

# A CHILD IS BORN

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In Memory of Rose Kudelka

For a long time now our whole civilization has been driving, with tortured intensity growing from decade to decade, as if towards a catastrophe: restlessly, violently, tempestuously ... Where we live, soon nobody will be able to exist.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born.

*Antonio Gramsci*

For the beautiful is right at the margin of the terrifying, which we can only just endure.

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

For when the power of thought  
is coupled with ill will and naked force  
there is no refuge from it for mankind.

*Inferno XXXI, 55–57*



## Johnny's Big Day

A world like this, all comforting miracles – people can change if we really try. The world spins to itself and flies around the sun – I believe that much, there's faith. But I've noticed it tonight, and now I can't drive the speed from my head. The minute you start to measure *that*, you can't forget the numbers. You don't want to go there, I tell you. You don't want ever to see that place. Dip your toe in, the world rips it off to the knee and goes on without a burp or a cough. The world some nights is one big dare that you try it. So, okay.

I can tell you – I'm staring at this – you don't ever want to know what happens later. The powers tell you the future will be more wonderful than ever when one thing leads to the next, so that leads to this, and then we can all know why everything will be what it all became. Don't believe it – the world, this world, is never going to tell you how close the future or how long, *which*, I tell you, is the joke it's playing. Focken doctors, hired killers, and Emma fears them as much as I loathe them right now. And these are supposed to be the best in all the Dream City. At least when I brought her here, to this wheeled bed in this hard white room, thirty hours ago, there was only one of them, head wrapped in tall linen like an Assyrian priest or a pastry chef, shovel beard down to his chest. More of them have been sliding in sideways since the twenty-seventh hour, crowding out the nurses, not that they're doing anything. They're *standing* there, now me too. I'm no good at hearing, listening, whatever you call it. I can't organize noise, and she was punching too much of it through the door. Put a graphite in my hand, a bit of chalk, a burnt stick. Show me a wall to draw on, the edge of a newspaper, a patch of mud, *something*. I can make sense of the world that way. But not all this tormented air and her screams overpowering. So I look no matter how hard. If I die with her if it comes to that, I'll know that I didn't just listen and that watching was all I could do for her.

Emma has never suffered quietly. Her face was a twisting mask for the last hour, caught in a thundercloud of sweat-darkened hair. No more – now it's a crumpled moon, bloated around the edges and collapsed in

the centre. The sheet under her is a maze of wrinkles like an old woman's skin, dark with sweat, the blood seeping through each time they change it. She was blushing five minutes ago every inch of her, but no more.

Carbolic, ether, and defeat have stifled breathing, and the coppery taint of too much human blood. Four or five of them, junior butchers, are munching dinner at the bedside, one pace back. A weisswurst him, an apple him, two others chewing salt rolls and all muttering doctor talk while they watch. The All Highest One at the bed's foot is staring at her belly, scraping his jaw through his beard. She was screaming off and on for most of the day, for me, for her grandfather, then for nothing at all. Words have stopped escaping her. That last one, five minutes ago, I knew was the last from how it struggled so hard not to fade. That was her death-facing word, but I'll never know what it was. Only that it meant to tell us *stop, anything's better*, and that everyone knew it without saying so.

I elbow to the foot of her bed and stare again at two drooping red legs, a little soldier in his helmet. Breach birth. He was almost a boy. A yellowed sheet over her breasts to her throat, spotted and rivered, her face pale and damp, her chin longer somehow. I don't know the colour of her face – it belongs in a different world. It's no white you'd ever see in nature. It's the white of the cloud the soul turns into the moment it goes *pffft*. Her hair doesn't wave to me any more. It's plastered onto the pillow like a sea gone solid, leaching the little colour it has left. Does Death even take colours with Him?

'Get the father,' the All Highest One says.

'*I'm* the father.'

I'm thinking, superficial iliac circumflex, inferior mesenteric artery, vasa vasorum. Words forgotten years ago. And that if anyone has killed her, it's me. One seed, that's all. If it had been any other, those months ago. If we'd waited ten minutes, or two, would that have made a difference now? What point is *this* luck making?

Shovel beard says something I ignore, and says it again, and then pokes my arm and says –

'We can save the boy, possibly.'

'Doctors,' I tell him. 'I thought you always saved the mother first. Her grandfather told me.'

‘That’s a good deed, not a commandment. She’s gone, Mister Karsch. We can save the boy, maybe, right now.’

‘How do you know she’s dead?’

