

THE FLAW IN THE DESIGN

Deborah Eisenberg

I float back in.

The wall brightens, dims, brightens faintly again—a calm pulse, which mine calms to match, of the pale sun’s beating heart. Outside, the sky is on the move—windswept and pearly—spring is coming from a distance. In its path, scraps of city sounds waft up and away like pages torn out of a notebook. Feather pillows, deep carpet, the mirror a lake of pure light—no imprints, no traces; the room remembers no one but us. “Do we have to be careful about the time?” he says.

The voice is exceptional, rich and graceful. I turn my head to look at him. Intent, reflective, he traces my brows with his finger, and then my mouth, as if I were a photograph he’s come across, mysteriously labeled in his own handwriting. I reach for my watch from the bedside table and consider the dial—its rectitude, its innocence—then I understand the position of the hands and that, yes, rush-hour traffic will already have begun.

I pull into the driveway and turn off the ignition. Evening is descending, but inside no lights are on. The house looks unfamiliar.

It looks to me much the way it did when I saw it for the first time, years ago, before it was ours, when it was just a house the Realtor brought us to look at, all angles and sweep—flashy, and rather stark. John took to it immediately—I saw the quick alliance, his satisfaction as he ran his hand across the granite and steel. I remember, now, my faint embarrassment; I’d been taken

by surprise to discover that this was what he wanted, that this was something he must have more or less been longing for.

I can just make out the shadowy figure upstairs in our bedroom. I allow myself to sit for a minute or so, then I get out of the car and close the door softly behind me.

John is at the roll-top desk, going over some papers. He might have heard me pull into the drive, or he might not have. He doesn’t turn as I pause in the bedroom doorway, but he glances up when I approach to kiss him lightly on the temple. His tie is loosened; he’s still in his suit. The heavy crystal tumbler is nearly full.

I turn on the desk light.

“How can you see what you’re doing?” I say.

I rest my hand on his shoulder and he reaches up to pat it.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he says. He pats my hand again, terminating, and I withdraw it. “Absolutely drowning in this stuff . . .” He rubs the bridge of his nose under his glasses frames, then directs a muzzy smile my way.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful to live in a tree,” I say. “In a cave, with no receipts, no bills, no records—just no paper at all . . .” I close my eyes for a moment. Good. Eclipsed—the day has sealed up behind me. “Oh, darling—did you happen to feed Pod?”

John blinks. “No one told me.”

“It’s all right. I didn’t expect to be so late. Maybe Oliver thought to.”

Gingerly, I stroke back John’s thin, pale hair. He waits rigidly. “Any news?” I ask.

“News,” he says. “Nothing to speak of, really.” He turns back to the desk.

“John?” I say.

“Hello, darling,” he says.

“Lamb chops,” Oliver observes pleasantly.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” I say. “I’m sure there’s a plain pizza in the freezer, and there’s some of that spinach thing left. If I had thought you’d be home tonight, I would have made something else.”

“Don’t I always come home, Mom?”

“Always?” I smile at him. “I assumed you’d be at Katie’s again tonight.”

“But don’t I always actually come home? Don’t I always come home eventually, Mom, to you?”

He seems to want me to laugh, or to pretend to, and I do. I can’t ever disguise the pleasure I take in looking at him. How did John and I ever make this particular child, I always wonder. He looks absolutely nothing like either of us, with his black eyes and wild, black hair—though he does bear some resemblance to the huge oil portrait of John’s grandfather that his parents have in their hallway. John’s father once joked to me, are you sure you’re the mother? I remember the look on John’s face then—his look of reckoning, the pure coldness, as if he were calculating his disdain for his father in orderly columns. John’s father noted that look, too—with a sort of gratification, I thought—then turned to me and winked.

“You’re seriously not going to have any of these?” John says.

Oliver looks at the platter.

This only started recently, after Oliver went off to school. “You don’t have to, darling,” I say.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” John says.

“Hats off, Dad.” Oliver nods earnestly at his father. “Philosophically watertight.”

Recently, John has developed an absent little laugh to carry him past these moments with Oliver, and it does seem to me healthier, better for both of them, if John at least appears to rise above provocation.

“But don’t think I’m not grateful, Mom, Dad, for the fact that we can have this beautiful dinner, in our beautiful, architecturally unimpeachable open-plan ... area. And actually, Dad, I want to say how grateful I am to you in general. Don’t think, just because I express myself awkwardly and my vocabulary’s kind of fucked up—”

John inclines his head, with the faint, sardonic smile of expectations met.

