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Cleanness



MENTOR

We had agreed to meet at the fountain in front of the McDonald's in Slaveykov Square. By my American standards G. was late, and as I waited for him I browsed the book stalls the square is famous for, their wares piled high under awnings in front of the city library. Really it wasn't a fountain anymore, it had been shuttered for years, since faulty wiring stopped a man's heart one summer as he dipped his fingers into the cool water there. It was December now, though winter hadn't yet really taken hold; the sun was out and the weather was mild, it wasn't unpleasant to stand for a bit and browse the books on display. From the beginning of the year G. had caught my attention, at first simply because he was beautiful, and then for the special quality of friendship I thought I saw between him and another boy in my class, the intensity with which G. sought him out and the privacy he drew about them. It was familiar to me, that intensity, a story from my own adolescence, as was the basking ambivalence with which the other boy received it, how he both invited

it and held it off. I had some idea, then, what we would talk about, and why school didn't offer enough secrecy for us to talk about it there, but I was still curious: he wasn't a student I was particularly close to, he didn't stop by my room outside of class, he had never confided in me or sought me out, and I wondered what crisis was bringing him to me now.

I was getting annoyed with the booksellers who, sensing my foreignness, kept directing me to their piles of battered American paperbacks, and as G. continued not to appear I wondered if my sacrificed afternoon would go to waste. But then he did appear, standing beside me suddenly, and my annoyance dissolved at the sight of him. He stood out here, with his slightly formal clothes, his feathered hair, though in the States he would have been generic enough, an East Coast aspirant prep school kid, maybe not quite the real thing, especially if he smiled too broadly (as he was careful almost never to do) and revealed a lower set of teeth in un-American disarray. He was friendly enough in greeting me, but as always there was something reserved about him, as if he were deciding whether or not to pronounce a judgment he was on the point of making. He asked me where we should go only to dismiss all my proposals, saying he would take me to a favorite place of his own, and then he set off, walking not beside but in front of me, preventing conversation and as if he were ready to deny any association with me at all. I was hardly a newcomer, I had lived in Sofia for two years, but I had remained a kind of dilettante of the city, and soon—though the center is small and we hadn't gone far from Slaveykov and Graf Ignatiev, the part of it I knew best—I had no idea where we were. My ignorance wasn't for lack of

trying: for months after I arrived, I came to the center every morning I could, walking the streets as the city woke up and returning to mark off my route on a map pinned to the wall. And yet those same streets, even a short time later, seemed almost entirely unfamiliar; I could never understand how they fit together, and only the stray detail (an old cornice carving, an oddly painted façade) reminded me I had passed that way before. Walking behind G., as always when I was with someone born in Sofia, I had a sense of the city opening itself up, the monolithic blank concrete of the Soviet-style apartment blocks giving way to unsuspected courtyards and cafés and paths through overgrown little parks. As we entered these spaces, which were quieter and less traveled than the boulevards, G. slowed his pace, allowing me to come up beside him, and we walked in a more companionable way, though still without speaking.

It was in one of these courtyards or little parks that G.'s restaurant was hidden. It was below ground, and as we approached the door that would take us down to it, I noticed a neighboring storefront, an antiquarian shop, its windows crowded with icons—Cyril and Methodius, a beatific Mary, St. George on horseback hooking the dragon through the mouth—as well as Nazi paraphernalia, watches and billfolds and flasks all stamped with a broken cross. These are common at antiques shops and outdoor markets here, souvenirs for tourists or for young men longing for a time when they might have allied themselves, however disastrously, with some real power in the world. The space we descended into was larger than I had expected, an open room with booths along each side and, at the back, a bar I imagined

crowded at night with university students. The room was lit by a row of small windows near the top of one wall, their panes clouded and stained with smoke, so that the light was strangely muted, as if steeped in tea. G. gestured toward one of the booths, most of which were empty, and we sat down in it together.