‘We’re men of science.’

‘You’re saying you don’t know *anything*.’

His sigh lands like a punch. ‘Look you. Her pupils are uneven, you see that from here. The back of her neck – feel the tendons.’ And he reaches there to show me. ‘They’ve been pressing through for one hundred minutes, and ninety’s the limit. Look at her feet – grey. Another minute, her ankles and so on up. Your boy tore an artery on the way out, bad luck. But he’s getting oxygen yet. We can save him, maybe. You decide.’

‘His name was going to be Johnny.’

‘If you want to baptize him, you’ll have to let us cut. He’s his mother’s son till then. Tell me now, do I try to save a lad?’

He brushes crumbs off his forearms, cracks his knuckles. A cleaning lady comes in pushing a mop at our feet. We step back while she works under the bed, clicking her tongue. How easy should death be? Death isn’t afraid, do you know. That’s the power it has over us and its weakness too: Death thinks fear goes one way.

‘Are you going to let us try, Mister Karsch? It’s all your decision.’

‘No,’ I tell him. ‘Let them rise together in grace.’

‘Wrong answer,’ he says, and body-blocks me out of the way. The strength, the shock. I’m up again in time to see the scalpel go in, a thumbnail blade with the power to gape a crease like that, and a soft, furry head float up from a lumpy pool of blood. He comes up with a tug and a pop, legs last, stone-faced, then Doctor Salt Roll dangles him by his feet, clears his mouth with a finger, gives him a shake and a slap. No starburst howl from Johnny. The room echoes with his cough, then a high-pitched squeal, then a snarl. He’s angry as hell, just like me, who wouldn’t be. When I look down again, they’re already stitching her and her face is that same white, and I know it now: liquid bone, that’s the colour. Imagine *that* before you see it. Emma, you didn’t want to go. You didn’t, and we knew that last, together. You were like the best of us still here in that way if no other – don’t deny your last, I tell you ... Let me remember that you’d have chosen another minute.

## Hunt that beast through every city

Johnny's world ... where has it started? I don't know where they took him, only that they all left with him before I could hold him. I open the window a crack to let her soul out, then search the walls for mirrors. I see one screwed to the wall, I cover it with my coat. I thought the two of us were immortal together, that to the point we knew how to love each other, we couldn't die. Emma would tell me, a lot, that love would kill her in the end, and I'd say, 'You're not from Budapest, no ...' And she'd laugh and laugh, don't ask me why. It was a private joke of hers that I stumbled against years ago, and she'd laugh and laugh. Where's the humour in Budapest? Okay, plenty, but I was never clear what was funny about Budapest to *her*. Someone that angry about most things at all times, and mostly at herself, all you could do was make her laugh, somehow, and I never questioned what worked. There's no sense being sad when you can be angry, we always knew that together. And if you can laugh when you're angry, even better. From the window, I look down into the hospital's carriage yard. Our child is riding onto this earth on an enraged wind. The trees buckle, glass clouds slice the sky. Will part of her soul stay attached to him in all of that? It's Christmas Eve, three nights after the darkest one. Across the city down there, coloured lights will be sparking as they soar, the air so cold you have to sip. While up here in the asylum woods, a wind is pouring from the eastern plain, a fist in the city's gut, a street-clearing wind turning the stonework into galloping horses, the snow into virgin stone. I swallow tears to stop their burning. I shiver at the keening window. Imagine Death hovering in that.

I see a horse pulling a cart stopped in the yard, and two attendants in hooded blanket coats carrying out a corpse in a winding sheet, snow streaming up from their boot tops. So two are lost tonight. A Franciscan told me as a lad once that no one dies alone, that every soul waits another soul's company for the journey. Every star is a word, and the space between is thoughts, but I can't hear the language in this. The light in the room blasts away all shadows. I look for the switch and can't find it. It's best to paint without shadows, but to draw? I'd brought all my kit, the twelve-pound sheets, the graphites and chalks,

charcoals and dry sponge. That was my plan for the birth, to draw everything I saw. And I'd started to, before the day went bad, and the night went worse.

