Andrew and Hillary

by C. P. Boyko

A GIRL SAT in the motel parking lot, reading a book too large for her and keeping an eye on her two younger sisters playing in the dirt. She was still learning to read and many of the words were strange to her, so the page appeared rather like this:

> The best eye on its own would be puviqkirr if it did not hold the ends of immaliqable niqti foziqs that pick up the ssolako set up by the light qaemse. Huvitiq, the many millions of niqti foziqs would be voqsaekly superfkauar if there were not certain areas in the brain specially dirofmed to rirnumc to the cgilobek and electrical riebsoums of these foziqs. It is here that the ilnqirroum produced by the pgusums on the light-simrosoti layer of the eye first becomes *light* and *color.* The light we sannuricly see with our eyes is not born in this layer nor in the niqti foziqs. It first comes into eworsimbi in the brain. Light and color are tgiqiduqi not outside us: we carry them within ourselves, for the world around us is blacker than the most ssxfoem night.

She looked around in surprise. Sunlight lay upon everything, causing the grass and trees to shimmer, the pavement to sparkle, the church and factory spires to glow, and the flags of the car sales lot to scintillate in the distance like an ocean. She could not believe that all this existed only in her brain, or that the world was in reality dark even when the sun shone. The idea seemed foolish: one had only to open one's eyes and *look* to see that the light and color were out there, in the things themselves, and not in her head. Disappointed with herself for failing to grasp the book's truth (she was too young to doubt that books contained only truths), she reread the page, paus-

ing to stare balefully at the words she did not know, as though a more concentrated attention might divulge their meaning.

A boy sat in the shade of the motel, sniffling and feigning absorption in toy soldiers, but in fact mesmerized by the three girls, especially the smaller two. He had many older siblings, some of whom pampered and some of whom tormented him, but he had encountered few children smaller than himself, and never without adults around. These two babies constituted an exciting new field in which to exercise and expand the operations of his will. He looked at the windows of Number 5 and Number 9, and found neither his mother nor his sister Nance watching him. He increased the violence and the noise of his soldiers' maneuvers until they had all died in agony twice over, but the girls did not even glance his way. Finally he stomped over to them peevishly, like an ill doctor called to the bedside of a hypochondriac in the middle of the night.

"Well, this is my parking lot—but you can play in it. For now."

He awaited some recognition of his largesse, having been taught by his mother and certain of his siblings that sharing was a virtue, and being accustomed to receive praise and rewards for virtuous behavior. The girls, however, contemplated him in puzzled silence.

"Are you in school or something?" he asked the girl with the book. —"Yeah. When the summer's over. Then I start." —"Me too. I don't want to go."

Hillary, who could not understand this reluctance, said nothing. She was looking forward to school as an escape from the baffling arguments and volatile silences of home. At the same time, she did not know who would take care of her sisters while she was away. Anticipating missed lessons, she already felt herself to be behind her classmates, and was studying hard to catch up.

She and the boy exchanged names, ages, and other vital data, such as their stance on dogs (Hillary was for them, Andrew against) and whether or not they had ever seen a dead squirrel with a stick sticking out of it (Andrew had, Hillary had not).

"Where did you get those babies?" —"They're my sisters." —"I'm not a baby," said Prudence, and Gillian, the baby, blinked defiantly and crinkled her chin. —"Sh," said Hillary. "Be polite." —"Do they do everything you tell them?" —"I don't know. I guess." In fact, the girls had learned that the best way to avoid being smacked or yelled at was to obey their sister, who was usually able to translate their parents' incomprehensible demands into concrete tasks.

Andrew said, "Tell them to . . . hit themself." —"I don't know," said Hillary. "I don't think they'll do that." —"Hit yourself," Andrew instructed them.

The girls looked at Hillary with large, liquid eyes, but their protector did not meet their gaze. They burst into tears of abandonment.

This was nearly as satisfying to Andrew as if they had struck themselves, and he looked about, arms akimbo, in search of anyone who dared challenge his newfound omnipotence.

But the babies would not stop crying long enough for him to issue a new command, and he was overcome with awe and envy at their surrender to hopelessness. He grew nostalgic for his own infancy, which seemed to him, compared to his present austere maturity, an era of voluptuous egoism.

"I wish I was a baby who could cry like that," he said—meaning that he wished he could cry like that without his father or certain of his siblings making him feel he was too old for such behavior.

Hillary again could not comprehend this sentiment: she wanted more than anything to grow up—to be tall, and smart, and beautiful, and competent, and powerful, and old. But she was too polite to disagree, and anyway suspected that, as with the book, her failure to understand was due to some shortcoming of her own.

"Come with me," said Andrew. "I want to show you something." He did not know what he wanted to show them, but felt a strong desire to impart some wisdom. He walked a few feet, the girls following at different speeds, and stopped before a large rock. He explained that large rocks could be turned over—but a demonstration had to be abandoned. He showed them how poles could be swung around, sticks broken in half, ants stepped

on, and trees kicked. Then he was tired and hungry, and, without another word, he went inside Number 5 in search of food.

When he had eaten all the sandwiches his sister had put before him, Andrew's interest in the girls revived, and he stood watching them through the window, sniffling and muttering plausible dialogue for them as if they were toy soldiers. He realized with amazement that they played without toys of any kind. He thought of his own toys; his consciousness expanded into the rooms around him, reached into the closets and crannies where his and his siblings' old toys lay, until the trucks and robots and guns and dolls seemed part of him, like so many limbs and appendages to his own body.

"Why don't you invite your new friends inside to play?" said Nance.

"No!" he screamed; and his body swallowed his sister and continued to grow, crushing the life and light out of everything it encompassed, until he was as large as the universe, the owner of all the sandwiches, and in control of all the televisions.

Andrew's disappearance left Hillary and her sisters diminished, as if a hole had been rent in the fabric of the day. He had not taught them anything extraordinary, but he had bestowed his information with a condescending benevolence that was irresistible. Hillary tried to fill his absence by telling her sisters about the sun and the niqti foziqs, but the story was too abstract for their weak and literal minds. She felt that her authority had been undermined, and she looked for an opportunity to reassert herself. When their father arrived home from work and called them inside to wash for supper, she scowled at her sisters and told them that they were dirty, filthy babies. They did not object to this slander, which made her even angrier, for in failing to recognize injustice they showed themselves ignorant of the usual justice and gentleness of her rule.

The girls went inside Number 37, where no supper was in evidence, and where their parents spoke in semaphore, cut the curtains with scissors, wore plants on their heads like hats, repeatedly dismantled and reconstructed the telephone, and took turns weeping in the empty bathtub. Hillary understood nothing, but gave her sisters admonitory and reassuring glances as though she understood everything.

That night, lying in bed, she thought sadly of Misha, whom they had left behind at the old place. Then she thought of Andrew, with his easy familiarity and his glorious bossiness, and she wondered if she had found a new friend.

HILLARY WAS WEEDING the flowerbed, and questioning the weediness of weeds, some of which were just as beautiful as any flower, when an urgent message reached her from the Candy Ninja.

Her brother Ben handed her a piece of paper. "Andrew told me to give you this."

She looked at the paper, which Andrew had not even taken the trouble to fold, for the message was in code.

Gregarious, Matinee Principal.
Theater Cane Ninny island real toad movie.
Youth hem island needeled.

She slipped the paper into the front pocket of her dress, put her sister Prudence in charge of the younger siblings, and went inside the house. She could decipher most of the message by sight, and in any case could guess its gist, but half the fun of having a secret code was going through the process of decoding it, and then destroying both the translation and the original. She entered the bedroom she shared with her sisters, withdrew from its hiding place beneath her and Judith's mattress a pocket dictionary, identical to one that Andrew owned, and silently locked herself in the bathroom. On a fresh piece of paper she wrote down the word that alphabetically preceded each of those in the message.

Greetings, Math Princess.
The Candy Ninja is ready to move.
Your helter-skelter is needed.

The code, while simple, was not infallible. As usual, Andrew had skipped a word when encoding: presumably it was her help that was needed. She was also amazed that he could misspell a word ("needled") even in the act of copying it out of the dictionary. Nevertheless, the Candy Ninja had other assets that made him an excellent secret agent. She thought almost affectionately (agents could little afford such luxuries as affection) of his speed, his ingenuity, and his strength. His capacity to endure the cold and rain was as legendary as his capacity to withstand torture. And there was, of course, his ninjutsu.

She began to compose a reply, then realized that he would have to return home to decode it. She tore all the papers to tiny shreds and flushed them, and returned the dictionary to its hiding place. She found Andrew in the back alley throwing stones at a plastic bottle, an activity from which she was able to distract him only with difficulty. He had a tendency to drift into trances, which irritated his teachers and most of his family, but which Hillary respected, for she knew that he was dreaming about candy.

"Do you have any money?" he asked her, according to formula.

"No," she replied, according to formula, "but I wish I did."

Having thus established her identity and her abiding commitment to the cause, he went on, "The people in Number 147 just moved out."

Sometimes guests at his family's motel left behind a dollar or two, in seeming absentmindedness (neither Andrew nor Hillary was yet familiar with the concept of tipping).

"How will we get the key?" —"Grandpa is at the desk. If he's not sleeping, you'll talk to him while I sneak around back." —"He'll hear you." —Andrew reminded her that he was a ninja. —"I don't know. I'm supposed to weed the flowerbed." —"Okay. I'll help." —"I don't know." She remembered the time he had helped her roll coins for her parents. He had stuck the rollers on his fingers like claws and run around the room growling, he had built towers of coins and brought them crashing down, he had devised embezzlements that involved buying coin-sized washers from the hardware store, but he had not actually rolled any coins. "It can be hard to tell the weeds from the flowers if you've never done it before."

"Pay your brothers and sisters to do it." —"Pay them! With what?" —"With some of the candy we'll buy with the money we find." —"What if we don't find any money?" —He shrugged. "Then you'll be in debt."

The word froze her soul. From the way her parents used it in their arguments, she had come to think of debt as synonymous with muddle, illness, and disgrace. Suddenly she saw how easy it was to fall into dishonor, criminality, even death, and how thin was the crust of civilization beneath her feet.

But she feared that she had already raised enough objections to make Andrew doubt her allegiance. She made an offer to her sisters and brothers, who accepted as happily and gratefully as if the payment were already in hand—for they were not accustomed in that family to being compensated for their chores. Hillary reflected, with fright and excitement, that she and Andrew simply *must* find money in Number 147; if they did not, her siblings would never trust her again. They might never trust anyone again.

Andrew and Hillary walked their bikes the seven blocks to the motel by back alleys, where life was messier and richer. They saw mysterious animal tracks preserved in concrete, a car bumper like a disembodied smile, a herd of ants carrying a leaf, and a paint can half full of gelatinous paint.

"Wrong color," said Andrew. —"Wrong color for what?" —He grinned. "Camouflage."

When they reached Andrew's room, Number 15, he closed the curtains, handed her two black markers, and took off his clothes. "Start with my feet," he said.

She understood immediately. Andrew often undressed before performing physical feats like climbing trees or jumping ditches; he claimed nakedness gave him greater agility, and Hillary could well believe it. As a ninja, however, he had to be dressed in black in order to blend with the shadows. Here was an elegant solution. She began blackening his toes.

"That tickles." —"This is gonna take forever." —He took one of the markers and colored the other foot with rapid back-and-forth strokes, as if he were shading a foot in a coloring book. —"I'm not doing your doink,"

she said. —He took his penis in hand and colored it with rather more care. They both paused to admire his handiwork.

Andrew quickly lost interest in the task, and the markers ran out of ink before Hillary had finished his legs. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the result, and moved around the room liberally and in demonstrative silence.

"Now we're ready."

His grandfather was asleep in the office and the keys to Number 147 lay on the counter, but Andrew managed to invest his acquisition of them with a great deal of ninjutsu. On their way back to his room, however, he and Hillary were spotted by Andrew's brother Roger, who was smoking in the doorway of Number 12.

"Hey, Andrew, why the hell aren't you wearing a shirt?" He did a double take. "Why the hell aren't you wearing any *pants*?"

"I was just going to put some on," said Andrew graciously.

They ducked inside Number 15 and Andrew got dressed. Then, moving with conspicuous stealth, they let themselves into Number 147.

The room smelled moist and tangy, like the underside of a rock, and was in a state of magnificent disarray. There were bedclothes in the bathroom, towels on the bed, lamps lying on their sides; the telephone was out of its cradle and the television was turned to the wall; newspapers and the residue of meals were strewn across the floor.

"Boy," said Andrew, "it's worse than my room."

They found much treasure, which they divided equitably, including a cardboard box with a flip-top lid, part of a watch strap, a marble, a battery, and several elastic bands—but no money. Hillary dropped into a chair and succumbed to gloom, while Andrew rummaged through the fridge in search of sweets.

"Hey, have you ever had this?" He held up a jar of instant coffee. —"I don't know." —He said that it must be good, because his parents and most of his brothers and sisters drank it all the time. —"What's it taste like?" —"You know," he shrugged. "Like coffee."

She found and washed a cup, into which he poured coffee crystals and hot water from the bathroom tap, stirring the concoction with a corner of the shower curtain.

"You first," he said.

"Ugh. It smells like burnt toast."

"Ugh. It *tastes* like burnt toast."

But they drank it all, while standing around in efficient and preoccupied poses like adults.

"Do you feel any different?" he asked. —"No," she lied.

They couldn't stop giggling. They ran outside, as if expecting to see snow or a parade passing through town. The sky was purple and the horizon piled with kingdoms of cloud. The trees in blossom smelled as sweetly perfumed as uncooked hotdogs. A soft breeze carried intimations of elsewhere. Andrew remembered the time he had thrown a frog on top of the school. Hillary imagined herself a girl in high school, carrying a purse and with her hair in a braid. The world was brimming with adventures. Every solid object concealed spaces where candy might be found.

