

I H A V E L I V E D more than a thousand years. I have died countless times. I forget precisely how many times. My memory is an extraordinary thing, but it is not perfect. I am human.

The early lives blur a bit. The arc of your soul follows the pattern of each of your lives. It is macrocosmic. There was my childhood. There have been many childhoods. And even in the early part of my soul I reached adulthood many times. These days, in every one of my infancies, the memory comes faster. We go through the motions. We look oddly at the world around us. We remember.

I say "we" and I mean myself, my soul, my selves, my many lives. I say "we" and I also mean the other ones like me who have the Memory, the conscious record of experience on this earth that survives every death. There aren't many, I know. Maybe one in a century, one born out of millions. We find one another rarely, but believe me, there are others. At least one of them has a memory far more extraordinary than mine.

I have been born and died many times in many places. The space between them is the same. I wasn't in Bethlehem for Christ's birth. I never saw the glory that was Rome. I never bowed to Charlemagne. At that time I was scratching out a crop in Anatolia, speaking a dialect unintelligible to the villages north and south. Only God and the devil can be counted on for all the thrilling parts.

The great hits of history go along without the notice of most. I read about them in books like everybody else.

Sometimes I feel more akin to houses and trees than to my fellow human beings. I stand around watching the waves of people come and go. Their lives are short, but mine is long. Sometimes I imagine myself as a post driven into the ocean's edge.

I've never had a child, and I've never gotten old. I don't know why. I have seen beauty in countless things. I have fallen in love, and she is the one who endures. I killed her once and died for her many times and I still have nothing to show for it. I always search for her; I always remember her. I carry the hope that someday she will remember me.

HOPEWOOD, VIRGINIA, 2004

SHE HADN'T KNOWN him very long. He'd shown up there at the beginning of eleventh grade. It was a small town and a small school district. You kept seeing the same kids year after year. He was a junior when he came, the same as her, but he seemed older somehow.

She'd heard many things about where and how he had spent the previous seventeen years of his life, but she doubted any of them were true. He was in a mental institution before he came to Hopewood, people said. His father was in jail and he lived by himself. His mother was killed, they said, most likely by his father. He always wore long sleeves, somebody said, because he had burns on his arms. He'd never defended himself against these stories, as far as she knew, and never offered any alternatives.

And though Lucy didn't believe the rumors, she understood the thing they were getting at. Daniel was different, even as he tried not to be. His face was proud, but there was a feeling of tragedy about him. It seemed to her as though no one had taken care of him and he didn't even realize it. One time she saw him standing in the cafeteria by the window while everyone else was jostling past him with their clattering trays, yakking a mile a minute, and he just looked completely lost. There was something about the way he looked at that moment that made her think he was the loneliest person in the world.

When he first appeared at school there was a lot of commotion about him because he was extremely good-looking. He was tall and strong-boned and self-possessed, and his clothes were a little nicer than most other kids'. At first the coaches were sniffing around for him to play football because of his size, but he didn't pursue it. As it was a small town and a bored town and a hopeful town, kids talked and rumors started. The rumors were ennobling at first, but then he made some mistakes. He didn't show up at Melody Sanderson's Halloween party, even though she invited him personally in the hallway, and everybody saw it. He talked to Sonia Frye straight through the annual junior/senior picnic, even though she was an untouchable freak to people like Melody. It was a delicate social ecosystem they lived in, and most people got scared off him by the first winter.

Except Lucy. She herself didn't know why not. She didn't respect Melody or her posse of yeah-girls, but she trod carefully. She had marks against her to begin with, and she didn't want to be an outcast. She couldn't do that to her mother, not after what she'd already been through with her sister. Nor was Lucy the kind who liked difficult boys. She didn't.

She had the weird idea—kind of a fantasy, actually—that she could help him. She knew what it was like on the outside and the inside at this school, and she knew what it took to maintain yourself through both. She sensed that he bore a heavier weight than most other people, and it gave her a strange, aching empathy for him. She honored herself with the idea that maybe he needed her, that maybe she was the one who could understand him.

He showed no sign of sharing this view. In almost two years he hadn't spoken to her once. Well, one time she'd stepped on his shoelace and apologized to him and he'd stared at her and muttered something. She'd felt nagging and uneasy afterward, and her mind kept going back to it, trying to figure out what he'd said and what he'd meant, but she finally decided that she hadn't done anything wrong

and it was his problem going around with his shoe untied in the senior hallway at three in the afternoon.

“Do you think I’m overthinking this?” she’d asked Marnie.

Marnie looked at her as though it took restraint not to claw at her hair. “Yes, I do. I think you are overthinking this. If there was a movie about you it would be called *I Am Overthinking This*.”

She’d laughed at the time and worried later. Marnie wasn’t trying to be mean. Marnie loved her better and more honestly than anyone else in the world, with the possible exception of her mother, who loved her intensely if not honestly. Marnie hated to see her spend so much of herself on someone who didn’t care.

Lucy suspected he was some kind of genius. Not that he did or said anything to let you know. But once she’d sat beside him in English class, sneaking looks when the class was discussing Shakespeare. She’d seen him, his big shoulders huddled over his notebook, writing sonnets from memory, one after the other, in beautiful slanting script that made her think of Thomas Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence. He had a look on his face that made her believe he was as far as he could be from the small, boxy classroom with the stuttering fluorescent light, the gray linoleum floor, and the one tiny window. *I wonder where you come from*, she thought. *I wonder why you ended up in this place*.

One time she’d asked him, in a fit of boldness, what the English assignment was. He’d just pointed to the board, where it said they were supposed to prepare for an in-class essay on *The Tempest*, but he looked as though he’d wanted to say something else. She knew he could talk; she’d heard him talk to other people. She prepared to give him an encouraging look, but when she met his eyes, which were the color of canned peas, she was suddenly swept away by an awkwardness so confounding that she cast her gaze to the floor and didn’t pick it up again until the end of class. Usually she wasn’t like that. She was a reasonably confident person. She knew who she was and where

she fit. She'd grown up mostly among girls, but between student government and the ceramics studio and Marnie's two brothers, she had plenty of friends who were boys. None of them made her feel the way Daniel did.

