose job it was to throw grain at the birds, was with him. But this time Wiley wasn't there, and, so, the chickens were afraid of Otto's fist. I am a fox. Otto wrapped his thumb around the front of his balled fingers and moved it like a mouth. I am a fox, let me in, pressing gently, but as hard as a fox, as a fox's mouth. I am hungry, I will eat you. Otto was hungry. He almost always was. Sometimes he ate little bits of the chicken grain. Good to chew on. If Wiley wasn't there.

He had checked three and a half sides of the wiring when three-and-a-half-year-old Winnie walked up in overalls with no shirt. Otto had put a shirt on her that morning, but it was hot, so she had taken it off. Dinner, she said. Close enough that he could hear, but not too close; chickens scared her. Otto, she said. Dinnertime. Then she left to find Gus and tell him the same. This was her job.

As well as a name, each child in Otto's family had a number, so they were easier to keep track of. Marie-1, Clara-2, Amos-3, Harriet-4, Walter-5, Wiley-6, Otto-7, and so on. Marie-1 was the eldest. The numeration was her idea.

1?

Yes.

2?

Yes.

3?

Hello.

4?

Yes, hello.

5?

Yes, yes, hello, hello.

6?

Present.

7?

Yes, please.

8?

Present.

9?

Hello!

Everyone was always present. Nobody ever missed dinner, or supper.

So, said Otto's mother, everyone is here. Everyone is clean?

Otto nodded vehemently. He was clean. He was starving. Everyone else nodded too. Winnie's hands were filthy and everyone knew it, but everyone nodded, including Winnie.

Okay then, said their mother, ladle propped against her round belly, soup!

Everyone rushed to the table, each to their own chair. Except today there was no chair for Otto. Or, rather, there was, but there was someone else in it. A boy. Not a brother. Otto looked at him, then reached across, in front, and took the spoon from him.

That's mine, he said.

Okay, said the boy.

Otto grabbed the knife. That's mine too, he said. And this, he said, grabbing the still-empty bowl.

Okay, said the boy.

The boy said nothing else and Otto didn't know what else to say, or do. He stood behind his chair, trying not to drop all his things, trying not to cry. He knew the rules. You didn't bother parents with child-problems unless there was blood or it involved an animal. Otto's mother was coming around, child by child, with the pot and ladle, so Otto, standing with his things, crying quietly, would have to wait for her to get to them. The other boy just looked straight ahead.

Otto's mother was spooning exactly one ladle of soup into each child's bowl. One for each, exactly, until, a pause, and,

I don't think you're Otto.

No, neither do I.

I'm Otto, right here.

Then who is this?

I don't know.

I'm from next door. I'm starving. I'm Russell.

But the Palmers don't have any children.

They have a nephew. One nephew. Me.

Otto's mother paused. Clara-2, she said, get another bowl from the cupboard, please.

UNTIL RECENTLY, RUSSELL'S parents had lived in the city, in Saskatoon, and, until recently, Russell had lived there too, with them. But five weeks ago the banks announced that everything was absolutely broken, right there in the paper, for anyone who hadn't noticed yet for themselves, and three weeks ago, Russell's father, who owned a shop right in the middle of downtown, an everything

shop with wrenches and lemon candy and bolts of printed cotton in rows, had turned a bit white, then a bit dizzy, then had to sit down, then had to lie down, and then, after sweating and sweating and Russell getting so much cold water from the kitchen, carried in the biggest bronze pitcher, hefting it up the stairs, hugging it to himself, so cold with the water inside, and bringing it to the bedroom where his father was lying, at first alone, and then, soon, with the doctor standing by, and then, not too long after, with the doctor and the priest standing by, while Russell's mother cooked for everyone and dealt with *all this goddamn paperwork* until, two weeks ago, while Russell was carrying a twelfth bronze pitcher from the kitchen, so cold against his stomach and chest, almost burning cold, Russell's father gave up and died. His mother sighed and put on her black dress, the one with the stiff lace collar, before closing up the shop for good, and going to work as a typist in Regina.

Russell rode part of the way with her on the train. He'd never been on a train before. The skinny-skinny cows zipped past so quickly. Russell wanted to lean out the window and open his eyes as wide as he could so that all the air hit them and dried them out, forever. But the windows didn't open. So, instead, Russell traced his finger up and down his mother's collar, following the twisting path of the lace, and let his eyes be wet. Almost exactly halfway between Saskatoon and Regina, the train stopped and Russell got off and his mother did not. You'll like the farm, she said. Farms are better.

Okay, said Russell.

They're better, she said.

Okay, said Russell.

And I'll see you soon, you know, she said.

Yes, said Russell. Okay.

Russell's aunt and uncle were waiting on the platform. They had made a small sign from the side of a milk crate. *WELLCOME HOME RUSSELL!* it said. Despite trying, they had had no children of their own.

THAT SAME YEAR, the year Etta was six, it did not rain, not once. This was odd, this was bad, but what was worse was that it did not snow either. In January she could walk out of town through the tall grass and everything would look like summer, no frost, no powder, but, if you touched them, or a bird tried to land on them, the grass-stalks would crumble, frozen and brittle. Alma had taken Etta out for a walk, to where the creek was, when there was a creek. They were looking at fish skeletons, all of them strung out along the dry bed, the whitest things. If a beetle or worm had bored through any of the bones they would take them home and use them to make necklaces. The skulls, of course, already had holes in them, but Etta's sister didn't like to use these for jewelry.

They can come back alive when they touch your skin, she said. And start talking. Leave those.

Okay, said Etta. But when Alma wasn't looking she stuffed smaller skulls into her mittens, on the top sides of her hands so she could still bend her fingers.

Are your ears cold? said Alma.

A bit, said Etta. Even though they weren't cold at all. She was holding her mitten-hands to her ears to see if she could hear them,

the fish skulls. To see if being against the skin of her fingers was enough to wake them up, to make them talk. The wind was loud that day, but if Etta pressed her skin against the bone against the wool hard enough, there was something. There were whispers.

What language do fish speak?

Alma was brushing dust from a beautiful rib, almost transparent; she did not look up. Probably French, she said. Like Grandma.

Etta pressed her mittens to her ears and whispered, Should I be a nun?

The wind blew and the insides of her mittens said, *Non, non, non.*

### THREE

**E**tta sang as she walked. She never forgot the words.

*We sit and gaze across the plains  
and wonder why it never rains  
and Gabriel blows his trumpet sound  
he says, "The rain she's gone around."*

She walked away from the roads, through the early fields. She knew the farmers wouldn't like it, but on the road every truck would want to stop and say hello and where are you off to and what are you up to, so she walked through the fields, trying not to crush any growth too badly. It was broad and mostly empty here, save occasional cattle, so she sang as loud as she liked.

She stopped for food in the rest-stop café in Holdfast. They had changed the tables and chairs since she was last there, with

Alma. Less color, cleaner. Nobody noticed her come into town, and nobody noticed her leave, except for the waitress and the boy at the till.

After eating three cabbage rolls, two pieces of white bread with butter, and one slice of rhubarb pie and paying for them, Etta left with ten sachets of ketchup and eight of green relish tucked into her coat pocket. Relish was vegetable and sugar and ketchup was fruit and sugar and either could see you through if you needed them to.

It was just starting to get dark when, little by little, the crops began to thin and the ground began to turn sandy and then to sand completely. And then, just as the sun sat down below the stretching orange of the horizon, Etta stopped walking; having made her way right up to a lake, right up to the water, just far enough away from the push of the waves to stay dry. She knew, of course, that she would encounter obstacles of smaller water before she was through to Halifax. She'd heard Ontario was full of them. But she didn't expect anything quite so soon. She sat down on the sand, a few meters from the wet edge. It felt good to sit. She wondered about swimming. How much energy it took; how far a person could go without needing to stop. She leaned back onto the beach and listened to the waves, a new kind of sound. Etta closed her eyes.

Oh my god I bet it's somebody dead.

No!

Maybe.

Well, are you going to check?

Come with me.

Of course.

I love you.

I love you. And, look, not dead. Breathing.

I hear sometimes they do that, after death.

What, bodies? Breathe?

Yeah.

No.

Maybe.

No.

Etta woke at their footsteps, shuddering through the sand toward her, but she kept her eyes closed to listen as the couple approached. She breathed shallow. In sleep, her legs had burrowed down in the sand, and much of her torso too. The weight against her was comforting. She could feel it cracking and then coming back together as she breathed in and out. If I open my eyes they will ask me who I am, she thought. But if I don't open my eyes, they'll think I'm dead. Probably call the police. She pulled at her thoughts, tried to stretch open her mind, still with her eyes closed. Sand. The feeling of sand. Tiredness in her hips. Night. Voices. Light wind. A sister with black hair. A house in the city. Writing paper. Paper.

The couple were still talking, distracted. Keeping her eyes closed, Etta reached through to her coat pocket to get to the paper, fumbling through restaurant packets, triggering sand cascades. Not subtle, not unnoticeable. And there it was. Folded. She took it out.

Unfolded it. They must have realized, now, that I'm not dead. They must be waiting. Or afraid. She opened her eyes. As it was dark, she had to hold the paper quite close to her face.

*You:*

it said.

*Etta Gloria Kinnick of Deerdale farm. 83 years old in August.*

Etta Gloria Kinnick, she whispered, to herself. Okay. Right, okay.

I'm not dead, she said, to the two young people standing beside her, staring. I'm Etta Gloria Kinnick. A person can't keep breathing after death.

Oh god! I mean, good! I mean hello, said the boy.

See? Told you, said the girl.

Are you okay? said the boy.

Yes, yes, I'm fine.

Oh, okay, good.

...

...

Do you need help getting home?

I'm not going home. So, no. No, thank you.

Are you homeless?

George!