“—Sorry, Dad. That I’m not grateful every single day for how we’re able to preside as a family over the things of this world, and that owing to the fantastic education you’ve secured for me, I’ll eventually be able—I mean of course with plenty of initiative and hard work or maybe with a phone call to someone from you—to follow in your footsteps and assume my rightful place on the planet, receiving beautiful Mother Earth’s bounty—her crops, her oil, her precious metals and diamonds, and to cast my long, dark shadow over—”

“Darling,” I say. “All right. And when you’re at home, you’re expected to feed Pod. We’ve talked about this.”

Oliver clasps my wrist. “Wow, Mom, don’t you find it poignant, come to think of it? I really think there’s a poignancy here in this divergence of paths. Your successful son, home for a flying visit from his glamorous institution of higher education, and Pod, the companion of your son’s youth, who stayed on and turned into a dog?”

“That’s why you might try to remember to feed him,” I say.

Oliver flashes me a smile, then ruffles grateful Pod’s fur. “Poor old Pod,” he says, “hasn’t anyone fed you since I went away?”

“Not when you’re handling food, please, Oliver,” John says.

“Sorry, Dad,” Oliver says, holding up his hands like an apprehended robber. “Sorry, Mom, sorry, Pod.”

And there’s the radiant smile again. It’s no wonder that the girls are crazy about Oliver. His phone rings day and night. There are always a few racy, high-tech types running after him, as well as the attractive, well-groomed girls, so prevalent around here, who absolutely shine with poise and self-confidence—perfect girls, who are sure of their value. And yet the girls he prefers always seem to be in a bit of disarray. Sensitive, I once commented to John. “Grubby,” he said.

“Don’t you want the pizza?” I say. “I checked the label scrupulously—I promise.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m just not really hungry, though.”

“I wish you would eat something,” I can’t help saying.

“Oh—but listen, you guys!” Oliver says. “Isn’t it sad about Uncle Bob?”

“Who?” John says. He gets up to pour himself another bourbon.

“Uncle Bob? Bob? Uncle Bob, your old friend Bob Alpers?”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a glass of wine, darling?” I ask.

“No,” John says.

“Was Alpers testifying today?” I ask John. “I didn’t realize. Did you happen to catch any of it?”

John shrugs. “A bit. All very tedious. When did this or that memo come to his attention, was it before or after such and such a meeting, and so on.”

“Poor Bob,” I say. “Who can remember that sort of thing?”

“Who indeed,” John says.

“We used to see so much of Uncle Bob and Aunt Caroline,” Oliver says.

“That’s life,” John says. “Things change.”

“That’s a wise way to look at things, Dad.” Oliver nods seriously. “It’s, really, I mean . . . wise.”

“I’m astonished that you remember Bob Alpers,” I say. “It’s been a long time since he and your father worked together. It’s been years.”

“We never did work together,” John says. “Strictly speaking.”

Oliver turns to me. “That was back when Uncle Bob was in the whatsis, Mom, right? The private sector? And Dad used to consult?”

John’s gaze fixes on the table as if he were just daring it to rise.

“But I guess you still do that, don’t you, Dad—don’t you still consult?”

“As you know. I consult. People who know something about something ‘consult,’ if you will. People hire people who know things about things. What are we saying here?”

“I’m just saying, poor Uncle Bob—”

“Where did this ‘uncle’ business come from?” John says.

“Let me give you some salad at least, darling. You’ll eat some salad, won’t you?” I put a healthy amount on Oliver’s plate for him.

“I mean, picture the future, the near, desolate future,” Oliver says. He shakes his head and trails off, then reaches over, sticks a finger absently right into a trickle of blood on the platter, and resumes. “There’s Uncle Bob, wandering around in the night and fog, friendless and alone ...”

John’s expression freezes resolutely over as Oliver walks his fingers across the platter, leaving a bloody track.

“A pariah among all his former friends,” Oliver continues, getting up to wash his hands. “Doors slam in his face, the faithless sycophants flee ... How is poor Uncle Bob supposed to live? He can’t get a job, he can’t get a job bussing tables! And all just because of these ... phony allegations.” John and I reflexively look over at one another, but our glances bounce apart. “I mean, wow, Dad, you must know what it’s like out there! You must be keeping up with the unemployment stats! It’s fierce. Of course I’ll be fine, owing to my outrageous abundance of natural merit or possibly to the general, um, esteem, Dad, in which you’re held, but gee whiz, I mean, some of my ridiculous friends are worried to the point of throwing really up about what they’re all going to do when they graduate, and yet their problems pale in comparison to Uncle Bob’s.”

“Was there some dramatic episode I missed today?” I say.

“Nothing,” John says. “Nothing at all. Just nonsense.”

“I just don’t see that Bob could have been expected to foresee the problems,” I say.

“Well, that’s the reasonable view,” John says. “But some of the regulations are pretty arcane, and if people are out to get you, they can make fairly routine practices look very bad.”