I lift away her sheet without touching her. Her breasts have sagged to either side, swollen and tiny both, the nipples gone chalky as her skin. Her hair felt stiff, I don't touch it again. She used to talk with her hair, actually. Toy with it, toss it, tie it differently eight times a day, always free-flowing and never the same except for that shocking colour, burnt strawberry – a colour that existed only in *her* nature. Now some of it has covered her left cheek, a strand or two tangled between her lips, and there I leave it. She was always beautiful, but the kind that's about expressed motion. Her face elastic, her eyes quick, her feelings shifting every surface, her mood's body a reed in the wind or an oak in the clearing. I sit on the high deep windowsill, tablet tucked into right elbow. I've drawn the dead before, but this woman ... I loved her, do you know? We loved each other. We were both so sure that we never said it much, or we said it in ways no one else would have understood, with touches no one else could have felt. Those stitches ... those cannibals ... arched over her belly, one bootlace bow to each end of the last wound the world could make in her, the thread thick as package twine. Her belly swollen and flat at once and unsettled from the long tug they pulled to get Johnny out. Her limbs fragile as sticks, all weight no light. She's lost the pins that once held her together, she looks disorganized. *I'm bored*, she's saying, *but I don't care that I'm bored*. *Death – so what?* Look, Paul. Do what you do. Life's been hard before, so say goodbye your own way. Love her memory. There must be a way to do that as much.

Her stitches are leaking – that shouldn't be. Those butchers could have shown more care. I take out the purple chalk. Purple, her favourite colour. She used to wear it because she knew she shouldn't, with tones like hers. She'd wear black to birthday parties, yellow to funerals, checks and plaids to the theatre, vertical stripes to bring out her leaning tower of skin and bones, that was her. She knew how to dress – she was a clothes modeller when we met, at the Flöge sisters – but she only dressed to please or stun *some* people, when she cared enough – about me, or her grandfather. (How will I tell him? What will he tell me?) I put down the purple and pick up the green. Now the

blood is dripping. Focken doctors – I would have done a better job myself. I'm going to berate them later, for her memory's sake, so that I'll be able to remember for us both that I did. But before I start practising the words for that, she blinks.

I blink back, who would not. The body is a pagan temple whose mysteries I no longer worship. But when I look again, her eyelids have fluttered half-open, her lips are parted, and the next breath is hers, not mine. To a choking sigh, one finger shifts towards her wound.

'Paul?'

'Yes, dear?' What else can you say?

Hair stirs, chin dips, eyes two sparks in slow time, one to each corner. Mouth twists in horror and contempt. How do you imagine that? Horror and contempt ...

'What did you *do* to me, Paul?'

'Nothing, Emma.'

'Yes you *did*. I thought I was having a baby. Where is it?'

'I'll get a doctor.'

'Oh no, not one of *them* again ...'

Too late – then I'm out the door. The next one she sees, she's going to win that fight, and neither of us will want to miss it, whatever happens next.

## Through wooded landscapes, silent and invisible

We wake together in darkness. I light the woodstoves in kitchen and studio, and boil water for tea and warm Emma's morning blanket. I step outside to watch the winter morning gather under the first sun and to smoke my morning pipe. When one star is left in the sky, I've stopped knowing who it is. I return and brew tea. In our bed, reclined on three pillows, Emma has tightened three blankets over herself, pulled them tight to her chin. She cradles the mug of sugary tea in her hands and lowers her chin to inhale the steam. She cradles Johnny in her arms and throws a furrowed stare of disbelief at his first yawn bubble. Then she offers him to me for safety, reaches for a fresh vial of Reisler's Blue Riband, pulls the cork, and tilts. These days, three swallows all gone. Then she gazes lovingly into my eyes until her pupils



clench and roll up and her thoughts sag back down to the pillow in an opium coma, while I place a drooling pad under her cheek and tuck her in till night returns.

## Images of an exiled past

What! What? Who? *All right*, yes then ... Paul did it too, once. I saw. Don't let him tell you he didn't. Every morning for seven years, he's poured one finger of rum into his morning tea (then made two or three warm-up drawings of me) before he starts in the studio. Every studio is too chilly most mornings – those high ceilings, and who can afford to heat a room that size? Makart maybe, but no one wants to be him any more, and even Gus with an income like his works in a chill. Then every evening, I've gone to the studio and poured him three fingers of plum brandy, peasant stuff, into the wine chalice, Czech crystal in a steel base, and he's shot it back to buff the edges of his evening's fading vision. Except one morning he told himself, 'I'll drink the chalice before breakfast to see what happens in the studio.' Like an experience, you know? He's always open. *Mistake*, that one – direct to the hands. His words for it after he came back that evening with a look of aghast on his face – direct to the hands. He couldn't work for three days (with Paul, bad things always happen in threes), which for him is as frightening as life gets. He did what he always does when he's scared, which is get angry. I did what I always do when he's angry, which is act scared. Then his pride wouldn't let him calm down for a day. Now he only gets drunk on Saturday nights, the good stuff – Count Freddie's *Élite Tokay*, whatever's left in the case from the week, one bottle or three. Then on Sunday morning while he's hung over or still drunk, he stumbles down the cottage hill to the Church of the Insane for Eucharist. It's supposed to be just for inmates of the nerve asylum outside the village, but he enamelled a lot of the wall tiles five years ago when they were building it, as piecework, and the priest remembers that, so they let him in as long as he doesn't agitate the inmates. I don't know what he does in there, but for the rest of the Sunday, he acts pretty normal.