And then there was the time, at the end of junior year, when she was cleaning out her locker. She was aching at the thought of not seeing him for the entire summer. She had parked her dad's rusted white Blazer badly, with two wheels up on the curb a couple of blocks from school. She had left piles of papers and books from her locker and a cardboard box of her pottery on the sidewalk while she tried to gently pry the door open.

She saw Daniel out of the corner of her eye at first. He wasn't walking anywhere or carrying anything. He was just standing still with his arms dangling at his sides, gazing at her with that lost expression on his face. His face was sad and a bit remote, as though he was looking inside himself as much as he was looking out at her. She turned and met his eyes, and neither of them jumped away this time. He stood there as if he was trying to remember something.

The ordinary part of her wanted to wave or make a comment that seemed clever or memorable, but another part of her just held her breath. It seemed that they really knew each other, not simply that she had thought of him obsessively for a year. It seemed that he was trusting her to just stand there for a moment, as though there were so many important things they could have said to each other that they didn't need to say any of them at all. He looked uncertain and walked away, and she wondered what it meant. Later she tried to explain it to Marnie as evidence of a true connection, but Marnie tossed it away as another "non-event."

Marnie felt that she was in charge of taming Lucy's expectations and had even adopted a special mantra for the purpose: "If he liked you, you would know it," she said constantly, a phrase Lucy suspected she'd read in a book.

It wasn't just that Lucy wanted to help him. She wasn't as selfless as that. She was madly attracted to him. She was attracted to all the normal things and then weird things, too, like the back of his neck and his thumbs on the edge of his desk and the way his hair stuck out on one side like a little wing over his ear. She caught his smell once, and it made her dizzy. She couldn't fall asleep that night.

And the truth was that he offered her something that no other boy in the school could: He didn't know Dana. Dana had always been a "handful," as her mother decorously put it, but when they were young she had been Lucy's hero. She was the smartest, fastest-talking person Lucy knew, and she was always brave. Brave and also reckless. When Lucy got in trouble for something, even for something dumb, like tracking mud into the house or spilling ketchup on the floor, Dana would take the blame. She did it even when Lucy begged her not to, because she said she didn't mind blame and Lucy did.

Dana became notorious when Lucy was in fifth grade and she was in ninth. Lucy didn't understand what all the whispering among the older kids and grown-ups meant at first, but she knew there was something to be ashamed of. "I had your sister," one or another of her teachers would always say significantly. Certain kids wouldn't come to her house anymore, or even invite her to theirs, and she understood that her family had done something wrong without really knowing what it was. Only Marnie was her unwavering friend.

By seventh grade Dana was the "Go Ask Alice" of the school, the cautionary tale, and her parents were the ones people endlessly speculated about. Did they drink? Were there drugs in the house? Had the mother worked when the girls were young? The speculation usually ended with somebody saying, "They *seem* nice enough."

Her parents took it all with heads bent so low it was like an invitation for more. Their shame was boundless, and it was easier getting blamed than doing nothing at all. Dana held her head high, but the rest of them walked around with a black eye and an apology.

Lucy tried to be loyal sometimes and other times wished her last name was Johnson, of which there were fourteen in the school. She tried to talk to Dana, and when it made no difference she convinced herself she didn't care. How many times could you give up on someone you loved? "Lucy's a different kind of Broward," she overheard her math teacher say to the guidance counselor when she entered high school, and she felt horrible for how fiercely she clung to it. She thought if she tried hard enough she could make amends.

Dana fell back a few grades for lack of attendance and every other possible crime that wasn't academic: drugs, violence, giving blow jobs in the boys' bathroom. Lucy once saw the envelope on her father's desk declaring Dana a National Merit Scholarship finalist based on her SAT scores. It was strange, the things Dana chose to do.

She dropped out for good on the second-to-last day of school, just a week before she would have graduated. She appeared again on graduation day and in the midst of "Pomp and Circumstance" made her dramatic exit. Daniel was possibly the only boy Lucy knew who hadn't seen Dana tearing off her clothes on the school's front lawn, surrounded by medics trying not to get their eyes scratched out as they carted her to the hospital for the last time.

Dana overdosed on Thanksgiving that year and went into a coma. She died quietly on Christmas. She was buried on New Year's Eve at a ceremony attended by the family and Marnie, her two surviving grandparents, and her crazy aunt from Duluth. The single representative from the school was Mr. Margum, who was the physics teacher and the youngest member of the faculty. Lucy wasn't sure if he came because Dana had aced his class or maybe given him a blow job or both.

Among the complicated legacy of Dana, the most tangible thing she left was a four-foot corn snake named Sawmill, and Lucy got stuck with it. What else could she do? Her mother wasn't going to take care

of it. Week after week she thawed the frozen mice and fed them to him with abiding discomfort. She dutifully changed his warming light. She thought maybe Sawmill would die without the animating spirit of Dana in his life, and one time she saw a desiccated, inert version of him in his glass box and for a moment believed—with a mixture of horror and relief—that he had. But it turned out he had only molted. He was lounging in his hollow log, looking fresher than ever. Lucy suddenly remembered the dry gray skins Dana had thumbtacked to her wall, her only effort toward home decorating.

Eleventh grade was the first year Lucy allowed herself to be something other than Dana's sister. Because she was pretty, the boys forgot faster than the girls, but they all came around eventually.

Lucy was elected junior class secretary in the late fall. Two of her clay pieces, a vase and a bowl, were chosen for a statewide art show. Every moment of freedom or success was outmatched by a moment of guilt and grief. She hated that she wanted anything from them, but she did.