“Oh, dear,” I say. “What Caroline must be going through!”

“There’s no way this will stick,” John says. “It’s just grandstanding.”

“Gosh, Dad, that’s great. Because I was somehow under the impression, from the—I mean, due to the—That is, because of the—”

“Out with it, Oliver,” John says. “We’re all just people, here.”

“—the evidence, I guess is what I mean, Dad, that Bob knew what that land was being used for. But I guess it was all, just, what did you call that, Dad? ‘Standard practice,’ right?”

John looks at him. “What I said was—”

“Oops, right, you said ‘routine practices,’ didn’t you. Sorry, that’s different! And anyhow, you’re right. How on earth could poor Bob have guessed that those silly peasants would make such a fuss, when KGS put the land to such better use than they ever had? Beans? I mean, please. Or that KGS would be so sensitive about their lousy, peasant sportsmanship and maybe overreact a bit? You know what? We should console Uncle Bob in his travails, open up our family to receive him in the warmth of our love, let him know that we feel his pain. Would Uncle Bob ever hurt a fly? He would not! Things just have a way of happening, don’t they! And I think we should invite Uncle Bob over, for one last piece of serious meat, before he gets hauled off to the slammer.”

John continues simply to look at Oliver, whose eyes gleam with excitement. When I reach over and touch John’s hand, he speaks. “I applaud your compassion, Oliver. But no need to squander it. I very much doubt it’s going to come to that.”

“Really?” Oliver says. “You do? Oh, I see what you mean. That’s great, Dad. You mean that if it seems like Uncle Bob might start naming names, he’ll be able to retire in style, huh.”

“Ooookay,” John says. “All right,” and a white space cleaves through my brain as if I’d actually slapped Oliver, but in

fact Oliver is turning to me with concern, and he touches my face. “What’s the matter, Mom? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, darling,” I say. He reaches for my hand and holds it.

“You went all pale,” he says.

“I applaud your interest in world affairs,” John says. “But as the situation is far from simple, and as neither you nor I were there at the time, perhaps we should question, just this once—this once!—whether we actually have the right to sit in judgment. This will blow over in no time, Oliver, I’m happy to be able to promise you, and no one will be the worse for it. And should the moment arrive in which reason reasserts its check on your emotions, you will see that this spectacle is nothing more than a witch hunt.”

“Well, that’s good,” Oliver says. “I mean, it’s bad. Or it’s good, it’s bad, it’s—”

“Do you think we might cross off and move on?” John says.

“Sure thing, Dad,” Oliver says, dropping my hand.

John and Oliver appear to ripple briefly, and then a cottony silence drops over us. Even if I tried, I doubt I would be able to remember what we’d just been saying.

Oliver prongs some salad, and John and I watch as he lifts it slowly toward his mouth. It actually touches his lips, when he puts it down abruptly, as if he’s just remembered something important. “So!” He beams at us. “What did you gentle people do today?”

“John pauses, then gathers himself. “The office, naturally. Then I caught a bit of the hearings, as I have to surmise that you and Kate did.”

“We did, Dad, that’s very astute.” Oliver nods seriously again, then turns to me with that high-watt smile. “Your turn, Mom.”

“I went into town,” I say. I stand up suddenly and walk over to the fridge, balancing myself on my fingertips against the reflective steel surface, in which I appear as a smudge. “I had an urge to go to the museum.” I open the fridge as if I were looking for something, let the cool settle against me for a moment, close the door, and return to the table.

“You look so pretty, Mom!” Oliver says childishly. “Isn’t Mom pretty, Dad?”

“Your mother was the prettiest girl at all the schools around,” John says wearily. For a moment, we all just sit there again, as if someone had turned off the current, disengaging us.

“And what about you, Oliver?” John asks. “What news?”

“None,” Oliver says, spearing some salad again.

“None?” John says. “Nothing at all happened today.”

Oliver rests the fork on his plate and squints into the distance. “Gosh, Dad.” He turns to John, wide-eyed. “I think that’s right—nothing at all! Oh, unless you count my killing spree in Katie’s physics class.”

“Seriously not funny,” John says.

“Whoops, sorry,” Oliver says, standing up and stretching. “Anyhow, don’t worry, Dad—I cleaned your gun and put it nicely back in the attic.”

“Enough,” John says.

“You bet, Dad.” Oliver bends down to kiss first John and then me. “I’m going upstairs now, to download some pornography. See you fine folks later.”

The moon is a cold, sizzling white tonight, caustically bright. Out the window everything looks like an X-ray; the soft world of the day is nowhere to be seen.

“When did you last talk to him about seeing Molnar?” John is sitting at the desk again. I glance at him then turn back to the window.