His creed, they almost all feel guilty about everything, but a few of them feel guilty about nothing, and he's the second type. The way he explains it, they can do anything they want as long as they tell a priest

later. That's *it*. No wonder Catholics are evil. The guilty type are scared my kind want to rule the world. The other type won't tell you they already do. It's the lack of guilt that lets them and the certainty that comes with it. Don't ever ask a rhetorical question around Paul, I warn you, unless you really want an answer (you don't). Guilt, he acts like, is the mark of someone else's conscience in you, and he never notices anything wrong with his own. Why do I love him so much? I bask in his certainty. He really doesn't *know* that guilt is possible. What a life that must be – daddy, buy me *that*.

My cordial wore off before dark today, and down there's Johnny tangled in the bedsheets. The wetnurse we've brought from the nerve asylum (they make babies there, too) comes up twice morning and twice afternoon and sits on a stool (always where I can't miss her) and nurses him while I ask myself, 'Where does she put those when she's done?' I'm used to being around Flöge models, and I'm sure my next nightmare *really* is going to be about waking up with a shelf like that. She burps him and places him at the foot of the sheets for when I look that direction as a hint for me to pick him up or something. How do I even know he's mine? I wasn't there. Because Paul says? All *right* ...

Johnny's half-awake too, so I get out the little woollen ball and play catch with him. It's his favourite thing. He hasn't caught it yet. Paul says sixteen days is too early, but he's trying to console me again. I toss him another. His eyes flicker at it, I think, and for a moment I don't feel as if he's trying to scare me back to death. Who *are* you, Johnny? One toss sails a little over his head and I reach for it without thinking and howl with pain. Well, not howl. Only inside. You'd better get the short course on Johnny's revenge for being born. He tried to come out backwards through the wrong hole, basically, and no one could reason with him. Now we're wearing diapers together, and he'll be out of them before me. And he'll be making his own babies before I ever try again, so declared. Is that why he's trying to smile right now? I stare back, making a stone face at his beady little eyes and pointed nose and snickering laugh. You tried to kill me, Johnny, and what do I do about that?

I can get out of bed by myself. I learned yesterday – just pretend to be a dreadnaught leaving harbour. One leg creeps to the floor, then the other. Bum seesaws to the edge of the bed. Onto my elbows, then my palms, then bend the knees (try to) and push, and choke down a scream

where I can't help bending, and there's mother's downstairs maid on loan getting ready to catch me in a robe.

A scarlet robe, a consolation from Gus the Painter day I left the hospital. A scarlet robe of quilted silk with golden cranes, green bamboo, tiny silver stitches. I asked to wear it for him once, when I saw it hanging in his wardrobe, the oak one in the hallway where his pose models used to wait, the closet a sunburst of kimonos, sarongs, Spanish lace. He smiled and said nothing, but someone like him, who talks with so much hesitation, you always know what his smile thinks: *You don't need it, Emma*. So I stood in his studio under the skylight, just *there*, just so, and shrugged one shoulder at a time until the cotton smock pooled at my feet, arms and legs like this, starburst hair fluffed like this, back arched just a little. Hand under my chin, relax my belly, hold. And a few weeks later I'm the second water sprite from the top. And eight years later, he's remembered. It came the day Johnny and I left the hospital, by a messenger blowing his little bugle from the bottom of the path. And an hour after that, a dogcartload of bringwiths from Paul's sister Charlotte, who lives a twenty-minute gallop over the other hill, in a much darker valley than the one below our garden. From her, a crate of Count Freddie's Élite Tokay smelling of the straw the bottles are cushioned in, a brace of pheasant shot out of season that no one knows how to cook, three freshly laundered horse blankets that even Paul struggles to lift all together, and a 100 gram tin of cocaine hydrochloride sealed and certified at the Duclos Laboratory of St-Cloud. Happy New Year to me. I hope Paul leaves me some. For me it's got to be nothing but opiates, and a litre of something nice, until I get some strength back.