"You know, Lu, I don't have a single friend at that school," she remembered Dana telling her once, as though that was a real surprise.

"HE'S PROBABLY NOT even going to show up," Marnie announced over the phone as they were both getting ready for the Senior Ball, the final event of high school.

"He will if he wants to get his signed diploma," Lucy pointed out before she hung up the phone and went back to her closet.

Marnie called a second time. "Even if he does show, it's not like he's going to talk to you."

"Maybe I'll talk to him."

Lucy carefully took her new lavender silk slip dress out of her closet and undid the plastic. She laid it with care across her bed while

she changed from a regular bra into a lacy cream-colored one. She painted her toenails pale pink and spent a full fifteen minutes at the sink trying to clean the clay and gardening soil out from under her fingernails. She used a curling iron, knowing the curls would fall out of her straight, slippery hair within the hour. As she drew black eyeliner along the edge of her top eyelid, she pictured Daniel watching her and wondering why she was stabbing herself in the eyeball with a pencil.

She often thought of that. Embarrassingly often. Whatever she was doing, she would imagine Daniel there with his thoughts and opinions. And though they'd never really spoken, she always had a clear idea of what he would think. He wouldn't like a lot of makeup, for instance. The blow-dryer would strike him as loud and pointless, and her eyelash curler like a torture device. He liked her sunflower seeds but not her Diet Pepsi. As her iPod shuffled her songs, she knew the ones he liked and the ones he thought were stupid.

He liked her dress, she decided, as she pulled it carefully over her head and let the delicate fabric settle over her body. That's why she'd picked it.

Marnie called again. "You should have gone with Stephen. He asked you nicely."

"I didn't want to go with Stephen," she said.

"Well, Stephen would bring you flowers. He'd pose for good pictures."

"I don't like him. What would I want those pictures for?" She didn't mention the main trouble with Stephen, which was that Marnie obviously admired him.

"And he'd dance with you. Stephen's a good dancer. Daniel's not going to dance with you. He's not going to care if you are there or not."

"Maybe he'll care. You don't know that."

"He won't. He's had a lot of chances to care, and he hasn't."

After Lucy hung up the phone for the last time she stood in front

of the mirror. She did rue the lack of flowers a little. She clipped three small violets from the pots on her windowsill, two purple and one pink. She attached them to a hairpin and tucked them an inch above her ear. That was better.

Marnie came to the front door at a quarter to eight. Lucy could read the expression on her mom's face as she came down the stairs. Her mother had been guardedly wishing for some version of Stephen, a handsome guy in a tux wielding a corsage, and not just Marnie again, in her ripped black stockings. She'd had two lovely fair-haired daughters and not one eager boy in a tuxedo to show for it. To look like Lucy had been enough in her day.

Lucy felt the old pang. Now she knew what she wanted those pictures for. Her mother could use them to remember a better outcome than she'd had. Lucy appeased herself with her usual litany of guilt reducers: She wasn't taking drugs. She wasn't piercing her tongue or getting a tattoo of a spider on her neck. She was wearing a lavender dress and pink toenail polish and violets in her hair. She couldn't do everything right.

"Oh, God," Marnie said when she looked Lucy over. "Did you have to do all that?"

"All what?"

"Never mind."

"All what?"

"Nothing."

Lucy had tried too hard. That was it. She looked down at her dress and at her gold shoes. "This might be the last time I see him," she said plaintively. "I don't know what will happen after this. I need to make him remember me."

"I HATE THIS SONG. Let's go outside."

Lucy followed Marnie out of the school auditorium. Marnie hated

every song, and Lucy creaked back and forth on her gold shoes, watching the dark red ring of lipstick on the filter of Marnie's cigarette. Marnie hunched down to relight, and Lucy saw the tender yellow roots at her part, pushing away the dyed-dark hair.

"I'm not seeing Daniel," Marnie said, more grumpy than triumphant.

"Who'd Stephen come with?" Lucy asked, meaner than she should've been.

"Shut up," Marnie said, because she had her disappointments, too.

Lucy did shut up for a while, watching the smoke climb and dissipate. She thought of Daniel's diploma left on the table along the wall of the gymnasium, and it felt like a rebuke to her. He really wasn't going to come. He really didn't care about her. Lucy felt as though her makeup was stiffening on her face. She wanted to wash it off. She looked down at her dress, which cost her an entire semester of Saturdays working at the bagel shop. What if she never saw him again? The thought gave her an almost panicked feeling. This could not be all there was.

"What was that?" Marnie turned her head abruptly.

Lucy heard it, too. There was shouting inside the school, and then a scream. You hear plenty of screams in the vicinity of a high school party, but this was one that made you stop.

Marnie stood with a look of surprise Lucy rarely caught on her face. People were piling up at the main doors, and you could hear the shouting. Lucy startled at the sound of glass shattering. Something was really wrong.

Who do you think of when glass is breaking and people are screaming real screams? That was a telling thing. Marnie was right there and her mother was home, so Lucy thought of Daniel. What if he was in there somewhere? The crowd was piling up thick and wild at the main doors, and she needed to know what was going on.

She went in through the side door. The hallway was dark, so she

ran toward the shouting. She stopped as she intersected with the senior hallway. She heard more glass breaking in the distance. She saw dark streaks on the floor and instinctively knew what it was. More blood pooled and rolled down the senior hallway, and she would have thought, she observed numbly, that that floor was flat. She took a few steps and froze. Somebody, a boy, was lying there mostly in the dark and everybody else was running away. It was his blood that was creeping down the hall. "*What is going on?*" she shouted after them.

She felt for her cell phone in her bag with shaking hands. By the time she'd opened it she heard the sirens, and there were many of them all at once. Somebody grabbed her arm and pulled at her, but she shook him off. The blood crept toward the toe of her gold shoe. Somebody stepped in it and ran away, making shoe prints on the linoleum, and that just seemed wrong.