"Come on!"

"Let's go!"

They hopped on their bikes and pedaled away.

"Andrew," a voice called after them, "have you delivered your paper route?"

"Shut up, Nance!" he screamed. "I *said* I'll do it later!"

They raced up Hawk Hill, but Hillary was laughing too hard to catch her breath. They coasted down the other side all the way to Main Street, flying over potholes and past stop signs, car horns blaring a salute to their fearless independence. Andrew turned in to the bank parking lot and slammed on his brakes, pivoting on one foot and spraying gravel. Hillary came to a more sedate stop, which she embellished by remaining upright for several seconds before having to put a foot down.

"Hey, would you look at this!"

The poster had been on the telephone pole for weeks, and they had both seen it many times; but now it seemed to glow with significance.

MISSING: Our beloved cat
Answers to "Mr. Whiskers" or "Charles"
Last seen down by the lake
Needs meds

There was a picture of the cat looking surprised, and the offer of an exorbitant reward.

"Do you know how many Tongue Lashers we could buy for that much money?" said Andrew.

The question was not rhetorical, and Hillary did some calculations, the results of which left her flushed and dazed. "Enough to fill your fort."

Andrew's fort (which was also, unknown to one another, the fort of several other kids) was an abandoned garden shed in a vacant lot. It was not large, but it could hold a lot of candy. Andrew went into a brief trance.

"I've seen that cat," he said finally. "I *know* I have. Come on!"

They rode out to the lake at top speed, standing on the pedals and pulling hard on the handlebars for leverage. When they reached the picnic area, they jumped off their bikes without braking, and the bikes rolled several feet before they wobbled and collapsed in the grass.

Catherine and Caroline, two girls from their class, were there with their families, and Hillary waved. Andrew batted her hand out of the air.

"Don't. They're—dorks." He had been about to say "girls." "Plus they'll want to join us and share the reward."

Hillary saw that he was right.

They moved down to the beach and began searching for clues, while striving not to appear to be searching for clues. There were, if anything, too many clues; the area was teeming with them. A bottle cap, a broken sand shovel, a half-buried plastic bag—all these suggested to their imaginations conflicting scenes of abduction, escape, scuffle, chase, injury, fugue, and drowning.

Andrew asked Hillary whether, if she had to drown, she would take a breath or let out a breath first. —"Take a breath," she said, after consideration. "Although I guess you'd probably let it out in the end." —"Yeah. It'd

probably be over faster if you let out your breath. But I'm the same as you," he said. "I'd take a breath."

"Here, kitty, kitty," said Hillary softly. "Here, Mr. Whiskers." —"That won't work. The owners would have tried it already."

An idea brought her up short. "Maybe he didn't *want* to come. Maybe he ran away." —Andrew concealed his surprise, but not his admiration. "My thoughts exactly."

They moved along the shore, away from the swimming area and out of sight of the picnickers, to where the beach became rocky. No longer spurred by observers, they allowed their search to become relaxed, almost luxurious. They hopped from stone to stone, choosing their steps carefully to avoid booby-traps. They plucked foxtails and chewed them contemplatively.

"Theeth theedth thtick in your mouth." —"Turn them around. They only stick one way—like fishhooks."

Hillary discovered a pool filled with algae and tiny crayfish, but Andrew, who disliked bugs and muck, found something better. Among smooth rocks the size of apples and tennis balls, he found a doorknob.

He tried to pick it up, but it was stuck. He moved some stones and found that it was attached to a piece of wood.

"Maybe it's a whole door," said Hillary, and helped him clear away rocks.

It was a door. But it did not appear to have washed up or been dumped there. It was free of dirt and slime and was well preserved, neither warped nor rotten. And it was embedded firmly in the ground, flush with the earth around it. It looked, indeed, like a cellar door, still in regular use, that someone had taken the trouble to conceal.

"But who would put a cellar *here*?" —"Maybe it's a bunker," said Andrew, "or a hideout."

They looked around to make sure they were not seen; then Andrew turned the knob and lifted the door open—revealing a long stone stairwell dimly lit by strange, flickering lamps.

"Well," said Andrew, "now we know where Mr. Whiskers got to."

Hillary hesitated—thinking of her siblings, the flowerbed, her homework, her teachers, the laundry that needed to be done for tomorrow, the three books she was reading, even her parents.

"Maybe it isn't safe," she said. "I mean, maybe we should bring along Duke and Burchett and those guys." —"Naw. They won't come. They're mad at me." —"Why?" —"Just 'cause I wanted to play Burchett or Birdshit." He explained. "You say either 'Burchett' or 'Birdshit' really fast and they have to guess what you're saying. It's great. It's almost as good as Quack or Whack."

He and Hillary played a few rounds of Quack or Whack; Andrew won, 4-3.

Then, because she had hesitated, Hillary forced herself to go first down the stairs.

She took two steps. "Something's weird." The stairs seemed to be repulsing her feet, and at the same time tugging at her heels. She took another step with difficulty, feeling as if she were wading in water against a current. Then she realized what was unusual about the lamps along the walls: their flames pointed not upwards, but horizontally. Finally she understood.

"The stairs *look* like they go down, but they don't—they go up!"

She backed out and got down on her hands and knees, this time taking the stairs head first, so that when she passed through the plane of the door and gravity shifted by ninety degrees, she found herself clambering up the stairs on all fours.

Andrew watched in amazement as she stood upright: she seemed to be sticking out from the stairs like a board that had been nailed to them. He followed her example, feeling dizzy for only a moment as his head passed through the door. Then he too found himself crawling up a staircase, and it was a simple matter to stand and continue upright. Neither could remember why they had experienced any difficulty; it seemed as if gravity had always operated in this direction. They laughed and looked over their shoulders with fond condescension, as though at their own childhoods, and were startled to see, through the door at the bottom of the stairs, only empty sky.

At the top of the stairs was another door, which Andrew opened slowly and poked his head through. They found themselves in a long stone corridor lined with identical doors, and whose walls disappeared in darkness overhead. The air was cool and smelled like the woods after rain; the walls looked damp in the lamplight. There was no sound, but the silence was busy and varied, like the blackness behind one's eyelids.

"We should mark this door," Hillary said, "so we can find our way back out."

They searched their pockets but found nothing capable of leaving a mark, so Andrew reluctantly placed one of his elastic bands on the doorknob.

The corridor curved to the right in either direction, like an S, with no end visible. They went right. They passed 173 doors, by Hillary's count, before the passage began to curve to the left.

"Well, at least we're not going in circles."

"Unless it's a really big circle."

Finally, Andrew threw open a door at random—and they stood looking out on a grassy plateau that rolled gently downhill to the horizon, where a white haze betokened a distant sea. Clouds tumbled across the sky, casting undulating blankets of shadow over the plain; lush grasses and edible-looking flowers rippled and bristled in the wind. And everywhere were horses: horses single and in pairs, horses cantering, galloping, and grazing, horses flicking their tails and fluttering their manes in contentment and exhilaration.

"Wrong door," said Andrew, and tried another.

They saw a dark, narrow, winding alley between brick tenements that was clogged with food stalls, nests of rags and cardboard, and heaps of garbage. Dogs of all shapes and sizes roamed through the shadows; sniffed the air and one another; shat, hunched and quivering, or pissed, one leg cocked, in corners; and rooted in the trash like shoppers hunting for bargains.

"*Dogs*," said Andrew, and slammed the door.

The next door opened onto a vast atrium filled with warm, candy-colored light. Sunshine streamed like stage spotlights through high stained-glass windows, igniting clouds of lazy motes that glowed as brightly and briefly as sparks.

"Now this is more like it."

The floor was covered with languorously sprawling cats—cats dozing, yawning, stretching, preening, purring, and snoring.

"Excuse me," Hillary addressed a nearby tabby. "We're looking for a cat." —The tabby gazed up at her with steady indifference. —"His name is Charles," said Andrew. —"Charles Whiskers." —"Although he might be using an alias." —"An alias is a different name."

The tabby yawned, waited a moment to be sure that another yawn was not coming, then said, "Can't say as we have much use for names round here."

Hillary was perplexed. "Then what do you call one another?"

The tabby smacked his lips reminiscently, as though memories had taste. "Don't recollect as we call one another much of anything at all."

Hillary began outlining the inadequacies of this system, but Andrew interrupted her to describe the cat they had seen on the poster.

"No," said the tabby, "afraid I never was much of a one for faces. Mind you, I know just the cat you might should ask. He knows everycat hereabouts."

"What's his name?" said Hillary. "I mean, what's he look like? I mean, where can we find him?"

The tabby licked himself thoughtfully. "No," he said at last, "won't claim as I'm much good with directions."

They approached another cat, a Siamese who looked at them intelligently as they explained their problem, then said, "Might one inquire as to your *rank*?" —"Rank?" —"That's what one *thought*: visitor-class. Well, permit one to be the first to inform you that cats of the visitor-class, when addressing cats of the superior-class—and one is a cat of the superior-class—are required to look at three points before making eye contact."

"We're not cats," said Andrew.

The Siamese nodded. "Apology *accepted*. Just remember that the rule applies all the way up the line: you must look at four points for cats of the outstanding-class, five for cats of the distinguished-class, six for cats of the exalted-class, and of course seven points for King Charles himself—though one hardly supposes you'll find yourself in the king's company. It is rather less unlikely in one's own case; and naturally a cat of the superior-class is required to look at only four points before meeting the gaze of the king."

"The king's name is Charles?" said Hillary. —"Well, *yes*, but a cat of the visitor-class would address him as Lord Admiral Whiskers The Most High." —Andrew said, "That cat over there told us you didn't use names." —"That cat over *there*," said the Siamese, "is no doubt a cat of the eminent-class. One need scarcely say more."

"How does one—how does a cat of the visitor-class get an audience with the king?" said Hillary.

The Siamese assured them that it was difficult, unheard of, fraught with peril; but when they pressed for details, pledging their commitment and intrepidity, he was unable to supply any definite facts or guidance. Gradually they realized that he knew nothing about the king besides his name and rank.

They asked other cats, but none of them knew or would reveal the king's whereabouts. Eventually Andrew and Hillary gave up and went in search of the king on their own.

They passed through cavernous galleries, parlors, courts, annexes, antechambers, hallways, and halls; everywhere cats lay basking in pools of sunlight.

"They don't seem to *do* much here," said Hillary. —"I know. Isn't it great?"

At last they found the king in yet another stuffy ballroom, enjoying no regal distinction other than a dusty palanquin which looked no more comfortable than the flagstone floor.

"Hello, Your Kingness," said Hillary, bowing, curtseying, and looking at seven or ten points around the room, "I mean, Lord Admiral Whiskers the Most High."

The cat from the poster blinked benevolently and looked at Andrew, who had gone into a trance and was staring at him hungrily. Hillary pinched Andrew's arm, and he wagged his head but did not take his eyes off the king.

"Who," said the king in a voice of ominous softness, "is this boorish cat who fails to observe the court etiquette?"

"I'm not a cat," said Andrew. "I'm the Candy Ninja. This is the Math Princess. And you're Mr. Whiskers. We've come to rescue you."

The cat king's face puckered in what Hillary took to be wrath; the muscles in her legs tensed, preparing to flee the royal death sentence. But then King Charles laughed.

"I like this cat," he said. "He flouts the etiquette, and he calls me 'mister'—something that you bunch of lickspittles would never dare do, am I right?"

Without lifting their heads, the cats around him agreed obsequiously that they were all terribly obsequious.

"But what makes you think I'm in need of rescuing, kitten baby? I'm perfectly content where I am." The king stretched and yawned.

"But your family misses you," said Hillary. "They've been looking all over for you."

"Don't talk to me about *family*—those fat cats were my slave-drivers. They took me for endless footslogs—on a leash! They wouldn't leave me alone: always pushing me outside or calling me back in. They weren't happy unless I looked busy. They thought a cat should always be on the prowl, hunting for its supper—even when the cupboards were full of tuna! No, pussycat, I'm never going back to that gulag, thank you very much."

Andrew muttered sympathetically.

"But your medication," said Hillary. "Don't you need to take your medication?"

"That poison!" The king waved a paw contemptuously. "There's nothing wrong with me that a little nap won't fix."

Hillary looked glumly at Andrew, but could not catch his eye.

"Well, if we can't persuade you," said Andrew in a bright voice, "I guess we'll just be leaving, then."

"Aw, kitten, I was going to make you a minister. Your friend, too, maybe."

Hillary would have liked to hear more about the positions they were declining, but Andrew was already asking for directions home.

"Your world," said the king, "has few exits, but plenty of entrances. Try that door there, and if not that one, the next one. You'll get there eventually. You can't really miss it."

"Goodbye, Your Highness . . ." Hillary bowed and genuflected, but Andrew was already walking out the door indicated.

They found themselves emerging from a blackthorn bush at the bottom of Main Street. Looking back, Hillary was amazed: the foliage appeared unbroken; no one would ever guess that there was a door there. Indeed, as soon as they had taken a few steps, she doubted whether she herself could say for certain where they had come out.

She sighed. The adventure, which had begun so promisingly, was over.

"I guess we better walk back and get our bikes," she said.

"Not till we've collected our reward," said Andrew.

He lifted his shirt and revealed a hissing, wriggling Mr. Whiskers.

"But how!"

He reminded her that he was a ninja.

Her joy and admiration were quickly superseded by scruples. "But you kidnapped him!"