“He won’t,” I say.

“What are you looking at?” John says.

I close the blinds. “He won’t see Dr. Molnar. He won’t agree to see anyone. He doesn’t want to take anything. He seems to be afraid it will do something to his mind.” I sit down on the bed. Then I get up and sit down at the dressing table.

“Do something to his mind?” John says. “Isn’t that desirable? I treat him with kid gloves. I’m concerned. But this is getting out of hand, don’t you think? The raving, the grandiosity, the needling—wallow, wallow, atone, atone, avenge, avenge. And this morbid obsession with the hearings! Thank you, I do not understand what this is all about—what are we all supposed to be so tainted with? We may none of us be perfect, but one tries; one does, in my humble opinion, one’s best. And explain to me, please, what the kid is doing here—what’s his excuse? He should be at school.”

“Darling, it’s normal for a college student to want to come home from time to time.”

“He’s hardly ‘home’ in any case. For the last three days he’s been with Kate every second she’s not at school or asleep. I wouldn’t be surprised if he actually did go to her physics class today. Why the Ericksons put up with it, I can’t imagine. Have you seen that girl lately? She looks positively, what ... furtive. Furtive and drained, as though she were ... feeding some beast on the sly. What does he do to them? These wounded birds of his! It’s as if he’s running a hospital, providing charity

transfusions to ailing vampires. That Schaeffer girl last year—my god! And before her that awful creature who liked to take razor blades to herself.”

“Darling,” I say. “Darling? This is a hard world for young people.”

“If any human being leads an easy life, it’s that boy. Attention, education, privilege—what does he lack? He lacks nothing. The whole planet was designed for his well-being.”

“Well, it’s stressful to be away at school. To be studying all the time and encountering so many new ideas. And all young people like to dramatize themselves.”

“I didn’t,” John says. “And you didn’t.”

That’s true, I realize. John took pains, in fact, to behave unexceptionably, and I was so shy I would hardly have wanted to call attention to myself with so much as a hair ribbon. I certainly didn’t want drama! I wanted a life very much like the one I’d grown up with, a life like my parents’—a cozy old house on a sloping lawn, magnolias and lilacs, the sun like a benign monarch, the fragrance of a mown lawn, the pear tree a gentle torch against the blue fall sky, sleds and the children’s bicycles out front, no more than that, a music box life, the chiming days.

“Young people go through things. I don’t think we should allow ourselves to become alarmed. He hasn’t lost his sense of humor, after all, and—”

“His—excuse me?”

—and his grades certainly don’t reflect a problem. I know you’re thinking of what’s best for him, I know you’ve benefited, but he’s very afraid of medication. I don’t think he should be forced to—”

“No one’s forcing anyone to do anything here,” John says. “Jesus.”

“John, we don’t really have a gun in the house, do we?”

“Oh for god’s sake,” John says. “We don’t even really have an attic.”

“Just try to be patient with him,” I say. “He loves you, darling—he respects you.”

“I rue the day I ever agreed to work outside of the country,” John says.

“Oh, John, don’t say that darling! Even when it was difficult, it was a fascinating life for us all. And Oliver was very happy.”

“I curse the day,” John says.

Strange ... Yes, strange to think that we used to move around so much. And then we came back and settled down here, in a government town, where everyone else is always moving. Every four years, every eight years, a new population. And yet, everyone who arrives always looks just the same as the ones who left—as if it were all a giant square dance.

“What?” John says.

“How did Bob look?” I ask.

“Bob?” he says. “Older.”

Driving back along the highway this afternoon, flowing along in the reflections on the windshield, the shadows of the branches—it was like being underwater. Morning, evening, from one shore to the other, the passage between them is your body.

I stroke Oliver’s hair, but his jaw is clamped tightly shut and he’s staring up at the ceiling, his eyes glazed with tears.

When he was little, he and I used to lie on his bed like this and often I’d read to him, or tell him stories, and he liked to pretend that he and I were characters from the stories—an enchanted prince and a fairy, the fairy who put the spell on him or the one who removes it, or Hansel and Gretel, and we would

hide under the covers from whatever wicked witch. His imagination was so vivid that sometimes I even became frightened myself.

Yesterday I was sorting through some papers upstairs at my desk, when I noticed him and Kate outside on the lawn. He was holding the lapels of her jacket and they were clearly talking, as they always seem to be, with tremendous seriousness, as if they were explorers calculating how to survive on their last provisions. I could see Kate’s round, rather sweet face—at least it’s sweet when it’s not flickering with doubts, worries, fears—and then Oliver held her to him, and all I could see of her was her shiny, taffy-colored hair, pinned loosely up.