G. laid his cigarettes on the table and rested the tips of his fingers on the pack, tapping it lightly. I realized that he was waiting for permission, that even though nearly everyone in the restaurant was smoking already, he wouldn't join them unless I gave him my approval first. I smiled at him or nodded and he snatched them up, smiling back as if in apology for his eagerness, and the edges of him softened as he took a first long drag. We spoke a little then, pleasantries mostly and the obligatory questions about college; applications had been sent out and the students were waiting to hear back, and though we were all sick of talking about it, it was the subject we all returned to. Fine, he said, it's fine, I'm just waiting, and he said that most of the schools he had applied to were in the States, though many students here now look to the EU, where tuition is cheaper and where they have a better chance of being allowed to stay after they graduate. But that conversation was like a cloth already wrung dry, and soon we were sitting in silence. I brought up poetry then; not long before we had read some American poets of the midcentury, and G.'s own poems in response had been a genuine surprise, witty and fluent, revealing depths his other work had never suggested. One of them especially had impressed me, a poem full of the everyday: descriptions of our school, of his classmates and teachers; and also of a sense that in the world he

described there was nowhere he could feel at home. It seemed like a kind of invitation, and I suspected that my response to it, excited and full of encouragement, had invited in turn this meeting.

He pulled a few pages from his bag and slid them toward me, saying Here, I've been working more on these. I was disappointed to see the slightest of the poems he had given me on top, a generic hymn to a feminine ideal, full of exaggerated praise and capitalized pronouns. It was the same draft I had seen already, the page full of my corrections and suggestions, advice I feel obligated to give even unpromising student work. You corrected so much, he said, but you didn't correct the most important mistake. I looked down at the page and then up again, confused; I don't see it, I said, what did I miss? He leaned across the table, reaching his arms toward the page so that his upper body rested on the lacquered wood, a peculiarly teenage gesture, I thought, I remembered making it but hadn't made it for years, and he pressed his finger to the margin of the page. Here, he said, pointing to a line where the single word *She* appeared, I made it here and it happens several times, the pronouns are all wrong, and even in his half-prone posture I could see that his whole body was tense. Ah, I said, looking up at him from the page, I see, and then he leaned quickly back, as if released by something, and as though after his revelation he wanted to reassert some space between us. I leaned back too, and pushed the pages across to him again; it was clear that they had served their purpose.

Those poems we read in class, he said then, I had never seen anything like them, I didn't know anything like them existed. He was talking about Frank O'Hara, I understood,

whose poems had shocked most of my students, as I intended them to. I had never read anything before, he went on, I mean a story or a poem, that seemed like it was about me, that I could have written it. He didn't look at me as he said this, looking instead at his hands, both of which were on the table in front of him and in one of which a cigarette had shrunk almost to its nub between two fingers. I felt two things as he spoke, first my usual dismay when talking to gay men here, who were more excluded than I had been, growing up in the American south, where at least I had found books that, even if they were always tragic, offered a certain beauty as compensation. But in addition to dismay I felt satisfaction or pride at having provided (as I thought of it) some degree of solace, and maybe this was the bigger part of what I felt. I had gathered him up, I thought, and this sparked a sense of warmth that started in the central pit of me and then radiated out. It was a craftsman's pride, I suppose: I had worked hard to find the right poems for the students, choosing O'Hara for his subject matter but primarily for his joy, his freedom from guardedness and guilt, which would only have reinforced what many of my students already believed about that category or class of people of which I was a part. My satisfaction only deepened when G. continued, after our coffee arrived and we took a moment to add sugar and milk. You're the only person I know who talks about it, who's so public and who isn't ashamed, he said; it's good that you're that way, it must be hard here. This was a kind of acknowledgment one hardly ever hears, and it recalled the sense of mission I had had when I first started teaching, which had faded so decisively since. And again this had the effect of increasing

the distance between us, so that even as I saw he remained agitated, tense and anxious, that he was miserable with something he still had to say, I was suffused with a sense of accomplishment, a peculiar and sharp pleasure.

