

I

I CAN TELL YOU about my friend Andrew, the cognitive scientist. But it's not pretty. One evening he appeared with an infant in his arms at the door of his ex-wife, Martha. Because Briony, his lovely young wife after Martha, had died.

Of what?

We'll get to that. I can't do this alone, Andrew said, as Martha stared at him from the open doorway. It happened to have been snowing that night, and Martha was transfixed by the soft creature-like snowflakes alighting on Andrew's NY Yankees hat brim. Martha was like that, enrapt by the peripheral things as if setting them to music. Even in ordinary times, she was slow to respond, looking at you with her large dark rolling protuberant eyes. Then the smile would come, or the nod, or the shake of the head. Meanwhile the heat from her home drifted through the open door and fogged up Andrew's eyeglasses. He stood there behind his foggy lenses like a blind man in the snowfall and was without volition when at last she reached out, gently took the swaddled infant from him, stepped back, and closed the door in his face.

This was where?

Martha lived then in New Rochelle, a suburb of New York, in a neighborhood of large homes of different styles—Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Greek Revival—most of them built in the 1920s and '30s, houses set back from the street with tall old Norway maples the predominant trees. Andrew ran to his car and came back with a baby carrier, a valise, two plastic bags filled with baby needs. He banged on the door: Martha, Martha! She is six months old, she has a name, she has a birth certificate. I have it here, open the door please, Martha, I am not abandoning my daughter, I just need some help, I need help!

The door opened and Martha's husband, a large man, stood there. Put those things down, Andrew, he said. Andrew did as he was told and Martha's large husband thrust the baby back into his arms. You've always been a fuck-up, Martha's large husband said. I'm sorry your young wife has died but I expect that she's dead of some stupid mistake on your part, some untimely negligence, one of your thought experiments, or famous intellectual distractions, but in any event something to remind us all of that gift you have of leaving disaster in your wake.

Andrew put the baby in the baby carrier that lay on the ground, lifted the carrier with the baby, and walked

slowly back to his car, nearly losing his balance on the slick path. He fastened a seat belt around the carrier in the backseat, returned to the house, picked up the plastic bags and the valise and carried them to the car. When everything was secured, he closed the car door, drew himself up, turned, and found Martha standing there with a shawl around her shoulders. All right, she said.

[*thinking*]

Go on. . . .

No, I'm just thinking of something I read about the pathogenesis of schizophrenia and bipolar disease. The brain biologists are going to get to that with their gene sequencing, finding the variations in the genome—those protein suckers attached to the teleology. They'll give them numbers and letters, snipping away a letter here, adding a number there, and behold the disease will be no more. So, Doc, you're in trouble with your talking cure.

Don't be too sure.

Trust me, you'll be on unemployment. What else can we do as eaters of the fruit of the tree of knowledge but biologize ourselves? Expunge the pain, extend the life. You want another eye, say, in the back of your head? That can be arranged. Put your rectum in your knee? Not a problem. Even give you wings if you want, though the result would not be flying aloft but more like giant skips, floating megastrides as on those tracks that are like flat-

tened escalators moving along the long airport corridors. And how do we know God would not want this, perfecting his fucked-up imperfect idea of life as an irremediable condition? We're his backup plan, his fail-safe. God works through Darwin.

So Martha took the baby after all?

I think also of how we decay in our rotting coffins, and how we reincarnate, the little microgenetic fragments of us sucked into the gut of a blind worm that rises it knows not why to wiggle in the rain-soaked soil only to die on the sharp beak of a house wren. Hey, that's my living genome-fragged ID shat from the sky and landing with a plop on the branch of a tree and dripping over the branch like a wet bandage. And lo! I am become a nutrient of a tree fighting for its life. That's true, you know, how those immobile standing-fast vascular creatures silently struggle for their existence as do we with one another, trees fighting for the same sun, the same soil in which they root themselves, and strewing the seeds that will become their forest enemies, like the princes to their king fathers in the ancient empires. But they're not completely motionless. In a high wind they do their dance of despair, the trees in heavy leaf swaying this way and that, throwing their arms up in their helpless fury of being what they are. . . . Well, it's a short step from anthropomorphism to hearing voices.

You hear voices?

Ah, I knew that would get your attention. Usually as I'm falling asleep. In fact I know I'm falling asleep when I hear them. And that wakes me up. I didn't want to tell you this and here I am telling you.

What do they say?

I don't know. Weird things. But I don't really hear them. I mean, they are definitely voices but at the same time they're soundless.

Soundless voices.

Yes. It's as if I hear the meanings of the words that are spoken without the sound. I hear the meanings but I know they are words that are spoken. Usually by different people.

Who are these people?

I don't know any of them. One girl asked me to sleep with her.

Well, that's normal—a man would dream that.

It's more than a dream. And I didn't know her. A girl in a long summer frock down to her ankles. And she wore running shoes. She had delicate freckles under her eyes, and her face seemed pale with sunlight even as she stood in the shade. Pretty enough to break your heart! She took my hand.

Well, that's more than a voice, certainly more than a soundless voice.

I think what happens is that I hear the meaning and provide an illustration in my mind. . . .

So, might we get back to Andrew the cognitive scientist?