It’s an affecting romance. It’s not likely to last long, though—none of Oliver’s romances do, however intense they seem to be. Oliver is way too young. In any case, I can’t help imagining a warm young woman as a daughter-in-law, someone who would be glad for my company, rather than someone beset, as Kate always seems to be, by suspicion and resentment.

They came inside, and I could hear Oliver talking. The house was so silent I didn’t have to make any effort to hear the story he was telling, a story I’d certainly never told him myself, which he must have heard from the help someplace we’d lived or stayed during our time away, a strange, winding folk tale, it seemed to be, about a man who had been granted the power to understand the language of the animals.

Oliver spoke slowly, in a searching way, as if vivid but puzzling events were being disclosed to him one by one. Kate said not a word, and I was sure that the two of them were touching in some way, lying on the sofa feet to feet, or holding hands, or clasped together, looking over one another’s shoulders into the glimmering mist that fans out from a story. And in the

long silences I could feel her uneasiness as she waited for him to find the way to proceed.

It was as if they were sleeping, making something together in their sleep—an act of memory. But I was a stranger to it, following on my own as morning after morning the poor farmer discovers the broken pots, the palm wine gone—as finally one night he waits in the dark, watching, then chases the thieving deer through the fields and hills all the way to the council of the animals—as the Leopard King, in reparations, grants him the spectacular power on condition that he never reveal it—as the farmer and his wife prosper from this power, year after year.

The story spiraled in until the farmer, now wealthy, is forced to face an enraged accuser: “I was not laughing at you,” he says in desperation. “I laughed because I heard a little mouse say, I’m so hungry—I’m going into the kitchen to steal a bit of the master’s grain.”

Oliver paused to let the story waver on its fulcrum and the shame of eavesdropping broke over me in a wave, but before I could get up and shut the door of the room or make some other alerting noise, Kate spoke. Her voice was blurred and sorrowful. “What happened then?” she said, but it was clearly less a question than a ritual acknowledgment of the impending.

“Then?” Oliver said. “So—” He seemed to awaken, and shed the memory. “—then, as all the people of the village watched, the man’s lifeless body fell to the ground.”

All that time we were away, during his childhood—which seems as remote to me now as the places where we were—and John was working so hard, Oliver was my companion, my darling, my heart. And I was shocked, I suppose, to be reminded yesterday that his childhood could not have been more different from mine, that he and I—who hardly even have to speak, often, to understand one another completely—are divided by that

reality, by the differences between our earliest, most fundamental sense of the world we live in. I had never stopped to think, before, that he had heard stories from beyond the boundaries of my world. And I was really shocked, actually, that it was one of those stories, a story I never could have told him, that he had chosen to recount to Kate.

My gaze wanders around his pristine room, as orderly as a tribute. When he’s away, no one would think of disturbing anything he has here, of course, any of his possessions. But I do sometimes come in and sit on his bed.

He’s still focused at the ceiling as though he were urgently counting. “Shall I leave you alone darling?” I say. “Would you like me to leave you alone?”

But he reaches for my hand.

“Oliver?” I say. “Darling?”

He blinks. His startling, long, thick eyelashes sweep down and up; his eyes glisten.

“Darling, Katie is a dear girl, but sometimes I worry that she’s too dependent on you. You can’t be responsible for her, you know.”

He draws a breath and licks his dry lips. “I can’t be responsible for anything, Ma, haven’t you noticed?”

“That’s not true, darling. You’re a very responsible person. But I just want to be sure that you and Katie are using protection.”

He laughs, without lifting his head or closing his eyes, and I can tell how shallowly he’s breathing. “Protection against what, Ma? Protection against Evildoers?”

“I don’t want to pry, darling. I just want to set myself at ease on that score.”

“Be at ease, Ma. Be very at ease. You can put down your knitting, because whatever you’re fantasizing just isn’t the case.”

Well, I don't know. I remember, when we returned to the States, how it seemed to me, the onslaught of graphic images that are used to sell things—everywhere the perfect, shining, powerful young bodies, nearly naked, the flashing teeth, the empty, perfect, predatory faces, the threat of sexual ridicule, the spectre of sexual inadequacy if you fail to buy the critical brand of plastic wrap or insurance or macaroni and cheese. Either the images really had proliferated and coarsened during our absence or else I had temporarily lost something that had once kept the assault from affecting me.

I became accustomed to it again soon enough, though, and I don't know that I would have remembered the feeling now, that feeling of being battered and soiled, unless I'd just been reminded of Oliver's expression when, for example, we would turn on the television and that harsh, carnal laughter would erupt.