I asked whether there was something else, besides the poems we had read, that made him want to talk to me now. I don't know, he said, I just had to talk to someone, and he twisted his coffee cup slowly in circles as he spoke, the handle passing from one palm to the other. You don't know what it's like, he said, speaking my name, which startled me a little, I'm not sure why, making me feel again—just for a moment and like a kind of echo—how shocking it had been, years before, when my students first called me by my surname. It was so alien then, so little connected to who I was, though now it feels inevitable, the self I have become, perhaps, a diminished self, as it sometimes seems. You don't know what it's like, he went on, there's no one I can talk to, it's impossible here, and he catalogued for me the sources of comfort unavailable to him, his parents, his friends, the adults at school who, in the States, might have been turned to for support; and of course there were no public resources here, no community centers or networks he could seek out. What about online, I said, couldn't you find people there, and he looked up at me sharply. Is that what you think I want, he asked, to meet someone online? I'm not interested in that, he said, and I realized from his tone that he had misunderstood me, that he thought I was suggesting hookup sites, when in fact I had something altogether different in mind, forums and chat rooms of which there are so many in America. But he seemed exasperated by this, too, making a little motion of dismissal

with his hands. What good would that do, he said, I live here, not in America, and it's impossible to live here. Besides, and here he leaned away from me again, resting his weight on the padded back of our booth, I've seen some of those sites, he said, I've seen what they talk about, television and pop songs and sex, do you think I have anything to say to them? There's nothing for me there, he said, that's not the life I want, that's not what I want to be. And then, after a pause, Is that what all of them are like, he asked, leaning forward again, is that what it means to be this way? My confidence faltered at this; I had said the wrong thing, and now I felt myself under attack, or anyway drawn more decisively within the compass of his scorn. He knew nothing about me, about those aspects of my life there's no reason for my students to guess at, even though I'm more open than is usual for my vocation, or for my trade, rather, though maybe it was a vocation once. He knew nothing about me, nothing about the appetites that sometimes shame me, and yet still I felt indicted, so that Of course not, I said much more sharply than I should have, and then clamped down on myself before I could say anything more. He drew back when I spoke, and I was sorry for what I had done. I put both of my hands around the cup in front of me, taking a deep breath as I pressed my palms against what warmth was left, and then, when I could speak more calmly, What is the life you want, I asked.

He hunched his shoulders a little, as if to say I don't know or maybe what does it matter, and then he started talking about something else, or what seemed like something else, making me feel again that I was on the wrong tack, that I had failed to sense or say what I should. You know those

poems you put up in the classroom, he began, and I nodded, of course I did: five student poems from the two classes of twelfth-graders I taught, which I hung up in a little display on the back wall. For a week before the students handed them in there had been an extraordinary wind in Sofia, fierce and incessant, a wind from Africa, people said, which played havoc through the city and left all of us feeling anxious or exalted. It was constant, unignorable, and in each of the poems I posted it appeared, in one as a snake, in another as horses galloping on sand, in a third as the sea they galloped by, the pages hanging on the wall together like panes of a compound eye. Four of the poems you put up were by me and my closest friends, he said, three of us are in one class and the fourth is in the other; we hadn't talked about it at all, it was funny that we wrote about the same thing. Did you know we were so close, he asked, but I didn't know; I was embarrassed to realize, in fact, that in the weeks since the assignment I had forgotten exactly whose work I had chosen, and as G. spoke that afternoon I would puzzle out only slowly who the other students in his story were. Or maybe it wasn't funny, he went on, I guess there's nothing so funny about it, but it was odd, anyway, how we were all drawn to the same thing. They had been friends since they came to the College, he said then, they met as eighth-graders, three boys and one girl, and almost from the first day they were inseparable. As he spoke of these friends, I felt that despite my missteps he had decided I was worthy of his confidence, of a deeper confidence than he had already shown; or maybe it wasn't judgment but need that drove him to speak to me as he did, not for some virtue of my own but merely for the function I could serve.