I look through the window, out at the world, down the hill through the frozen sunlight, the black pines. And there's my grandfather, and his horse and cart, and Paul with him. Paul and horses – I knew about it when I married him, I was ready for it, I told myself I'd forgive no matter what, but on days like these new ones, with me feeling so horribly vulnerable, it isn't easy. Watch Paul running his fingers through her golden mane, patting her strong, ivory flanks, staring deep into her mouth while she snorts, feeding her a carrot. I can't deny this is happening or stop racking myself for ways to live with it. Her name's Ostara, can you believe that? That's the Aryan Goddess of Spring, you

heard. Times like this, a city like ours, a world like the one we've got, she might as well have been named 'Jew Basher,' which would have been more on point.

'Why don't you change her name, grandfather?'

'I suppose I could,' he told me. This was two years ago, after he brought her home from the cabbage farmer in Krems who sold her. 'But I'd rather not contribute to this world's bitterness by taking sides that way. I'll take good care of her, and she'll take good care of me, and together we'll come to understand what we add to each other's world. Horses and people go back thousands of years, Emma, and neither has destroyed the other. Doesn't that prove that the present days are the real aberration? Surely we can get along if our people's desire for peace can express itself through open acts of goodwill.' And I think, *All right* ... Who would not want to believe it? So I try again.

Just then, a twisted, one-toothed face pops up to the window and shrieks at my face, then waits for the result with a giggle of expectation. Hi you again, my stare tells her, sorry but not today. My nerves are getting stronger – I don't lean back or gasp this time at this one. Fourth since I woke, I count without trying to stop myself. They all know me and Paul; this was their hill long before ours. There's a footpath alongside the cottage, from the asylum to the next village, and the good behavers, the ones who aren't on lockdown or crazy watch, get to wander the hills between porridge and cocoa. The cacklers and droolers and handflappers, the Napoleons and Caesars, they wander the hills. That's what crazy ones do to comfort themselves if you let them. They wander the hills, sigh. Mostly it's the manic depressives who climb this high, who brave the rope path up and down. The hysterics would rather stay in their rooms and mope, and the dementics are too heavily dosed. You think they'd seep into Paul's work up here, but no. He draws them sometimes as a technical thrill, but he doesn't subject them to paint. I know why, after seven years with: these people are trapped in their own worlds, and he gravitates more towards the one we face together down below, the Dream City, the one full of people with choices and no excuses. With all the free will that frightens them so badly. Each of these ones is lost in a world too unique for others to join or rescue them, hears the world speak with a language no one else knows so that they have to think thoughts no one else can. It's madness

itself to think they fall outside the human – you don't want to know how much like us they are in ways we don't want to know. So, now you know how we got the cottage for so near to nothing – no one wants to live this close to the nerve asylum, especially the path to us almost a cliff. (How did he get me up here last week?) Truth, we're usually only here summers now, but this winter we've found that with both stoves lit it's warmer than our apartment on the canal quay, and that the silence, especially at night, is doing me good.

I'm teaching myself little things, like how to walk without falling like a tree, how to fill the kettle without bending at the waist, how to step into shoes with no hands. I'm walking on my sixteenth day, so take *that*, Johnny. The night wind in the chimney sounds like a flute. Lying there, with Paul breathing beside me and Johnny snoring in his cage at the foot of the bed, I'm warm enough. Baby makes three – three is the number we'll always be. It's the first thing the doctors told Paul, and then he told me. And then they cut me again to make sure of it. Neat little stitches this time, dozens of them, not the kind they use to sew corpses. They even left me my sailor. I'd expected them to cut it out to take my mind off it.

Johnny smells like walrus milk (you'd have to see her) and feels like a raw dumpling when I pick him up. Yes, it hurts. But after you live through ten years of cycles and five of heroic medicine, what's a little of that? What's a lot of that? It hurts but so what? I've tried to be tough as Paul, and practising that is helping me get through this. We look at each other these nights when he comes in from out there, and it's as if we're telling each other that our life together had better not dare start hurting.

I get to sleep all I want up here and to avoid people I don't want to see. The visitors we want, the ones with something to say to us, always come in the evening. Paul has so much work to finish, with his show at the SilverDome in May and eleven canvases to prepare by then. He needs every minute of daylight this winter.