She made her way toward the body on the ground, trying not to walk in his blood. She leaned down to see his face. It was a boy in the junior class, a face she recognized but didn't know. She crouched beside him and touched his arm. He was groaning with each breath. He was alive, at least. "Are you all right?" It seemed obvious he wasn't. "Help is coming," she assured him weakly.

Suddenly she heard an explosion of shouting and footsteps coming toward her as the police arrived. They were yelling at everybody. They blocked the doors and told everybody to calm down, though they themselves were not calm.

"Is there an ambulance?" she said. Not loud enough, so she said it again. She hadn't realized she was crying.

Two policemen rushed to the boy, and she stepped back. There was another eruption of shouting into radios. They made way for the EMS guys to get through.

"Is he okay?" she asked, too quietly to make any difference. She backed up farther. She couldn't see anything anymore.

At that moment a policewoman pulled at her roughly. "You're not going anywhere," she commanded, even though Lucy wasn't going anywhere. She directed her down the science hall and pointed to a door on the right. "Go in there and stay until we can get a detective in to talk to you. Don't move, do you hear me?"

She pushed open the door to the chemistry lab where she had done experiments on the Bunsen burners in tenth grade.

Through the windows she first saw all the red from the lights of the police cars. She waded through dark chairs and tables to see out. There were probably ten police cars parked at odd angles on the patch of grass at the back of school where they spent free periods in good weather. When the lights flashed over it she could see how the tires had chewed up the grass, and that seemed like a further dire thing.

She made her way to the classroom sink more by memory than sight. She could have found the light switch, but she didn't feel like exposing herself to all the people bustling outside the windows. She turned on the faucet and bent forward, washing away makeup and tears. She dried her face with a stiff brown paper towel. Her violets drooped. She'd thought the room was empty until she turned around and saw the figure sitting at a desk in the corner, and it scared her. She walked closer, trying to adjust her eyes to the darkness.

"Who is that?" she asked in a voice just above a whisper.

"Daniel."

She stopped. The red glow filled in parts of his face.

"Sophia," he said.

She came closer so he could see who she was. "No, it's Lucy." Her voice shook a little. There was a boy bleeding in the hallway, and she felt a gathering disappointment that he still didn't know her.

"Come sit down." He wore a stoic expression, a look of resignation, as if he would rather she were Sophia.

She skimmed along the edge of the room, picking over chairs and jackets and bags kids had stowed there. Her dress felt insubstantial

for this kind of night. He was sitting back against the wall in one of those desk/chair combinations with his feet crossed as though he was waiting for something.

She wasn't sure how close to sit, but he pulled a desk/chair toward him so the two right-handed desks faced each other like yin and yang. She shivered as she got close. She felt the goose bumps on her bare arms. Self-consciously she pulled the violets from her hair.

"You're cold," he said. He glanced at the little flowers on the desk.

"I'm okay," she said. Most of the goose bumps were owing to him.

He looked around at the piles on the stools and chairs and desk-tops. He pulled out a white sweatshirt with a falcon on it and held it out to her. She put it over her shoulders but did not contend with the sleeves or zipper.

"Do you know what happened?" she asked, leaning forward, her hair brushing past her shoulders so it almost touched his hands.

He spread his hands out flat on the desk as she'd seen him do many times in English class. They were the hands of a man and not a boy. He seemed to be steadying them for something. "Some juniors crashed and vandalized the senior lounge and hallway. A couple of them had knives, and there was a fight. I think two of them got cut and one kid got stabbed."

"I saw him. He was lying on the ground."

He nodded. "He'll be all right. It's his leg. It'll bleed, but he'll be all right."

"Really?" She wondered how he knew.

"Did EMS get there yet?"

She nodded.

"Then yes. He'll be fine." He looked as though he was thinking about something else.

"That's good." She believed him whether he deserved it or not, and it made her feel better. Her teeth were chattering, so she closed her mouth to make it stop.

He leaned down and lifted something from a bag on the floor. It was a bottle of bourbon, half full. "Somebody left their stash." He went over to the sink and took a plastic cup from the stack. "Here."

He was pouring it before she said yes or no. He put it on the desk right in front of her, leaning so close she could feel his warmth. She felt breathless and light in her head. She put her hand to her warm throat, knowing it was turning red, as it did in moments of deep agitation.

"I didn't realize you were here," she said, forgetting to think how she revealed herself by saying so.

He nodded. "I came late. I heard the screaming all the way from the parking lot. I wanted to see what was going on."

She would have taken a sip of the bourbon, but her hands were shaking and she didn't want him to see. Maybe he understood this, because he leaned away from her toward the counter, where he switched on a burner. She watched the dots of fire flicker around the rim before the flame took hold. It reflected off the glass door and made a faint quivery light through the room. She took a quick sip and felt the sting and burn of it in her cold mouth. She tried not to wince at the fumes. It wasn't exactly her custom to drink whiskey.

"Will you have some?" she asked when he'd settled back into the desk/chair contraption. His knees brushed against hers. She didn't think he'd been intending to drink any. But he looked at her, and he looked at the cup. He reached for it, and she watched in amazement as he put it to his lips just where her lips had been and took a long sip. She'd imagined he might pour himself a cup but never that he'd share hers. What would Marnie say to that? This was intimacy she couldn't quite believe. She was sitting with him, talking with him, drinking with him. It was happening so fast she couldn't quite take it in.

She took another sip, recklessly. If he saw the shaking, she didn't care. Her hand was where his hand was and her lips over his lips.

Do you have any idea how much I've loved you?

He sat back again. He tipped his head to the side and studied her face. Their knees touched. She waited for him to say something, but he was quiet.