Well, she just doesn't look homeless, is all.

I'm not homeless. I'm just not going home.

Where are you going?

East.

But that means across Last Mountain Lake.

Or around it.

But it's really long, right?

I don't know. Maybe.

It is. We have a map in our cabin. It is.

...

...

Hey, can we help you up?

Molly and George, the kids who found Etta, had come from a party; they had excused themselves quietly, separately, seven minutes apart, and then had met, a hundred meters further down the beach, behind the Lamberts' fishing shed. They were on their way back to the party, half an hour or so later, when they found Etta. And now that they had found her, and established she was not dead, and helped her to stand up and brush the sand off her legs and back, they were heading back there, to the party, both smelling of dry yellow perch nets, with indentations of gill lines across their backs and stomachs.

Hey, you know what? said Molly.

What? said George.

What? said Etta.

You should come with us. Back to the party. Come with us.

Yeah? said George.

Yeah? said Etta.

Yeah! said Molly, already taking Etta's hands, already moving forward down the beach toward the noise and the light.

\*

*Dear Otto,*

*I am on a boat. Just a small one, a cheap inflatable one, which is good, because I'm not sure how or if I'll be able to get it back to its owners, the younger twin sisters of a boy I met last night around a fire on the west beach of Last Mountain Lake. We were at a party. One girl said I was like her grandmother, now dead. I told her I'm nobody's grandmother and I'm not dead, and she said that made it perfect.*

*I am using a paddle we found on the beach. We don't know whose it is. I guess the twins never wanted to go far enough to need a paddle.*

*When I'm across I'll put the paddle in the dinghy and push them back onto the lake, with a note that says: Boat: property of the McFarlan twins. Paddle: owner unknown. I have already written it, on a napkin. I have other, real paper, (like this) but I don't want to use it up too fast.*

*As well as the boat and paddle, the kids also gave me two beers and half a forty of rye. Good in case I get cold, they said. They really were nice kids. Some of them were in love.*

*Remember to wear a hat and eat the spinach when it comes up.*

*Your,*

*Etta.*

Otto got the letter five days after Etta had dated it. He was cleaning the oven, following handwritten instructions on a yellowed recipe card—

NEEDED:

Baking soda and water.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Apply, wait, remove.

—when the letter arrived with the morning mail. Etta had been gone for one week. The first day he had tried going out into his fields, as usual, but couldn't stop looking back, toward the house. Like Russell, with his deer.

The rest of the week Otto worked in the close garden plot or in the house. His stomach hurt whenever he got further away than that. He turned the garden soil and raked it out, then did the same the next day. Lining up the indents of the rake exactly, row to row. He would not plant anything, spinach or carrots or radishes, in the rows until Etta had reached Manitoba.



I AM  
RADAR

Reif Larsen



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ONE

*Elizabeth, New Jersey*

*April 17, 1975*

It was just after midnight in birthing room 4C and Dr. Sherman, the mustached obstetrician presiding over the delivery, was sweating lightly into his cotton underwear, holding out his hands like a beggar, ready to receive the imminent cranium.

Without warning, the room was plunged into total darkness.

Though he had been delivering babies for more than thirty years now, Dr. Sherman was so taken aback by this complete loss of vision that he briefly considered, and then rejected, the possibility of his own death. Desperate to get his bearings, he wheeled around, trying to locate the sans serif glow of the emergency exit sign on the stairwell across the hall, but this too had gone dark.

“Doctor?” the nurse called next to him.

“The exit!” he hissed into the darkness.

All through the hospital, a wash of panic spread over staff and patients alike as life support machines failed and surgeons were left holding beating hearts in pitch-black operating theaters. None

of the backup systems—the two generators in the basement, the giant, deep-cycle batteries outside the ICU, usually so reliable in blackouts such as this one—appeared to be working. It was a catastrophe in the making. Electricity had quite simply vanished.

In birthing room 4C, Dr. Sherman was jolted into action by Charlene, the expectant mother, who gave a single, visceral cry that let everyone know, in no uncertain terms, that the baby was still coming. Maybe the baby had already come, under shroud of darkness. Dr. Sherman instinctively reached down and, sure enough, felt the conical crown of the baby's skull emerging from his mother's vagina. He guided this invisible head with the tips of his ten fingers, pulling, gathering, turning so that the head and neck were once again square with the baby's shoulders, which still lingered in Charlene's birth canal. He did this pulling, gathering, turning without seeing, with only the memory infused in the synapses of his cortex, and his blindness was a fragile kind of sleep.

As he shepherded the child from its wet, coiled womb into a new kind of darkness, Dr. Sherman heard a distinct clicking sound. At first he thought the sound was coming from the birth canal, but then he located the clicking as coming from just behind him, over his right shoulder. Suddenly his vision was bathed in a syrupy yellow light. The father of the newborn, Kermin Radmanovic, who had earlier brought a transceiver radio and a telegraph key into the birthing room in order to announce his child's arrival to the world, was waving a pocket flashlight wrapped in tinfoil at the space between his wife's legs.

“He is okay?” asked Kermin. “He comes now?” His accent was vaguely Slavic, the fins of his words dipping their uvular tips into a smooth lake of water.

Everyone looked to where the beam of light had peeled back the darkness. There glistened the torpedo-like head of the child, covered in a white, waxy substance. The sight encouraged Dr. Sherman back into action. He first slipped his finger beneath the child’s chin, but when he felt no sign of the umbilical cord wrapped around the neck, he yelled, “*Push!*”

Charlene did her best to comply with the order, her toes curling as she attempted to expel the entire contents of her abdomen, and when the breaking point was most certainly reached, surpassed, and then reached again, there was a soft popping sound and the rest of the baby emerged, the starfish body tumbling out into the dim mustard glow of this world.

Kermin leaned in to catch a first glimpse of his new child. Ever since his wife had come hobbling into his tiny electronics closet, staring at her dripping hand as if it were not her own, time had begun to unravel. The labor had come three weeks early. His fingers—so steady as he mended the cathode ruptures and fizzled diodes of his broken radios and televisions—suddenly became clumsy and numb at their tips, as if they were filled with a thick, viscous sap. In the hospital parking lot, he had taken the old Buick up and over the curb onto a low, half-moon shrubbery, which had not weathered this trespass well at all. As he ushered a blanketed Charlene through the rotating doors, Kermin had looked back at the battered shrubs, lit by the ugly glow of the parking lot’s blinking fluorescents, and

wondered in that moment if they were prematurely introducing the future into the present.

In the final days of World War II, his younger sister Tura had also been born three weeks early. He and his parents had been fleeing the advancing Communist Partisans for the uncertain refuge of Slovenia and the West when she arrived suddenly, like a sneeze, in the mildewed basement of a Bosnian hotel on the River Sana. He remembered her tiny and pink in their mother's arms, sheltered by a horsehair blanket while they rode in the back of a sputtering diesel truck past homes that burned and hissed against a light rain.

*That is my sister in there,* he thought, watching the blanket bounce to the staccato beat of the road's potholes. *She was born in the war, but she will not know the war. I will tell her how it was so that we will always have the same memories.*

Tura would not have the same memories as he, nor any memories at all. On the second day, she opened her eyes to the light of this world, but she would not nurse, and so her body grew soft and light like a bird's. One week later she was dead, from an illness that was never named. They buried her in an abandoned vineyard on the outskirts of Zagreb. After the impromptu ceremony, they were walking back to the truck when they discovered an unexploded German bomb lying only twenty meters from her grave.

"Her headstone," his father, Dobroslav, had said, and it was not meant to be a joke, but they all began to laugh, and this felt good until their mother started to weep again. Two days later, she too would be dead, at a checkpoint near Ljubljana. Kermin was too young at the time to understand the particulars, but he knew

it was because of something vaguely erotic—something wanted by the trigger-happy Russian private with the moth-eaten beard and something refused by his grieving mother, who was malnourished and weak but who was still and always would be a strong-willed Radmanović woman. His father had just turned from successfully negotiating their passage with the squat colonel, but it was too late; the young Russian guard had already shot her twice through the chest. It was as if the man had meant to push her backwards with the palm of his hand but had simply used the wrong tool. He began to walk quickly away from the scene so his comrades would not see the terror in his eyes. Instead of falling to the ground like a heavy doll, as Kermin had seen the prisoners do at the Chetnik executions, his mother shrank into herself, a reverse blossoming, coming to rest in a sitting position, like a ruminative Buddha. She was already stiff by the time Dobroslav reached her. He sat down beside her and held her hands as though they were quietly praying together. Later, the colonel apologized to his father and promised that the young guard would be executed before the day was through.

Years later, even after he had fled Europe, Kermin's limited sexual encounters—in a Meadowlands parking lot; in a Saigon bordello; behind the vestry of St. Sava's; in the synthetic floral bloom of his dentist's bathroom—these moments of carnal urgency were still inflected with the lingering sense of crossing a hostile border. Until he had met Charlene, his relationships had not gone well.

In the darkness of birthing room 4C, Kermin tried to hold his pocket light steady on his wife and brand-new baby. *All will be fine*, he whispered to himself, there is no reason to worry. His own birth had

been famously quick and painless. His mother had claimed he leaped out into the world the first chance he got, as if he could not breathe inside her. “I was killing you!” she used to say. Maybe his child would be no different. *Kakav otac takav sin*. Like father, like son.

But even then he could tell something was not right. Under the pocket light’s dull beam, the child appeared almost prehistoric. The newborn’s skin was covered in a white, gooey plaster, as if he were not a baby but a statue mold of a baby—a golem, complete with a tiny plaster penis. Kermin stared. He wanted to press his hand into this creature’s clay skin, to test its warmth, but already here were the first signs of life: the statue-child was squirming, clawing for oxygen, expelling the first sticky mew of a cry, his tiny mouth working the air for the solidity of a nipple.