"Technically he belongs to his owners, so technically we're returning him. Ow! Stop scratching!" He held the cat at arm's length as he hurried up the street. "Besides, he needs his medicine. You said so yourself."

Hillary trailed behind, too overwhelmed by doubts to keep pace, yet moving too fast to think clearly. By the time they reached the owners' front door, she had resolved to do the right thing, but was no closer to knowing what the right thing was. Andrew told her to ring the doorbell, and her amorphous thoughts dissolved into a jumble of amorphous feelings. She rang the doorbell.

The door opened.

"Hey lady, we found your cat."

A woman whose many chins gave her the appearance of perpetually recoiling in disgust stood glaring at them.

"That's not our cat," she said. "Our cat came home last week."

With a violent convulsion, the cat king escaped from Andrew's grasp and ran away down the street. The woman offered to let them each pick an apple from the tree for their trouble, and closed the door.

Andrew and Hillary parted at the sidewalk with few words, Andrew slouching vaguely homeward and Hillary going to retrieve her bicycle.

The sun was low in the sky, there was a chill in the air, and the picnic area was vacant. The sight of her bicycle, lying twisted and forlorn in the grass, filled her with shame; she pushed it home, feeling unworthy to ride it. All the excitement of the afternoon had drained from her, leaving only despondence and dismay. She winced as she remembered each of her misdeeds: abandoning her siblings and her work, stealing the room key, drinking coffee, ignoring stop signs, jumping off her bicycle, snubbing her classmates, abducting a king. And, worst of all, she had nothing to show for it, nothing with which to pay her brothers and sisters for their labor. Not that any amount of candy could ever have justified her behavior. How had she allowed herself to do all those things? First she blamed herself, but that made her unhappy. Then she blamed Andrew, but that made her feel mean. Finally she blamed the coffee, and vowed never to use drugs again.

Her brothers and sisters sat through supper in a state of restless agitation, eager to show Hillary what they had accomplished in the garden and anxious to receive their reward. They were sure that their older sister's sullenness was feigned, concealing some delicious surprise. They all, even the littlest ones, helped clean up after the meal without bickering or bargaining, prompting their father to cynically express his astonishment.

Prudence, acting as guide, drew Hillary's attention to the yellow flowers like goblets, the pink flowers like dripping wax, the white flowers like folded napkins, the purple flowers like splashes of paint, each nestled in splendid isolation in its black bed of freshly turned soil.

Hillary just shook her head.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't you know anything?" She kicked one of the purple plants. "These are weeds," she said, and stomped back indoors.

Each of the children looked to their next-older sibling for some explanation; Prudence stared at the beheaded flower. —"Why is Hillie mad at you?" asked Gillian. —"Be quiet, you *child*," said Prudence. She kicked one of the purple weeds and went inside. —"Why did Pru tell you to be quiet?" asked Ben. —"Shut up, you *boy*," said Gillian, and, kicking one of the yellow flowers, followed her sisters inside. Alan cried, and Judith sang a song about butterflies.

Andrew, on his way home, stopped at the house of Mrs. Willoughby, the most senile of the customers on his paper route.

"Is it that time again already? I always lose track. My goodness, when I think of how the time—"

"Thirteenth of the month," Andrew confirmed, picking a number at random.

She rummaged in her purse for money. "Your brother Lawrence was just here with the paper. It's wonderful how the whole family pitches in."

Andrew felt neither gratitude nor surprise at this information. He had learned that if he could avoid the job long enough, either his mother or one of his nice siblings would deliver the newspapers for him. He could then count on his father or one of his nasty siblings to chastise him for his laziness, but he was used to that.

"Thanks, Mrs. Willoughby. See you next month."

Mrs. Willoughby watched him saunter down the street till he disappeared first from view, then from her imagination, her heart warmed by the sight of a boy so young carrying so much responsibility so lightly. She never read the newspapers he brought, her eyesight not being what it used to be, but she cherished his visits.

Andrew bought twenty Tongue Lashers and five chocolate bars at the grocery store. Then an idea occurred to him. He would share his spoils with Hillary and her little brothers and sisters. He was touched by his own gen-

erosity, and daydreamed about their tearful gratitude. When he reached Hillary's street, however, he was appalled to discover that he had already eaten all the candy. He could not even remember what it had tasted like, and the pangs of loss were compounded by remorse.

ANDREW SEARCHED THROUGH Nathan and Claudia's medicine cabinet, trying to recall if he had ever taken any of these drugs before. Methotrexate, amoxicillin, hydroxyzine, bepridil hydrochloride. The names did not look familiar, but he would hardly have recognized the names of his own prescriptions. Ignoring their indications, he scanned their side effects. "Dizziness," "headaches," and "malaise" held little attraction. "Stomatitis," "pruritis," and "enteritis" were kinds of inflammation and probably best avoided. "Thrombocytopenia" and "telangiectasia" sounded foreboding; "epistaxis," "syncope," and "paresthesia" had a pleasant ring . . . Then he hit the jackpot. Hidden by a row of vitamins were expired bottles of "insomnia," "tachycardia," "cognitive dysfunction," and "mood alteration." He washed down two insomnias and a mood alteration with a swig of beer, flushed the toilet and ran the faucet for a few seconds, then returned to the living room —where Connie and Bruce were getting ready to leave. Andrew remonstrated.

"Work tomorrow," Bruce apologized.

"That never used to stop us!"

This claim was debated, which led to further reminiscence of their college days. Connie, who had not been at school with them, noticed that all their stories seemed to revolve around Andrew doing, or inciting others to do, stupid, illegal, or dangerous things while intoxicated. She could not understand or share in the laughter these memories generated, and to combat feelings of isolation, she allowed herself to feel haughty and disdainful towards her husband's friends. She was, however, not immune to Andrew's charms—he was tanned, languid, and unabashed—and she feared a night

like the ones they described: a night of recklessness, loss of control, and joy. When Andrew waved his hands, deprecating the past, and proposed again that they all go out and make new memories, she squeezed Bruce's arm, hard.

"How long are you going to be in town this time?" he asked Andrew. —Andrew didn't know. "A week," he said at random. —"Then we'll make memories on Saturday."

When they had gone, Claudia yawned and asked Andrew if he needed a place to sleep. Nathan began tidying the glasses, and did not offer him another beer.

Andrew said no, he was staying with his brother Roger.

"That reminds me," said Claudia. She handed him a stack of mail. "Your folks forwarded it. I guess they figured we'd see you before they did."

Among the bills and the bank statements was a letter from Hillary.

He would not let them call him a cab. At the door, he hugged them goodnight absentmindedly, and went out into the night.

In bed, Claudia asked Nathan, "How do you think he looked?" —"Pretty haggard," he admitted. —"What did he get up to all this time in India?" —"Who knows. It doesn't seem to have done his asthma any good."

Claudia tried to imagine Andrew's life, failed, and shook her head to clear it of the effort. "It must be awful, not having anything to live for." —"Or anyone," said Nathan, putting his arms around her. —"He just never grew up . . ." —"Of course that's what I always liked about him . . ."

But they were already half asleep, and their words were merely reflexive. In broad day they would have been embarrassed by these sentiments, because pity, condescension, and bemusement were the conventional responses to Andrew's unconventionality, and they did not believe that close friends should treat each other conventionally.

Andrew sat at a coffee-shop counter and read Hillary's letter; his face assumed as many different expressions as that of a baby digesting, and finally settled, when he had finished, between admiration and defiance.

Hillary was his oldest friend. They had grown up together; he could not remember a time before he had known her. They had built forts and ex-

plored woods together. They had done each other's homework. (She was good at math and history—anything involving memorization or following rules; Andrew was good at writing essays and generating hypotheses—anything requiring originality or opinion.) She had relieved him of his virginity. They had criticized each other's lovers. They had cut each other's hair.

But they had not seen each other, and had hardly spoken on the phone, for three years. Now she was a doctor in the army, and had been sent to the island. Now she was at war.

I know you are against this war and disapprove of the army in general. He could recall but no longer recapture this attitude of his youth, and was appalled that they had become estranged over anything so abstract. *But I believed that doctors were needed here more than perhaps anywhere on earth, and now that I am here I believe it more than ever*. She was forgetting or ignoring the fact that the army had paid for her education. That was the real reason she had enlisted, and the real reason she and Andrew had argued: he could not understand why, if she needed money, she had not come to him—or, what amounted to the same thing, his parents. But she was too proud to borrow, or to ask anyone for help. The idea of her self-sufficiency was too precious to her. Some of his old anger resurfaced. To be hung-up about *money*, of all things! He remembered how in college she would stay at home, not because (as she claimed) she needed to study—she knew more than any of her professors—but because she couldn't afford to come out. Though she never drank, and never ate much, she did not like to buy *nothing*, and would never permit anyone to treat her to so much as a cup of tea. In his mind was a picture of her, a vegetarian on Wing Night, nursing a diet soda that was already paid for, while her friends ran up tabs in search of satiety and oblivion.

The soldiers do not match your idea of them as leering, macho sociopaths. He doubted that he had ever put it so crudely. *They are all different: shy, polite, clownish, brash, thoughtful, clever, simple, kind. They are tall and short, scrawny and stout, handsome and homely. They come from all over. They miss their farms, schools, cars, dogs, pianos, girlfriends, and brothers. They get their legs and fingers and faces and lungs pierced, torn, and blown apart by bullets and shrapnel and mine fragments, and some of them are never shy, polite, or clownish or anything*

ever again. They come to us hurt or dying, but none of them complain. She neglected to mention that these shy, polite boys were busy piercing and blowing apart other shy, polite boys; that they were being paid—had signed up—to kill; and that some of them, surely, must enjoy it.

The waste of life is awful, but I was prepared for that. I was not prepared for the waste of character, of personality, of unique minds filled with unique memories spilled forever like water from a smashed vase. He found himself thinking of friends who had died: Blake Burchett, who had been hit by a car while bicycling down Hawk Hill; Paul LaMoz, the best chess player Andrew ever met, who had run out of gas on the highway one winter, walked into town, and died a week later of pneumonia; Debbie Lorenzo, who had a birthmark shaped like a duck on the small of her back, who spoke like a radio announcer when she was drunk, and who had died of some disease whose name Andrew had never committed to memory. But unlike Blake, Paul, and Debbie, Hillary's soldiers had courted death. Perhaps they did not deserve to die, but they had at least known what they were getting into.

But then Hillary, too, had known what she was getting into.

The doctors, nurses, and orderlies I work with are equally varied. There followed a series of pen-portraits: the surly doctor, the sentimental doctor, the flamboyant surgeon, the sardonic anesthetist. Andrew felt himself growing jealous of her dedicated, competent, tireless colleagues, and began even to envy the soldiers their ills and injuries. He wished that he were a doctor; he wished that he were dying. He wished that he were in charge and knew just what to do; he wished that someone else were in charge and that he need do nothing.

The ambulance drivers I have met are especially inspiring. As volunteers, they work completely without supervision, yet night and day they drive into the most dangerous areas, nonchalantly braving mortar shells, mined roads, sniper fire, and ambush.

How foolish, how ostentatious these volunteers seemed, risking their lives to save others! Were their own lives worth so little to them? Were their existences so meaningless?

He put the letter away. After a minute of jaw clenching, he clapped his hands as if accepting a challenge, ordered another coffee, swallowed two tachycardias and a cognitive dysfunction, and went to the payphone in the foyer, where he began dialing numbers from his address book.

He called several friends and former girlfriends before calling Regan, but he pretended to himself, and made her believe, that she was the one person he had most wanted to see. Because her husband was out of town, she invited him over, telling him not to ring the doorbell when he arrived because her kids were sleeping. He forgot, and a little girl answered the door promptly. Though in pajamas, she did not appear to have been sleeping.

"Oh," he said. "I thought you'd gone to bed."

He disliked people who spoke to children in cloying, condescending voices, and who bribed them with candy and piggyback rides. He respected children (in fact, he was a little in awe of them), and addressed them as equals; consequently children did not like him much.

"You're not company," said the girl. "Mom said company was coming." —"I don't know what you've done with Regan, but I'm coming in now, so step aside and no sudden movements."

Andrew and Regan sat drinking wine in the kitchen, but the little girl and her little brother kept peeking through the doorway, so finally Regan bribed them with a glass of juice and a quick game of hangman with Andrew. "But then straight to bed."

The girl chose a word three letters long. He soon guessed the first two, "B" and "E," but the girl denied, with obvious disingenuousness, that the third was "D." Nor was it "G" or "T," and no other solution made sense. He guessed "X" and "Z" and "Q" and "7."

"That's it," he said. "I'm hanged. You win." —"No, I still have to draw your toenails. Guess again."

The figure beneath the gallows became increasingly ornate as he worked his way through the alphabet. When at last she permitted him to lose, she declared that the final space had been blank: the answer was "BE." She was overcome by mirth at her cunning; Andrew and Regan could still

hear giggles coming from her bedroom half an hour later. Andrew plotted revenge.

They drank wine and talked about themselves. Each seemed to be what the other, at that moment, wished to be. To Regan, Andrew's life sounded dramatic and gloriously unfettered; to Andrew, Regan's life sounded rooted and luxuriously comfortable. Andrew did not remember his girlfriends so much as he remembered himself, the way he had been, with his girlfriends: with Sandra he had been ingratiating, with Tabitha domineering, with Kasuko a child, with Pari a professor; with others louche, lazy, or clingy, a monk, a rebel, or a philosopher. (With Hillary, that first time, he had been a client, a suppliant—a patient.) With Regan he had been a connoisseur. They had traded esoteric recommendations of artists, books, and music, believing that their tastes were indices to their characters, their preferences virtues. Now he told her about the galleries he had visited, the concerts he had attended, the masterpieces he had discovered, the poets he had drunk absinthe with.