I find myself reluctant to tell you that I hear the soundless voices too when I'm up and about in my daily life. But why shouldn't I? There was a morning on my way to work, for instance, when I had picked up my coffee and newspaper from the deli and was waiting at a stoplight. Watching the red seconds run down. And a voice said: *As long as you're standing there, why don't you fix the screen door.* It was so real, so close to an actual sounded voice, that I turned around to see who was in back of me. But there was no one, I was alone on that corner.

And what was the illustration you provided when you heard that remark?

It was an older woman. I put myself in her kitchen doorway. It was some sort of broken-down farm. I thought it might be in western Pennsylvania. There was an old flatbed truck in the yard. The woman wore a faded housedress. She looked up from the sink, totally unsurprised, and said that. At the kitchen table a small girl was drawing with a crayon. Was she the woman's granddaughter? I didn't know. She looked at me and turned back to her drawing and suddenly violently scribbled all

over it with her crayon—whatever she had drawn she was now destroying.

Are you in fact the man you call your friend Andrew, the cognitive scientist who brought an infant child to the home of his ex-wife?

Yes.

And are you telling me that you dreamt you ran away and found yourself standing at the screen door of some broken-down farmhouse somewhere?

Well, it was not a dream, it was a voice. Try to pay attention. This voice brought back to me how it was when I needed to get away after my baby with Martha had died and my life with Martha with it. I didn't care where I went. I got on the first bus I saw at the Port Authority. I fell asleep on the bus, and when I woke it was winding its way through the hills of western Pennsylvania. We stopped at a small travel agency in one of these towns and I got off to walk around the town square: It was two or three in the morning, everything was closed of what there was, a drugstore, a five-and-ten, a picture framer, a movie theater, and taking up all one side of the square a sort of Romanesque courthouse. In the square of dead brown grass was a greenish-black Civil War statue of a man on a horse. By the time I got back to the travel agency, the bus was gone. So I walked out of town, over the railroad tracks, past some warehouses, and

about a mile or two away—it was dawn now—I came upon this broken-down scrabbly-looking farm. I was hungry. I walked into the yard. No sign of life there so I walked around to the back of the house and found myself standing at a screen door. And there were these two just as I'd made them up or thought I had, the child and the old woman. And the old woman was the one who'd made that remark the morning I stood with my coffee and paper in Washington, D.C., waiting for the light to change.

So what you're saying is that you ran away and found yourself at the actual screen door of some broken-down farmhouse somewhere in Pennsylvania that you'd previously imagined?

No, dammit. That's not what I'm claiming. I did get on that bus and the trip was exactly as I've said. The shabby little town, the dirt farm. And when I got to the house it's true that those two people were in the kitchen, the old woman and the child with her crayons. There was also a roll of flypaper hanging under the ceiling light, and it was black with flies sticking to it. So it was all very real. But nobody asked me to fix the screen door.

No?

I'm the one who suggested that I fix it. I was tired and hungry. I didn't see a man anywhere. I thought if I offered some sort of handyman's help, they'd let me wash

up, give me something to eat. I didn't want charity. So I smiled and said: Good morning. I'm a bit lost, but I see your screen door needs mending and I think I can fix it if you will offer me a cup of coffee. I'd noticed the door couldn't close properly, the upper hinge had pulled away from the frame, the mesh was slack. As a screen door it was quite useless, which is why they had hung flypaper from the ceiling light cord. So you see, it was not a preternatural vision that drew me to that place. I had taken that bus ride and seen that farm and those two people and then blanked them out of my mind until the morning in Washington when I was standing on the corner waiting for the red seconds to wind down and heard—

You were then working in Washington?

—yes, as a government consultant, though I can't tell you doing what—and heard the voice of the old woman saying more or less what I had said when I appeared outside her screen door. Except in her voice the words had a judgmental tone—as if I had given her an insight into my hapless existence, to the effect of: “As long as you're standing there why don't you for once make yourself useful and fix the screen door.” There's a term for this kind of experience in your manual, is there not?

Yes. But I'm not sure we're talking about the same kind of experience.

We have our manual too, you know. Your field is the

mind, mine is the brain. Will the twain ever meet? What's important about that bus trip is that I had reached the point where I felt anything I did would bring harm to anyone I loved. Can you know what that's like, Mr. Analyst sitting in his ergonomic chair? I couldn't know in advance how to avoid disaster, as if no matter what I did something terrible would follow. So I got on that bus, just to get away, I didn't care. I wanted to tamp down my life, devote myself to mindless daily minutiae. Not that I had succeeded. What he said made that clear.

What who said?

Martha's large husband.

When Andrew stepped inside the front door he saw Martha's large husband putting on his coat and hat and Martha walking up the stairs with the baby in her arms while turning back the little hood, unzipping the snowsuit. Andrew took note of a large well-appointed house, much grander than the house he and Martha had lived in as man and wife. The entrance hall had a dark parquet floor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw to his left a comfortable living room with stuffed furniture, and a fireplace with a fire going, and on the wall over the mantel the portrait of what he took to be some Russian czar in a long robe with an Orthodox cross on a chain and a

crown that looked like an embroidered cap. To the right was a book-lined study with Martha's black Steinway. The staircase, carpeted in dark red with brass rods at the bottoms of the risers, was elegantly curved with a mahogany banister that Martha was not holding as she mounted the stairs with the baby in her arms. Martha wore slacks. Andrew noticed that she had maintained her figure and he found himself considering, as he hadn't for many years, the shape and tensile strength of her behind. The coat of Martha's large husband was of the round-shouldered style with a caped collar and sleeves that flared out. Nobody wore coats like that anymore. The hat, a sporty crushproof number, was too small for Martha's large husband's head.