Live. To live? What a word. I *thought* it was a word. I really didn't yearn to come back from the dead, not the first new sensation of it, not while I was sort of up there watching myself on the night of Johnny's Big Day. *Different*, you know? I saw the clock on the clinic wall, and it had stopped. Paul was moving around, but the clock? Did you ever

imagine that? When every clock has stopped, time is telling you something. And the wind through the window that Paul cracked open, I knew it was cold but I didn't feel the cold, it gripped me but I didn't feel it grip. I was in pain but the pain, like I said, was down there, in that corporeal place that was no longer me. After you die, there's no more experience, not in heaven. No, heaven, the corner I listened to from the cloudy gates, sounds a little like a party with lots of bland party food and tinkly music and people you're supposed to like because they're dead too, and they're all laughing to themselves at the same small joke you arrived just too late to hear. And that's it – everything. I could have tolerated heaven, but I don't know how long. I would have got bored soon, which was always a bad idea for me. If there's anything I've craved all my life, it's experience, for change to have its chance at me, for me to let those chances their try. If I have to die to see those clouds again, I'm still too young to crave it.

But that's *now*, that's what I see behind me from sixteen days. *Then*, while I was waiting for what happened next, this ... well, *breath* sort of floated me back this way and suddenly, *snap*, my body and I were one thing again and my body was letting me know it. Up there's powers and authorities had made a choice before I had any say, and for once, with Paul to hold me, I rode with them.

## A dream sleep has fallen on the city

First thing, she tried to pass one by you about playing catch with Johnny. The truth – she's terrified he's going to be left-handed. Don't ask me why. *I'm* left-handed, and she loves it. My right hand never did much for her unless she was already in a mood to be done to, but when she feels my left one coming up the back of her left knee ... like a bath in fireworks for her. Used to be. Here's an even darker secret – *she's* left-handed, and she's ashamed. If you want to see her blush mauve, catch her writing something and watch her try to hide that she was. When anyone but me is there, and she has to sign her name, pour from a bottle, pick up a broom, anything like that, she pins her left arm to her side like it's paralysed. The *guilt*, I tell you. Don't ask me where from. And now it's about Johnny. She takes a little cloth ball in her

right hand and tosses it towards his right hand, and waits to see which way he's going to lean. Every day, over and over. The truth is, her demons stopped trying me on a long time ago. I learned to ignore them for the both our sakes. For example, it's okay that I loathe her mother as much as she does, but I've stopped calling her brother Emil an evil dwarf when she can hear me. He is, obviously to anyone you want to know, but the first time the woman you love tells you he isn't, or that two and two make three or that lamppost there is made of marzipan – it's over. You hear the *way* she told you, then cast her a nod of credibility and go over and choke down a bite while she's watching. Do you love a woman? Think long, stare at the horizon, remember the walk you're making together. Then don't argue about what won't matter when you get there. I tell myself that some of what she believes was true *once*, or that she's being allegorical.

If it's a story you want ... I'm no good at them but I'll try. You take a plum, a late fall one, purple with a crimson flesh, and cut a sliver out of it this wide from stem to bottom and give it the gentlest squeeze. That's what she looked like down there before Johnny, but now I don't know, she won't let me see, and she stares at Johnny as if he was the last who did and he'd better not tell. Mirrors ... Long ago it was, she could never pass one. As soon as she saw, her graven self-image yanked her to a lingering stop. I understand, actually – so would you. Anyone who thinks that beauty is subjective has just never seen her walk with intent. Her eyes would pour into her reflexion to absorb herself entire, and she'd straighten and arch, hands sliding caresses up her belly, her tilting hips and shoulders, until she lifted her hair with elbows high, having loosened her frock just so it slipped down her waist from her hint of command. It saddened her, you could tell, that the world could never be as perfect as herself, that only in a mirror would she ever experience the sublime vision we all met in her. Then she'd cup her breasts up (a tender moment to share with herself) and gaze longingly at her features one by one, and sighing wistfully turn to remember me waiting in bed behind her. *All right ...* My turn *then*, let the worship begin. She was like that the first night I saw, before she knew anything except herself. Vain? I didn't mind, and she knew how to carry it lightly and when to put it away when there was no one near to intimidate. It was less work for me that she could love herself outwardly without my help or

approval. But she lives in her head now, and that's an adjustment for her. She was told for years (not by me) that her head was where all her problems were, and now it's the part that always works. Since Johnny's Big Day, she's had no choice but to think first.