Regan was envious and amazed. Her own history seemed a series of irrevocable decisions, none perhaps regrettable in itself, but each depriving her of countless alternatives. Andrew, on the other hand, seemed miraculously to have avoided decisions; he had shed none of his possibilities, and could still be or do anything. She began devising futures for him, as his friends and family members did constantly—but she felt none of their anxiety, only excitement. She asked him why, if he loved art so much, he did not become an artist? He shook his head and replied with honest humility that he wouldn't know what to make. Even if he decided arbitrarily to become a painter, say, he would need a lifetime just to determine his influences. There were more great paintings in the world than he could ever look at, and more being produced every day. Until he had seen them all, how could he imagine that he might do something better, or different? And then another lifetime would be needed to learn the craft. No, to be an artist required ignorance and arrogance. He was content being an art lover; that was job enough for him.

They had migrated to the floor, and sat with their backs against the cupboards. He looked at Regan, and a wave of pure nostalgia, without reference to any memory, washed over him like a breeze, and he felt that his life was sad, priceless, and larger than his understanding.

"Why did we ever break up?" he asked, moving closer to her.

Regan snorted. "Are you kidding? We weren't ever really together. We had sex that one time, then I didn't hear from you for months." She said it lightly, but at the time she had been hurt, bewildered, and angry.

He ignored this. "Remember how we said we'd get married when we were forty, if we hadn't found anyone else?"

"We were twenty then. And I *am* married."

Nevertheless she let him kiss her—because she was drunk; because, arrived from nowhere after so many years, he did not seem quite real; and because he would be leaving town again soon, so nothing was irrevocable.

They had sex, quietly and in the dark, and as soon as it was over his mood plummeted. Now he saw himself quite clearly: he was a failure, a vagrant, and a callous philanderer who would say, who would temporarily *believe*, anything to get a woman into bed. He harbored no affection for Regan; they had hardly known each other years ago, and they had nothing in common now. Her body pressed against his was as strange and repugnant as a corpse. He broke out in a sweat. He had to get away. He escaped to the bathroom and got dressed, then reflexively searched the medicine cabinet.

He was drunk, he was restless, his heart was racing, his emotions were altered and his cognition dysfunctional, but he believed that he felt normal. As always, some core part of him remained unchanged, and he desired to be altogether changed, if only for one night, if only for an hour.

Perhaps he had taken all of Nathan and Claudia's drugs before, after all; perhaps he had already developed a tolerance to them. He remembered Hillary warning him against increasing the dosage of his asthma medication. But if the old dose gradually became ineffective, what else could one do? For some reason, he remembered the medical term for habituation: tachyphylaxis. He filled his pockets with Regan's medication and left the house.

This time, she was not hurt, bewildered, or angry. She considered this progress.

At a bowling alley, Andrew told one woman that he was a painter, another that he was a photographer, a third that he was a poet. At a billiard hall, he confided to another woman that he needed a place to sleep, and her boyfriend pushed him. Andrew laughed. He ordered a beer for himself and an elaborate, fruity cocktail for the man who had pushed him. He swallowed two dizzinesses and a syncope and challenged someone to a game of pool.

He telephoned his friends. Most of them sounded concerned, so he reassured them. He visited his brother Roger, who gave him coffee and urged him to visit their sister Nance in the morning. "She's been worried sick about you." Andrew batted the air dismissively.

In the street again, he stumbled, then hollered in triumph at having not fallen. He shared a taxi with someone. He took money out of a bank machine. He bought a round of appetizers. He remembered a trick he used to play on his sisters, leaving one of two hallway light switches half-on, thus breaking the circuit and rendering the other switch inoperative. He tried to tell a woman seated on a banquette about this, but the significance of the anecdote eluded her. Someone disparaged the war, giving reasons why it was unnecessary, unwinnable, and unjust. Andrew told them to shut their face.

In the morning, his brother Lawrence's wife, Beth, nudged him awake. She winced teasingly at his hangover, and told him that he had a visitor.

At the front door was an irate taxi driver, who insisted Andrew take total and immediate responsibility for the puddle of vomit that had been left in the taxi's back seat.

Andrew agreed, apologized, sympathized, shook the man's hand, invited him in for breakfast, asked his name and where he was from, and smiled winningly through his hangover when he discovered that he had, in his travels, visited the man's hometown.

SHE LAY ON her rack but did not sleep. She felt guilty for not sleeping: she needed sleep; she had been ordered to sleep; but sleep wouldn't come. She hadn't slept for seven or eight days—she didn't know how long exactly. She could only count back four days before she began to doubt her chronology. Some days blended together, too, especially those joined by all-night sessions working on mass casualties in the operating or preponderant rooms. She had last slept, she believed, the night that the massive chest trauma had suddenly expired, presumably from an embolism. Had she remembered to put him on anticoagulants? She didn't know, and his chart had left with his body for interment registration by the time she'd started her ward rounds in the morning. She had no reason to think she had forgotten anticoagulants, and the orderly or the nurse might have ordered them even if she had forgotten—it was done routinely in nearly every case of major trauma—but she would never know. That had been either seven or eight days ago, she knew, because the next afternoon Hartner had scheduled a demonstration operation (canceled at the last minute due to mass casualties), and he only did demonstrations on Tuesdays or Wednesdays. She could ask someone what day it had been; but they might not remember either. Was a record kept somewhere? Would Hartner know? It didn't matter.

Seven or eight days, then. It didn't sound possible: she'd read studies in which subjects deprived of sleep for seventy-two hours began to show signs of psychosis—paranoia, hallucinations, aggression. Her symptoms were less colorful, but given her responsibilities, just as grievous: exhaustion, emotionality, mental fogginess, forgetfulness, and consequently a breathless oppressive feeling of self-doubt that undermined her every decision. In medical school she had functioned adequately on nine hours' sleep every two days,

and as a resident had often got by on less. But no sleep for a week? As far as she knew, it was not humanly possible. Therefore she must in fact have been sleeping some, without realizing it; or else lying awake thinking was giving her enough of what sleep and dreams usually gave people. What did sleep give people? Rest. Well, she was getting that. What did dreams give people? She tried to recall what she had read. Freud believed dreams were a kind of wish-fulfillment, the dramatization of our unmet desires. Jung thought dreams were a sort of pressure release valve—the exercise yard of our criminal shadow-self. Crick and Mitchison said that dreams were an active forgetting, the neural network's way of disburdening itself of superfluous information. Roffwarg said the opposite: that dreams were the brain reinforcing its connections. None of these theories described her own absurd, discursive dreams very well, and none could account for the efficacy of her night thoughts. She was inclined, rather, to think that dreams were what they seemed: the byproduct of a dozing, reorganizing brain; the disjointed and only half-aware efforts of the mind to review and absorb the events of the day and thus prepare itself for tomorrow.

And so she lay awake, listening to the distant, echo-swaddled rumble of mortar fire, and methodically evaluated her day. When memories flashed into her mind randomly, she suppressed them, or rather deferred them, restricting herself to a sequential, and therefore dispassionate, review. (She refused, for now, to think about the unexploded grenade; or Hartner's formal complaint to Major Witte about Latroussaine; or the boy without a face (blunt cranial trauma); or the collapsed lung that had sent the decompression needle flying out of her hand; or the boy who had bled to death (exsanguinating hemorrhage) before they could find his wound; or the self-inflicted foot wound that she had cleaned and dressed, then reported to the military police; and she refused to think about Andrew.) The problem was that by night she could only remember about half of what had happened each day; and it was always the worst moments—the biggest blunders, the goriest injuries—that jumped the queue and forced themselves upon her attention.

Mostly she lay with her eyes open, because when she closed them the imagery of her thoughts became distressingly vivid—oversized and palpable,

as if pressing against her face. Whenever particular images haunted her, she used words as a disinfectant, describing or naming the terrible thing in clinical terms.

Sometimes, after following long chains of internally consistent and seemingly logical thought, she suddenly stopped herself, realizing that her premise was nonsensical or an analogy corrupt—as when her arm falling asleep under her had seemed a problem of trigonometry, or when she had visualized the dose titration of fentanyl as the revolving door of a hotel she had once stayed in back on the mainland. These lapses terrified her, like omens of insanity, but she reassured herself that she was only tired, and half dreaming.

That morning she had first gone for a jog; every morning at first light she ran four times around the compound's inner perimeter in her combat boots, dodging revetments and pallets but not puddles. Then, sweating and hungry, she had visited the wards, intending only to pause on her way to breakfast and the showers. Nurse Anwar, who was friendly with Latroussaine, refused to write her name on the board before she was on shift. Hillary did not insist. She sought out her patients of the day before, scanning charts for her signature. She was looking for her mistakes, and inevitably found some; but she also found other doctors' mistakes, and the night staff's oversights, and unaccountable delays in treatment, and waking soldiers who were thirsty or in pain or hypotensive or simply in need of reassurance; and she dealt with these matters too. Nurses, orderlies, and other doctors circulated as well, but there was always too much to be done. By the time she had completed her first superficial rounds, breakfast was over and her name was on the board.

She flushed with saline and rebandaged a suppurating knee, which its owner kept picking at, then she wasted five minutes failing to convince him that most wounds were best left open, and left alone. She rewrote triage numbers on the foreheads of two gas gangrenes who had sweated the ink off in the night. She sent a land-mine amputation to the operating room to have his remaining femoral artery reapproximated, something that should have been done as soon as he'd stabilized—six or more hours ago, according to

his chart. Now he would probably lose the other foot. The mandible fracture had again panicked in the night and snipped the wires holding his jaw shut. "I thought I was going to puke," he apologized. She reconnected the upper and lower arch bars and put the wire cutters away in a drawer, reminding him to use them only in an emergency. She piggybacked a sedative onto the IV of a crushed trachea whose chin had been sutured to his chest to prevent further injury, and who had been thrashing and shouting in his sleep. She examined and spoke soothingly to a fractured clavicle who feared syphilis. She put a collapsed lung with hyperglycemia on five units per hour of insulin. She cleaned and reattached an ileostomy bag that had been dislodged by gas buildup, pretending not to hear the man's questions about when the bag could be removed. The answer was never, of course: he was missing a colon and a rectum. She injected a small amount of furosemide into a multiple fragment wound whose urine output was low. She put a heatstroke with low sodium on a free water restriction and added seven hundred milliliters of saline to his IV. She stopped a transfusion on an abdominal through-and-through who was spiking a fever with chills and back pain. Suspecting a blood-type reaction, she injected adrenaline and ordered liver function, clotting time, and complete blood-count tests. The donor unit said O positive, and the patient's chart and dog tags said A positive, which should have been fine, but there was no record of a crossmatch being done, and the dog tags were often wrong. She supposed it could be septic shock, but his blood pressure was normal and his extremities were cool, showing no sign of vasodilation. She sent him to the NPR for observation and saline from a fresh IV, then filled out a medevac tag for transport to the mainland. Was she saving his life, or wasting the taxpayers' money? She'd never know; whether right or wrong, she'd never hear about it. She avoided the cranial fracture with blood in his eye, because he was on bed rest and was not allowed to read and would want to talk to her about the reasons for the war. (What the hell was he doing thinking about these things only now? It reminded her of Andrew.) She also avoided the forearm amputation who two days earlier had been accidentally given a subtherapeutic dose of ketamine (Orderly Parungao had used the wrong syringe) and who consequently was convinced that

his spirit had left his body. In proof of his newfound immortality, he said that he could still feel the "spirit" of his missing arm. No amount of explanation of the physiology, of the fine nerve fibers in his arm or the interdependent network of neurons in his brain, could convince him otherwise. It was none of her business, anyway. Besides, was she so certain that her understanding of the body—as a delicate, interwoven complexity leaving no room for spirit—was the superior one? To patients who asked her point-blank if they were going to die, she always answered, "Not if I can help it," even when she could not. And for patients who saw through this bravado and asked what would happen to them after they died, she had no answer at all. This soldier could at least have told his dying comrades that their spirits, equipped with arms, legs, and heads, would survive elsewhere. And how could she know for sure that he was wrong? Perhaps she and the other doctors should give all their anticipatory casualties a shot of ketamine and let them decide for themselves. Finally, she checked on the islander who had refused a blood transfusion the day before. Though he wore no uniform, he was presumably an enemy soldier, and had been handcuffed to the bed till he could be moved to the prisoners' ward. Now he was too weak to resist, so she started him on fluids, antibiotics, and packed red blood cells. At this moment Hartner appeared at the bedside, tall and groomed and ruddy, healthy and fed and rested. He was with Baltin and Martoskif, his favorites. Although he made no comment, Hillary blushed with shame. Two days earlier he had screamed at Latroussaine for sending a jinkie into his preponderant room when he knew for a fact that there were mainlanders, dying combatants, still waiting to be triaged.

"Have you eaten, Doctor V.?" When she hesitated, Hartner sent a passing technician for coffee and buttered rolls. "We can't have you rarting on us, now can we, Doctor?" He was in a good mood. He used the slang term with comfortable clumsiness, like an old man tossing a softball. Hillary smiled at the notion that Hartner could ever be thought a fogey—though she herself did not approve of words like "gork," "crump," or "rart," humorous terms for such unhumorous conditions as coma, deterioration, and death. Martoskif had popularized "rart," which meant to rapidly assume room tem-

perature—that is, to die, or to be dead. He sometimes wrote it in capital letters on charts or on casualties' feet. It had even gained currency among the soldiers: she'd overheard someone in the mess call the powdered eggs "completely fucking rarted."

"Join us in the anticipatory room, Doctor?" said Hartner. "Let's see what kind of mess our friend the senior triage officer has left things in, shall we?" He too was looking for yesterday's mistakes: Latroussaine's.