Martha said without turning her head: Go with him, Andrew, in the same quiet commanding tone of voice she used when they were married.

Andrew ran ahead and opened the passenger's car door. He was grateful when Martha's large husband maneuvered himself into the seat. Off they went to Martha's large husband's preferred pub. He directed Andrew wordlessly, pointing left or right at the intersections, grunting and pointing to the parking space when they'd arrived. It was a bar in a mall. Andrew anticipated a conversation, some sort of understanding—they after all had the shared experience of the same wife—but once

they were seated at the bar with their drinks in front of them in tall crystal-cut glasses, and though Andrew waited for the conversation to begin, Martha's large husband did not speak. So Andrew said something along these lines:

Everything you believe about me is true. It is true I accidentally killed my baby girl that I had with Martha: In good faith I fed her the medicine I believed had been prescribed by our pediatrician. The druggist sent over the wrong medicine and I was not as alert as I should have been, I'd done a day on my dissertation in cognitive science, I had spent hours at the lab, plus department meetings and so forth, and I dutifully fed the medicine into her tiny mouth with an eyedropper. All night I did this every two hours, until the child stopped crying and was dead. I didn't know it was dead, I thought it had finally gone to sleep. I was tired and lay down myself, it had been my task to stay up with a sick child because Martha was exhausted—she'd been teaching her master class in piano all day, and I was the man, after all. What woke me was Martha screaming, it was not human, it was the sound of a huge forest animal with its leg caught in a steel trap, and maybe not even an animal of the present time, but something like its paleontological version.

Martha's large husband said, looking into the blue mirror behind the bar: When an animal's leg is caught in

a trap, do you know what it does to free itself? It chews the leg off. But of course it is forever disabled and unable to reasonably provide for itself and live a normal life.

You mean Martha, Andrew said.

Yes. And so I have been permanently crippled as well, having in love married an irremediably damaged woman who can no longer practice her profession. Thanks to Sir Andrew the Pretender.

Is that who I am, Sir Andrew the Pretender?

Yes, whose well-meaning, gentle, kindly disposed, charming ineptitude is the *modus operandi* of the deadliest of killers. Let's have another.

When Andrew picked up his glass to down his drink quickly so that he could honor his moral debt to Martha's large husband by having another, which he didn't really want, the glass slipped from his hand. In his attempt to grab it, Andrew hooked the bowl of peanuts off the bar with the edge of his jacket sleeve, and flustered by the sudden obligation to right two things simultaneously he lost them both, the glass and its contents, including its ice cubes and wedge of lime, following the cascade of peanuts onto Martha's large husband's lap.

Were you offended by what he said—Martha's large husband? Did that anger you?

No, he's an opera singer. Opera is the art of unconstrained emotions. Something happens and they sing about it for hours. What he said, though expressed in a bass-baritone voice of great and intimidating czarist resonance, was true. I could not be offended or made angry, not only because I already knew that about myself, but because there is a caesura in my brain—so that honor, among other virtues, is nothing I connect to. I have none. Deep down, at the bottom of my soul, if such exists, I am finally unmoved by what I've done. A faint tinge of regret for dead babies, for dead wives, for the fires I've inadvertently started, and all such disasters can make me run in my dreams to someplace where I can't do any harm, but in this waking life I am numb to my guilt.

But after that terrible event of the baby's death you did get onto a bus to western Pennsylvania. Didn't you? Or are you saying now you dreamt the whole thing?

No, what actually happened is the way I've described it.

Well, then, in your waking life as in your dreams, weren't you running away? That doesn't sound like someone numb to his guilt.

You can have such moments but they're not characteristic, they're incidental to the predominant state of mind. Remnants of whatever humanity I may have once had.

I see.

Because the truth is, I just shrug and soldier on. As kind as I am, as well-meaning and helpful as I try to be, I have no feelings finally, for good or ill. In the depths of my being, no matter what happens, I am left cold, impenetrable to remorse, to grief, to happiness, though I can pretend well enough even to the point of fooling myself. I am trying to say I am finally, terribly, unfeeling. My soul resides in a still, deep, beautiful, emotionless, calm cold pond of silence. But I am not fooled. A killer is what I am. And to top things off I am incapable of punishing myself, taking my own life in despair of the wreck I've made of people's lives, helpless infants or women I love. And that's what Martha's large husband the opera singer failed to understand when he condemned me, perhaps in the hope that I would see the light and off myself. [*thinking*] Of course I would never do that.

So now Martha had a baby after all, a replacement for her lost child.

I hadn't thought of it that way. I didn't mean to give her the baby outright. I just needed some help. For a year or two. I was still in shock from Briony's death. But Martha took possession of the kid as if she was the rightful parent.

Did that bother you?

I was in no position to argue. Do I have to spell it

out? Are you that dense? I'd killed one baby. Did you want me to kill another? Anyway, I'll reconnect someday. She has Briony's pale blue eyes. The same fair coloring.

Was Martha's large husband correct that you bore a responsibility for your wife's death?

Not entirely.

What does that mean?

It was indirect—not directly causal.