“Why is he like this?” Kermin whispered, his pocket light inadvertently dipping before he righted its beam again. “Why does he look like this?”

Charlene, completely exhausted but wild with muddled adrenaline, tasted the concern in her husband’s voice. She tried to sit up.

“What is it? What’s wrong? He’s a boy? Is he okay?” The words swung and gimballled.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. He’s fine,” Dr. Sherman reassured her, gathering the baby and all of his limbs into a pastel blanket. Instinctively, he took the bright white plastic clamp from the tray and snapped it closed at the base of the umbilical cord. “Preterms are often covered in a substance called vernix caseosa. This protects their skin. It will come right off.” In truth, he had never quite

seen such a thick vernix coating, but then there had been nothing normal about this night, so he tried not to let his concern reveal itself in the contours of his words.

Charlene's green eyes burned in the light.

"I want him with me . . ." she said.

"You will have him, don't you worry," said the nurse. "You'll have him for the rest of your life."

Before Charlene could process the ominous undercurrent of this statement, the nurse put a hand on her shoulder and gently eased her backwards onto the bed. She smoothed a wet curl of black hair across Charlene's forehead and then adjusted the flow of her IV, opening the secondary port to allow an influx of opioids. Charlene let out a quiet groan and slumped back into the darkness.

"Do we have battery power on the suction?" Dr. Sherman asked.

The nurse checked the machine. "No, doctor," she said.

"That's all right. I'll do it myself."

He took a wet cloth and carefully wiped off the child's mouth and face and then his left arm. The thick layer of vernix came away easily. "You see?" he said to Kermin, but Kermin did not answer. He was holding his pocket light, staring at his son. Where the doctor had wiped away the globular coating, the child's skin appeared very dark—so dark it shimmered purple in the beam of light, like an eggplant. Dr. Sherman looked down and caught his breath. He wiped away more of the white substance. The jet-black umbra of the skin beneath the bright white vernix was disarming, as if beneath his covering the child was made only of more shadows.

“He is okay?” Kermin was asking from behind. “He looks . . .” There was not a word for this. And now the first full-force wail from the infant, announcing his own arrival.

“Doctor, should we do an Apgar test?” the nurse asked. The doctor hesitated, mystified, holding the baby up to the beam of the light. The body squirmed, half white, half black—a negative image of itself. There was a chance this was all still a dream, though the pain in his oblique muscles told him otherwise. He had lived long enough to know that pain never appears in dreams.

From somewhere down the hall came the sound of urgent shouting.

Dr. Sherman snapped back to life. “It’s a boy!” he said, flushing out the obvious. He busied himself with wiping away the rest of the vernix and then snipped the umbilical cord with a precision that calmed his nerves.

“I’ll get an Apgar. Can we get some more lamps in here?” He was enjoying speaking aloud. The act of speaking was making this world possible. “And what the hell happened with the electric? Can someone find out? You would think with all of this modern technology . . .”

“Can I have him?” Charlene said from the darkness.

“We just want to run a few tests to make sure—” Dr. Sherman was in the process of handing the baby off to the nurse when a deep, mechanical moan rose up from somewhere in the building. The central air system shuddered and the ducts began to exhale above their heads and then all of the lights in the room sputtered on, one by one.

Those collected in the birthing room blinked as their pupils constricted with this explosion of photons. Everyone stared at the baby wriggling in the doctor's outstretched hands. In the harsh light of the fluorescents, the infant's skin, marked by the last globs of remaining vernix, was as black as the darkness from which he had just emerged. The umbilical cord and its apparatus dangled white and translucent against tiny, pumping legs the color of charcoal. Such monochromatic contrast appeared manufactured; the child looked like a puppet come to life.

"Why is he . . . so like this?" Kermin finally blurted out.

"I wouldn't worry," Dr. Sherman said reflexively, finishing the handoff to the nurse. "Many newborns have a different skin color when they first come out of the womb. A mark of transition. This will correct itself."

"Is something wrong?" Charlene asked, drunk on her drugs, her pasty skin flush with the exertion of her labor. She reached for her child, but he was already being wheeled out of the room on a special trolley, followed by the doctor, who began yelling at someone down the hall.

"Is something wrong?" Charlene asked again. "What is that smell?"

"He is . . ." Kermin said, staring at the door, left to wander closed on its hinges. They were suddenly, strangely alone. "He is . . . Radar."

"Radar?"

"His name: Radar."

To her horror, Charlene realized they had never settled on a

name. On several occasions they had tentatively circled the topic, but each time, all she could muster was a halfhearted short list of names for girls, and these tended to be lifted directly from famous novels: Anna, Dolores, Hester, Lucie, Edna. Every choice seemed either too obvious or too obscure or both too obvious and too obscure at the same time. How to name someone who existed only in theory? And coming up with a single viable boy name proved next to impossible. You were not just naming the boy—you *were naming the man*. Kermin, of course, proved no help at all; all five of his suggestions had been lifted from an electromagnetic textbook. And so Charlene succumbed to the narrative that they would have a girl and that all would become clear later. The decision of the name had been abandoned for simpler, tactile assignments, such as assembling the crib. They had cleared out space for the nursery; they had bought diapers and a kaleidoscope of onesies; they had inherited an outdated perambulator from her parents; but they had chosen no name. Except now that the baby had arrived (and left again), now that the baby had in fact revealed himself to be a *he*, the absence of a name suddenly took on great significance. *He* could not exist without a name.

“Radar,” Kermin said again. “You know, *radar*. Like bats. And aeroplanes.”

“I know what radar is,” she said. She willed her brain into action. “What about . . . Charles?” Charles had been the name of her preschool boyfriend. He had punched her in the stomach to declare his love. She had not thought of him in at least thirty years, but now his name rose from the depths and became the stand-in for all things male.

“Charles?” said Kermin.

“Yes, he can be a Charlie . . . or Chuck . . . or Chaz.”

“Chaz? What is Chaz?”

She sighed. She was too tired for this.

“Okay, not Charles, then. What about your father’s name?”

“Dobroslav? This is peasant name.”

“I’m being serious, Kerm! What about *your* name?”

His own name was not so much a name as a signal of protest. In the small Serbian village in eastern Croatia where he was born, a name was practically all you had. To know your name was to know your history, your present standing, the circumscription of your future. It was the one thing you could never escape. His father, in a feat of madness or brilliance, had bucked their heritage and invented the name Kermin, in service to no tradition, lineage, or culture. Kermin had thus been both blessed and cursed: his singularity established, he could claim to have never met another with his same name, but he had also weathered a lifetime of confused looks when introduced on both sides of the Atlantic. *Kermit? Like the frog?*

“But listen,” he said. “I am being serious: Radar *is* name. Have you seen this television program *M\*A\*S\*H?*” He articulated each letter, as if they were made out of wood. “Corporal Radar O’Reilly can sense the choppers before they arrive. It is like he has this ESP.”

“We don’t want our child to have ESP,” Charlene said, bringing her hands to her face. The hospital bracelet white against her wrist. “I just want to see him . . . Where did they take him? They can’t just take him like that . . . I want to see him, Kerm. Bring him back to me.”

Later, hunkered down in a deserted corner of the hospital, Kermin tapped out a message on his telegraph key, his thumb conjuring signal with the quiver of the smooth brass lever. The clusters of clicks and clats evaporated into the air, invisible pulses slipping out into the Jersey night, to be collected like dew by the radios of those who were listening to the electromagnetic spectrum in the early-morning hours:

—• —•• — •— 4 17 75.

MY SON IS BORN. RADAR RADMANOVIC.

MOTHER IS FINE. BABY IS FINE. I AM FINE.

KAKAV OTAC TAKAV SIN.

73, K2W9

Moments before, the nurse had asked Kermin for the child's name.

"I must type it up," she said. "For the certificate."

He had glanced through the doorway at his sleeping wife.

"Radar," he said, testing the boundaries of truth. "It's Radar."

"Radar?" The nurse raised her eyebrows, unsure she had heard the word correctly.

"Radar," he confirmed, bouncing and recalling his fingers from an invisible barrier. "Like this: *Signal. Echo. Return.*"

## Couple Give Birth to Black Newborn at St. Elizabeth's

STATE OF NEW JERSEY. BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS.

USE INK AND WRITE PLAINLY **Certificate and Record of Birth.** 840

Name of child..... **Radar Radmanovic**  
(In full if possible.)

Sex..... **Male** Color..... **Black** Date of birth..... **April 17, 1975**

Place of birth..... **255 Williamson St. Elizabeth, NJ**  
(If city, give name, street and number; if not, give township and county.)

Name of father..... **Kermin Radmanovic** Father's birthplace..... **Yugoslavia**  
(If out of wedlock, write O. W.)

Maiden name of mother..... **Volmer** Mother's birthplace..... **Trenton, NJ**

Age of father..... **40** Occupation of father..... **Television Repair**

Age of mother..... **29** Occupation of mother..... **Librarian**

Name and P. O. address of professional attendant in own handwriting:  
*Frank Portone M.D.*  
(Signature of professional attendant.)

Date of this report..... **April 18, 1975** *Attending Physician at the time Dr. M.D.*  
(P. O. address.)

Radar Radmanovic's Certificate and Record of Birth from St. Elizabeth's hospital in Elizabeth, NJ.