They were easy with one another in a way he had never been before, he told me, he had never been part of a group like that; he had always held himself apart from others, it was his nature to hold himself apart. I felt lucky, he said, I expected the whole time that I would mess it up, that our friendship would burn out the way my friendships always burn out; I don't have any friends from before the College, he said, they slip away from me somehow. Or maybe those weren't the phrases he used, burn out and slip away, maybe I've supplied them just now, though I'm fairly certain of the shape of what he said as we sipped our second cups of coffee, as I kept pouring more sugar into mine, packet after packet. But they didn't slip away, he continued, they stuck. We met at the same place every morning before classes and then again for lunch, after school we took the bus together, on weekends we went to the park or the mall. Even during vacations we were together, we went to the mountains for winter break and spent summer at the seaside, our families became friends, we all traveled together. They're not like me, they had lots of friends, they've always been popular, but we were still a special group, I always had my place. I had what I wanted, for the first time I didn't want anything else, do you understand, and I nodded; I understood him entirely, and it seemed to me the intimacy he had drawn between us deepened further, becoming a sort of kinship, which I greeted with both welcome and dread.

There were more people in the restaurant now, and G. lowered his voice as the booths around us filled and the air grew thick with smoke. I was leaning forward to hear him, and it occurred to me that he had brought me here for the added

privacy of it, the privacy of the booth and his lowered voice but also the privacy of the language; at any of the brighter cafés on the boulevards we would have heard English but here no one else was speaking it, we were alone in that way too. I didn't think of B. as special then, not really, he said, speaking of the boy who was also in my class, whom I thought of as G.'s particular friend; we were all equally friends, the four of us, but B. and I had always been in the same classes, in eighth and ninth grade, and then the next year they put us in different sections. It shouldn't have mattered, he said, we were good students, we didn't talk in class or fool around, and we still had our time together as a group. But it did matter, he said, I couldn't stand it. I made them switch me, I said that I hated the other students, I said they were cruel to me. It wasn't true but I made my mother believe it, I made her come to the school to complain, and after a few days they put me where I wanted to be. Everything should have been fine then but it wasn't fine, I knew that it shouldn't have made me so upset, I couldn't understand why it had. But that's not true, he said, shaking his head just slightly, I did understand, at least a little, I knew I felt something I shouldn't feel.

He lit another cigarette. For some time as he spoke he hadn't been smoking, but now he took a deep drag and again I saw him relax as he exhaled. But really everything was fine, he said, I still had my place with my friends and I still had my friendship with B., I could do without the rest of it. B. dated a few girls, so did I, and it didn't mean much more to him than to me, we were still the same thing to each other, all four of us, and now for the first time G. named the third member of the group, the female friend, what he had said

about her to that point hadn't been enough for me to be sure who she was. She was a beautiful girl, smart, kind, one of my favorite students; she was undemanding, by which I mean that she had never been a source of the worry that makes up so much of teaching, she was a student you could be sure of. Everything was fine, he said again, and this year was our big year, we were finally seniors. We'd been looking forward to it for so long, the trips we would take, the parties. There was a tradition of these celebrations, I knew, one each quarter and then a final post-prom bacchanalia at the seaside that lasted, for some of them, until they left for university in the fall.

We arranged to rent a house together for the fall trip, he said, close enough to the others to join the parties at night but far enough away to have the days to ourselves. We were in the mountains, in a little village that's empty most of the year, there was nothing else for kilometers around. We brought everything with us, alcohol, music, even little lights to hang up in one of the houses so we could dance. There was a deck that looked out over the mountain, and on the first night we sat there late, talking and drinking, laughing in a way I only ever laughed when I was with them. It was a perfect night, he said, with the long weekend still stretching before them, when have I ever been so happy. There came over his face at this an expression of such longing I had to look away. I had been feeling this increasingly as he spoke, this desire to look away, and had resisted it, wanting him to know I was listening, that I was ready to receive whatever he offered; and this was all the more true because he so seldom looked at me, staring instead at the table, at his hands or the empty cup between them. I wanted to be present when he did look, I

wanted him to see my attention, which was my way of catching him, I suppose, or that's what I wanted it to be, I wanted to gather him up. But as he continued to speak I failed even at this, I was unable to keep my eyes on his face.