So what happened? You mean in childbirth?

No, I do not mean that.

How did she die?

I don't want to talk about it. [*thinking*] I can tell you that after killing his baby with Martha, Andrew took a low-paying adjunct professorship at a small state college out west that he'd never heard of.

Why?

Why do you think? Because it was far away. Because after she divorced him Martha liked to be seen standing outside his apartment building when he came home from work. She would take a drag on her cigarette, drop it on the ground, step on it, and walk away.

So in her eyes only you were to blame—you and only you.

Who else?

What about the pharmacist? Did you think of suing?

Oh, God, you have no idea, do you, of the obliteration of social reality in the aftermath of something like this. The brain all lit up with the realization that what you did is unchangeable. To sue someone? Was there redemption in that? What would you gain—money? Jesus, I don't know why I talk to you. Would suing someone bring the infant back? And whom should we have sued? The pediatrician who phoned in the prescription? the druggist who filled it? the delivery boy who brought it? Where had the thing gone wrong? Whom should we have sued? I could have read the label. I could have sued myself. I had administered the medicine. That's all Martha could see, that I had done the thing, finally, I and no one else.

And you agreed with her.

I did. It was me, all over.

And now here was Andrew, self-exiled to this state college in the foothills of a mountain range called the Wasatch. At first I liked the mountains. I got there early in September, a still-warm summer's end with traces of the old winter's snow on the mountaintops. That gave me a sense of the nonhuman world we live in. You get that when you're out of the city. Americans like to catch rides in that world.

What is this you're saying?

Skiing down a mountain—that's one of the free rides. Sea combers, white-water rivers. A wind to hang in. Free rides of the planet. They're all there for you to get on or get off or get killed.

I see. So it turned out to be a good change of scenery for you.

Not really. I don't suppose you've ever lived under a mountain. Wasatches ruled that town. After a day or two the truth dawned on me. You got up in the morning, they were there. You pulled into a gas station, and they were there. They were there in their stolid immensity, and that was that. You were colonized. They negotiated the light, they had to pass on it before it got to you.

I don't understand.

They took in the light, they'd bounce it down or suck it up as was their wont. It was a kind of mountain bureaucracy, and nobody could do anything about it, least of all the sun. The college had a deal for visiting faculty with a local suite motel. Formica countertop kitchenette. Laminated furniture. And turquoise-and-rust curtains to suggest the Native American heritage. That was also what the mountains did—invite a corporate culture. I was the college's halfhearted attempt to expand its offerings. I was the one-man Department of Brain Science. I had no one to talk to. My colleagues, if that's what they

were in their polite and distant way, were bores. I was lonely and miserable.

One day, as Andrew walked past the college gymnasium, a building much like an airplane hangar, he saw through the open doors a population of gymnasts and track and fielders: broad jumpers, high jumpers, hurdlers, shot putters, pole vaulters, pommel horsers, steel ringers, balance beamers, trampoliners. The intensity, the concentration of each of them on what they were doing, everyone moving in a differentiated self-absorbed effort while ignoring everyone else, put him in mind of a culture of squiggling DNA molecules, so that if he waited long enough all these jumping and vaulting and circling squiggles would assemble themselves into the double helix of a genetic code. He was particularly attracted to one of the gymnasts working out on the high bar, a blond girl swinging to and fro in what could have been a one-piece swimsuit. She seemed more human than the rest of them, as if she were actually reveling in the exercise. But this swinging maneuver was preparatory—once she had the velocity, up she rose to a handstand, holding herself upside down and straight as an arrow, only to lazily begin to fall backward into another sequence of three-hundred-and-sixty-degree suspensefully-pausing-at-the-top rota-

tions. And then to fall into another spin, but forward this time, like a clock hand gone crazy. Andrew, not wanting to be seen staring, quickly walked on when she completed her routine with a final spin around and a leap through the air with a perfect landing in a half crouch, arms outstretched.

Which reminds me, once I saw a woman do a complete somersault in the air, launching herself into an in-flight three-hundred-and-sixty-degree head-over-heels maneuver before landing nimbly on her bare feet. You'd think that was impossible.

Where was this?

She leapt into the air not from any platform but from the floor of what I took to be some sort of dance studio, and then grabbed her ankles and curled into her remarkable airborne spin. She wore a man's ribbed sleeveless undershirt and a pleated billowing pair of bloomers and did not look at me for approval once the maneuver was completed. A short plain dark-haired little woman but with good round calves and slim feet that widened at the metatarsals. But the man, her putative manager, a big bulky fellow who had gotten me to come see this, said, What do you think? And I had to tell him the act needed beefing up. Her trick had taken only a few seconds.

That's not enough for an evening's entertainment, I told him. Why would I have said that? What business was it of mine?

Bloomers? Was this a dream?

Later, I was informed that the fellow habitually forced himself on this somersaultist. For proof I'd been taken to look through the window of an adjoining bedroom as he pressed down upon her, flattening her out.

This was your dream, then.