She squeezed the plastic cup nervously in her hand, bending the circle to an oval and back. "I thought the year would end and we would all go our separate ways and we would never have talked to each other," she said bravely. She felt like her words echoed in the silence, and hated being stuck with them for so long. She wished he would say something to cover them over.

He smiled at her. She thought she had never seen his smile. He was beautiful. "I wouldn't have let that happen," he said.

"You wouldn't?" She was so genuinely surprised she couldn't help asking. "Why not?"

He continued to study her, as though he had many things to say and wasn't sure he was ready to say them. "I've been wanting to talk to you," he said slowly. "I wasn't sure . . . when the right time would be."

In a completely juvenile and heady way, she wished Marnie could have heard him say that.

"But this is a strange night," he went on. "Maybe not the best time. Tonight I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"You did?" She was worried her face was so eager as to be pitiful.

He smiled in that same way again. "Of course."

She took another sip of bourbon and giddily passed it to him as if they were old friends. Did he have any idea how much time she had spent thinking about him and fantasizing about him and parsing his every glance and gesture? "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well." He was trying to measure something about her; she didn't know what. He took another long swig. "I probably shouldn't be doing this. I don't know." He shook his head, and his face was serious. She wasn't sure if he meant drinking bourbon or talking to her.

“Shouldn’t be doing what?”

He looked at her so hard it almost scared her. She wanted nothing more in the world than to have him stare into her eyes, but this was too much to take in. It was like buckets of water spilling off of parched soil.

“I’ve thought about this a lot. There are so many things I’ve wanted to say to you. I don’t want to”—he paused to choose his words—“overwhelm you.”

She had never had a boy talk to her like that. There was no cover of bullshit, no flirtation, no added charm, but his look was searing. He was different from anyone she had known.

She swallowed hard to keep herself down. She felt she could turn inside out and show him her kidneys if she wasn’t careful. She would hold herself together, but she wouldn’t leave him out there on his own. “Do you know how much I’ve thought about you?”

They were sitting knees to knees, pressing them together, so when he split his legs hers went right through until they were practically joined. Her knee was nearly in his crotch, and his was in hers. Her knee was bare, and his knee was deep under her dress, pressed against her underwear, and her nerves were thrumming. She had a feeling of disbelief. She was suspicious that her imagination was choreographing this out of pure desire and that it wasn’t really happening.

“Have you?” he asked. She suddenly knew, just knew, that he was soaking her in, that he was as parched as she was.

He reached out and put his hand on the back of her neck and pulled her forward. She drew in her breath, astonished that he would put his mouth on hers. He kissed her. She lost herself in his breath and his warmth and his smell. She leaned so far forward that she felt the edge of the desk cutting into her rib cage under her breasts and her heart slamming against it.

His arm hit the cup of bourbon, and it fell to the floor. She vaguely felt the liquid splash and puddle under her foot and didn’t care. She

meant to stay in his kiss until she died if necessary, but she felt something strange, a strange sensation barreling toward her, a heavy foreboding. She was able to ignore it for a while, until it crashed into her all at once.

It was a sensation of feeling and remembering at the same time, two explosions colliding and expanding. It was like déjà vu but far more intense. She felt dizzy and suddenly afraid. She opened her eyes and pulled back from him. She looked into his eyes. She felt tears on her face, wholly different from her earlier tears. "Who are you?" she whispered.

His eyes seemed to dilate and refocus. "Do you remember?"

She could not make herself see in front of her. The room spun so violently she closed her eyes and he was there, too, behind her eyes, as though from her memory. He was lying on a bed and she was looking down at him, and she felt an undertow of despair she didn't understand.

She felt him now holding both her hands, she realized, and hard. When she opened her eyes his expression was so intense she wanted to look away. "Do you remember?" He looked as though his life depended on her answer.

She felt scared. She had another scene invading her mind that she couldn't place. It was him, but in a strange setting, not anywhere she knew. She felt as if she was fully awake and dreaming at the same time. "Did I know you before?" She felt sure it was true, and also that it couldn't be. She had a terror of not knowing quite where she was.

"Yes." She saw that there were tears in his eyes.

He pulled her out from the desk and held her standing up so her whole body was clutched to his. She felt a rocking against her chest, and she didn't know if it was her heart or his. "You are Sophia. Do you know that?" Her head was pressed into his neck, and she felt dampness on top of her head.

If he wasn't holding her, she didn't think she could stand up. She

felt herself slipping. She didn't know where she was or who she was, and she didn't know what she remembered. She wondered if the bourbon was acting as some kind of hallucinogen or if she was just losing her mind.

Is this what it was like? Dana had loved to be out of control, but Lucy hated it. She pictured an ambulance coming to get her. She thought of her mother.

She pulled roughly away from him. "There is something wrong with me," she said tearfully.

He didn't want to let her go, but he saw the whiteness of her face and the fear. "What do you mean?"

"I have to go."

"Sophia." She realized he had two fistfuls of her dress, and he wasn't letting them go.

"No, it's Lucy," she said. Was he crazy? He was. He was confused and thought she was someone else. He was having some kind of psychosis. He was so crazy he was making her crazy, too.

She suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of danger. She cared about him too much, and he was a dangerous person to love. He wouldn't love her back. He'd suck her into pure confusion where he thought she was someone else. And she would want so much to believe him that she wouldn't know who she was anymore.

"Please let go."

"But. Wait. *Sophia*. You do remember."

"No. I don't. You're scaring me. I don't know. I don't know what you are talking about." She sobbed between the words.

She felt his hands shaking. She couldn't look at the despair in his face. "I wish I could tell you everything. I wish you knew. Please let me try to explain."

She pulled away so hard her dress tore down the front. She looked down and then at him. He looked surprised and horrified that he was still holding the fabric in his hands.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.”