I went to bed before B., he said then, we were sharing a room but he wanted to stay up a bit and I was exhausted. I thought he would wake me up when he came in, that we would talk for a little like we always did, just a few minutes the two of us by ourselves; but I slept through the night and when I woke his side of the bed was untouched. I thought maybe he had fallen asleep out on the deck, but it had gotten cold in the night and there was nobody outside. It was early, foggy and quiet, like it only ever is in the mountains, and I stood for a while at the wooden rail, looking down at the village where everything was still. He waited for them in the main room, doing nothing, he said, just waiting until he heard a noise on the upper floor and then the final member of their group came down. G. called this boy by name and for the first time I had a clear sense of the four of them, all of them students I had seen every day, more or less, with so little idea of what passed between them. I have such a strange perspective on their lives; in one sense I see them as no one else sees them, my profession is a kind of long looking, and in another they are entirely opaque to me. He was so excited, G. said of this fourth friend, he couldn't wait to tell me about the night before, how after I went to bed they stayed up drinking, how there was something going on between B. and our other friend, how they began talking to each other as though he weren't there, until finally he said good night and left them alone. And then, before he fell asleep he heard

them walk past his door together. Isn't it great, this friend said to G., they're perfect for each other, and it's been coming for so long; he couldn't understand how it hadn't happened already, it was so obviously what they wanted. And he said all this to me like I knew it already, G. went on, like it was so clear it didn't need to be said. But I didn't know, I hadn't seen anything, and as I sat there I felt something I had never felt before, it was like I was falling into something, like water though it wasn't really like water, it was like a new element, G. said. But surely he didn't say precisely that, surely this is something I've added; added in solidarity, I'd like to say, but it wasn't solidarity I felt as I listened to him, it was more like the laying of a claim. The experience he had had was my own, I felt, I recognized it exactly, and as he spoke I felt myself falling also, into his story and his feeling both, I was trapped in what he told.

Finally we heard them moving, G. went on, we heard a door closing and steps coming from above, and then they came down the stairs together. They were shy, holding hands, it was like they were nervous about us seeing them. Our friend whistled at them and laughed, clapping his hands, and then they all laughed together. But I couldn't laugh with them, not really, I could only pretend to laugh. They had changed, the two of them, they seemed like different people sitting there in chairs they pulled together as close as they could, leaning against each other, like people I didn't know; and even though I could see B. glancing at me now and again, I couldn't make myself meet his eyes. G. paused, lighting another cigarette though the ashtray was already full. The restaurant was busy now, every table was taken, the room was

loud with conversation and laughter, but G. hadn't raised his voice as he spoke; I had to strain to hear him, leaning forward as best I could. He was silent for a while, dragging on his cigarette. I was grateful for the pause, I was exhausted by listening to him, by the effort of it in that noisy space but also by the obligation it imposed, not just to listen but to feel in a way I had grown unaccustomed to feel. I didn't want him to keep talking, I knew what he would say; it was such an ordinary story, which was what I had tried to tell myself when I was young and felt what G. felt now. But for G. it wasn't a story at all, it was the air he breathed, though it was even less like air than water, it was the opposite of air.