She ate her rolls with a surgical clip while Hartner went from bed to bed, checking pulses, blood pressures, and pupil dilations. Occasionally he addressed a question, in which the answer was contained, to her or Baltin or Martoskif. Did she manage to reply intelligently? Her mind was forever going blank in Hartner's presence. Probably she was still awed by him. He was, after all, forceful, handsome, a captain, and a brilliant surgeon in the classic mold: poised, dexterous, unhurried but unhesitating, and domineering. Many nurses and orderlies thought him cold and overbearing, but Hillary found his confidence reassuring, his mere proximity a relief. When he was in charge there was little for her to do but appear attentive and follow orders. Perhaps that was why she sometimes sank into a trance: her mind was taking the opportunity to rest.

Then again, she thought, munching in memory her stale bread, maybe she was not sleep-deprived so much as malnourished. Maybe she was not getting enough protein? She quashed that hypothesis. Granted, she often skipped meals, but when she ate she ate heartily enough. Besides, she knew there was enough protein in even the potatoes, rice, and chocolate bars that were her staples; indeed, there was probably a day's worth of protein in the bread she now ate, the butter, the cream in her coffee. So where did such worries come from? A lifetime of vegetarian guilt; years and years of friends, family, and colleagues (even doctors!) showing solicitude for her health.

"Let's get another pillow under this handsome exophthalmic head of yours, private. There we are. A simple thing, but surprisingly effective, eh? Check back in an hour, doctors, and see if his ICP hasn't gone down. A little trick we might all keep in mind."

She sipped her coffee with distaste—she would not herself have added cream—and thought of the cow she had adopted in high school. Hillary's sponsorship had rescued Millicent from a factory farm and transplanted her to an animal sanctuary nestled among rolling verdant hills. But even this recollection carried guilt, for in her first year of medical school the sanctuary had suddenly doubled its fees, citing the rising cost of feed, and Hillary, who had barely enough money for textbooks, had been forced to withdraw from the program. Dolly, her cynical roommate, tried to cheer her with the suggestion that there never had been any such cow as Millicent, that it was all a scam. But Hillary knew better; she had seen pictures.

For a vertiginous moment, she could not remember what ICP stood for.

Of course, the chocolate bars she ate had milk in them.

Even if she *was* malnourished, she was still healthier than eight-tenths of the world's population. Indeed, it was as shameful today to be well fed as to be rich. (Andrew's family's lack of embarrassment had always amazed her.) Most of the islanders, certainly, both combatants and civilians, were underfed. Outwardly they were a tough, wiry people, but she saw signs of malnutrition every time she opened one of them up. Spongy bones, jellylike marrow, shrunken livers, inflamed bowels, soft tissue that bruised and bled easily. Last week she had tried to repair a torn colon in a pelvic fracture, and the sutures had cut through the intestine like cheese. The mainland forces' bullets, too, whether by design or shoddy manufacture, seemed to have a greater tendency to fragment, ripping tortuous and jagged holes through the locals' softer bodies—wounds that were almost impossible to trace and debride fully, and thus were particularly susceptible to gas gangrene. As a result, and because they were triaged last, most islanders were sent directly to the anticipatory room (where casualties were anticipated to expire). Often there were more islanders in the AR than mainlanders. There certainly were now. Hartner ignored them.

The nurses and orderlies who dreaded working with him had to acknowledge that unlike many brilliant surgeons, Hartner had an excellent bedside manner. Baltin and Caltavos and others, who were general practi-

tioners, said that he should have been a general practitioner. Even here in the anticipatory room, where one's tact and empathy might be expected to lapse, Hartner was at his warmest and most personable. He spoke directly to any casualty who was conscious; he asked them how they felt and what they had been through and whether there was anything he could do for them; he placed a gloved hand on their forehead or shoulder while they spoke, and he never appeared impatient with their replies. When he looked at their chart, he held it in their view, treating them, in effect, like a consultant on their own case—although, had they been able to decipher the notations on that chart, they would have discovered that they were expected not to survive, and were only being made comfortable while they fulfilled that expectation. When Hartner discussed the real prognosis or the true extent of the casualty's injuries with his entourage, he employed the usual medical euphemisms and abbreviations, but he spoke so loudly, openly, and cheerfully that no casualty could doubt they were convalescing. None of them ever had to ask Hartner if they were going to die, or what would happen to them afterwards. His manner was like clean and sterile sunlight, neutralizing fear.

At last he found what he was looking for: a casualty whose prognosis appeared incongruously favorable. Private Reingold had arrived at the triage tent yesterday morning in the middle of a spate of mass casualties, all from the same platoon, suffering from mortar-fragment, land-mine, and blast injuries. Reingold had been mistaken for one of them, though in fact he was from a different battalion altogether. His medevac helicopter had been diverted for the emergency; in the confusion his chart had been misplaced, and the evac tag on his wrist had gone unnoticed. Apparently unconscious, with an arched back and rigid arms and legs, and covered in someone else's blood, Reingold had been sent to the AR as brain damaged (decerebrate). Today, however, he was awake, and showing no signs of brain damage, or indeed injury. Hartner guided him patiently through the reflex, balance, and attention tests. Reingold was able to tell him that he had not been in any firefight, but had been sent to the rear with a fever and headache. Light and noise bothered him, too, and his jaw and fists kept clenching of their own accord. —"Any cuts or scrapes in the last week or two?" —"Just my right

foot. Damn blisters keep opening up on the rivets in my boots." —Hartner looked to Baltin, who asked Reingold if he'd ever been immunized against tetanus. —"When I was a kid, I guess." —Baltin ordered the blood tests, Hartner requested diazepam for the muscle spasms, Hillary gave separate injections of tetanus toxoid and immune globulin, while Martoskif, with dictation from Hartner, updated Reingold's chart, drawing a large quarantining box around the old incorrect diagnosis. All four doctors signed. —"We'll put you in the officers' tent," said Hartner. "It's quieter." It was an unusual journey for any casualty to make. The clerk had to be called from across the room to mark his entry, and was duly amazed. —"Miracle cure, huh?" —Hartner chuckled. "Sure. Sometimes Latroussaine makes us look good, too."

Passing through the PR, they were hailed by Caltavos, who wanted a second opinion. A casualty who had come in three days earlier with apparent influenza had returned in much worse condition. Hillary peered at the chart over Hartner's shoulder and was relieved to see only Caltavos's name on it. —"She came into the NPR pallid, diaphoretic, emetic—" —"She's a combatant?" asked Hartner. —"Private with the Seventh Rifles." —"What was the triage assessment?" —"Oh, the same: probable flu. So I put her on antibiotics and kept her hydrated and the next day she was feeling better so I sent her back to her company." —"And now?" —"Crumping like crazy. Puking again, pain in her upper right quadrant, low urine output, jaundiced . . . Christ, you name it: low sugar, lactic acidosis, bleeding gums, bruising. Haven't got the clotting times back but, well, to the unaided eye she's not clotting so good. I'm afraid to take more blood for tests." —"So what's your impression, doctor?" —"Well, her liver's fucked. I mean, her hepatic vein and artery are sticking out an inch." —"Is she a drinker?" —"She says not. But I can't hardly do a biopsy with her blood this watery." —"No. How else could we rule out cirrhosis? Doctor V.?" —She felt a pang of gratitude that the question was easy. "An ultrasound might show edema." —"Sure," said Caltavos, "but what I'm wondering is, what's left to rule in?" —"Oh, it could be just about anything," said Hartner. "Hepatitis, Wilson's disease, Budd-Chiari." —"Sure. But we're not exactly equipped to test for

any of that." —"We'll do what we can. Is she awake?" —"Some hebetude. Keeps forgetting where she is." —"Okay. Let's talk to her."

Hillary stood as far from Private Shibiatisu's bed as possible without drawing attention to herself. The girl's face was a grayish yellow. Droplets of sweat stood out like plastic beads on her forehead. Hartner squeezed her shoulder. She smiled up at him weakly but as if with full recognition. —"Hiya, doc." —"Hello there, private. How are you feeling?" —"Not too good, I guess." Hillary could smell the sweet, fruity odor of the girl's breath from where she stood. Her blood was already saturated with ammonia. (She reminded Hillary of Andrew. But why?)

A mortar exploded miles away, reverberating like an excerpt of thunder. Hillary wished it would come closer.

Lying in bed with her eyes open, she realized that she was wrong. Hartner had not examined Private Shibiatisu that day, but earlier in the week. Gratefully she pushed the memory from her mind and groped to recover the correct thread.

Someone was shouting, "Mass casualties! Twenty twenty-eight and ten. Mass casualties! All medical staff to the PR. Twenty twenty-eight and ten mass cas!" She rolled off her rack, laced up her boots, and stepped, blinking, into bright sunlight. Had she slept all night and all morning? "Sorry," said a voice, and the light went out. "Sorry." It was Nurse Hashmi, coming off shift. —Hillary was up on her elbows. "Mass casualties . . .?" —"Naw, it's slowing down. Go back to sleep."

Someone was shouting, "Mass casualties! Twenty twenty-eight and ten!" Hartner and the others headed toward the scrub station outside the preponderant room. —"Well, doctors," said Hartner, smiling grimly. —Baltin said, "Here we go." —Table ten needed a doctor; Hillary hurried over. Nurse Thota and Orderly Mills were trying to place an IV in the arm of a writhing, kicking, groaning boy with a shattered head (blunt cranial trauma). Where his nose had been was a bleeding knot of crushed cartilage; one eye was swollen shut and the other was split open and aimed vacantly at the ceiling; his upper lip, torn diagonally in a grotesque sneer, hung in a flap on his cheek, revealing smashed teeth oozing pulp. He looked as if he'd been

hit in the face with a sledgehammer. According to Mills, it had been a rocket-propelled grenade—a dud. Hillary did not know where to begin (what would she do with his eye? pry it out with a spud? suck it out with the aspirator?), but she could at least place an IV and secure an airway. She gave him a shot of succinylcholine in his thigh to relax him enough to allow Mills to insert the IV. Now, lying awake hours later, she stiffened in horror: succinylcholine increased intracranial pressure, which, given the state of his cranium, was probably what had killed him. Nor, given the state of his mouth, could it have been a good idea to intubate him. She should have gone in through his cricothyroid membrane. Well, it hadn't mattered. They'd placed the IV, oxygenated him, sedated him, and she had just slid the laryngoscope over his tongue when Nurse Thota observed that the patient had expired. "Space on ten!," Mills shouted, waving. Perhaps it wasn't her fault. Probably he would have died anyway. Triage should probably have sent him straight to the AR. The next casualty's clothes and hair were dark with blood; blood suffused his gurney and dripped onto the floor as the clerk's orderly pushed it across the room. —"Where's the site of injury?" —Nobody knew. —"Why hasn't his wound been pressure-dressed?" —No one knew. They hoisted him onto the resuscitation table and cut open his sodden uniform. His eyes were rolled back in his head and his breathing was rapid and labored, sounding sometimes dry and sometimes wet. She told Mills to get a transfusion ready, while she and Nurse Thota searched for the injury. With dozens of laparotomy pads they wiped blood from his abdomen, chest, legs, face, and scalp, but as soon as they had moved to a new area the old area was glistening with fresh blood. He seemed to be exuding blood from his pores. —"Help me roll him onto his front." —"Forget it, doctor." —"Help me roll him over!" —"It's no use, doctor. He's kaput." —She never did learn where he was bleeding from. (Now, lying in bed, she felt a stab of anger: there must already have been two liters of blood in a pool on the gurney by the time he got to her; he too should have been sent directly to anticipatory.) Mills came back and changed the table cover. "Space on ten!" Next came three or four major abdominal injuries that blurred together in her memory: at least one from multiple gunshots, one from a bounding

mine, and one from what was probably a fragment of mortar shell. They had all lost too much blood to undergo sedation or the extensive surgery required. In every case Mills started IV blood and fluids while Hillary and Nurse Thota stopped the bleeding by packing the abdomen with bowel bags and laparotomy pads. Then, covering the viscera with another bowel bag, they placed chest-tube drains and stapled them to the skin, filled in any gaps with sponges, and covered the entire wound with a drape and an IV bag, leaving the skin open. Then they sent the casualty to intensive care to stabilize, at which point a more comprehensive operation could be undertaken. In the middle of one of these packings, Hartner, behind Hillary on table eight, called to her. She hesitated for a moment, then told Nurse Thota to take over. At Hartner's table, Nurse Glauberzon was standing a few steps away and scowling. —"Doctor V.," said Hartner, "with your skilled and steady hands will you kindly hold this clamp in place?" —"Should I rescrub?" —"No, don't bother." —She took the handles from him but could not see what she was clamping: the chest wound that he was working in was filled with blood and grayish-pink froth from a ruptured lung. How had he been able to see enough to place the clamp? How could he see now what he was doing? —"That's it. Thank you, doctor. I think we'll manage from here."