He tried to put the sweatshirt around her to cover her up. “I’m so sorry,” he said. He wouldn’t take his arms from her. He wouldn’t let her go. “I’m so sorry. I love you. Do you know that?” He was holding her, pressing his face desperately in her hair. “I always have.”

She wrested herself away from him. She caught the desk with her leg and sent it backward. She tripped over chairs and bags to get to the door. She couldn’t be loved like this. Not even her. Not even by him.

“You don’t,” she said without turning around. “You don’t even know who I am.”

She didn’t remember getting to the front doors of the school, but a policeman found her there. She was crying and couldn’t find a way out because all the doors were locked. That’s what the cop told her mother when she came to get her, but Lucy honestly didn’t remember any of it.

HE SAT CROUCHED in the room by himself for a long time after she left. He could still taste her on his lips and feel the warmth of her body against his, but they were a reproach now. He stared at the three wilted blooms on the desk where she’d sat. He still had a piece of her dress in his hand.

There was only regret left over. And disgust at himself. He didn’t want to move for fear of opening more cracks and letting all that in, and worse. He wished he could bathe in the touch and smell of her rather than in his failure, but the failure overwhelmed him. He’d destroyed all hope of her. He’d hurt her and upset her. How could he have done that to her?

She remembered me.

That was his worst weakness, his most toxic drug. He was so eager for her to remember, he would tell himself anything. He would do anything, believe anything, imagine anything.

She did. She knew.

In a daze he left the school long after everyone had gone. There were a few security guards left over, cleaning up the mess. Nobody bothered with him. His failures were private and invisible.

But not to her.

He'd pushed her. He'd scared her. He'd besieged her. He'd vowed he wouldn't, and he did. He'd kept himself together so scrupulously for so long, but when he came apart he did it with the force of centuries. He hated himself and every intention and desire he'd ever had. He hated everything he'd ever planned or wanted.

I love her. I need her. I gave away everything I had for her. I just wanted her to know me.

He walked until he was away from the sights and sounds. He found a clearing past the soccer field and lay down in the damp grass. He couldn't go any farther. There was no place to go, no one to see, nothing to want or hope for. He had built up his vision so patiently for so many years and wrecked it in a matter of moments.

She is my doing and my undoing.

She always had been. And what a price she had paid for it, too.

He couldn't stay there. He still saw the red of the police lights beating against the heavy June sky. He got up, and his back was wet with the ground. He walked down the hill away from the school. He was done with it, never to return, leaving it in the state of ruin in which he seemed to leave everything. He should have left the world alone.

He realized he'd forgotten to take his diploma. He pictured it sitting on the long picked-over table in the gym, alone amid the crepe streamers and sinking balloons. They were for the people who cared, who'd treasure it as though it was their first and last. He knew better. What did one more matter to him? So there it would sit, with his name written in careful calligraphy.

Why did he keep going when everyone else got to start over? Why was he still here and she would always go? Sometimes he felt like the only one on earth. He was different. He always was. His attempts at living in the regular world seemed stupid and false.

I've lost her again.

It would seem that someone who had been around as long as he had, who'd seen as much as he had, would have a longer view and some amount of patience. But he was too pent up, too full of need. She was right there, and he couldn't control himself. He tricked himself into thinking that she would look into his eyes and remember, that love would conquer all. The bourbon was tricky, too.

Nobody remembers but me. He kept that thought locked in its place, but this night he let it out. The loneliness of it was unbearable sometimes.

HE WALKED THROUGH fields and along a two-lane road. He walked along the river, and it felt good to be close to something older than he was. This river had a long memory but, unlike him, wisely kept it to itself. He thought of the Appomattox campaign, the Battle of High Bridge. How much blood had soaked into this river? And yet the river flowed. It cleansed itself and forgot. How could you cleanse yourself if you couldn't forget?

I don't want to want this anymore. I don't want to do this to her anymore. I want to be done.

He had no one to keep him here. He had no real family. In the life before this one, he'd lucked into one of the truly great families, and he'd recklessly given them up to follow Sophia. It was no wonder he got what he got in this life—an addict who left before he turned three and a foster family every bit as bad as he deserved. For the last two years he'd been on his own, living narrowly on hope. He'd given

up blessings he hadn't been worthy of for the chance to be with her, and now he'd lost that, too.

What would it be like if you didn't come back? That was one of the few corners of experience he hadn't looked into. Would dying be different? Would you get to meet God finally?

He sat at the edge of the river, minding the cold, muddy soak of it, and wondering why you couldn't free yourself from those small inclinations. No matter how long you lived. Like the death-bound convict glancing at the clock. You could never quite fit the small rotations to the big ones, could you?

He pulled mud-covered rocks from the riverbank, small enough to fit in his pockets. Bigger ones he threw blindly into the riverbed, listening for the hollow crack of stone hitting stone or the merciful slap of soft water. He pushed rocks and mud into the pockets of his good pants, just daring his dumb autonomic brain to resist him. He stuffed a jagged few rocks into his breast pocket, a little abashed at his own stagecraft in a moment like this. There was no moment so momentous that it strangled all the little notions.

Except when you kissed her.

Decisions like this were more dignified in the future or the past, or when they occurred in the lives of other people. The petty workings of your birdlike mind brought you down, and forgetting was your only salvation. It was his curse to remember lifetimes of them.

Appropriately burdened, he trudged to the road and followed it onto the bridge. The dark air moved cooler and faster over the water. Headlights of a car appeared and grew on the other side of the river but passed without crossing. He got to the highest point, climbed onto the guardrail and sat on it, facing the river, dangling his legs over the water, feeling strangely young. He observed the rocks cutting into his skin as though they hurt someone else.

He climbed up to standing, balancing the guardrail under his stiff-soled shoes. He waved his arms to keep from slipping. Why did

it seem important to jump and not to fall, when it came to the same thing? The heavy moisture in the air made his face feel wet. Another car passed.