**Fig. 1.1. Radar's Certificate and Record of Birth**

From Popper, N. (1975), "Caucasian Couple Give Birth to Black Newborn at St. Elizabeth's," Newark Star-Ledger, April 18, 1975, p. A1

## TWO

The birth of such an extremely dark baby (described as “blacker than the blackest black” by an overeager *Star-Ledger* reporter) to two white parents was Jersey gossip that could not be kept quiet for long. The news of the birth must have been leaked by one of the orderlies, or one of the janitors, or perhaps even the nurse who had typed up the certificate of birth. Someone had talked to someone who had talked to someone, and suddenly there was a small group of reporters wandering around the maternity ward the next morning asking questions to anyone who would listen: *You’re telling me this wasn’t just a mix-up, right? The kid could be from another family . . . No? Okay, well, had the mother slept around? All right, all right. Fair enough. So then what was wrong with him? Okay, but what do you call that kind of thing? Was it a disease? What were the chances of this kind of thing happening? Yeah, but ballpark: one in a million? One in a billion? How black was he really? That black? Like Nigerian black? So then,*

*when can we see him? What do you mean? Well, come on now, that's a load of horseshit.*

The day after his birth, the Newark *Star-Ledger* ran a front-page article with the relatively modest headline “Caucasian Couple Give Birth to Black Newborn at St. Elizabeth’s.” Lacking a serviceable photograph, they settled for a poorly rendered xerox of Radar’s birth certificate, as if this was all the proof anyone could need. Across the Hudson, the *New York Post* declared, “Jersey Freak of Nature: White Parents . . . Black Baby!” and then proceeded to give very few details elaborating on their inflammatory headline. Baby Radar, caught in a genealogical conundrum not of his choosing, had suddenly become a cultural touchstone.

Perhaps all of the fuss was due to the alchemy of that particular time and place: eight years removed from the ’67 Newark riots, urban white flight was now in full swing. The manufacturing industry was steadily collapsing, leaving New Jersey in the throes of a severe recession. People—both white and black alike—were struggling to come to terms with the great expectations laid forth by the civil rights movement of the previous decade. How would such lofty ideals play out in the banal commerce of the everyday? Had everything changed? Or, as many were slowly realizing, had nothing really changed at all?

No doubt the story also gained traction because the simplest and most obvious explanation for Radar’s appearance, the explanation that spawned a thousand breakfast table jokes—a.k.a. “the milkman theory”—ultimately proved inadequate, given the child’s coloring. If the people could only have gotten a good look at the baby, they

would have understood, once and for all, that mere infidelity could not possibly have triggered such a dramatic swing in color from the whitest of whites to “the blackest of blacks.” And yet the people could not get a good look at Radar Radmanovic, because there were no photos of him save a (supposed) shot of his incubator, taken from some distance. With such scant evidence, the public was left to wonder on their own about the nature of inheritance, about what was passed down to a child and what was not, about the chances of such a highly unusual genetic occurrence—if it was indeed a genetic occurrence—ever happening to one of their own children. In the midst of all this, the family remained secretive, declining all interviews, shunning photographers, despite rumors of several five-figure offers for an exclusive photo shoot and rights to their story.

On one of the morning talk radio shows, a then relatively unknown Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, who was about to embark on the famous ten-day tour of apartheid South Africa that would subsequently springboard him into the international spotlight, weighed in on the case, admonishing the media for implicitly accusing “the black male scapegoat of raping another one of its white women.”

“This,” he said emphatically, “is an act of God, not of one man. This child is blessed. I hope the family realizes just how lucky they are.”\*

\*“Jesse Jackson, Mayor Abe Beame,” *The Alex Bennett Show*, WCMA, April 22, 1975, radio broadcast.

Radar's story lingered in the Jersey tabloids for only a week or so. Various medical professionals and semi-professionals were called in to offer half-baked theories for what might have happened to the baby—theories that ranged from a rare double-recessive melanism gene expression (“A distant black ancestor come to life!”) to toxic waste exposure from one of New Jersey's many Meadowlands industrial sewage dumps (“The child was a mutant!”). After this initial flurry of coverage, however, the story, like all stories, shriveled up and eventually disappeared, and Radar and his condition would not be heard of again until nearly four years later, when Dr. Thomas K. Fitzgerald would deliver his much anticipated diagnosis, “On an Isolated Incidence of Non-Addison's Hypoadrenal Uniform Hyperpigmentation in a Caucasian Male,” in the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*.

Charlene Radmanovic, for her part, emerged from the afterglow of the birth with a strange olfactory condition, in which everything around her smelled exactly the same, and of such an intensity as to be almost paralyzing. At first the hospital and all of its contents smelled of something approximate to burnt Cocoa Krispies. The night nurse, the squishy spinach greens in her muted meals, the urine-resistant plastic pillows, the television remote buttons—everything was morning cereal, permanently singed and distinctly nauseating. Most distressing of all was that her own son, whom she was eventually allowed to hold, smelled so strongly that she could not be near him for long without becoming overwhelmed by his smoldering stench. It was the worst kind of torture—to be repulsed by the very thing one should love above all else. Breastfeeding felt

like the most unnatural act in the world. He would not latch, and she quickly grew too dizzy to persist for long. Her complaints were answered with more painkillers, and when these did not work, a half-blind British otolaryngologist was summoned to her bedside. He prodded her sensory orifices and declared the condition temporary.

“A childbirth is an explosion,” he said by way of explanation. “Some shrapnel is inevitable, isn’t it?”

A week of intensive tests confirmed that everything else with Radar, save his unlikely hue, was more or less normal. A couple of the results were slightly worrisome: the iron content in his blood was elevated, as were his cortisol levels, though neither of these was unusual for newborns recovering from the hormonal starburst of birthing and the violent adjustment to a new world of oxygen and sunlight. Baby Radar also exhibited slightly higher-than-normal blood pressure and suffered from moderately dry skin that required treatment with a prescription lotion. But nothing so out of the ordinary as to point to a cause for his unusual appearance. His hair, present from birth, was soft and black and straight, just like his father’s. Indeed, if you could look past his darkness, Radar perfectly resembled a little Kermin: there was the same dimpled chin, the same funicular jawline, the same protrusive brow. If not for their diametric coloring, there would be no question of their relation.

Luckily, the public debate around Charlene’s possible infidelity, a debate that had ignited all sorts of heated exchanges about race and sexuality in the local media, had not quite managed to pierce the cocoon of their hospital room. Dr. Sherman had done well

to keep the cameras at bay. He was distinctly aware of the care one must take when wading into such a sensitive subject. At the time, comprehensive DNA testing was not readily available, and questions of legitimate parentage could often linger indefinitely. Still, Dr. Sherman thought it his duty to inform them of their options, should they want to pursue certain answers, and so, the day they were scheduled to take Radar home, he called them into his office for a final meeting.

“Here we are!” he said. “Hard to believe it’s only been a week.”

Charlene looked exhausted. “What,” she asked, bringing a hand to her nose, “do we do now?”

“Well. . . .” He thumbed at his pen. “That all depends. I’m not sure if you want to do a test.”

“A test?” she said. “For what?”

He paused. “For paternity. There’s a new procedure available that uses HLA from both father and baby, but it’s expensive, and the lab needs a significant amount of blood to test, so we would need to wait until the baby is at least six or eight months—”

“What’re you saying?” she said.

“What am I saying?”

A silence.

Dr. Sherman held up his hands. “Look, I didn’t mean to suggest anything one way or another. I was merely pointing out that there are tests out there, should you choose to want to know these things.”

Kermin was staring at his wife. She was looking back at him, steadily. After a moment, her eyes filled with tears.

“Kermin,” she said, reaching out for his hand. “Kermin. Kermin.”

Dr. Sherman decided it was time to start speaking again. “It’s all your choice, of course. Regardless, you’ll no doubt want to see a specialist about your son.”

He handed her a list of referrals, which Charlene accepted, only briefly shifting her gaze away from her husband’s face. His eyes had stayed hot, but there was now something dull and sooty around their edges, something she had not seen before, like glowing embers suddenly shushed by a bucket of water.

“One of these doctors I’m sure will help you get to the bottom of what’s going on here. Truly, in all my years, I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” He paused, looking at them over his spectacles. “But I say this not to worry you.”

That evening, at the suggestion of Dr. Sherman, they left the hospital through a service entrance, so as to avoid any lingering paparazzi. They arrived home to a house that felt like it belonged to a couple of strangers. Everything was familiar but not their own. The curtains were too brown, the forks were too big.

During her first week out of the hospital, Charlene’s olfactive focus gradually transitioned from burnt breakfast cereal to something more sinister. Descriptors proved elusive; the closest she could come to describing the stench was rotten meat that had been heavily grilled and then doused with an astringent lemon-scented cleaner. It was a three-toned miasma that pounded her in waves. She tried to nurse her son but would quickly be consumed by an enduring sensation of rotting flesh. One evening, she left him

squirring on the bed as she fled to the bathroom, weeping at her futility.

“Are you okay?” Kermin said through the door, their child in his arms.

“I can’t,” she said from the other side.

He tried the door.

“Charlene?” he called.

When there was no answer, Kermin clumsily swaddled Radar like a burrito and walked the ten blocks to the A&P, where he bought a case of formula tins. He fed their child in the Shaker rocking chair in the kitchen, the metronome of his son’s suckling beating against the static hush of his transistor radio on the countertop. Now and again a Halifax ham could be heard reading verses from *Leaves of Grass* to no one in particular.

At some point, Charlene emerged from the bathroom and stood at the threshold of the kitchen. Father and son had fallen asleep in the chair. She observed them as one observes a painting in a museum, as if she might set off an alarm by venturing too close.

One day, she woke up and found the rotten meat smell had parted and given way to the particulars of the world: she could now smell things individually, though these were warped and amplified a hundredfold. Citrus and all of its iterations triggered a special torment; she was tortured by their downstairs neighbors’ heavy hands with the lemon vinaigrette at their weekly family reunions. On one of her first forays into the outside world, she almost passed out on the sidewalk from a single blast of truck fumes. People, too, despite their concoctions of deodorants and perfumes, emitted

strong psychological odors, such that she could instantly read a person's mood with a single sniff. She quickly learned how to brave the world with two wads of cotton surreptitiously stuffed up her nostrils.