In the silence at the studio door, charging my sunset pipe, I can intuit the forces. It's a time and place I always can. I've no desire for eternal forms, and just then, here, I can sense the mutable forces while they come out. Below in the city, people yearn only for stasis. Come out here now, forces, cast your stars for us to know this heaven, truly.

I watch her grandfather stop his cart at the foot of the rope walk. He leads Ostara into the snow-filled ditch a little nervously, cosies her under a blanket, ducks her kick. When a horse doesn't snort before it kicks, you know evil exists. There are a hundred types of Jews in the Dream City. If they ever rule the world, their king will look something like him – burly, round-edged, round-faced, wrinkled eye creases and a wide straight mouth. Tall felt boots, tucked black pant legs, two heavy grey sweaters below a fisherman's cap but never a jacket. His neat beard is a rich-looking grey. Life hasn't crushed him, and it's good to know that someone old has survived this world as well as he has. It's good for Emma to see it. But no one knows how he's done it. Sometimes you want to be around someone like that, who can slow the world down with just the look he gives it. He came down from Stry half a century ago and did well. He could have left the Isle of Jews years ago, he did well enough to buy into the Ninth Quarter like his son (Emma's daddy, in the register). But he doesn't want to. All his customers are there where he started, and he feels obligated to them.

I come down to greet him, and tell him again: 'A little hay in the morning, a little more at noon, just a handful of oats in the evening with a tossing of hay. When a mare has this much jump to her, it's good for her to start work a little tired.'

'Logical,' he says. When he uses that word, he smiles with his silver eyes wide open, a little boy's eyes after seventy years. 'But it's her nature to be skittish. Let's let her be what she is and not try to make her what she isn't. And how is Emma? Has Johnny caught his ball yet?'

The backstairs maid is still there. I've told her to wait for grandfather and boil us some dinner and get a ride with him back to the city. Emma has gone to bed again, still in her robe, and now she's wearing a



round boxcap with her hair billowing from under it, embroidered silk, red with unreadable yellow script, another Johnny's Day gift from Gus. Johnny is at the foot of the bed, talking cackle talk to himself. Emma lights a cigarette and blows a smoke ring at his right shoulder.

While the maid is bringing us mugs of tea, he places our apartment mail in front of me and pats it with his hand.

'No bills, no draughts. And how is little Johnny?'

'Hold him and see,' Emma says. Their little ritual. He dandles Johnny in his hands, the lad's arms winged out, eyes round and bright with unfocused wonder. Johnny never smiles at us, but look at him now. Grandpa inhales his milk smell and kisses his forehead.

'Four kilos seven,' grandfather says. He's handled cabbage out of his shop forty years, so I believe him. He smells of sauerkraut, but softly.

'Little lion, what colour is your hair going to be, eh? Like your father's? Like your grandfather's? I think not. That colour goes to the women in our family. The next century's yours, lad. How will you change it when we aren't there to see, eh?'

Emma has energy only to stare. She has one of those for me and everyone else – pale and flinty – and then this melting one that you see when her grandfather's near. God knows we can use his smile. There's been plenty of laughter around here since Johnny, but not much smiling. You laugh at fate, you don't smile at it.

'I got up twice today,' she says. 'I can sit in the armchair.'

'That's good news,' he says.

'If you don't believe me, ask *her*,' she says, pointing to the maid. 'She saw.'

Another of Emma's specialties – she has null tolerance for being disbelieved or misunderstood. The maid brings us each a plate of potato soup with a little sauté of cabbage piled in the centre. Deal with the maid quickly, let's. I don't know her name, and she has no personal qualities – Emma's mother scraped them off her within a week twenty years ago. She's a robot, which is how Mrs Aaronson likes everyone. Mrs Aaronson's world is a function of her own needs, so tell yourself how much fun Emma's had as her daughter. The maid cooks and cleans for us and then goes back to the city at dusk, to tell Emma's mommy everything she saw up here, because really, and everyone knows it, mommy loaned her to us for spying duties. Now we're supposed to

worry about what her mother knows, but even Emma doesn't do that any more.

Then after dinner grandfather takes three slim tubes of lathed wood from his pocket, unstained mahogany, their ends sealed tight with pegs, and a tack hammer and three tin brackets from the other pocket, and a sachet of flat-head nails. He places all of it on the corner of the table so that Emma can see. No, she says without reaching, show me. And I hand one tube to her.

'One doesn't have to place them during the day,' he says. 'It would have been better, perhaps.'