Of all the millions of possible things he could take with him, he had a piece of Lucy's soft purple dress balled up in his hand and the sour taste of bourbon in the back of his throat. In his mind he held the look of fear on her face as she tried to get away from him and he wouldn't let go, ruining centuries of carefully nurtured hope, knowing he was ruining it, and still not being able to stop himself from ruining it.

That was enough to make him hold his balance and jump.

NORTH AFRICA, 541

J was once a perfectly normal person, but it didn't last long. That was in my first life. The world was new to me then, and I was new to myself. It began in roughly the year 520 A.D., but I am not sure of the exact point in time. I didn't keep track of things in the same way then. It was long ago, and I didn't know I'd be remembering them.

I consider it my first life because I don't remember anything coming before it. I guess it's possible that I lived lives before that. Who knows, maybe I've been around since before the time of Christ but something happened to me in this particular life that led to the formation of my strange memory. Doubtful but possible, I guess.

And the truth is, some of the very early lives are murky. There were one or two when I think I must have died young from ordinary childhood diseases, and I'm not sure how they fit into the larger order of events. I keep a few bits and pieces from them, the expansive hotness of fever, a familiar hand or voice, but my soul was hardly situated before I moved along.

It's painful for me to think about that first life and to try to recount it to you. I would have done better to die early of measles or pox.

Since I first began to understand my memory, I've considered my actions differently. I know that suffering doesn't end with death. That's true for all of us, whether we remember or not. I didn't know it then. Maybe it helps explain how I did the things I did, but it doesn't mitigate them.

I WAS FIRST born to the north of the city that was then called Antioch. The first indelible notch in my long record was the earthquake of 526. I had no perspective on it then, but in the years since, I've read every account I could find to compare to my own. My family survived, but it left many thousands dead. Our parents had gone to the market that day, and I was alone with my older brother, fishing in the Orontes, when it happened. I remember falling on my knees as the earth rolled under us in waves. For reasons I can't explain I got up again and walked unsteadily into the river. I can still remember standing in water up to my neck, feeling the syncopated roll of one surface under the other, and then suddenly ducking under, my eyes open wide and my arms out at either side for balance. I lifted my feet from the ground and stretched out until I was parallel with the river. I rolled until I was face up and saw the sky through the water. I saw the way the light lost its certainty under there, and I felt I understood something about it. I have known a true mystic well enough to be sure I am not one, but for a moment the ticking of time was silenced and I saw through the fabric of this world to eternity. I didn't process it then, but I've dreamed it a thousand times since.

My brother shouted curses at me to come back and then followed me when I didn't. I think he meant to pummel me and drag me back to shore, but the sensations were so peculiar he stood

a few yards from me, his face suspended over the river in a look of abstraction. I came back up to the surface, and we waited for the shore to go back to normal. And even when it did, I remember walking home, keeping a wondering eye on the ground as it passed under my feet.

WE WERE PROUD subjects of Byzantium then. Belonging to a great empire made little difference in our small domestic life, but the idea transformed us. It made our hills a little grander and our food a little tastier and our children a little prettier because we fought for them. The able-bodied men in my family fought, albeit distantly, under the famous general Belisarius. He, more than anyone, gave the glory and shape to our lives, which were otherwise not glorious. My uncle, whom we revered, was killed on a campaign to put down a Berber uprising in North Africa. We had only enough information about his death to demonize North Africa and every soul contained therein. I later discovered my uncle was most likely stabbed to death by a comrade for stealing his chicken, but again, that was later.

I sailed with my brother and a hundred other soldiers of the empire across the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa. We were inflamed by vengeance. Like many new souls, I was never better suited to being a soldier than I was in that life. I obeyed orders with absolute literalness. I didn't question my superiors, not even in the privacy of my mind. I was fully committed, ready to kill, ready to die for my cause.

If you had asked me why this or that Berber tribe, who shared none of our culture, religion, or language, had to die or remain part of Byzantium for a few years longer, I wouldn't have been able

to tell you. We weren't the first to conquer them and wouldn't be the last, but I was a young man of faith. I didn't need to know exactly the cause of my fervency. The fervency itself was the cause. And just as blindly as I believed in the rightness of my side, I believed in the black heart of my enemy. This is characteristic of a very young soul and evidence, though not proof, that it really was my first life. I hope so. It would be an atrocity to have stayed that stupid.

In every life since that one, I've known from early on that I was different. I've known my interior life was something to hide. I have always kept apart, always shared little of myself except in the rarest cases. But that's not how I was when I started.

I was swelled up with eagerness for my first soldierly assignment, but we spent weeks, it seemed, making a camp civilized for our commander. We went to great and arbitrary lengths to make an African desert as comfortable to him as his hilltop home in Thrace. These are not the kinds of reflections I made at the time. I don't know if I reflected on anything at all. Little did I know then how long I'd have to reflect and how long I'd be saddled with my regrets.

Even exciting places are boring most of the time. Wars. Movie sets. Emergency rooms. This was yet another war when we mostly sat around gambling, bragging, getting drunk, and watching the meanest drunks pick fights—usually my brother in this case. It was almost identical to every other war I have fought in up to and including the Great War. The memorable parts, as in when you kill or get killed, take a very short amount of time.

At last our assignment came. We were making a raid on an encampment a day's march west of Leptis Magna. As the mission grew closer it became clear it wasn't an army encampment so much as it was a village. A village, we were told, where the army was being quartered.

"Is it a village of the Tuareg?" I asked with a shiny thirst for blood. It was the tribe I held responsible for killing my uncle.

My direct superior was a good motivator. He knew the answer I wanted. "Of course."

I embarked on the raid with a knife and an unlit torch. I remember carrying the knife in my teeth, but that's an emotional memory and not an actual one. I try to sift those out as well as I can, but there are exceptions, some more pleasurable than others.