Yet what was more maddening than this evolving cast of odors was what had remained the same: Radar's smell was the one smell that had not changed since those early days of rotten cereal. He smelled exactly as he had the moment he was born. Or: her perception of his smell had not changed since the moment he was born. She was not so naive as to think her perceptions provided an objective dictum on the truth.

As the days and weeks went by, she slowly learned to tolerate her intense olfactive repulsion for him. Such repulsion was not acceptable, she knew—this was her child, after all, her own flesh and blood—and so she willed herself to love the repulsion itself. The dizzier she became, the tighter she held him. *If this was her curse, then so be it.* And yet she also became convinced that if only she could determine what had gone wrong with Radar, then she would also discover the secret to loving him as a mother should. All she needed was a medical diagnosis that could be spoken out loud and everything would be fixed.

They took Radar to each of the pediatric dermatologists that Dr. Sherman had recommended. Charlene expected an answer to come quickly. Surely, science would give them a name for what had happened, some kind of explanation or clinical history. The doctors, however, did not hold up their end of the bargain. They gave the Radmanovics more slips with more references, each of

which Charlene diligently pursued. They crisscrossed New York City, visiting a growing list of increasingly suspect specialists who would pluck biopsies from Radar's squirming thighs or rub on seven-syllabled creams that did nothing but irritate his skin. Nothing worked, nor did these specialists seem to have a clue about what, if anything, was wrong. Each doctor, after some fancy medical footwork, eventually admitted he was at a complete loss for an explanation.

Kermin seemed unfazed—content, even—with the utter lack of answers, but Charlene underwent a slow metamorphosis while she waited in all of those waiting rooms. The process began to consume the purpose. She started to collect medical textbooks; she began subscribing to half a dozen obscure dermatology newsletters and journals; she amassed a detailed, cross-referenced Rolodex of doctors' names, which she slowly crossed off one by one. With each successive visit, Charlene became more and more determined to find the root cause of her son's extraordinary condition, though her reasons for doing so were both circular and tautological. *Something was wrong with him because no one could figure out what was wrong with him.* In an African American family, Radar would be a dark, slight-featured baby with unusually straight hair—nothing more, nothing less. The problem (if one could even call it a problem) arose only when you placed him alongside his biological parents.

When Charlene once sheepishly confessed her own smell condition to Dr. Zeikman, a specialist in Queens who was attempting to treat Radar, he told her it was most likely psychosomatic, that she was simply internalizing the situation with her son. This

rebuke so shook her that she could not sleep for three nights straight. Could it actually be that her condition was all in her mind? But surely he could tell there was something wrong with her son? This, she had not made up. This—everyone could see. Right?

She called Dr. Zeikman's office several days later, under the pretense of complaining about the peroxide formula he had prescribed for Radar. In truth, she wanted to press him on the extent to which he thought her delusional. If it was not her son but she who must be treated, then . . . then what on earth should she do?

The phone in the doctor's office rang and rang until the answering machine clicked on. There was a long pause, and then, in a quavering voice, the secretary announced that Dr. Arnold Zeikman had passed away the night before from a heart attack. All future appointments were canceled.

Charlene stood with the phone in her hand, shocked. She stared at Radar dozing in his bouncy seat. She felt sad for a minute, sad for the briefness of life, sad for Dr. Zeikman's family. But then this feeling was quickly replaced—she was ashamed to admit—by disapproval. Maybe it didn't make sense, but she found herself wondering how a doctor of any skill had managed to die of a heart attack. Shouldn't his alleged expertise on the body's mechanics shield him from his own mechanics ever breaking down?

She put down the phone and went over to her son. She let the tips of her fingers brush across his forehead. His skin was warm to the touch. He stirred; his lips trembled.

“Radar, my Radar,” she whispered. “What have I done to you?”

H  
IS FOR HAWK

Helen Macdonald



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## *Lost*

I was about to leave the house when the phone rang. I picked it up. Hop-skip-pity, doorkeys in my hand. ‘Hello?’ A pause. My mother. She only had to say one sentence. It was this: ‘I had a phone call from St Thomas’ Hospital.’ Then I knew. I knew that my father had died. I knew he was dead because that was the sentence she said after the pause and she used a voice I’d never heard before to say it. Dead. I was on the floor. My legs broke, buckled, and I was sitting on the carpet, phone pressed against my right ear, listening to my mother and staring at that little ball of reindeer moss on the bookshelf, impossibly light, a buoyant tangle of hard grey stems with sharp, dusty tips and quiet spaces that were air in between them and Mum was saying there was nothing they could do at the hospital, it was his heart, I think, nothing could be done, you don’t have to come back tonight, don’t come back, it’s a long way, and it’s late, and it’s such a long drive and you don’t need to come back – and of course this was nonsense; neither of us knew what the hell

could or should be done or what this was except both of us and my brother, too, all of us were clinging to a world already gone.

I put down the phone. The keys were still in my hand. In that world already gone I was going for dinner with Christina, my Australian philosopher friend, who'd been there all along, sitting on the sofa when the phone rang. Her white face stared at me. I told her what had happened. And insisted we still go to the restaurant because we'd booked a table, of course we should go, and we did go, and we ordered, and the food came and I didn't eat it. The waiter was upset, wanted to know if anything was wrong. Well.

I think Christina told him. I can't remember her doing so, but he did something quite extraordinary. He disappeared, then reappeared at the table with an expression of anxious concern, and a double chocolate brownie with ice-cream and a sprig of mint stuck in the top, on the house, dusted with cocoa powder and icing sugar. On a black plate. I stared at it. *That is ridiculous*, I thought. Then, *What is it?* I pulled the mint out of the ice-cream, held it up, looked at its two small leaves and its tiny cut stem smeared with chocolate, and thought, *This isn't going to grow again*. Touched and bewildered that a waiter had thought that free cake and ice-cream would comfort me, I looked at the cut end of the mint. It reminded me of something. I groped for what it could be. And then I was back three days ago, back in Hampshire, out in the garden on a bright March weekend, wincing because I saw Dad had a nasty cut on his forearm. *You hurt yourself!* I said. *Oh, that*, he said, threading another spring onto the trampoline we were building for my niece. *Did that the other day. Can't remember how. On something or other.*

*It'll be all right though. It'll be healed soon, it's healing fine.* That was when the old world leaned in, whispered farewells and was gone. I ran into the night. I had to drive back to Hampshire. I had to go *now*. Because the cut would not. It would not heal.

Here's a word. *Bereavement*. Or, *Bereaved*. *Bereft*. It's from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob'. Robbed. Seized. It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try. 'Imagine,' I said, back then, to some friends, in an earnest attempt to explain, 'imagine your whole family is in a room. Yes, all of them. All the people you love. So then what happens is someone comes into the room and punches you all in the stomach. Each one of you. Really hard. So you're all on the floor. Right? So the thing is, you all share the same kind of pain, exactly the same, but you're too busy experiencing total agony to feel anything other than completely alone. *That's* what it's like!' I finished my little speech in triumph, convinced that I'd hit upon the *perfect* way to explain how it felt. I was puzzled by the pitying, horrified faces, because it didn't strike me at all that an example that put my friends' families in rooms and had them beaten might carry the tang of total lunacy.

I can't, even now, arrange it in the right order. The memories are like heavy blocks of glass. I can put them down in different places but they don't make a story. One day we were walking from Waterloo to the hospital under clouds. Breathing seemed an act of discipline. Mum turned to me, her face tight, and said, 'There'll be a time when all this seems like a bad dream.' His glasses, carefully folded, placed in my mum's outstretched hand. His coat.

An envelope. His watch. His shoes. And when we left, clutching a plastic bag with his belongings, the clouds were still there, a frieze of motionless cumulus over the Thames flat as a matte painting on glass. At Waterloo Bridge we leant over Portland stone and looked at the water below. I smiled for the first time, then, I think, since the phone call. Partly because the water was sliding down to the sea and this simple physics still made sense when the rest of the world didn't. And partly because a decade before, Dad had invented a gloriously eccentric weekend side-project. He'd decided to photograph every single bridge over the Thames. I went with him, sometimes, on Saturday mornings, driving up into the Cotswolds. My dad had been my dad, but also my friend, and a partner in crime when it came to quests like this. From the grassy source near Cirencester we walked and explored, followed a wormy, muddy stream, trespassed to take photos of planks over it, got shouted at by farmers, menaced by cattle, pored over maps in fierce concentration. It took a year. He did it, in the end. Every single bridge. Somewhere in the files of slides back at my mum's house is a complete photographic record of ways to cross the Thames from source to sea.

On another day, the panic was that we might not find his car. He'd parked it somewhere near Battersea Bridge and, of course, had never returned. We looked for it for hours, increasingly desperate, searching back streets and side streets and cul-de-sacs to no avail, widening our search to streets miles from anywhere we knew the car could possibly be. As the day drew on, we understood that even if we found it, Dad's blue Peugeot with his press pass tucked in the sun-visor and his cameras in the boot, our search would still

have been hopeless. Of course it had been towed away. I found the number, called the compound and said to the man on the phone that the owner of the vehicle couldn't collect it because he was dead. He was my father. That he didn't mean to leave the car there but he died. That he really didn't mean to leave it. Lunatic sentences, deadpan, cut from rock. I didn't understand his embarrassed silence. He said, 'Sorry, oh God. I'm so sorry', but he could have said anything at all and it would have signified nothing. We had to take Dad's death certificate to the compound to avoid the towing fee. This also signified nothing.