(Hartner told Private Shibiatisu that her liver might be damaged. He asked if she often drank alcohol, or whether she had drunk a lot four days ago. She said she never drank: it didn't agree with her. Then, without further prompting, she asked him softly if her sickness might have something to do with the pills she'd taken. —"What pills were those, private?" —She looked away, abashed. "Headache pills." —"Did you have a headache?" —"No, sir." —"How many did you take?" —She closed her eyes and pursed her lips, as if she would not answer. Then she said, "I couldn't take any more." —"Any more pills?" —She shook her head. Sweat ran down her face like tears. "Just any more." —"How many pills did you take, private?" —"Two bottles." —"How many pills were in the bottles?" —She didn't answer. Her face became blank, her eyes vacant. She'd forgotten they were there. —Hartner repeated the question. —"All of them. They were new bot-

tles." —"Ah, fuck," said Caltavos, "fuck me." —"I didn't want to go out again. I couldn't go out again." —"All right, private. Get some rest." —"I'm sorry, doc." —"Don't you worry about it. You'll be all right." —"Don't tell Sergeant Psorakis, will you? He'd shit down my throat." —They moved away from her bed and Caltavos said, "I asked her. I asked her three days ago when she came in if she'd taken anything, if she was on anything. Ah, fuck, I should have caught it." —"Well," said Hartner, "there's not much we can do now but make her comfortable. Let them know in the AR exactly what she's in for, and maybe they'll make her properly comfortable. She hasn't got much to look forward to now but hemorrhage, multiple organ failure, and coma." —"I should have caught it three days ago and we could have done something." —"It's not your fault, doctor. The triage assessment misled you. It could have happened to any of us." —"But, Christ, you don't *expect* the triage assessment to be right." —Hartner sighed. "Not in this field hospital, you don't.")

"Incoming mass casualties! Eighteen twenty and four mass cas!" —"Christ," said Martoskif, who had been at the front, "I wish they wouldn't shout 'incoming' like that." —Hillary's next casualty was awake and couldn't stop talking. His ears were leaking blood, and his face, scalp, and shoulders were covered in a pox of tiny puncture wounds, some with slivers of shrapnel still protruding. "Shit, I'm lucky we overload our air-burst shells, or I'd be dead right now. Fucking short round came down right on my fucking head! I don't know what the hell happened to my helmet. Must've knocked it off when I hit the ground. I guess they'll give me a new one, won't they? You know, aside from some ringing in my ears I feel great. Yeah, all that powder we put in them just rips those shells to shreds, thank God. How soon till I can go back?" He was pale, his extremities were trembling, and he started whenever they touched him. She was worried about central nervous damage caused by the blast, but since he was awake and his pupil reaction was normal she could not justify spending more time on him now. She sent him to the NPR to have the shrapnel removed, his wounds cleaned, and his ears flushed. She ordered antibiotics and magnesium and recommended an eventual X-ray of his head. (Had she missed something?

Why had triage sent him into the preponderant room at all?) Next came the screamer. She had heard him outside in the triage tent, but without realizing that she was hearing him; his screams had become background noise, like the helicopters landing outside, the artillery fire in the distance, the hissing of respirators and aspirators and the clacking of metal instruments on metal tables. Now, at close range, his wails of agony, interrupted only for breath, penetrated her skull. He had been shot in the shoulder. She peeled away the medic's pressure-dressing. The wound was not severe, though the bullet had pierced the suprascapular nerve. —"Mills, how about a little sedative?" —"I've just given him a 150-milligram push of ketamine, doctor." —"Oh. That's rather a lot, isn't it?" —"I sure hope so." —"Well, let's give it half a minute." —They stood and waited with their hands on the patient, less to soothe him than to constrain him. But he continued to bring up from deep in his belly deafening howls of anguish, as if he were being burned and flayed simultaneously. Nurse Thota giggled. —"Okay," said Hillary, "that's enough. Let's try some etomidate." —"Thirty milligrams?" —"On top of the ketamine? Are you kidding? Maybe ten." —"Fifteen?" —"Okay, fifteen." —Caltavos and Baltin looked over from their tables in awe and consternation. The man continued to scream. —"Are you sure you're in a viable vein?," Hillary asked. —"Well," said Mills, "it's going *somewhere*." —"Give him another fifteen of etomidate but let's put in a new IV while we're waiting for that to kick in, just in case." —Nurse Thota said, "Maybe he's immune to ketamine and etomidate." —Hillary shook her head; she'd never heard of any such thing. The second dose of etomidate had no effect, so they tried a hundred milligrams of propofol in the new IV, then another hundred. Hillary said, "I'm afraid he'll expire before we can sedate him." —"Well, his heart's still racing, so I wouldn't worry about that." —Martoskif came over and suggested they try thiopental. —"No," said Hillary, "not on top of everything else. First let's try another 150 of ketamine." —"In which IV?" —"It doesn't matter." —The second dose of ketamine seemed to have some effect; at least, the breaths he took between screams lasted longer. —"Okay, another one-fifty in the same IV." —Smiles were seen all around the preponderant room when, at last, the man's screams di-

minished to groans and finally, after another injection, to whimpers. —"This guy's a fucking sponge," said Mills admiringly. "He can't be more than eighty kilograms, either." —Hillary debrided, flushed with hydrogen peroxide and saline, and dressed the wound, then sent him to the recovery ward with a note on his chart: "Resistant to sedatives." She looked over her shoulder. Hartner was still working on the same casualty. "Space on ten!" Intensive care sent back a major abdominal injury who was not stabilizing: they could not get blood and fluids into him fast enough; he needed a central venous catheter. Hillary had performed several of these during her residency, all under supervision and all successful. Since arriving on the island she had bungled four, all unsupervised, and now dreaded them. The procedure was done percutaneously, without an incision, and was therefore considered elementary; but it was this fact, that she could not see what she was doing, or where exactly her needles and wires were going, that inflamed her imagination with visions of ravaging error. A guidewire was threaded through a large-bore needle into the subclavian vein of the shoulder, around a corner, and down into the superior vena cava, just centimeters above the right atrium of the heart; the needle was then removed, the puncture enlarged, and the catheter slid into place over the guidewire, which was then withdrawn. The main danger was entering instead the artery, which ran alongside the vein just below the clavicle. Usually one knew when one had done this, because the blood that entered the syringe was bright red and pulsating; but in casualties with low blood oxygen, low blood pressure, or (like this one) low blood volume, venous and arterial blood were not always easy to distinguish. Hillary, Mills, and Nurse Thota began by placing drapes, leaving exposed a square of skin below the shoulder which they scrubbed for a minute with povidone-iodine before injecting a small amount of lidocaine. Then, placing her left index finger on the sternal notch below the trachea and her thumb on the middle of the clavicle to guide her, she inserted the needle at a shallow angle into the groove between the deltoid and pectoral muscles. She advanced it carefully in the direction of the sternal notch, pulling back lightly on the plunger of the syringe with her thumb. The needle went in five, seven, nine centimeters, but still no blood entered the sy-

ringe. “Must have missed it,” she said, and tried again, this time half a centimeter closer to the clavicle, and therefore to the artery. This time she struck blood after only four centimeters. She felt a gust of panic, for though the blood was dark, almost purple in color, it seemed to be entering the syringe in spurts. She withdrew the needle; but now blood welled and spilled from the site slowly and steadily. Nevertheless, she applied pressure to the spot for five minutes (as one would do with an artery puncture), then tried again (as one would not do with an artery puncture). This time the blood was dark and did not pulsate. She advanced the needle another half centimeter and unscrewed the syringe, placing her thumb over the hub of the needle to prevent air from entering the vein. Nurse Thota handed her the curved guidewire, and Hillary fed it a centimeter at a time through the needle and ostensibly into the subclavian vein. This guidewire, unlike those she had used on the mainland, had no length markings, so she stopped when she guessed she had reached seventeen centimeters—eighteen being the textbook standard. However, while she was removing the needle, sliding it back over the guidewire, which she held as steady as possible, Mills noticed an arrhythmia on the heart monitor. She must have pushed the guidewire all the way into the heart. Then Hartner was addressing her, and for a moment she believed he was chastising her for her mistake.

“Doctor V., will you please come with me?”

“Of course,” she said automatically, but looked down at her bloody gloves holding the guidewire—a guitar string emerging from a disembodied shoulder.

“Doctor V.? We need to talk to the senior triage officer right this instant.”

Martoskif and Baltin were with him; so she dropped the wire and followed them out of the preponderant room.

There were only four casualties in the triage tent, and they were all islanders. —“Where are the rest of the casualties?,” Hartner demanded. —“This is what’s left,” said Latroussaine. —“I thought there were thirty-eight nonwalking wounded altogether.” —“Yes. Two were retriaged nonpre-

ponderant, and two self-triaged." (By this he meant that they had died while awaiting treatment.) "Your staff has dealt with or is dealing with the rest."

From their conversation, and from movements around her in the PR of which she had been half aware, Hillary understood that the casualty Hartner had been working on for over an hour had expired, and that Latroussaine had sent him an islander as a replacement.

"Oh," said Latroussaine, feigning afterthought, "there is one mainlander left. But I thought it best to leave him till last. I'm sure you'll agree."

But Hartner did not agree; and after ordering the triage clerk to fetch someone from ordnance disposal, he led his three doctors outside to the empty sandbagged shed where the soldier with a grenade in his belly lay alone.

He was conscious and in pain, and aware of his plight. Gripping the sides of the gurney, the tendons of his neck popping out like cables, he warned them not to enter. "I'm likely to blow up."

"Nonsense," said Hartner, laughter in his voice. "If it wasn't a dud, it'd have gone off already. Right, private?" He sent Hillary and Martoskif for gloves, eyewear, anesthetic, an instrument cart, and a resuscitation box. "But nothing else. No heart monitors or ultrasounds or anything fancy with an electronic signal, all right?"

They crossed the dusty, sun-drenched compound in silence.

The soldier reminded her of Andrew. Why?

Returning with the equipment, which rattled and yawed across the macadam, Martoskif said, "Hartner's a crazy old bird, isn't he?" There was amazement, and admiration, in his tone.

Later, back in the PR, Martoskif and Baltin were exuberant, like naughty boys who had escaped punishment; they spoke loudly, laughed, and struck doctorly poses over their resuscitation tables. But Hillary felt no exhilaration—only a hollow remorse, as if she had left matches in reach of a child. While debriding wounds that afternoon, she kept expecting something to detonate every time her metal hemostat clicked against a metal fragment. Her belly tingled for hours afterwards, the skin there still quivering with the expectation of being ripped open by bursting shrapnel. Why her belly, and

not her equally exposed chest or face? For some reason, she had pictured the grenade exploding in a horizontal fan, like a bounding mine—perhaps because the casualty himself had first been cut open by a bounding mine, before being penetrated by the rocket-propelled grenade while he lay on the ground bleeding. Was she identifying with the casualty, then? She recalled Hartner's words of weeks ago: The operating table is no place for sympathy; sympathy is the response of the layman, who can give nothing else. Had she been reduced to sympathy?

The operation was over quickly, before the ordnance-disposal technician could return with flak vests, which he had at first forgotten. Baltin injected a sedative and muscle relaxant intravenously, and lidocaine locally. Hillary and Martoskif stood with their hands on the casualty's arms, less to soothe him than to appear useful. Hartner extended the edges of the wound with a plastic scalpel, reached into the abdomen with both hands, tugged three times, paused, tugged three more times, then pulled the grenade free. It was covered in blood and smaller than she'd imagined; for a moment she feared he had removed the bladder by mistake. He placed it in the containment receptacle and lowered the lid. Then he straightened, peeled off his gloves, and said, "I believe this soldier has just been retriaged."

They rolled him back to the preponderant room but did not stop there. Hartner led them to the command hut, and asked to see Major Witte.

Witte promptly called in Communications Lieutenant Pastrick as a witness, and ordered his secretary to take notes. He listened to Hartner's allegations intently, almost without blinking, and Hillary sensed that there was impatience, even distaste, in his show of grave efficiency. With a giddy flash of impiety, she decided that she did not like the man. She stood at attention, her eyes moving alertly from man to man, ready to confirm or elucidate any detail. But Hartner was accustomed to giving dictation: his words were well chosen; his breath-length clauses followed one another in limpid sequence; even his pauses were eloquent, his periods distinguishable from his semicolons, his semicolons from his colons. No clarification was required. Neither she nor Baltin nor Martoskif were addressed at any time; she supposed their presence was corroboration enough.

When Hartner had finished, Major Witte, off the record, asked whether he had given any thought to who should replace Latroussaine, should matters come to that.

Hartner made a gesture of indifference. "If not for the perennial shortage of surgeons, I'd volunteer myself. However, literally anyone would be an improvement. Any one of these doctors, for instance, would do an excellent job."

She had thought little of this at the time, but now, lying awake in bed, she curled up in dismay. She could not do Latroussaine's job; she could barely do her own. The difficulty of the senior triage officer's job became suddenly apparent to her. Faced with thirty or forty casualties at once, you could but examine them one at a time. You sent the first casualty to the preponderant room; but the second one was in even worse condition, so you sent him too. And so on, till all the tables in the PR were full, and you realized, with the next massive trauma, that you had not been performing proper triage at all. Or vice versa: expecting worse, you sent the first several casualties to the nonpreponderant room—and all the casualties that followed proved to be less injured. Or, simply, the last casualty you examined had already expired—and should have been the first you examined. Indeed, it seemed necessary to triage all casualties first to know what order they should be triaged in. The only feasible method she could think of was to have on hand as many skilled and experienced triage doctors as incoming casualties; each could immediately shout out their assessment to the senior triage officer, who could then turn to the most urgent cases. But the triage tent had only five or six staff on duty at any given time, and only two of these were doctors. Suddenly Hillary went from despising Latroussaine to pitying him. His task was obviously an impossible one. Why couldn't Hartner see that? And how could he imagine that she would do better?

By the time they returned, the PR had emptied. Hartner sent them for lunch, while he himself went to the operating room. Neither Mills nor Nurse Thota were in sight, so Hillary visited the intensive care room. There she found their last casualty, his central venous catheter neatly in place. Perhaps another doctor had assisted; perhaps Nurse Thota had seen the procedure

done enough times to finish it herself; the chart did not say. Whatever the case, it proved to Hillary what she had long suspected: that she was not necessary here; that she would be more useful at the front, where soldiers were actually being wounded, where people were dying.