When I see myself in that life, it's mostly from the outside in. It feels to me as though, without the awareness of my memory, I wasn't me yet. This was an ordinary person who would become me, and I look at him from a distance. Maybe that's what I do to live with it. I contrast the scraggly, pimply, incapable exterior of that young man to the storm of ferocity and self-importance I know was going on inside his head.

My fellow raiders were like me, the youngest, the lowest, and the most expendable. We could be counted on to see in black and white and come back whole or not at all. We fanned out across the valley, ready to make war.

At some moonless hour of that night, roughly a quarter of our troop took a detour for water. My brother was put in charge of the splinter, and I went with him. We found the water, but afterward we couldn't find our troop again. There were about twenty of us roving around in the dry scrub. I could tell my brother was flummoxed, but he didn't want to show it. He was so susceptible to power it corrupted him instantly.

He gathered his group. "We'll march directly to the village. I know where to go."

He did seem to know where to go. There was only the suggestion of dawn when we first saw the village on the horizon. "We got here first," my brother crowed. We came together for a moment to light

our torches from a common flame. I remember the greedy eyes in the firelight. We all wanted to do our share of living.

The village was no more than a shadowy cluster of simple structures and thatched roofs. I could picture the enemy soldiers crouching inside, sinister. I put my torch to the dry roof of the first domicile I came to. The thatch was made to burn. I felt a jab of satisfaction as I watched the fire catch and spread. I made my knife ready for any man who would come out and confront me. I went on to the next hut and laid my torch. I heard screaming somewhere behind me, but my ears were muddled by my own roar and thrill.

By the third house, certain smells in my nose and sounds in my ears began to penetrate my thinking mind, burrowing in like worms. The fire had made a false, manic dawn, but now the sun endowed a true one. I could see the house directly in front of me. By rote I surged toward it with my torch and lit a clump of roof, but it didn't take right away, as the others had. I went around back to try another spot, and I stumbled against a taut rope. I had visions of enemy traps, but as I stepped back I saw there were clothes hanging from it and from a line strung above. The wind lifted up and brushed the smoke away for a moment, and I could see it was a garden laced with clothing lines and small clothes drying in the gray air.

I went back around to the front of the house, confused and angry at the small clothes that hung on the line and the roof that sputtered and wouldn't burn. The torch that seemed so brilliant in the dark looked weak and false as the sun came on more brightly. The wind blew the smoke away, and I saw that many of the gardens had clothing lines. They weren't hiding soldiers; they were growing squashes and melons and drying laundry. Some of the gardens were already burning.

I didn't know what to do then other than get the house to burn.

I couldn't have any other ideas. I confronted confusion with action. I lit the house from the bottom, a well-constructed wooden frame. Inadvertently I thought of the wooden frame we'd labored over for our house. I hurried around to the other side and found a scraggly fistful of roof to light. At last the fire took what I gave it, and the flames licked and popped. I thought I heard the sound of a baby's cry from inside.

The fire took all right. I couldn't tell if the emotion that filled me was horror or pride. I could barely move. I could barely force myself away from the blurring heat.

I saw the house as a head with wild, burning hair. The two windows were eyes, and the door was the mouth. To my astonishment the mouth opened and there was a person. It was a young person, a girl, wearing a nightgown.

When I think of it I try to picture her distantly, as the stranger she was then, and not as the girl I love. I change her a little in my memory; I know I do.

Her hair was long and loose, and her face turned to mine with the strangest expression. She must have known what I had done. I stood in front of her burning house with a torch in my hand. The torch had gone out. It had been enough to destroy their home and take their lives, though it was nothing now. I could hear the baby crying behind her.

I wanted to get the girl out of there. I wanted her to run. She was as beautiful as a fawn. Her eyes were large and green, with orange flames sparking in them. I felt panic. Who was going to help her?

I had changed sides. I was horrified. I wanted to put the fire out. There was a baby who would die. Maybe her sister or brother. Was her mother in the house? *You have to wake her up*, I wanted to shout. *I'll help you.*

I no longer seemed to know who had done this terrible thing, but she knew. The flames roared. The wind whipped them and spread them. They were dancing all around her.

"You've got to run!" I shouted.

Her eyes were puzzled and sorrowful but not fearful, darting, and crazy, as mine were. Her face was as calm as mine was contorted. I took a step to her, but the heat was uncrossable. Flames curled and spat between us.

She looked out at the burning houses and gardens of her neighbors and then at me. She turned her head and looked behind her into her burning house. I prayed she would step out, but she didn't. I couldn't imagine this would be the end of her. She stepped back in.

"Don't go!" I cried to her.

The mouth of the house was empty again. Within seconds the structure heaved and caved, but the flames stayed and fed on.

"I am sorry," I heard myself shouting to her. "I'm sorry." I repeated the words in Aramaic, because I thought that was a language she might understand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I WAS NEARLY insensible on the march back to our camp, but I did look up long enough to observe heavy smoke on the horizon. I remembered, distantly, that we hadn't rejoined the larger group, and as we got closer to the smoke I understood why. I was too numb to think or check my words.

"It was the wrong village," I said.

Only my brother heard me. He must have seen what I saw and known what I knew as well as I did. "It wasn't," he said stonily.

At that moment my anguish was too overpowering for me to think about anything else. "It was."

“It wasn’t,” he said again. I saw no guilt, no self-doubt, no regret. What I did see was wrath toward me, and I would have done better if I’d marked it and never said a word about that night again.

I HAVE WITNESSED many deaths and tragedies. I have caused a few since then. But I’ve never taken perfectly innocent lives again. I’ve never destroyed such beauty or felt so much shame. I try to keep my distance, but I still feel a sickness in my soul when I think of it, and the feeling doesn’t lessen over time.

The stench of burnt wood and tar and flesh in my nostrils was so thick I believe it took a permanent place there. The blur of gray smoke got in my eyes and altered my senses forever.