You're eager for it to be a dream. If it was, it might have occurred after I saw Briony on the high bar. If it occurred before that, before I was even situated out west, it might not have been a dream. I've spent time in Eastern Europe, but how would you know that? I studied for a year in Prague. They had no money, the Czechs. They had mountainous Russia looking down at them. Their own secret police used to pop out of the bushes in powder blue jumpsuits and take your picture as you sat on a park bench. I spent time also in Hungary, in Budapest. There is a street there that World War II came through, first one way as the Germans advanced and the Russians retreated and then the other way as the Russians advanced and the Germans retreated. That one street for the war to flow back and forth through. And in a big lot there, near a high school, was a mass unmarked graveyard, skulls and femurs just under the sod. So it may not

have been a dream. On the other hand I don't remember this somersault as you remember things in a specific context. Exactly where and when. So maybe it was a dream. All I can say is that I remember it as having a dark impoverished quality, like a flickering silent movie, and occurring in a shabby room with splintery floors and dirty windows, and so not something to have occurred even as a dream in the wide-open big-sky spaces of the democratic Far West. But the gymnastic linkage to Briony reminds me how far apart we were, not only in age and social position but in how we thought of our lives or, more exactly, our expectations of what life offered according to its nature as we understood it.

Who are we talking about now?

It was peculiar, to see something like an interior light on the face of this lovely brilliantly alive young college student, as a means of understanding my own shadowed existence some of which may have taken place in a shabby dance studio years before where I was taken to watch some woman in bloomers and undershirt turn herself into a flying missile.

Then you saw her again, the athletic college student? She had a name, you know.

Briony.

My wife-to-be.

On the first day of his elementary Brain Science class, Andrew was writing his name on the blackboard when the chalk snapped in two. "And—" was as far as he'd gotten, and when he turned to look for the errant piece of chalk that had flown past his ear he knocked his lectern awry so that the books he had placed on it slid to the floor. He heard student laughter. And then Briony, in this bright fluorescent classroom with mountains watching through the window, rose from her chair in the first row and picked up the books and the piece of chalk. She was not bluejeaned like the others, she wore a long pale-yellow frock with shoulder straps and the running shoes they all wore. The combination made him smile. She was a slender wheat-haired beauty with the fairest skin, as if a property of it was sunlight. Andrew thanked her for her kindness and proceeded with the lecture. She sat with her running shoes pointed at each other under that long dress and her head bent over her notebook computer as she typed her notes, a serious student, listening with her head bowed over her chair-desk. He thought of her legs under that dress.

And then he realized this was the girl on the high bar.

Good morning, class. *Good morning, pale-yellow shift and running shoes.* Today we begin our exploration of

consciousness, the field of all meaning, the necessary and sufficient condition of language, the beginning of all good mornings. Consciousness—*not what that heavy-lidded lout slumped in the chair next to you confronts the world with, but what is left when you erase all presumptions, forgo your affections, white out the family, school, church, and nation in which you have couched your being . . . cast off the techno clutter of civilization, cut the wires of all circuits, including connections to your internal mechanisms, your bowel conditions, your hungers, what itches, what bleeds or produces tears, or the cracklings in the joints when you rise from a sitting position, abandon, however reluctantly, your breathless lips-apart contemplation of me, how my voice resonates in you, how my glance lases your netherness, and float free and unconnected in your own virtual black and starless space. And thus you have nothing to fix on, nothing for your thought to adhere to, no image, no sound, no smell, no physical sensation of any kind. You are not in a place, you are the place. You are not here, you are everywhere. You are not in relation to anything else. There is no anything else. There is nothing you can think of except of yourself thinking. You are in the depthless dingedom of your own soul.*

O lovely acrobat, it is true we may be immaterial presences in our beings, mere currents in the ocean of

our molecules. But take heart! Let your wild desires bring you back to earth, to culture, to citizenship, to your bodily needs. To me. I have so much to teach you! And love is the blunt concussion that renders us insensible to despair.

This doesn't sound like the Andrew I know.

I'm another man in front of a class.

So you were smitten.

Well, I admit I was vulnerable. But she was truly glorious. Something happens in the heart, you know. You recognize life as it should be. And so what you thought of as life were only the shadows in the cave.

What cave?

You've never read your Plato, Doc. Where most people live, most of us, imagining it to be the real sunlit world when it is only a cave lit by the flickering fires of illusion. Briony was out there in the sun. I began as a horny lecher, instantly evolved into a worshipful adorer, and then, as it turned really bad, I felt that I couldn't live without her.

Good morning, class. *Good morning pink knee and peek of cursive underthigh in her short denim skirt today.*

You may have assumed from our last lecture that my argument was only theoretical, that of course there is no existence without the world, and thus no mind apart from its engagement with the world. Consciousness without world is impossible, just as there is no sight without the light to see by. Is that your objection, *my darling? Bent over her notebook, her face framed in the fall of hair.* Well, then, let's look at this solid real world of yours. It has a platform in space and that platform has a history of animate life. So far so good. But notice, there does not seem to be a necessary or sufficient condition for animacy, it occurs under any conditions. You would think it needs air, but it does not, you would think it needs to see or hear or lope, or swim or fly or hang by its tail from a tree branch, but it does not. It requires no particular shape or size or any particular supplies from the mineral universe in order to be life, it can make itself out of anything. It can live underwater or on a mote of dust, in ice or in boiling seawater, it may have eyes or ears but may not, it may have the means to ingest but may not, or the means to move about but may not, it may have a procreative organ but may not, it may be sentient but may not, and even when it has intelligence may not have it in sufficiency, *as for example the nodding sloth who always manages to be sitting next to you—who when he yawns his eyes disappear, have you noticed that, my lo-*

ganberry? So life is taxonomically without limit but with one intention common to its endless varieties—be they fish, fly, dung beetle, mite, worm, or bacterium—one intention to define it in all its minded or mindless manifestations—its pathetic intention to survive. Because of course it never does, *does it, my bosky babe*, for if life is one definable thing of infinite form then we have to say it feeds on itself. It is self-consuming. And that is not very reassuring if you mean to depend on the world for your consciousness. Is it? If consciousness exists without the world, it is nothing, and if it needs the world to exist, it is still nothing.