After the funeral I went back to Cambridge. I didn't sleep. I drove around a lot. I stared at the sun going down and the sun coming up, and the sun in between. I watched the pigeons spreading their tails and courting each other in stately pavaues on the lawn outside my house. Planes still landed, cars still drove, people still shopped and talked and worked. None of these things made any sense at all. For weeks I felt I was made of dully burning metal. That's what it was like; so much so that I was convinced, despite all evidence to the contrary, that if you'd put me on a bed or a chair I would have burned right through.

IT WAS ABOUT this time a kind of madness drifted in. Looking back, I think I was never truly mad. More mad north-north-west. I could tell a hawk from a handsaw always, but sometimes it was striking to me how similar they were. I knew I wasn't *mad* mad because I'd seen people in the grip of psychosis before, and that was madness as obvious as the taste of blood in the mouth. The kind of madness

I had was different. It was quiet, and very, very dangerous. It was a madness designed to keep me sane. My mind struggled to build across the gap, make a new and inhabitable world. The problem was that it had nothing to work with. There was no partner, no children, no home. No nine-to-five job either. So it grabbed anything it could. It was desperate, and it read off the world wrong. I began to notice curious connections between things. Things of no import burst into extraordinary significance. I read my horoscope and believed it. Auguries. Huge bouts of *déjà vu*. Coincidences. Memories of things that hadn't happened yet. Time didn't run forwards any more. It was a solid thing you could press yourself against and feel it push back; a thick fluid, half-air, half-glass, that flowed both ways and sent ripples of recollection forwards and new events backwards so that new things I encountered, then, seemed souvenirs from the distant past. Sometimes, a few times, I felt my father must be sitting near me as I sat on a train or in a café. This was comforting. It all was. Because these were the normal madneses of grief. I learned this from books. I bought books on grieving, on loss and bereavement. They spilled over my desk in tottering piles. Like a good academic, I thought books were for answers. Was it reassuring to be told that everyone sees ghosts? That everyone stops eating? Or can't stop eating? Or that grief comes in stages that can be numbered and pinned like beetles in boxes? I read that after denial comes grief. Or anger. Or guilt. I remember worrying about which stage I was at. I wanted to taxonomise the process, order it, make it sensible. But there was no sense, and I didn't recognise any of these emotions at all.

Weeks passed. The season changed. The leaves came, the mornings filled with light, the swifts returned, screaming past my Cambridge house through the skies of early summer and I began to think I was doing fine. *Normal grief*, they call it. That's what this was. An uneventful, slow climb back into life after loss. *It'll be healed soon*. I still break into a wry smile thinking of how blithely I believed this, because I was so terribly wrong. Unseen need was motoring out through me. I was ravenous for material, for love, for anything to stop the loss, and my mind had no compunction in attempting to recruit anyone, anything, to assist. In June I fell in love, predictably and devastatingly, with a man who ran a mile when he worked out how broken I was. His disappearance rendered me practically insensible. Though I can't even bring his face to mind now, and though I know not only why he ran, but know that in principle he could have been anyone, I still have a red dress that I will never wear again. That's how it goes.

Then the world itself started to grieve. The skies broke and it rained and rained. The news was full of inundations and drowned cities; lost villages at the bottom of lakes; flash floods spilling over the M4 motorway to strand holiday traffic; kayaks on town streets in Berkshire; rising sea levels; the discovery that the English Channel was carved out by the bursting of a giant superlake millions of years ago. And the rain continued, burying the streets in half an inch of bubbling water, breaking shop canopies, making the River Cam a *café-au-lait surge*, thick with broken branches and sodden undergrowth. My city was apocalyptic. 'I don't see the weather as odd at all,' I remember saying to a friend under a café awning while

the rain struck the pavement behind our chairs with such violence that we sipped coffee in cold mist.

As the rain fell and the waters rose and I struggled to keep my head above them, something new began. I'd wake up frowning. I'd dreamed of hawks, again. I started dreaming of hawks all the time. Here's another word: *raptor*, meaning 'bird of prey'. From the Latin *raptor*, meaning 'robber,' from *rapere*, meaning 'seize'. Rob. Seize. The hawks were goshawks, and one in particular. A few years earlier, I'd worked at a bird-of-prey centre right at the edge of England before it tips into Wales; a land of red earth, coal-workings, wet forest and wild goshawks. This one, an adult female, had hit a fence while hunting and knocked herself out. Someone had picked her up, unconscious, put her in a cardboard box and brought her to us. Was anything broken? Was she damaged? We congregated in a darkened room with the box on the table and the boss reached her gloved left hand inside. A short scuffle, and then out into the gloom, her grey crest raised and her barred chest feathers puffed up into a meringue of aggression and fear, came a huge old female goshawk. Old because her feet were gnarled and dusty, her eyes a deep, fiery orange, and she was *beautiful*. Beautiful like a granite cliff or a thundercloud. She completely filled the room. She had a massive back of sun-bleached grey feathers, was as muscled as a pit bull, and intimidating as hell, even to staff who spent their days tending eagles. So wild and spooky and reptilian. Carefully, we fanned her great, broad wings as she snaked her neck round to stare at us, unblinking. We ran our fingers along the narrow bones of her wings and shoulders to check nothing was broken,

along bones light as pipes, hollow, each with cantilevered internal struts of bone like the inside of an aeroplane wing. We checked her collarbone, her thick, scaled legs and toes and inch-long black talons. Her vision seemed fine too: we held a finger in front of each hot eye in turn. *Snap, snap*, her beak went. Then she turned her head to stare right at me. Locked her eyes on mine down her curved black beak, black pupils fixed. Then, right then, it occurred to me that this goshawk was bigger than me and more important. And much, much older: a dinosaur pulled from the Forest of Dean. There was a distinct, prehistoric scent to her feathers; it caught in my nose, peppery, rusty as storm-rain.

Nothing was wrong with her at all. We took her outside and let her go. She opened her wings and in a second was gone. She disappeared over a hedge slant-wise into nothing. It was as if she'd found a rent in the damp Gloucestershire air and slipped through it. That was the moment I kept replaying, over and over. That was the recurring dream. From then on, the hawk was inevitable.

## *Small worlds*

I was twelve years old when I first saw a trained goshawk. *Please, please, PLEASE!* I'd begged my parents. They let me go. Drove me there, even. *We'll look after her*, the men said. They carried hawks on their fists: orange-eyed goshawks as remote and composed as statuary, with barred grey tails and breast feathers of vermiculated snow. I couldn't speak. I wanted my parents to leave. But when their car pulled away I wanted to run after it. I was terrified. Not of the hawks: of the falconers. I'd never met men like these. They wore tweed and offered me snuff. They were clubbable men with battered Range Rovers and vowels that bespoke Eton and Oxford, and I was having the first uncomfortable inklings that while I wanted to be a falconer more than anything, it was possible I might not be *entirely* like these men; that they might view me as a curiosity rather than a kindred spirit. But I pushed my fears aside in favour of silence, because it was the first time I'd ever seen falconry in the field. *I'll remember this day for ever*, I thought. *One day this will be me.*

We walked in dark winter light over fields furred with new wheat. Vast flocks of fieldfares netted the sky, turning it to something strangely like a sixteenth-century sleeve sewn with pearls. It was cold. My feet grew heavy with clay. And twenty minutes after we'd set out, it happened – the thing I expected, but for which I was entirely unprepared. A goshawk killed a pheasant. It was a short, brutal dive from an oak into a mess of wet hedge; a brief, muffled crash, sticks breaking, wings flapping, men running, and a dead bird placed reverently in a hawking bag. I stood some way off. Bit my lip. Felt emotions I hadn't names for. For a while I didn't want to look at the men and their hawks any more and my eyes slipped to the white panels of cut light in the branches behind them. Then I walked to the hedge where the hawk had made her kill. Peered inside. Deep in the muddled darkness six copper pheasant feathers glowed in a cradle of blackthorn. Reaching through the thorns I picked them free, one by one, tucked the hand that held them into my pocket, and cupped the feathers in my closed fist as if I were holding a moment tight inside itself. It was death I had seen. I wasn't sure what it had made me feel.

But there was more to that day than my first sight of death. There was something else, and it also gave me pause. As the afternoon wore on, men started disappearing from our party. One by one their hawks had decided they wanted no more of proceedings, saw no good reason to return to their handlers, and instead sat in trees staring out over acres of fading pasture and wood, fluffed and implacable. At the end of the day we left with three fewer men and three fewer hawks, the former still waiting beneath their hawks'

respective branches. I knew goshawks were prone to sulk in trees: all the books had told me so. ‘No matter how tame and loveable,’ I’d read in Frank Illingworth’s *Falcons and Falconry*, ‘there are days when a goshawk displays a peculiar disposition. She is jumpy, fractious, unsociable. She may develop these symptoms of passing madness during an afternoon’s sport, and then the falconer is in for hours of annoyance.’

These men didn’t seem annoyed; fatalistic merely. They shrugged their waxed cotton shoulders, filled and lit pipes, waved the rest of us farewell. We trudged on into the gloom. There was something of the doomed polar expedition about it all, a kind of chivalric Edwardian vibe. *No, no, you go on. I’ll only slow you down.* The disposition of their hawks was peculiar. But it wasn’t unsociable. It was something much stranger. It seemed that the hawks couldn’t see us at all, that they’d slipped out of our world entirely and moved into another, wilder world from which humans had been utterly erased. These men knew they had vanished. Nothing could be done except wait. So we left them behind: three solitary figures staring up into trees in the winter dusk, mist thickening in the fields around them, each trusting that the world would later right itself and their hawk would return. And like the feathers in my pocket, their waiting also tugged at my faintly baffled heart.