Maybe Oliver's fastidiousness, his severity, is typical of his generation. These things come in waves, and I know that many of Oliver's friends have seen older brothers and sisters badly damaged by all sorts of excesses. And it is a fact that Oliver spent his early childhood in places where there was a certain amount of hostility toward us—not us personally, of course, but toward our culture, I suppose, as it was perceived, and it wouldn't be all that remarkable, I suppose, if his view of his native country had been tarnished before he ever really came to live in it.

There were a lot of changes occurring in all the places where John had to go, and foreigners, like ourselves, from developed countries, were seen to represent those changes. Fortunately, most of the people we encountered personally received us, and the changes that accompanied us, with great enthusiasm.

In time, it came to feel to me as though we were standing in a shrinking pool of light, with shapes moving at the edges, but,

especially at first, I was delighted by the kindness, the hospitality of the local officials, by parties at the embassies. Everyone was always kind to Oliver, in any case—more than kind.

And there were always children around for Oliver to play with, the children of other people who had come to help, the engineers and agronomists and contractors of various sorts and people who were conducting studies or surveys, and children of the government officials to whose parties we went and so on, who invariably spoke English. And sometimes there would be a maid on the premises, or a gardener, who had children. But when we would drive by local markets or compounds, or even fenced-off areas, Oliver would cry—he would scream—to play with the children he saw outside the car window.

John would explain, quietly and tirelessly, about languages, about customs, about illnesses. We brought Oliver up to share—naturally—but how does a child share with another child who has nothing at all? I always thought, and I still think, that John was absolutely right to be cautious, but the fact is, when Oliver was a bit older and John was away for some days, I would sometimes relent and let Oliver play with some of the children whom, for whatever reason, he found so alluring.

Oliver had spent so little time on the planet, so all those places we went were really his life—his entire life until we came back—and maybe I didn't take adequate account of that. Sometimes now, when I hear one of those names—Nigeria, or Burma, or Ecuador—any of the names of places where we spent time—it is as lustrous to me as it was before I had ever traveled. But usually what those names bring to my mind now are only the houses where we stayed, all the houses, arranged for us by the various companies John was attached to, similarly well equipped and comfortable, where I spent so much time waiting for John and working out how to bring up a child in an unfamiliar place.

Oh, there were beautiful things, of course—many beautiful and exciting things. Startling landscapes, and the almost physical thrill of encountering unaccustomed languages and unaccustomed people, their music, their clothing, their faces, the food—the sharp, dizzying flash of possibilities revealed—trips into the hectic, noisy, astonishing towns and cities.

Sometimes, on a Sunday afternoon, when he wasn't traveling around, John liked to go to a fancy hotel if there was one in our area, and have a comically lavish lunch. Or, if we were someplace where the English had had a significant presence, a tea—which was Oliver's favorite, because of the little cakes and all the different treats and the complicated silver services.

There was the most glamorous hotel, so serene, so grand. The waiters were handsome—truly glorious—all in white linen uniforms that made their skin look like satin, dark satin. And their smiles—well, those smiles made you feel that life was worth living! And of course they were charming to Oliver, they could not have been more charming.

And there were elegant, tall windows overlooking the street, with heavy, shining glass that was very effective against the heat and noise, with long, white drapes hanging at their sides. It was really bliss to stop at that hotel, such a feeling of well-being to sip your tea, watching the silent bustle of the street outside the window. And then one afternoon, beyond the heavy glass—I was just pouring John a second cup, which I remember because I upset it, saucer and all, and could never get the spot out of my lovely yellow dress—there was a sort of explosion, and there was that dull, vast, sound of particles, unified, rising like an ocean wave, and everyone on the street was running.

Well, we were all a bit paralyzed, apparently, transfixed in our velvety little chairs—but immediately there was a whoosh,

and the faint high ringing of the drapery hardware as the waiters rushed to draw the long, white drapes closed.

Early on, John would sometimes describe to me his vision of the burgeoning world—lush mineral fields that lie beneath the surface of the earth and the plenitude they could generate, great arteries of oil that could be made to flow to every part of the planet, immense hydroelectric dams producing cascades of energy. A degree of upheaval was inevitable, he said, painful adjustments were inevitable, but one had to keep firmly in mind the long-term benefits—the inevitable increases in employment and industry, the desperately needed revenues.

Well, in practice things are never as clear, I suppose, as they are in the abstract; things that are accomplished have to get accomplished in one way or another. And in fairly fluid situations, certain sorts of people will always find opportunities. And that, of course, is bound to affect everyone involved, to however slight a degree.

In any case, eventually there was a certain atmosphere. And there were insinuations in the press and rumors about the company John was working with, and it just wasn't fun for John anymore.