These were my preparatory thought experiments—to begin from a basic philosophical hopelessness before looking for rescue from the first responders, Emerson, William James, Damasio, and the rest. But I must have given myself away as nothing more than a depressive.

Who was the lout?

He was no contest, really. Long, lean, indolent, with black hair combed back wet, like Tarzan. The school's star quarterback. He didn't stand a chance once I entered the picture.

And "bosky babe"?

Yes, that was a momentary lapse, a lingering thought

of my high school girlfriend who was the bosky babe down there. Not Briony. Briony, for comfort's sake as she did her spandex-suited gymnastics, kept her mons trimmed.

There were a lot of western blondes at the college but mostly of the blaringly self-indicative kind, with an empty-headedness or cunning about them, or perhaps their faces too clearly anticipated cosmetic collapse. Briony was fine-featured, her looks were modestly aristocratic, you would think she belonged at a country house in the Cotswolds or perhaps in a Polish shtetl. For some reason I kept seeing her around the campus. Riding her bike, standing in the cafeteria line, talking with friends. Didn't that mean something? Each time she arrived for class she smiled hello. I asked her if she would volunteer to be a subject for the lab work and she said yes. And so, one morning, as I placed the electrode net on her pretty head—didn't shave it, of course, this was not medical science, just a way to show the electric busyness of our brains—I had reason to tuck her long hair behind her ears. I inhaled the clean freshness of her. I felt I was in a sunlit meadow. I did a basic brain graph using an old EEG machine I had brought west with me. Something like a lie detector, very primitive, but useful

for Brain Science 101. Flashing pictures at her, seeing where the graph spiked, where she was frightened, where she remembered something, where she was hungry, where a sexual innuendo lit her up. The exercise was illustrative, this was elementary stuff, nothing about localizations. The other students stood around and watched and made jokes. The lout was there with a stupidly superior smile on his face. I decided I would flunk him, not that it would matter. But I saw things the students couldn't have. I saw things more intimately Briony's than if I had seen her undressed. This wasn't mere voyeurism, it was cephalic-invasive, I admit, but, after all, less legitimate scientific inference than professorial fantasy.

What did you see?

One of the flash cards was a picture of a toy circus. A one-ring circus with a circus master in top hat and jodhpurs in the center and ladies in tutus standing on backs of ponies galloping in a circle around the ring and overhead a man in tights hanging upside down from a trapeze and a woman in matching tights suspended from his hands. That practically took the pen off the scroll. It actually made me uneasy that the joys of a child were still evocative.

And then the despair of my chosen field. You've got to be brave when you do science. I reacted badly to the publication of an experiment demonstrating that the brain can come to a decision seconds before we're conscious of it.

That is unsettling. And you disagree?

It would be easy to disagree. Say "Wait a minute. Is this duplicable? Will it stand?" But my own brain took over and declared its solidarity with the experiment's results. There will be more sophisticated experiments and it will be established that free will is an illusion.

But surely—

One morning I found myself abandoning my lecture and blurting out something I had not planned to say—something like a preamble to a course in cognitive science that I had not yet devised. . . . [*thinking*]

What did you say?

What?

Something you blurted out to the class.

I asked this question: How can I think about my brain when it's my brain doing the thinking? So is this brain pretending to be me thinking about it? I can't trust anyone these days, least of all myself. I am a mysteriously generated consciousness, and no comfort to me that it's one of billions. That's what I said to them

and then picked up my books and walked out of the room.

Hmmm.

What do you mean “Hmmm”? You remember why the great Heinrich von Kleist committed suicide? He'd read Kant, who said we could never know reality. He should have come out west, Heinrich. Would have saved his life. No despair of intellect possible in these parts. Something about the mountains and the sky. Something about the football team.

So you were an anomaly with your intellectual crisis.

Only one student showed up for the next class and that was Briony. We went to the student union and had coffee. She was concerned, looked me over with a compassionate frown. As I see her now I realize that she never fussed with herself the way young women do, running their hands through their hair, tying it back if it's loose, letting it loose if it's tied, all those small gestures of self-reflection. Briony did nothing of that sort, she sat still, calmly present in the moment with no undercurrent of self-regard. This was early enough in the semester for students to drop out of one class and switch to another and she knew that could mean trouble for me. Of course the dean would get on my back but I couldn't have cared less with this glorious creature before me. I basked in her sympathy. I wore a mournful expression. She extended

her hand across the table as if to console me. She did not want to show me that she found me strange. She was the sort of person who'd feel obliged to engage a leper in conversation.

What was her background?

Her background? The Wasatch mountains.

No, I mean—

You want to know where she was from, this extraordinary child, who her parents were, the family that produced her?

Yes.