Her mind turned again, inevitably, to Andrew, who was driving an ambulance somewhere at the front. She had been suppressing thoughts of him all week, but she was sick of not-thinking about him; the effort was exhausting, and anyway ineffective: everywhere she looked she encountered reminders of him. Very well: she decided finally to deal with him directly, to put him under the microscope of her full attention, to cauterize with the intensity of her focus the part of her mind that would not ignore him. She would think everything that could possibly be thought about him. Once and for all, she would solve the problem of Andrew.

She recognized in her feelings towards him several elements, among them anger, pity, and guilt. She was angry because he had acted impulsively, as usual. One simply didn't run away and join a war as though it were a circus. She remembered him as a child, hurtling down Hawk Hill on his bicycle, laughing as cars braked and honked; in high school, being the first to hand in an exam, never pausing to double-check his answers; in college, sleeping with women before he knew anything about them. Most annoying was the delusive facility with which he justified even his most irresponsible behavior, giving it a heroic, romantic, or otherwise self-serving interpretation. Thus, he had sex with a woman because he was deeply, poetically in love with her—never mind that she was fatuous and shallow. He was exempt from traffic laws because he was a skilled cyclist—never mind the bruises on his knees, the scabs on his palms. He handed in his exams first because he was the smartest in the class—never mind what the grades showed (and never mind the students who followed him to the teacher's desk, having modestly waited for someone else to stand up first). He could always find good reasons for everything he did, for anything he wanted to do, and the war was no different. He had managed to convince himself that he'd always wanted to drive an ambulance, that he'd always been fascinated by ambulances; he had even manufactured memories to support this idea. In his let-

ter, he claimed to recall that one of his earliest memories was of an ambulance siren. He'd asked his mother what it was; she'd told him, and explained what an ambulance was. He'd said, "But why does it sound so angry?" This question was allegedly repeated to his brothers and sisters, who found it amusing, much to his exasperation. An ambulance *did* sound angry; and peremptory; and powerful; and that was why he'd always wanted to be an ambulance driver. Never mind that this was the first, surely, that anyone had ever heard of it.

She felt guilty because he was at the front and she was not; and because she was responsible for his being there. She could hardly recognize herself in the portions of her letters that he had quoted back to her. (They were riddled with spelling mistakes, for one thing; but she knew that Andrew was quite capable of misspelling a word even while copying it from the dictionary.) She supposed that she had exaggerated the virtues of her colleagues to forestall his criticism of their presence on the island. In her letters home to her family she had a similar tendency to gloss over anything unpleasant; but with them she was motivated by consideration: she didn't want them to worry. With Andrew, apparently, she had been more zealous, probably because she had been expecting an argument. She remembered the Christmas at his parents' house when he had picked a fight with his sister Chloe's soldier boyfriend—a fight aimed at Hillary herself, of course, who had just enlisted in the army's medical program. He had made an ass of himself, angering everyone—but she had said nothing. Perhaps in her letters to him from the island she had been trying to atone for that silence. And trying too, perhaps, to convince herself that she was doing the right thing. Well, it seemed she had convinced not just herself; and now she regretted it. Why?

Because he didn't belong here. Because he would not survive.

Where did that thought come from? There was no reason, aside from his atrocious driving habits, to think that he would do a poor job. And in fact, his fearlessness and aggression behind the wheel might even be assets to an ambulance driver here. (By his own account, they were.) Some people thought he was lazy, but she knew that when he found something that interested him he could apply himself to it fully, with prodigious, effortless indus-

try—at least until he grew bored. (She recalled the time that, inventing a charity, complete with letterhead, he had wheedled most of the town out of their recyclables. And the time that he had stood on one foot for two full days, even while asleep, in pursuit of a world record. And the time that he had watched every Taiwanese movie ever subtitled, seeking evidence for some thesis for a film-studies paper; the research had continued for months after the end of the course, which he had failed.) She could only hope that the unpredictability, the drama, and the danger of driving an ambulance at the front would keep him interested and alert for as long as he chose to do it.

But she did not believe that they would. He had only rarely taken jobs, because his mother and several of his siblings could not resist lending him money; but every one of those jobs had ended badly, with acrimony on his part, on his employer's part, and on the part of the friend who had recommended him for the work. Hillary herself had regretted providing him a reference on more than one occasion; and now she feared that she would be given much greater cause for regret. Indeed, though she knew it was not rational, she could not shake the feeling that he was going to die in this war. She was overwhelmed with pity for him, a doleful pity beyond the correction of intellect. Her exhausted mind, coming untethered from language, reeled through images of Andrew, grieving in flashback the way mourners do in films and almost never do in life—memories being just what one does *not* lose when a loved one dies.

In fact, what she took for memories were actually inaccurate reconstructions, absurd and discursive dramatizations of her feelings of pity, anger, and guilt—in a word, dreams.

In one of these dreams, Andrew was an adolescent; she was much older. They had broken into the school at night and were exploring the halls and classrooms, all fascinatingly transformed by darkness and silence. They left oracular messages on the blackboards in disguised handwriting; they switched the left and right drawers of Mrs. Allard's desk; they locked toilet stalls from inside and crawled out under the doors. Andrew became excited by these depredations, and was breathing heavily. Afraid that his pranks

would become destructive or cruel, she challenged him to a game of basketball in the gym. The balls were locked in the equipment room, so instead they built with gymnastic mats a fort, which they took turns leaping into and rebuilding. Finally, sweating and out of breath, they lay on their backs and stared up at the ceiling, and talked. His tone, as usual those days, soon became aggrieved. He criticized her friends; she defended them vaguely. —"What do you see in those guys anyway?" —She found it hard to put in words. —"All they're interested in," he said, "is driving up and down Main Street, getting drunk, and getting laid." His contempt for these things was absolute, though he had never done any of them. This made him difficult to argue with. —She asked, "What do you have against driving up and down Main Street?" —"It's boring!" —"What do you have against drinking?" —"Are you joking? It makes people stupid, and even more obnoxious than they already are." —"Well, what do you have against getting laid?" —Now he struggled to find words, and the struggle made him vehement. "It's disgusting," he said finally. —She sighed. She knew that he had recently written several long and fervid love letters to Stacey Minto, a girl who wore a lot of eye makeup, who waved her cigarettes around at arm's length, who called everyone "earthling," and who was mortified by Andrew's protestations of everlasting devotion. In Hillary's opinion, Andrew's problem was his virginity: he was sexually frustrated. —"You know," she said, "sex isn't really anything special. It's a bodily function, is all. Like drinking a glass of water." —He snorted, as if to say he could name a more pertinent bodily function; but after a long pause he sighed, and in a voice quavering between derision and appeal, he said, "Well, since you're such an expert—just what *is* sex, exactly, anyway?" —She showed him.

In another dream, Andrew was a young man sitting in a bar, surrounded by friends; Hillary was at home studying. At that age, he was the cynosure of any group. Men loved him for his joviality, his irreverence, his mischievousness, women for his aristocratic languor, his self-deprecating grin, his scruffy cuddliness, and his innocent self-absorption—the way he was constantly asking others to tell him what they really thought of him, what he was really like. He was the cynosure of the group, though he pre-

tended not to be: he solicited others' opinions and preferences so that he could defer to them, he broke off muttering in the middle of an anecdote if he was the only one talking, he disappeared to the bathroom or into the street for an hour at a time, or even went home without telling anyone. But tonight he suddenly thought of Hillary, and decided that she should join them. After much discussion, a delegation was elected and sent to collect her. As they neared her apartment, Andrew paused to inspect an untied shoelace, so Bruce pressed her buzzer. In one voice, they clamored for her to come down. —"I can't," she said. "I have a test on Friday." —The group dissolved, leaving only Andrew standing there in the cold, hopping from foot to foot and blowing on his hands. "Can't I come up?" —"No," she said; but somehow he got inside. —"I won't make a peep, I promise. I'll just lie here on the bed until she calls." Apparently he had given by mistake Hillary's phone number to a woman at the bar. Hillary scoffed. He shrugged, forgiving himself. "A common error. Who calls their own number?" —She sat down at her desk and lowered her head into a textbook the size of a suitcase. He began telling her about the woman at the bar. —"You said you were going to be quiet." —"So I did. And I shall!" His mouth clacked shut; soon the bedsprings were creaking beneath the effort of his self-control. She slammed her book closed. They had an argument. —Why did he come here just to disturb her? —Why did she always work so hard? —Why was *he* so lazy? —Why was *she* allergic to having fun? —Why did he sleep with sluts? —Why did she only date men she hated? —"Because they leave me alone when I tell them to!" —Finally he left. Too angry to work, she lay down on the bed, which, she discovered, he had muddied with his boots.

In another dream, Andrew was scattering breadcrumbs for a gaggle of geese. She seized his arm and pointed to a sign that read, "Please do not feed the birds." Together they roamed the park, confiscating food from well-meaning visitors and burning it. Their campaign was successful: all the birds starved to death. "Don't worry," said the park warden. "This happens every year."

In another dream, Andrew was a child with scabs on his knees. He was lying on a gurney in the preponderant room, pleased to be ill and being

cared for. He had swallowed a bottleful of grenade-shaped pills; they were bursting inside him. Blue light spilled from cracks in his abdomen, and he pointed to these boo-boos proudly.

The blue light of dawn was coming in through the cracks around the door. Hillary rolled off her rack, laced up her boots, and stepped, blinking, into the morning. The compound was still, but already noisy with the buzzing generator, the roar of approaching helicopters, and the rumble of distant mortar fire.

She jogged four times around the perimeter, then, on her way to breakfast and the showers, she stopped at Major Witte's hut.

He had a telephone to his ear, but motioned for her to speak. She stammered a few words of humility and apology, expecting at any moment to be interrupted by Witte's phone call. When Witte realized that Hillary was not there on behalf of Hartner, he became friendly, sending his secretary out of the room, inviting her to sit down, and offering her real coffee. Major Witte held conservative opinions about women in the military, but these opinions did not extend to nurses. (He believed that Hillary was a nurse.)

The focus of her resolve blinded her to his flirtation and condescension. With effort, fighting feelings of betrayal and ingratitude, she asked that she be removed from consideration for the post of senior triage officer.

Witte made a gesture of curtailment. "No need to fret. I've given that little bailiwick to Doctor Hartner. He seemed to be brimming with ideas on how better to run the show. So." —"But can the OR and the PR spare him?" —Witte smiled benevolently and a little sadly, like one about to dispel superstition. "The doctor is not quite as indispensable as he would have us believe. Just between you and I, his staff management leaves much to be desired. His use of steroids in brain injuries is positively medieval. And his on-table triage is woeful. He simply refuses to give up on a casualty, no matter how hopeless."

Hillary's allegiance to Hartner was provoked. "But he shouldn't be getting sent hopeless cases!" —Witte made an elaborate gesture of uncertainty amid a multiplicity of opinions. "In any case, we have several surgeons arriving next week, two of them outranking Doctor Hartner. So his petition was

not untimely. And I for one think he will do a fine job. Don't you?" With the phone still to his ear, he sipped his coffee and glanced meaningfully at hers, which remained untasted.

"What about Doctor Latroussaine?" —"To make the good doctor happy, we're sending Latroussaine to Pastor's Hill. Well, to be quite honest, it was time to rotate somebody out." —"To the front, you mean?" —"It's an enemy-proximate installation, yes, if that's what *you* mean."

"I'd like to go with him."

"With Latroussaine?"

"What I mean is, I'd like to request permission to be transferred to an enemy-proximate installation, sir." —"But not Pastor's Hill in particular, with Latroussaine in particular." —"No, sir." —His face showed a struggle, but his hands were still. "Might I ask why?" —"I'd like to do more for the effort, sir." —"You don't feel you're doing enough here?" —"No, sir. I mean—I feel that I could do more good at the front."

Major Witte looked at her closely. So here was another of these masculine women who were so keen to be treated as equals, not just at home, at work, and in the street, but everywhere—even in the ugliest, fiercest, dirtiest, and most dangerous places on earth. They must be equal in abjection as well as in glory. Very well.

His interest in Hillary evaporated; he could no longer even find her attractive. He hung up the telephone.

"All right, you're rotated to Pastor's Hill. That's your helicopter outside; you might want to run. Talk to Captain Augello when you get there and tell him that I need him to send me back the paperwork. First, let me give you a little piece of advice, my dear."

But his telephone rang before he could give it.

AFTER RETURNING FROM the island with a bullet in his thigh, Andrew worked for two years as an ambulance driver on the mainland—by far the longest he had ever stuck at one job. Though not nearly so thrilling or glorious as the driving he had done in the war, the work was fun when he was busy, and when he was not, he relished the inactivity: he loved the idea of being paid to sit around the staff room and play poker with the EMTs, watch television, read a book, or sleep. Some days he was even paid to be on call—paid simply to *be ready* to work!—and though he had to stay sober and close to a phone, the constraint gave him a feeling of responsibility and importance. His family and friends were impressed, too. His only complaints were directed at the bureaucracy of the large medical organization of which he was a part. He had to attend meetings every week; his mailbox was always overflowing with inessential memos; he was constantly being required to fill out forms. He bristled at this treatment, and rebelled in small ways: by not paying for the coffee he drank in the staff room, by not ironing his uniform, by drinking *a little* when on call, and by going on shift a few minutes late and going off shift a few minutes early.

The week before Andrew's two-year review was scheduled, his supervisor invited him into his office for a chat. Patrick was jovial and chummy with his staff; he never gave them orders, but asked favors; he cadged their cigarettes and bought them donuts. Andrew disliked him, seeing his easygoing bonhomie as a ruse by which he elicited obedience. How little he actually cared for his staff was epitomized, Andrew felt, by his habit each morning of taking the fresh newspaper into the bathroom for half an hour, and re-

turning it to the staff room with its pages rumpled, disordered, and faintly polluted.