It was an uncomfortable, silent ride to the airport when we finally did come back for good. I remember Oliver staring out the window at the shanties and the scrub and the barbed wire as John drove. There was a low, black billowing in the sky to one side of us, fire in the distance, whether it was just brush or something more—crops or a village or an oil field, I really don't know. And after we returned, there was a very bad patch for John, for all of us, though John certainly had done well enough financially. Many people had done very well.

“What is it, darling?” I ask Oliver. “Please tell me. Is one of your courses troubling you?”

He turns to gaze at me. “One of my courses?” His face is damp.

“You’re not eating at all. I’m so worried about you, sweetheart.”

“Ma, can’t you see me? I can see you. I can see everything, Ma. Sometimes I feel like I can see through skin, through bone, through the surface of the earth. I can see cells doing their work, Ma—I can see thoughts as they form. I can hear everything, everything that’s happening. Don’t you hear the giant footfalls, the marauder coming, cracking the earth, shaking the roots of the giant trees? What can we do, Ma? We can’t hide.”

“Darling, there’s nothing to be frightened of. We’re not in any danger.”

“His brain looks like a refinery at night, Ma. The little bolts of lightning combusting, shooting between the towers, all the lights blinking and moving ...”

“Darling—” I smile, but my heart is pounding. “Your father loves you dearly.”

“Mother!” He sits bolt upright and grabs me by the shoulders. “Mother, I’ve got one more minute—can’t you see me, there, way off in the distance, coming apart, flailing up the hill, all the gears and levers breaking apart, falling off—flailing up the hill at the last moment, while the tight little ball of fire hisses and spits and falls toward the sea? He’ll close his fist, Ma, he’ll snuff it out. Are you protected by a magic cloak? The cloak of the prettiest girl at school?”

“Please, darling—” I try to disengage myself gently, and he flops back down. “Oh, God,” he says.

“What, darling? Tell me. Please try to tell me so that I can understand. So that I can understand what is happening. So I can try to help you.”

“It’s all breaking up, Ma. How long do I have? I’m jumping from floe to floe. Do I have a minute? Do I have another minute after that?”

I run my hands over his face, to clear the tears and sweat. “This is a feeling, darling,” I say. My heart is lodged high up near my throat, pounding, as if it’s trying to exit my body. “It’s just a feeling of pressure. We’ve all experienced something like it at one time or another. You have to remember that it’s not possible for you to fix every problem in the world. Frankly, darling, no one has appointed you king of the planet.” I force myself to smile.

“Every breath I take is a theft,” he says.

“Oliver!” I say. “Please! Oh, darling, listen. Do you want to stay home for a while? Do you want to drop one of your courses? Tell me how to help you, sweetheart, and I will.”

“It’s no use, Ma. There’s no way out. It was settled for me so long ago, and now here’s your poor boy, his head all in pieces, just howling at the moon.”

During that whole, long time, when we were away, I used to dream that I was coming home. Almost every night, for a long time, I dreamed that I was coming home. I still dream that I am coming home.

I stand, for a moment, outside the bedroom door.

“Well, there you are,” John says, when I bring myself to open it. “I was calling for you. Didn’t you hear me?”

“I was ... Do we have any aspirin?”

“Come in,” he says. “Why don’t you come in?”

The blinds are drawn, the house is a thin shell. The acid moonlight pours down, scalding.”

“Talking to your son?” he asks.

“John?” I say. “Do you remember if Oliver ever had a nurse—maybe in Africa—who told him stories?”

“A ‘nurse?’” John says. “Is he having some sort of nineteenth-century European colonial hallucination?”

I sit down at the dressing table. In the mirror, I watch John pacing slowly back and forth. “He needs reassurance from you, darling,” I say. “He needs your approval.”

“My approval? Actually, it seems that I need his approval. After all, I’m an arch criminal, he must have mentioned it—he’s not one to let the opportunity slip by. I’m responsible for every ill on the planet, didn’t he spell it out for you? Poverty? My fault. Injustice? My fault. War somewhere? Secret prisons? Torture? My fault. Falling rate of literacy? Rising rate of infant mortality? Catastrophic climate change? New lethal viruses? My fault, whatever is wrong, whatever might someday go wrong, whatever some nut thinks might someday go wrong, it’s all my fault, did he not happen to mention that? The whole world, the future, whose fault can any of it be? Must be dear old Dad’s.”

I rest my head in my hands and close my eyes. When I open them again, John is looking at me in the mirror.

After a moment, he shakes his head and looks away. “I noticed we’re running low on coffee,” he says.

I turn around, stricken, to face him. A neat, foil packet, weighing exactly a pound—such a simple thing to have failed at! “I meant to pick some up today—I completely forgot, I’m so sorry, darling. But there’s enough for you in the morning.” He looks back at me, sadly, almost pityingly, as if he had just read a dossier describing all my shortcomings. “Enough for me?” he says. “But what about you? What will you do?”