Why does that matter? They don't tell you in movies where people grew up unless the movies are about people growing up. They never tell you where your heroes come from, to whom they were related, you just find them as they are, in the present moment. You're called to worry about them as they live on the screen and all you know about them is the time they're there. No history, no past, just them.

Is this a movie?

This is America. Having discovered each other we went hiking in the mountains, Briony and I. You could walk right up the street and find yourself at the foot of a mountain trail. The Wasatch let you know they were always there—even when your back was turned, even as you drove away from them, you sensed them. They

changed constantly according to the light they negotiated but also the temperature, their coloration like their change of mood, but they were constant presences, a family of gods, low mountains jagged in the peaks, this one taller, that one shorter, but all connected, an alliance of venerable powers, trail-scarred, implacable with snow that could kill, or carelessly alive with spring foliage in all the pale shades of green or blue evergreen, but still with the yellow-brown remnants of the previous year. And then their tilt, their rising backward to their apex in the sky as if in aversion to something we supplicants had done to displease them, for when you lived in that town awhile you knew those mountains ruled, they walled you in, you were their people. Briony in her white shorts with her belted water bottle and baseball cap with the blond hair ponytailed through the hole in back, and her hiking boots and ankle socks and firm rounded mulping calves—Briony climbed ahead of me, and she was vigorous, and in my need to keep up—at moments I worried that she was trying to get away from me—I could not luxuriate in contemplation of her legs and the glory of her tight white shorts as she hoisted herself over rocks, sometimes touching the ground for support, or gripping an outcrop, and so climbing higher and higher, the path more like a series of cryptic Tibetan steps into a Buddhist acceptance of

the way things really were when you didn't talk about them.

Well, I was only asking.

You lack empathy, you don't know when to stop asking me these things. You can't imagine what it was like having her but never forgetting for a moment my killing ineptitude. That I would be at my most dangerous when blissfully happy. How I had to concentrate moment by moment, examine my actions, everything I did, living attentively with the minutiae, watching myself every waking minute, attending carefully, ritualistically, to everything I did so as not to become Andrew the Pretender. I can't talk to you anymore, it is too painful. You don't get it. Just speaking her name destroys me. I can no longer hear her voice.

You, with the ear for voices?

I can still summon the voices of my long-dead mother and father. I can hear their voices quite well if only for a fading moment. What I hear is their moral nature. My mother's practicality. My father's sad evasiveness. Their moral nature is in the remembered voices of the dead. It is what is left of the dead that is still them, that fragment of the voice that renders a moral nature though the rest of the person is gone.

But her voice, Briony's voice, is gone, you say? You don't hear it? Maybe that's why for my part I can't seem

to get a fix on her. I get your voice, your feeling what you think and feel about her. It's as if it's in the way, your voice. What was she like, except for her athleticism? And she was a math major? They go together, perhaps, the math, the gymnastics. Doing geometry on the parallel bars.

Who said she was a math major? How did you know that?

Didn't you say—?

Are you CIA?

Really, Andrew.

I don't know why I talk to you.

Martha I feel as if I know from your description of the way she acted. But Briony doesn't come through to me.

She was a younger person, Briony, still becoming herself. Innocently smart. Unaffected. She didn't act as if she felt especially pretty. She was intensely physical, as grown children are. When she liked something it was passionately. She had favorite books, favorite bands. She worked at her studies. She could write a grammatical sentence—you know how rare that is in an undergraduate? She believed in her life, her future.

I see.

Martha was being, Briony was becoming. What kind of a shrink are you who has to be told this? You have the

heartlessness of someone living vicariously. That's what you're doing, isn't it, living vicariously through me. I am grist for your mill. Jesus! Don't you have a life of your own?

Not really.

I'm not clear on the time here. When did you and Briony marry?

We never married.

She was your wife.

Of course she was my wife, but we never married. We never got around to it. We never got past the intense feeling for each other that you have to get past in order to legally marry. In our minds we were married. We didn't need anyone else to tell us we were. We were Andy and Bri. One day I went to the Saturday football game, and there she was, of course, atop the cheerleader pyramid, and doing a swan dive into all their arms at the end of the cheer.

I should have known . . .

Meanwhile there *he* was, the lout, padded and helmeted, leading his team out of the huddle, glancing disdainfully at the defenders, running off his plays with calm authority and moving his team efficiently down the field. I watched as he threw the football forty yards in the

air, a perfect spiral right into the arms of his receiver. Touchdown. Twenty thousand people leapt to their feet, and roared, the college band struck up a victory march, some idiot in an ape costume danced a jig in front of the stands, and I realized I had stepped into a powerful tribal culture here, and if I was going to extract her from it I had some thinking to do.

I seem to recall your saying the lout didn't have a chance once you entered the picture.

Well, after all, I was Andrew, he of the dark mournful eyes. Even as I lectured provocatively, they shone with a glistening cry for help. To Briony this was personhood on display. The vulnerability of the teacher at the lectern was a new classroom experience for her. She stared at me, she was attentive. [*thinking*] I'd known since high school that women were attracted to me. My first girlfriend was a zoology nerd at the Bronx High School of Science. She said I had the eyes of a langur. After school we went to her apartment, where her parents weren't home, and we made out.

Because of your languorous eyes.