Over the next weeks I lost all the pleasure I had ever taken in my friends, he said. B. told me about every minute of it, every feeling, and I hated him while he spoke, I hated his happiness. There was so much to feel, G. said, I had never let myself imagine what I wanted, I had never in all those years fantasized about him, not once; I hardly fantasized about anything, I didn't want that part of me to exist. But now he was all I could think about, I couldn't concentrate in my classes—and it was true, I thought, I had noticed it, the abstraction, the missed work, the fact that so often I caught him staring off into space and had to call him back from wherever he had gone. Every day I saw something I couldn't stand, G. said, the two of them kissing or holding hands, they were so happy together. Everything I had looked forward to was ruined, the year was ruined, and I was lonely in a way I had never been before, not just alone but incapable of being not alone, do you understand? I looked up at him, having heard the grimace I saw now on his face, a look of

such desolation I barely caught myself before I reached for him, wanting to place my hand on his, though I had been teaching long enough to know never to touch students, or almost never, even innocent touches can be suspect. And he wouldn't have welcomed it, I thought, he wasn't the type to want it, it would have been an intrusion. But maybe I was wrong, maybe it was precisely what he wanted, maybe it was some better or wiser part of me I restrained. That's the worst thing about teaching, that our actions either have no force at all or have force beyond all intention, and not only our actions but our failures to act, gestures and words held back or unspoken, all we might have done and failed to do; and, more than this, that the consequences echo across years and silence, we can never really know what we've done.

G. was quiet for a moment, keeping his eyes on the table. When I told him, he went on, it was by accident, almost, I told him all at once and without any plan. We were alone for the first time in weeks, out of the city, at a house my parents keep up on Vitosha. I knew the area he meant, I thought, a band of exclusive neighborhoods built up the side of the mountain, each year climbing farther up; it was just a half-hour drive from Sofia but it was like a different world, with its own climate free of the congestion and noise of the center. This was a few weeks ago, he said, we had gone up on a Friday for a quick trip, we were coming back on Saturday. But we planned to spend the whole day there, and it was still morning, and it had been a wonderful night. G. was quiet for a while, and then, What was I thinking, he said, speaking to himself more than to me. He had waved the waitress away when she approached, the cups in front of us were empty

and cold. G. had his cigarettes but I was empty-handed, and suddenly I felt that I should make some gesture of comfort or encouragement, though I wasn't sure how much encouragement I wanted to give. I had heard enough of his story, I wanted to leave the restaurant and the thick air that made my eyes and my throat ache, I wanted him to stop talking, I wanted to go home.

I don't know, G. said, answering his own question, I wanted it to end, I guess, I didn't want to go back to being so miserable; or maybe it was something else, maybe I did have some hope, not that he would feel what I felt but that he would let me give it to him somehow, that he would receive it. If I could just kiss him, he said, his voice stripped now and small, if I could kiss him just once, that would be enough, I wouldn't want anything more. I looked at him then, wondering if he meant what he said, if he was really so new to desire that he could believe it. I don't think so, I said, speaking for the first time since he had started his story, my voice raw, I don't think that's how it works; it was a ridiculous thing to say, I knew it even as I spoke. Whatever, G. said, still not looking up, it doesn't matter, he didn't give me a chance. I told him that I loved him but he didn't understand me, or he pretended not to understand, I had to explain it, and once I started speaking I couldn't stop, after being silent for so long I spoke too much. But it didn't matter what I said, I only made things worse by talking. He didn't welcome it at all, and he hadn't had any idea; I guess I thought he had known it somehow, that he was all I thought about, the only thing, the only thing I cared about. But he was surprised, really surprised, and he didn't welcome it, he turned away when I kept

talking. He wasn't cruel to me, he was gentle, he was even kind, but he didn't pretend we could go on as we had. We would stop being friends, he said, he said he was sorry; he didn't want me to suffer, and it was the quickest way to end suffering, and anyway he couldn't be comfortable with me now. I was crying then, G. said, I don't think he had ever seen me cry before, I couldn't stop. Why did you tell me, he said, I've lost something too, you've taken something from me too. And I had, I realized, I had ruined so much, for him and for me. I was wrong to tell him, G. said, I shouldn't have said anything, along with everything else now I'm so sorry for what I said. But there's nothing I can do, I have to live with it, like I have to live with everything else I feel. He paused, and then, But what if I can't bear it, he said, looking up at me, finally catching my eye, and though at first I thought the question was rhetorical I realized it was genuine, I needed to have something to say. I remembered the confidence I had had, hours before, in my own competence, the pleasure I had taken in the solace I could give, and I wished I could have some of it back, that it would ease the sense I had now of helplessness and loss, though loss of what I wasn't precisely sure, an idea of myself, I suppose, which shouldn't have been so precious to me but was.