“I don’t mind,” I say. “It doesn’t matter—it’s fine. I’ll get some later—I have to do a big shop tomorrow, anyhow.”

“No,” he says. “I’ll go out now. Someplace will still be open.”

John’s car pulls out. The sound shrinks into a tiny dot and I feel it vanish with a little, inaudible pop. I listen, but I can’t hear a thing from Oliver’s room—no music, or sounds of movement. I’ll check on him later, after John has gone to sleep. I begin to brush my hair. It’s surprisingly soothing—it always has been; it’s like an erasure.

It’s extreme to say, “I do my best.” That can never quite be true, and in my opinion it’s often just a pretext for self-pity, or self-congratulation—an excuse to give yourself leeway. Still, I do try. I try reasonably hard to be sincerely cheerful, and to do what I can. Of course I understand Oliver’s feeling—that he’s lashed to the controls of some machine that eats up whatever is in its path. But this is something he’ll grow out of. As John says, this is some sort of performance Oliver is putting on for himself, some melodrama. And ultimately, people learn to get on with things. At least in your personal life, your life among the people you know and live with, you try to live responsibly. And when you have occasion to observe the difficult lives that others have to bear, you try to feel gratitude for your own good fortune.

I did manage to throw out his card. I couldn’t help seeing the name; the address of his office twinkled by. But I made an effort to cleanse them from my mind right away, and I think I’d succeeded by the time the card landed in the trash basket.

There’s no chance that he would turn out to be the person who appeared to me this afternoon, really no chance at all. And I doubt I’m the person he was imagining, either—which

for all I know, actually, was simply a demented slut. And the fact is, that while I might not be doing Oliver or John much good, I'm certainly in a position to do them both a great deal of harm.

I'd intended to stay in today, to run some errands, to get down to some paperwork myself. But there we are. The things that are hidden! I felt such a longing to go into town, to go to the museum. It's not something I often do, but it's been a difficult week, grueling, really, with Oliver here, ranging about as if he were in a cage, talking talking talking about those hearings and heaven only knows what—and I kept picturing the silent, white galleries.

Looking at a painting takes a certain composure, a certain resolve, but when you really do look at one it can be like a door swinging open, a sensation, however brief, of vaulting freedom. It's as if, for a moment you were a different person, with different eyes and different capacities and a different history—a sensation, really, that's a lot like hope.

It was probably around eleven when I parked the car and went down into the metro. There was that awful, artificial light, like a disinfectant, and the people, silhouettes, standing and walking, the shapeless, senseless sounds. The trains pass through in gray streaks, and it's as if you've always been there and you always will be. You can sense the cameras, now, too—that's all new, I think, or relatively new—and you can even see some of them, big, empty eyes that miss nothing. You could be anywhere, anywhere at all; you could be an unknowing participant in a secret experiment. And with all those lives streaking toward you and streaking away, you feel so strongly, don't you, the singularity and the accidentalness of your own life.

We passed each other on the platform. I hadn't particularly noticed him until that second, and yet in some way

he'd impressed himself so forcibly upon me it was as if I'd known him elsewhere.

I walked on for what seemed to be a long interval before I allowed myself to turn around—and he was turning, too, of course, at just the same instant. We looked at each other, and we smiled, just a little, and then I turned and went on my way again.

When I reached the end of the platform, I turned back, and he was waiting.

He was handsome, yes, and maybe that was all it was about, really. And maybe it was just that beautiful appearance of his that caused his beautiful clothing too, his beautiful overcoat and scarf and shoes to seem, themselves, like an expression of merit, of integrity, of something attended to properly and tenderly, rather than an expression of mere vanity, for instance, or greed.

Because, there are a lot of attractive men in this world, and if one of them happens to be standing there, well, that's nice, but that's that. This is a different thing. The truth is that people's faces contain specific messages, people's faces are secret messages for certain other people. And when I saw this particular face, I thought, oh, yes—so that's it.

The sky was scudding by out the taxi window, and we hardly spoke—just phrases, streamers caught for an instant as they flashed past in the bright, tumultuous air. And no one at the reception desk looked at us knowingly or scornfully, despite the absence of luggage and the classically suspect hour. It was as solemn and grand, in its way, as a wedding.

We had taken the taxi, had stood at the desk; we had done it—the thought kept tumbling over me like peeling bells as we rose up in the elevator, our hands lightly clasped. And we were solemn, and so happy, or at least I was, as we entered our room, the beautiful room that we might as well have been the

first people ever to see—elated as if by some solution, when just minutes before we'd been on the metro platform, clinging fiercely, as if before a decisive separation, the way lovers do in wartime.

The Twilight of the Superheroes
New York: Picador, 2006