Well, that and the mop of curly hair, though by now it has lost its color. I have always been good-looking in a kind of weak-jawed way. And I had attitude. I was one of those wise-ass high school kids, loose-limbed and scornful of everything. The fact is, Doc, that I've had a lot of

success with women. But this with Briony was different. Overwhelming. An abrupt neural resetting wherein I found myself with an immense capacity for love. Much later, when we were living together—actually, we had gone out for a celebratory dinner—we had just learned that she was pregnant—Briony admitted to a revolutionary experience of her own: Andy, she said, I realized one day in class that I’d been waiting for you. And there you were. There was such recognition. It was as if this was only the latest of our lives, she said.

But at this point, here at the peak of the Wasatches, I only knew how I felt. It wouldn’t do to be careless. I needed to know more before making my move. More of what, I didn’t know. [*thinking*]

What?

Emil Jannings.

What?

I didn’t want to be Emil Jannings in *The Blue Angel*. You remember that movie? The professor who falls in love with this cabaret singer Marlene Dietrich and ends up as a clown in her sleazy act, crowing “Cock-a-doodle-doo!” He gives up everything to marry her and of course she screws around. His life is ruined, job, dignity, it’s all gone. He staggers back to his empty classroom one night and dies at his desk. You mean you never saw that?

No.

At least he had his desk.

Of course Briony could not be compared to a decadent Weimar cabaret singer. On the other hand I knew I could accomplish whatever it took to destroy myself. I could imagine her staring at me in a kind of end-of-it-all sorrow as I did the Far West equivalent of a cock-a-doodle-doo dive off the mountaintop. As we sat to catch our, or rather my, breath, and drank our bottled water, I said to her, Briony, not many people could have persuaded me to climb up here.

But, Professor, it's good and aren't you glad you did? Don't you feel happy? Because a climb like this gets the good brain hormones going.

I said: Please don't call me Professor, call me Andrew. That's what the other students call me, after all.

She smiled. OK, I will, then. Andrew. I don't know what to make of you, Pro— I mean Andrew. I've never met anyone like you before.

Howso, I said.

I don't know. I'm not bored with you. No, that isn't the word, I'm not bored in my life, I've got too much to do to be bored—

That was true, she had her classes, her gymnastics, her cheerleading, she waited table in the faculty dining room and on weekends she put in hours at a local old people's home.

—but your moodiness, she said, I don't know, that's

so unusual, a powerful thing, almost like your way of life. And it's such a personal way to be up in front of a class. It almost seems like a strength, like someone who has an affliction and is brave about it. When it's just, I don't know, a worldview that's very solemn.

And I said: Briony, I think if we carry this as far as I'd like to, I will end up depressing you into marrying me.

Oh, how she laughed! And I with her. At that moment we were no longer teacher and student. She must have realized this because she grew quiet, not looking at me. She made a ceremonious thing of unscrewing her water bottle and holding it to her lips. I detected the faintest flush on her throat. [*thinking*]

Yes? You were saying?

No, I was just thinking. Suppose there was a computer network more powerful than anything we could imagine.

What's this?

I remember trying this idea out on her. And never mind a network, just this one awesome computer, say. And because it was what it was, suppose it had the capacity to record and store the acts and thoughts and feelings of every living person on earth once around per millisecond of time. I mean, as if all of existence was data for this computer—as if it was a storehouse of all the deeds ever done, the thoughts ever thought, the feel-

ings ever felt. And since the human brain contains memories, this computer would record these as well, and so be going back in time through the past even as it went forward with the present.

That is a tall order, even for a computer.

Not for this baby. Consider the possibility that there are things you don't know, Doc.

I consider that every day.

I'll tell you one thing you may not know: The genome of every human cell has memory. You know what that means? As evolved beings we have in our genes memories of the far past, of long-ago generations, memories of experiences not our own. This is not pie-in-the-sky stuff, a neuroscientist will tell you the same thing. And all we need is the right code to extract what the cell knows, what it remembers.

Sounds poetic.

I'm talking science here, I'm telling you my computer to end all computers that sucks up the mental and physical activities of every living thing—I mean, let's throw in the animals too—necessarily then can go back in time and move into the past as readily as it moves along with the present. Do you give me that?

OK, Andrew.

So what that means, what that means . . .

Yes?

. . . that at least on the microgenetic level couldn't there be the possibility of recomposing a whole person from these bits and pieces and genomic memories of lives past?

You don't mean cloning.

No, dammit, I don't mean cloning. We're talking about how this computer could crack the code of every cell of every human brain and reconstitute the dead from their experiences. Isn't that something like reincarnation? Maybe it wouldn't be perfect, you couldn't always see her, maybe if you reached out she would be just a shade of herself, but she would be a presence, and the love would be there.

Who are we speaking of now?

What possessed me to tell Briony all this? If this computer could come up with the code to read the makeup of our cells, in birth, in death, in the ashes of our cremation, in the rot of our coffins, and of course it could because of what it was, then we could recover our lost babies, our lost lovers, our lost selves, bring them back from the dead, reunite in a kind of heaven on earth. Do you see that?

Well, maybe on a speculative level . . .

But if you accept the premise the logic is sound, will you give me that?

I give you that.

But you still don't know what this computer is, do you? Oh, Doc, if there was such a computer, it could do anything, finally. I mean, call it by its rightful name. And I could have my baby with Martha brought back. And I could have my Briony, and we would bring our baby home and we would be a family.