I NEVER FORGOT those silent, wayward goshawks. But when I became a falconer I never wanted to fly one. They unnerved me. They were things of death and difficulty: spooky, pale-eyed psychopaths that lived and killed in woodland thickets. Falcons were

the raptors I loved: sharp-winged, bullet-heavy birds with dark eyes and an extraordinary ease in the air. I rejoiced in their aerial verve, their friendliness, their breathtaking stoops from a thousand feet, wind tearing through their wings with the sound of ripping canvas. They were as different from hawks as dogs are from cats. What's more, they seemed better than hawks: my books all assured me that the peregrine falcon was the finest bird on earth. 'She is noble in her nature' wrote Captain Gilbert Blaine in 1936. 'Of all living creatures she is the most perfect embodiment of power, speed and grace.' It took me years to work out that this glorification of falcons was partly down to who got to fly them. You can fly a goshawk almost anywhere, because their hunting style is a quick dash from the fist after prey at close range, but to fly falcons properly you need space: grouse moors, partridge manors, huge expanses of open farmland, things not easy to come by unless you're wealthy or well connected. 'Among the cultured peoples,' Blaine wrote, 'the use and possession of the noble falcons were confined to the aristocracy, as an exclusive right and privilege.'

Compared to those aristocratic falconers, the *austringer*, the solitary trainer of goshawks and sparrowhawks, has had a pretty terrible press. 'Do not house your graceless austringers in the falconers' room,' sniped the fourteenth-century Norman writer Gace de la Bigne. 'They are cursed in scripture, for they hate company and go alone about their sport. When one sees an ill-formed man, with great big feet and long shapeless shanks, built like a trestle, hump-shouldered and skew-backed, and one wants to mock him, one says, "Look, what an austringer!"' And as the

austringer, so the hawk, even in books written six centuries later. 'One cannot feel for a goshawk the same respect and admiration that one does for a peregrine,' Blaine explained. 'The names usually bestowed upon her are a sufficient index to her character. Such names as "Vampire", "Jezebel", "Swastika" or even "Mrs Glasse" aptly fit her, but would ill become a peregrine.' Goshawks were ruffians: murderous, difficult to tame, sulky, fractious and foreign. *Bloodthirsty*, wrote nineteenth-century falconer Major Charles Hawkins Fisher, with patent disapproval. *Vile*. For years I was inclined to agree, because I kept having conversations that made me more certain than ever that I'd never train one. 'You fly falcons?' a falconer enquired of me once. 'I prefer goshawks. You know where you are with a gos.'

'Aren't they a pain in the arse?' I said, remembering all those hunched forms lodged high in wintry trees.

'Not if you know the secret,' he countered, leaning closer. There was a slight Jack Nicholson vibe to all this. I drew back, faintly alarmed. 'It's simple. If you want a well-behaved goshawk, you just have to do one thing. Give 'em the opportunity to kill things. Kill as much as possible. *Murder* sorts them out.' And he grinned.

'Right,' I said. There was a pause, as if it wasn't quite the right response. I tried again. 'Thanks.' And I was all, *Bloody hell! I'm sticking with falcons, thank you very much*. I'd never thought I'd train a goshawk. Ever. I'd never seen anything of myself reflected in their solitudinous, murderous eyes. *Not for me*, I'd thought, many times. *Nothing like me*. But the world had changed, and so had I.

IT WAS THE END of July and I'd convinced myself that I was pretty much back to normal. But the world around me was growing very strange indeed. The light that filled my house was deep and livid, half magnolia, half rainwater. Things sat in it, dark and very still. Sometimes I felt I was living in a house at the bottom of the sea. There were imperceptible pressures. Tapping water-pipes. I'd hear myself breathing and jump at the sound. Something else was there, something standing next to me that I couldn't touch or see, a thing a fraction of a millimetre from my skin, something vastly *wrong*, making infinite the distance between me and all the familiar objects in my house. I ignored it. *I'm fine*, I told myself. *Fine*. And I walked and worked and made tea and cleaned the house and cooked and ate and wrote. But at night, as rain pricked points of orange light against the windows, I dreamed of the hawk slipping through wet air to somewhere else. I wanted to follow it.

I sat at my computer in my rain-lit study. I telephoned friends. I wrote emails. I found a hawk-breeder in Northern Ireland with one young goshawk left from that year's brood. She was ten weeks old, half Czech, one-quarter Finnish, one-quarter German, and she was, for a goshawk, small. We arranged that I should drive to Scotland to pick her up. I thought that I would like to have a small goshawk. 'Small' was the only decision I made. I didn't think for a second there was any choice in the matter of the hawk itself. The hawk had caught me. It was never the other way around.

WHEN THE RAIN STOPPED the heat began. Dogs panted flat in the black shade under the limes, and the lawns in front of the house

paled and burned to hay. A damp, hot wind pushed leaves about but failed to cool anything; it was a wind that made things worse, like stirring a hot bath with your hand. Walking in it was like wading neck-deep through thick liquid. I struggled into the furnace of my car and drove to a friend's house in a village just outside the city. I wanted to talk goshawks, and there was no one better than Stuart to do it with. He is my goshawk guru. Years ago I'd hawked with him on late winter afternoons, crunched across long shadow and sugarbeet in search of wild fenland pheasants, his big old female gos sitting on his fist like a figurehead, leaning into the gilded wind. He is a splendid chap; a carpenter and ex-biker, solid and serene as a mid-ocean wave, and his partner Mandy is brilliantly generous and funny, and seeing them both was such a shot in the arm. I'd halfway forgotten how kind and warm the world could be. Stuart fired up the barbecue, and the garden filled with kids and teenagers and cigarette smoke and pointers nosing around, and ferrets rattling in their hutches, and the sky grew whiter as the afternoon went on, and the sun turned gauzy behind a spreading mat of fibrous cloud. A Spitfire banked overhead. We mopped our brows. The dogs panted, the ferrets drank from their water bottles, and Stuart slaved over his barbecue, coming back around the side of the house wiping his forehead on his arm. 'It's getting cooler!' he said, surprised. 'No, you've walked away from the barbecue!' we chorused.

I plonked myself down with a burger on a white plastic chair. And there, on a perch on the lawn, shaded by the hedge and ignoring the melee, was a perfect little peregrine, carefully preening

the long, floppy barred feathers of his undercarriage. ‘Half-Czech?’ Stuart was saying. ‘The most bloody-minded gos I ever trained was Czech. It was a *nightmare*. Are you *sure* you want to do this?’ He tipped his head towards the bird on the lawn. ‘You can fly that if you like,’ he said. ‘Want a peregrine?’

My heart skipped a beat. The falcon. There he was, an impossibly beautiful creature the colour of split flint and chalk, wings crossed sharp over his back, his dark, hooded face turned up to the sky. He was watching the Spitfire overhead with professional curiosity. I looked up at the plane. Its engine note had changed; it was throttling back, slowly descending through white air to the aviation museum where it lived. The peregrine bobbed his head, watching it too. Our gazes were exactly aligned. For a long, sinking moment, I wondered if I was making a terrible mistake.

‘I’d love to,’ I said stiffly, formally, the half-burger in my hand suddenly unappetising. One deep breath, then, and the words came. ‘I mean, *normally* I would, I’d leap at the chance; that’s an amazing offer, Stu. But I really do want this gos.’ He nodded. Manfully, I finished the burger. Ketchup dripped down my arm like a wound.

THERE WOULD BE A GOSHAWK. And what happened next was this: my eyes started avoiding a book that lived on the shelf by my desk. At first it was just a visual blind-spot, a tic of a blink; then something like a grain of sleep in the corner of my eye. I’d look past the place where the book was with a little flicker of discomfort I couldn’t quite place. Soon I couldn’t sit at my desk without knowing it was there. Second shelf down. Red cloth cover.

Silver-lettered spine. *The Goshawk*. By *T. H. White*. I didn't want the book to be there, and I didn't want to think about why, and soon it got to the point that the bloody book was all I could see when I sat at my desk, even if it was the one thing in the room I wouldn't look at. One morning, sitting there, sun on the table, coffee to hand, computer open, unable to concentrate, I snapped: this was ridiculous. I leaned down, drew out the book and put it on the desk in front of me. It was just a book. There was nothing especially malevolent about it. It was old and stained with water, and the ends of the spine were bumped and scuffed as if it had been in many bags and boxes over the years. *Hmm*, I thought. I was interested in my emotions now. I thought about the book cautiously, ran my feelings over it the way you feel for a hurting tooth with your tongue. The dislike was palpable, but bound up with a strange kind of apprehension that needed pulling into parts, because I wasn't sure exactly what it was made of. I opened the book and began to read. *Chapter One*, it said. *Tuesday*. And then: *When I first saw him he was a round thing like a clothes basket covered in sacking*. It was a sentence from a long time ago, and it carried with it the apprehension of another self. Not the man who wrote it: me. Me, when I was eight years old.

I was a scrawny, too-tall child with ink on my fingers, binoculars around my neck, and legs covered in plasters. I was shy, pigeon-toed, knock-kneed, fantastically clumsy, hopeless at sport, and allergic to dogs and horses. But I had an obsession. Birds. Birds of prey most of all. I was sure they were the best things that had *ever* existed. My parents thought this obsession would go the way of the

others: dinosaurs, ponies, volcanoes. It didn't. It worsened. When I was six I tried to sleep every night with my arms folded behind my back like wings. This didn't last long, because it is very hard to sleep with your arms folded behind your back like wings. Later, when I saw pictures of the ancient Egyptian falcon-headed god Horus, all faience and turquoise and with a perfect moustachial stripe below his wide, haunting eyes, I was stricken with a strange religious awe. *This* was my god, not the one we prayed to at school: he was an old man with a white beard and drapes. For weeks, in secret heresy, I whispered *Dear Horus* instead of *Our Father* when we recited the Lord's Prayer at school assemblies. It was a suitably formal address, I thought, having learned it from writing birthday thank-you notes. Hawk habits, hawk species, hawk scientific names; I learned them all, stuck pictures of raptors on my bedroom walls, and drew them, over and over again, on the edges of newspapers, on scraps of notepaper, on the margins of my school exercise books, as if by so doing I could conjure them into existence. I remember a teacher showing us photographs of the cave paintings at Lascaux and explaining that no one knew why prehistoric people drew these animals. I was indignant. I knew *exactly* why, but at that age was at a loss to put my intuition into words that made sense even to me.

