

Clock time is our bank manager, tax collector, police inspector;

this inner time is our wife.



—J. B. Priestley, *Man and Time*

P R O L O G U E



CLARE: It's hard being left behind. I wait for Henry, not knowing where he is, wondering if he's okay. It's hard to be the one who stays.

I keep myself busy. Time goes faster that way.

I go to sleep alone, and wake up alone. I take walks. I work until I'm tired. I watch the wind play with the trash that's been under the snow all winter. Everything seems simple until you think about it. Why is love intensified by absence?

Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water, scanning the horizon for the tiny ship. Now I wait for Henry. He vanishes unwillingly, without warning. I wait for him. Each moment that I wait feels like a year, an eternity. Each moment is as slow and transparent as glass. Through each moment I can see infinite moments lined up, waiting. Why has he gone where I cannot follow?

HENRY: How does it feel? *How does it feel?*
Sometimes it feels as though your attention has wandered for just an instant. Then, with a start, you realize that the book you were holding, the red plaid cotton shirt with white buttons, the favorite black jeans and

the maroon socks with an almost-hole in one heel, the living room, the about-to-whistle tea kettle in the kitchen: all of these have vanished. You are standing, naked as a jaybird, up to your ankles in ice water in a ditch along an unidentified rural route. You wait a minute to see if maybe you will just snap right back to your book, your apartment, *et cetera*. After about five minutes of swearing and shivering and hoping to hell you can just disappear, you start walking in any direction, which will eventually yield a farmhouse, where you have the option of stealing or explaining. Stealing will sometimes land you in jail, but explaining is more tedious and time-consuming and involves lying anyway, and also sometimes results in being hauled off to jail, so what the hell.

Sometimes you feel as though you have stood up too quickly even if you are lying in bed half asleep. You hear blood rushing in your head, feel vertiginous falling sensations. Your hands and feet are tingling and then they aren't there at all. You've mislocated yourself again. It only takes an instant, you have just enough time to try to hold on, to flail around (possibly damaging yourself or valuable possessions) and then you are skidding across the forest-green-carpeted hallway of a Motel 6 in Athens, Ohio, at 4:16 a.m., Monday, August 6, 1981, and you hit your head on someone's door, causing this person, a Ms. Tina Schulman from Philadelphia, to open this door and start screaming because there's a naked, carpet-burned man passed out at her feet. You wake up in the County Hospital concussed with a policeman sitting outside your door listening to the Phillies game on a crackly transistor radio. Mercifully, you lapse back into unconsciousness and wake up again hours later in your own bed with your wife leaning over you looking very worried.

Sometimes you feel euphoric. Everything is sublime and has an aura, and suddenly you are intensely nauseated and then you are gone. You are throwing up on some suburban geraniums, or your father's tennis shoes, or your very own bathroom floor three days ago, or a wooden sidewalk in

Oak Park, Illinois, circa 1903, or a tennis court on a fine autumn day in the 1950s, or your own naked feet in a wide variety of times and places.

How does it feel?

It feels exactly like one of those dreams in which you suddenly realize that you have to take a test you haven't studied for and you aren't wearing any clothes. And you've left your wallet at home.

When I am out there, in time, I am inverted, changed into a desperate version of myself. I become a thief, a vagrant, an animal who runs and hides. I startle old women and amaze children. I am a trick, an illusion of the highest order, so incredible that I am actually true.

Is there a logic, a rule to all this coming and going, all this dislocation? Is there a way to stay put, to embrace the present with every cell? I don't know. There are clues; as with any disease there are patterns, possibilities. Exhaustion, loud noises, stress, standing up suddenly, flashing light—any of these can trigger an episode. But: I can be reading the *Sunday Times*, coffee in hand and Clare dozing beside me on our bed and suddenly I'm in 1976 watching my thirteen-year-old self mow my grandparents' lawn. Some of these episodes last only moments; it's like listening to a car radio that's having trouble holding on to a station. I find myself in crowds, audiences, mobs. Just as often I am alone, in a field, house, car, on a beach, in a grammar school in the middle of the night. I fear finding myself in a prison cell, an elevator full of people, the middle of a highway. I appear from nowhere, naked. How can I explain? I have never been able to carry anything with me. No clothes, no money, no ID. I spend most of my sojourns acquiring clothing and trying to hide. Fortunately I don't wear glasses.

It's ironic, really. All my pleasures are homey ones: armchair splendor, the sedate excitements of domesticity. All I ask for are humble delights. A mystery novel in bed, the smell of Clare's long red-gold hair damp from washing, a postcard from a friend on vacation, cream dispersing into coffee,

the softness of the skin under Clare's breasts, the symmetry of grocery bags sitting on the kitchen counter waiting to be unpacked. I love meandering through the stacks at the library after the patrons have gone home, lightly touching the spines of the books. These are the things that can pierce me with longing when I am displaced from them by Time's whim.

And Clare, always Clare. Clare in the morning, sleepy and crumpled-faced. Clare with her arms plunging into the papermaking vat, pulling up the mold and shaking it so, and so, to meld the fibers. Clare reading, with her hair hanging over the back of the chair, massaging balm into her cracked red hands before bed. Clare's low voice is in my ear often.

I hate to be where she is not, when she is not. And yet, I am always going, and she cannot follow.