Other people have gone through this, I began, finding it difficult to speak. Other people have felt it, they bear it and they get through it, they aren't trapped in it forever. These feelings, I said lamely, all of them, they will get easier, they'll stop being the only thing you feel, they'll fade and make room for other feelings. And then, in time, you'll look at them from far away, almost entirely without pain, as if they

were felt by somebody else, or felt in a dream. That's what it's like, I said, thinking I had struck on something, it's precisely like waking from a dream, and like a self in a dream the self that feels this will be incomprehensible to you, and the intensity you feel now will be like a puzzle you can't solve, a puzzle it finally isn't worth your while to solve. I was speaking of myself, of course, of my own experience with love, with overwhelming love that had made me at times such a stranger to myself. But I could see this failing even as I spoke, I could see him recoiling from me, looking at me with an expression first of surprise and then of dismay, and then of something like revulsion. I don't want to feel it less, he said, I don't want it to stop, I don't want it to seem like it wasn't real. It would all be for nothing if that happened, he said, I don't want it to be a dream, I want it to be real, all of it. And who else could I love, he asked, his voice softening, we grew up together, in the same country, with the same language, we became adults together; who could I meet wherever I go next who could know me like that, who could love me as much as he could love me, who could I love as much? What life could I want except for that life, he said, reminding me of the question I had asked so long before, he hadn't forgotten it, his whole recitation had been an answer, what other life than that could I bear?

He raised his hand then, signaling for the waitress and signaling too that our talk was over, that he had exhausted all hope of my helpfulness; and I was both relieved and exasperated by this, and exasperated too by what he had said. But this is a story you're telling yourself, I said, a story you've made up that will make you unhappy. There's nothing inevitable

about it, it's a choice you've made, you can choose a different story. But he was already gone, though he was still with me at the table; he was taking out his wallet to pay the check, which I covered with my hand as the waitress laid it down. I've got it, I said, and he thanked me, for the coffee and for the talk, as he said. He stood up and put on his coat while I was still counting out bills, and though he stood there willing to wait for me he was clearly relieved when I let him go, saying I would wait for my change. I watched him as he left, walking hunched over just slightly, carrying away the despair he held on to so tightly, and I told myself he would grow out from under it, that he would go to university and discover a new life in England or America, new freedoms and possibilities, a greater scope for love, and with it room in himself for other feelings. The pain he felt now would become a story he told to others, I thought, and of course he couldn't believe this, of course it seemed impossible, I told myself, of course I had failed to make him see it.

I walked into the street, breathing in the fresh air and setting off in what I hoped was the direction of the Nevsky Cathedral, from which I was sure I could find my way home. As I walked I remembered other times I had felt impatience or exasperation with my students' private lives, with their outsized passions and griefs, and I felt this even as I knew that the perspective they lacked couldn't be willed, that it came only and inevitably with time. He would be all right, I thought again, comforting myself by thinking it, though I thought too that he wasn't altogether mistaken in what he had said, that there would be loss in loving another, that the perspective that limited his grief would also limit his love,

which, having taken the measure of its bounds, he could never again imagine as boundless. And I had thought this before, too, how much we lose in gaining this truer vision of ourselves, the vision I had urged upon my student, the vision it was my obligation to urge, though it carried us away from our dreams of ourselves, from the grandeur of novels and poems which it was also my obligation to impart. How much smaller I have become, I said to myself, through an erosion necessary to survival perhaps and perhaps still to be regretted, I've worn myself down to a bearable size. And then I realized that I had wandered into a maze of narrow streets, the walls on either side too high to glimpse the gold dome of my landmark, and I began to walk more quickly, spurred by the unease that always claims me when I lose track of where I am.