'In case God's eyes are failing,' I say.

'In case *mine* are. God has no opinion on that part. Some of us mortals do, I'm sure, but we're safe from them up here. Let me explain: *Sh'ma yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai ekhad*. That's "Hear, oh Israel, our God Adonai is one." Which is also the first prayer I learned as a lad. Then three more lines, mostly from Devarim. That's what's written on the slips of paper inside. Three *mezuzot* is all you need here. The kitchen doesn't have a door, so not there. But the bedroom does, and the front door, of course, and the back door. Not your studio, because you work there, you don't dwell there.'

The day we returned here after Johnny's Big Day, he visited the day after, and she asked him for these. I believe in luck, so if she's looking for some of her own, I'm not going to step in front of her.

Grandfather and I join each other on the front step, the snowbanks surrounding us a cold sea under the moon.

'Shoulder height so that people can touch as they enter,' he tells me.

'You know what I think,' I say. 'This is Emma making sure her parents never visit us here.'

'We have to live before we learn to live well,' he says. 'That's why it's so sad to look back instead of forward. So ... always attached diagonally. Two wise people got in an argument over that centuries ago. One said horizontal, the other said vertical. So, an easy compromise that's lasted eight hundred years. Can we hope?'

'Do you people turn everything into a life lesson?'

'Do you people turn everything into a superstition?'

He places the first bracket where I can tap in the first nail.

'Oh yes, Paul,' he grins while I tap in the second nail. 'Keep walking,

do. All the walks you take will get you somewhere, if you end-to-end them long enough. I'm always curious whom you'll meet. If you ever see someone special beside you, tell me. I'll come over for dinner, bringing some special biscuits, perhaps, and Emma will roast a nice saddle of lamb. A real end-of-days feast.'

He slides the first box onto its bracket and pats it with his fingertips. '*Barukh atah Adonai ...* We'd love to see God, Paul, but we also accept that he doesn't want us to, so we never expect to. I'd say it's better if no one ever does – heaven help civilization if people ever think the gods are actually revealing themselves. When I think of all the churches full of symbols in this city, I don't wonder that so many people are resented for insisting He can't be seen. And Emma?' He brushes snow from his sweater, puffs a few stray flakes from his hat. 'There's no such thing as a pure motive. Perhaps these are Emma's way of saying she wants to believe something, or it's just her way of declaring, "A Jew lives here."' "

'It's like I said, she's hanging garlic to keep her mother away. Her mommy hates being a Jew. I don't understand that. How can people not like what they are?'

He sighs once gently and looks at me with his head tilted a little. 'Paul, you married a woman who every day of her life has been despised by half this world immediately, intensely, and for no reason at all. Get used to it, sonny.' He shrugs once, quickly. *Enough*. 'You've blessed me, you two. I don't know anyone with a great-grandchild. Life has been all worry and hope since he came to you.'

The question – How will you raise him? – he's never asked it. Nine days after, Johnny kept his helmet. If he's sad about that ... he *isn't* sad. He's having too much fun. That's what a baby means, you know – a chance to find new sense in the world for a while.

'Now the bedroom. One blessing per house, by the way. No more *barukh* and so on.'

When we enter again, Emma is sleeping in my armchair, a baby's bottle in her hand, Johnny sprawled over the bedspread across from her. I lift Johnny from her lap before he can learn how to slide off. Grandfather catches the bottle.

'Nothing will wake her for a while, will it?' he asks.

We attach the second *mezuzah* to the doorframe behind her, and a third, outside again, to the back door. I swoop Johnny into my arms

and hand him to the maid for her to feed him and invite grandfather into my studio for a moment. The Aaronsons' maid is clicking her tongue at both of us. She's a bundle of repressed hostility. *That's something.* She thinks this is Mayerling and she'll find us dead in our beds one morning before the month is out, struck by lightning and a pistol cradled between us, charged with opium pellets and cocaine powder.

In the studio, the stove is smoking, and I tinker with the flue while I tell him, the desk, the near corner. He unties the portfolio and looks down, sliding the sheets slowly, layer by layer. *Thank God she's wearing something in these.* When he turns –

‘Take one, please.’

‘Thank you, Paul.’

‘Next time, on your way from the island you can stop at Rosemeyr's on Hail Mary. He'll have a frame ready. Which one did you choose?’

He shows me.

‘They're working drawings for that one,’ I tell him. ‘The third drop-cloth, please.’

All right, yes, [ ... ]