When I discovered there was still such a thing as falconry things became less amorously religious. I told my longsuffering parents that I was going to be a falconer when I grew up and set about learning as much as I could about this miraculous art. Dad and I hunted for falconry books on family days out, and one by one the great works came home with us, second-hand trophies in paper

bags from bookshops long since gone: *Falconry* by Gilbert Blaine; *Falconry* by Freeman and Salvin; *Falcons and Falconry* by Frank Illingworth; the gloriously titled *Harting's Hints on Hawks*. All the boys' books. I read them over and over, committed great swathes of nineteenth-century prose to memory. Being in the company of these authors was like being dropped into an exclusive public school, for they were almost entirely written a long time ago by bluff, aristocratic sportsmen who dressed in tweed, shot Big Game in Africa, and had Strong Opinions. What I was doing wasn't just educating myself in the nuts and bolts of hawk-training: I was unconsciously soaking up the assumptions of an imperial elite. I lived in a world where English peregrines always outflew foreign hawks, whose landscapes were grouse moors and manor houses, where women didn't exist. These men were kindred spirits. I felt I was one of them, one of the elect.

I became the most appalling falconry bore. On wet afternoons after school my mum'd be writing up news stories for the local paper – court reports, local fêtes, planning committees – fingers hammering away on her typewriter in the dining room. There'd be a pack of Benson & Hedges on the table, a cup of tea, a shorthand notebook, and a daughter standing next to her reeling off imperfectly remembered sentences from nineteenth-century falconry books. It seemed crucial to explain to my mother that *while dog leather was the best leather for hawk-leashes, it was almost impossible to get these days*. That the problem with merlins was that they're *prone to carry their quarry*; and also did she know that *saker falcons, hailing from desert areas, are unreliable performers in English climatic conditions?*

Lining up another yellow piece of copy paper, fiddling with the carbons so they didn't slip, she'd nod and agree, drag on her cigarette, and tell me how interesting it all was in tones that avoided dismissiveness with extraordinary facility. Soon I was an expert on falconry the way the carpet salesman who used to come into the bookshop where I once worked was an expert on the Greco-Persian Wars. Shy, crumpled, middle-aged, and carrying with him the air of some unspoken defeat, he rubbed his face anxiously when he ordered books at the till. He wouldn't have lasted long, I think, on a battlefield. But he knew everything about the wars, knew each battle intimately, knew exactly where the detachments of Phocian troops were stationed on high mountain paths. I knew falconry like this. When I got my first hawk, years later, I was astounded by the reality of the thing. I was the carpet salesman at the battle of Thermopylae.

IT IS SUMMER 1979 and I am an eight-year-old girl in a bookshop. I'm standing under a skylight with a paperback in my hand and I am extremely puzzled. *What is an eighteenth-century story of seduction?* I had no idea. I read the words on the back cover again:

*The Goshawk* is the story of a concerted duel between Mr White and a great beautiful hawk during the training of the latter – the record of an intense clash of wills in which the pride and endurance of the wild raptor are worn down and broken by the almost insane willpower of the schoolmaster falconer. It is comic; it is tragic; it is all absorbing. It is strangely like some of the eighteenth-century stories of seduction.

No, still no idea. But I needed the book all the same because on the cover was a goshawk. She looked up from under her brows in truculent fury, her plumage scalloped and scaled in a riot of saffron and bronze. Her talons gripped the painted glove so tightly my fingers prickled in numb sympathy. She was beautiful; taut with antipathy; everything a child feels when angry and silenced. As soon as we were home I raced upstairs to my room, jumped onto the bed, lay on my tummy and opened the book. And I remember lying there, propped on my elbows with my feet in the air, reading the opening lines of *The Goshawk* for the very first time.

When I first saw him he was a round thing like a clothes basket covered in sacking. But he was tumultuous and frightening, repulsive in the same way as snakes are frightening to people who do not know them.

It was unusual. It didn't sound like my other falconry books at all. The eight-year-old girl that was me read on with a frown. It wasn't *anything* like them. This was a book about falconry by a man who seemed to know nothing about it. He talked about the bird as if it were a monster and he wasn't training it properly. I was bewildered. Grown-ups were experts. They wrote books to tell you about things you didn't know; books on how to do things. Why would a grown-up write about not being able to do something? What's more, the book was full of things that were completely beside the point. It talked, disappointingly, of things like foxhunting and war and history. I didn't understand its references to the Holy Roman

Empire and Strindberg and Mussolini and I didn't know what a pickelhaube was, and I didn't know what *any* of this was doing in a book that was supposed to be about a hawk.

Later I found a review of the book in an old British Falconers' Club journal. It was superbly terse. 'For those with an interest in the dull introspective business of manning and training a hawk, *The Goshawk* will be a well-written catalogue of most of the things one should not do,' it said. The men in tweed had spoken. I was on the right side, was allowed to dislike this grown-up and consider him a fool. It's painful to recall my relief on reading this, founded as it was on a desperate misunderstanding about the size of the world. I took comfort in the blithe superiority that is the refuge of the small. But for all that, my eight-year-old self revered the hawk in the book. Gos. Gos was real to me. Gos had steely pinions and a mad marigold eye, and hopped and flew and mantled his great wings over a fist of raw liver. He cheeped like a songbird and was terrified of cars. I liked Gos. Gos was comprehensible, even if the writer was utterly beyond understanding.

A FEW YEARS AGO I met a retired U2 pilot. He was tall, flinty and handsome and had just the right kind of deadly stillness you'd expect from a man who'd spent years flying at the edge of space in a dusty-black American spy plane. The geopolitical aspects of his role were truly disconcerting. But as a day job it was absurdly cool. At eighty thousand feet the world curves deep below you and the sky above is wet black ink. You're wearing a spacesuit, confined to a cockpit the size of a bathtub, piloting a machine that first flew the year James

Dean died. You cannot touch the world, just record it. You have no weapons; your only defence is height. But as I talked with this man what impressed me the most weren't his deadpan tales of high adventure, the 'incidents' with Russian MiGs and so on, but his battle against boredom. The nine-hour solo missions. The twelve-hour solo missions. 'Wasn't that horrendous?' I asked. 'It could get a little lonely up there,' he replied. But there was something about how he said it that made it sound a state still longed-for. And then he said something else. 'I used to read,' he said, unexpectedly, and with that his face changed, and his voice too: his deadpan Yeager drawl slipped, was replaced with a shy, childlike enthusiasm. '*The Once and Future King*. By T. H. White,' he said. 'Have you heard of him? He's an English writer. It's a great book. I used to take that up, read it on the way out and the way back.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Yes.' Because this story struck me as extraordinary, and it still does. Once upon a time there was a man in a spacesuit in a secret reconnaissance plane reading *The Once and Future King*, that great historical epic, that comic, tragic, romantic retelling of the Arthurian legend that tussles with questions of war and aggression, and might, and right, and the matter of what a nation is or might be.

White is not a fashionable writer. When I read English at university his name wasn't mentioned at all. But once upon a time White was very famous indeed. In 1938 he published a children's book about the boyhood of King Arthur called *The Sword in the Stone* and it made his name and his fortune. Disney snapped up the rights and turned it into an animated cartoon. White went on

to write *The Once and Future King*, which covered the rest of the Arthurian story, and that in turn inspired the stage-musical and film *Camelot*. White's reworking of Arthurian legend was hugely influential: when you hear Kennedy's White House described as Camelot, that is White – Jackie Kennedy quoted lines from the musical after her husband's assassination. When you think of the wizard Merlin wearing a tall, peaked hat embroidered with stars, that is White too. And when I think of the U2 pilot up there reading a book about King Arthur, a book that had been wrenched strangely into a fairytale about American political life, I can't help but think of a line written by the poet Marianne Moore: *The cure for loneliness is solitude*. And the solitude of the pilot in the spy-plane, seeing everything, touching nothing, reading *The Once and Future King* fifty thousand feet above the clouds – that makes my heart break, just a little, because of how lonely that is, and because of some things that have happened to me, and because T. H. White was one of the loneliest men alive.

*The Goshawk* is the book of a young man. It was written before White's better-known works, and before he was famous. It 'would be about the efforts of a second-rate philosopher', he explained sadly, 'who lived alone in a wood, being tired of most humans in any case, to train a person who was not human, but a bird'. When I read it again, years after that first childhood encounter, I saw more in it than bad falconry. I understood why people considered it a masterpiece. For White made falconry a metaphysical battle. Like *Moby-Dick* or *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Goshawk* was a literary encounter between animal and man that reached back to

Puritan traditions of spiritual contest: salvation as a stake to be won in a contest against God. That older, wiser me decided that White's admissions of ignorance were brave rather than stupid. But I was still angry with him. First, because his hawk had suffered terribly as he tried to train it. And second, because his portrayal of falconry as a pitched battle between man and bird had hugely influenced our notions of what goshawks are and falconry is. Frankly, I hated what he had made of them. I didn't think falconry was a war, and I knew hawks weren't monsters. That small girl lying crossly on her bed was still cross.

That is what I thought as I sat there staring at the open book on my desk, four months after my father died. I read on, and as I did, there was a tiny jolt that was a realisation of why my eyes had spurned the book for weeks. I knew that part of why I was cross was that I felt, for the first time, that my urge to train a hawk was for reasons that weren't entirely my own. Partly they were his.