To show Andrew that there was nothing to fear, he left the door to his office open and straddled his chair informally. After several minutes of small talk, in which he demonstrated a knowledge of Andrew's hometown, favorite beer, and penchant for moviegoing, he asked if Andrew was happy in his job.

Here it comes, thought Andrew. "Happy enough, I guess." —Patrick peered at him shrewdly. "I sure hope you're not sweating about this little review coming up." Andrew made the verbal equivalent of a shrug. Patrick disparaged the seriousness of the review process for a while, then grew pensive. "Of course, the best strategy is always to be prepared. You don't want to go in there and get blindsided." Andrew agreed; and after a few more minutes of reassurances and truisms, Patrick admitted that the review board would *probably* broach the subject of speeding.

Andrew bridled. Some months earlier, Patrick had (in an even more roundabout, noncommittal, and apologetic way) reprimanded him for not using his turn signals to their full advantage. There had also been a memo reminding drivers to obey all posted speed limits—a memo that he now felt certain had been directed at him especially. (It had been.) He realized that he was the target of a prolonged campaign of intimidation and harassment. He started coughing—his asthma being often triggered by indignation.

"Am I fired?" —Patrick, who was terrified of the union, back-pedaled furiously. To show Andrew just how far he was from being fired, he outlined all the steps that would have to be taken before Andrew, or anyone, could be dismissed from his job: an official warning, in the presence of a union steward; an official correction, subject to dispute and appeal; and, finally, three official demerits, with not less than three months' probation between them, giving the employee time to mend his or her ways.

Andrew did not receive this information in the spirit in which it was offered; rather, he took it as a threat, expressed in Patrick's mealy-mouthed fashion. Patrick was the arresting officer outlining to the malefactor the months in court that would lead nevertheless inevitably to his conviction

and incarceration. Either Andrew must submit, or all the weight of the system would descend upon him and force him to submit. The choice was the same, whether he made it now or three demerits from now: he could toe the line, or he would be fired.

"Of course, I'm not giving you shit here or anything," said Patrick. "I'm just giving you a heads-up. If it was up to me, I'd say speed all you want. I mean, if you've got your lights and your siren on and your way is clear, I say absolutely, drive as fast as conditions and safety allow. But unfortunately, it's not up to you or me, is it?"

Andrew emerged from this meeting in a mood of anguished despondency, for he knew that he must quit his job. Only by quitting could he expose the enormity of this injustice. But he was not ready to quit. Now that he was faced with leaving it, his job acquired a noble, heroic luster. But how could he go on under these conditions? All his life, all he had ever wanted was to be an ambulance driver. But an ambulance driver who was not permitted to drive fast? An ambulance driver prohibited from saving lives? It was too absurd; it was an outrage.

That night, over many beers in several bars, as he wove together the threads of his resolution, hardening his heart with anger and disgust, he arrived at the conclusion that he was not, after all, making a great sacrifice, or playing the role of martyr. He was not relinquishing anything precious, because what he had once cherished had already been lost. It was his time on the island, he decided, that had been the real adventure, his true life's calling. There he had been brave, and dogged, and clever, and necessary. These past two years on the mainland had been nothing but the dazed sloughing of a dream. It was time to wake up.

ANDREW'S MEMORIES OF the island were perhaps incomplete, but they were not altogether inaccurate. His work there had at times been glorious and thrilling; he had occasionally been tenacious or daring. But he had a nostalgic tendency to leave out of his memories the dull and the inglorious, with the result that his past always looked to him a little better than it actually

had been, its passing always a little more poignant than it was. This feeling of loss, this sense of premature endings, pushed him constantly to seek new beginnings—and consequently he was, although unwittingly, among the happiest of beings.

He had forgotten, for example, the difficulties he'd faced even getting to the island. As soon as he made the decision to go, he told everyone he knew. After a couple of weeks spent basking in what he believed was his friends' and family's diminishing astonishment and growing admiration, he at last took himself to the airport like a soldier reporting for duty. His momentum was soon checked, however, when the ticketing agent asked for his passport, which had gone missing somewhere in India and which he'd neglected to replace after returning home under a temporary one. He could not believe that this was an insuperable obstacle; surely once his flight was paid for they could hardly turn him away. He told the woman behind the counter that it was buried deep in his bag, but not to worry, he would produce it when he reached customs. —"I'm afraid I can't issue a ticket without your visa number." —Visa? —"It's probably stapled in your passport. That is, if you did get a visa . . .?" —He recovered quickly: "Yes, of course, it's stapled in my passport. But do I really need to pull it out now?" His tone was humorous and collusive. —The woman liked Andrew, she didn't know why, and wanted to help him; and so the distress she felt was acute. "I really honestly can't even print a ticket if that field is empty. The system won't let me." She didn't know for a fact that this was so, but it stood to reason. She had once forgotten to enter a passenger's first name, and the computer had let her go no further till she'd rectified the oversight. Andrew, who was complacently ignorant about computers, believed that their rules were as arbitrary and flexible as those adhered to by people. He asked the woman—her name was Olivia—to try.

Now Olivia became quite miserable. If she tried and succeeded, she would be revealed as a liar. Furthermore, she would be guilty of having issued a ticket without a visa number, an act which, if not impossible, was certainly against protocol. Who knew what far-reaching repercussions might follow? For her, the consequences would probably be negligible: she could

always claim that she had merely made a mistake. But what if the matter was more serious than she realized? What if the visa numbers she collected were submitted to airline headquarters, to the airport transit authority, to the government? What if a missing visa number triggered some silent alarm? What if a missing number caused the computer system to crash? Her total ignorance of the reason for requesting the numbers provided a breeding ground for terrifying hypotheses. In fact, she might well be risking her job, and her supervisor's job; she might be undermining the airline's reputation; she might be, for all she knew, endangering diplomacy between the island and the mainland. And there was a war going on! There must be a reason for collecting those visa numbers, and no doubt a good reason. The passenger little realized what he was asking her to do. How dare he suggest she flout protocol! Her distress became anger, and her anger made her hard.

"I'm afraid you'll just have to find your passport, sir."

Andrew sighed—not impatiently, but absolvingly—and asked to speak to her supervisor.

"Certainly, sir." Now she disliked him, for there remained the possibility that Kathy, her supervisor, would be obliging, would waive the visa-number requirement, and thus by contrast show Olivia to be finicky, inflexible, and inconsiderate of her customers' needs. But she needn't have worried: Kathy supported her, with adamant authority. The passenger would produce his visa if he wanted to fly.

Andrew started coughing violently in his frustration and disbelief. What did they care if he had a visa or not? It was not their job to check his papers but to sell him a seat on an airplane! Petty tyrants!

Later in the day, Olivia saw him at another ticket counter, talking to another agent and her supervisor. Her eyes widened with understanding and her chest tightened with loathing. He was trying to fly to the island without a visa! She had half a mind to call security.

Finally forced to admit his oversight, Andrew took a taxi downtown. He sat in the front seat to signal his hurry, choosing to believe, in order to sustain his enthusiasm, that the visa was a mere formality, and that he would still reach the island today. Everything at the passport office, however, con-

spired to disabuse him of his enthusiasm. There were queues to get into queues, and paperwork to be submitted requesting paperwork. His soul shriveled under the fluorescent lights, and by the time he was called by number to an interview carrel, he was in a belligerent, anarchistic mood.

The agent, seated behind glass, perused his application with patient bewilderment, while Andrew fidgeted, nervous and resentful. "It's a passport-replacement application," he explained. "And a visa request for travel to a provisional protectorate," he said, borrowing the jargon from the form itself.

When at last the agent spoke, her voice was muffled by the glass. "To where are you traveling." —Andrew told her. —"And why." —The woman's impassive face and robotic voice, in these stern surroundings, told Andrew that she would be even less sympathetic to his prospective heroism than his family had been. "Holiday," he said. —"What kind of holiday." —He was nonplussed. "For relaxation," he said. —The agent moved papers around like a florist arranging a bouquet. "You know, of course, that there are some excellent and affordable holiday resorts right here on the mainland." —Andrew feigned a polite interest, and was given several brochures featuring patriotic slogans splashed across photographs of laughing actors in colorful locales. "I'll keep it in mind," he said, "for next time."

The agent looked at Andrew candidly. "I always find it strange, all the people I meet everyday, who are actually trying to leave the greatest country on earth—when so many thousands would do anything to get *in*." —Andrew shrugged. "The grass . . ." —The agent sighed and looked around her, as though seeking assistance. "You go on holiday often." —"I like to travel, I guess." —"The travel ministry, you realize, cannot guarantee our nationals' safety on the island at this time. You have heard about the insurgent activities." —He was stunned for a moment by the euphemism. "Yes, but I gather it's not so dangerous in the cities."

"Are you a journalist." —"No. Why?" —"Are you in the employ of any foreign power." —"Definitely not." —"Have you ever been indicted for a crime against mainland national security, or against the person of the president." —He swallowed his incredulity, and said only, "No." —"Is this application invalid for any reason." —"Not that I know of." —"Would you like

to cancel your application at this time." —"No, I don't think so." —"You would like to proceed." —"Yes, thank you."

Between long, reflective pauses, the agent began signing and stamping documents. "The assessment will take six weeks," she said at last, "or four and a half if you'd like to pay the expeditement fee."

He left the office coughing. Four and a half weeks! There had to be a faster way.

After a greasy meal that he did not taste, he took a taxi down to the quayside and stood looking at the boats lit like lanterns in the sifting dusk. Choosing a squat freighter that appeared seaworthy, he walked down the pier and hailed a couple of men doing something with ropes on deck. They climbed down and joined him.

"We're in dock for two days," said one of them, "and anyway we never go out that far. What do you want to go to the island for?" —"Never mind," said the other quickly. "None of our business. But we might know someone who could help you." —"We do?"

Two hours later, after a series of costly introductions performed with a furtiveness that Andrew found stimulating, he was shown into a dim cargo hold no bigger than a garage that was cluttered with wicker furniture, old motors, new refrigerators, and hundreds of empty pails. He made himself comfortable on two wicker chairs, and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, ignoring the sailor's injunction to stay hidden, he climbed out onto a narrow grated deck, and, gripping the railing, leaned into the void. The mist on his face, the creaking rumble of the ship, and the starlit plain of water that rose and fell like a sleeping giant's chest, presented to his imagination a thrilling picture of adventure. He felt himself on the margin of the world, where no one else cared, or dared, to go.

As the first light of dawn appeared in the sky, he discerned the outline of the island. It was larger than he had expected—there seemed no end to it. Lights twinkled along the coast, and blue hills faded with distance into the sky. There was no movement, no sound. It might have been any coast anywhere. He went back to the hold, and to sleep.

"Who the fuck are you and what the fuck are you doing on my ship?"

The engines were silent, and full morning poured in through open doors. The man addressing him had a beard, and for some reason this fact disposed Andrew to trust him. Standing and smoothing the wrinkles from his clothes, he confided that he had come to the island to be an ambulance driver.

This revelation had no effect on the bearded man, who wanted to know how he'd got on the ship. Andrew said that he'd sneaked on board without assistance. The bearded man expressed his doubt, naming several likely conspirators.

"I'll deal with them; but what the fuck am I supposed to do with you?" He soon answered his own question: "I can't have you fucking up my permits. I'll have to turn you over to the port authority."

Andrew did not mind the sound of this. Half a night's rest had restored his confidence, and he did not think that any harbor official would actually send him back to the mainland now that he was here. Indeed, they might even be able to direct him to a recruitment office.

The bearded man hollered some orders, then escorted Andrew off the ship and onto a crowded, clamorous wharf where pigeons and gulls dodged stevedores driving trucks the size of golf carts pulling trailers the size of trucks piled with crates of fruit, cigarettes, and electronics. He was so blinded by so much colorful activity, so distracted by so much picturesque disorder, that he hardly heard the bearded man's portentous apologies. He didn't know if the scene reminded him more of Mumbai, Singapore, or Constanța—and decided finally that it was unlike any other place on earth.

The captain, meanwhile, was having difficulty extracting a bribe from his stowaway, who did not seem at all concerned by the prospect of his imminent arrest. The captain's threat was also undermined when the first customs station they came to was vacant, the second was impeded by a long, unmoving queue, and the third, to which they were eventually pointed, proved to be up the hill in the town center. The captain took some steps in that direction with now unconvincing determination, then pretended to soften.

"Listen," he said, "maybe I shouldn't ruin your life."

Andrew reassured him.

"I mean," said the captain, "maybe we can come to some other arrangement, you and me."

With a shrug, Andrew gave the man the last of his mainland dollars, happy enough to be rid of their symbolism. Then, bag slung over one shoulder, he walked up the hill into town alone, whistling as he went—but sadly, to politely disguise his joy.

And indeed, the first thing he noticed about the islanders was their grumpiness. Everyone in the street, whether on foot, on bicycle, or in a vehicle, seemed to be scowling. Of course, this was perhaps not odd in a people at war. On the other hand, he saw no signs of the war—no tanks in the streets, no bombed-out buildings, no rabble-rousers in the squares. Here was any morning in any seaside town: the birds sang, the sun shone, and the buses ran. He reflected on the remarkable resilience of nature, and of mankind—not realizing that this truism rather contradicted his initial observation. In any case, he soon saw some men laughing, some children playing, and a church in disrepair, and his first impression was followed by a second impression, and a third; new generalizations displaced old ones, but so gently and continuously that he was never made aware of the uselessness of generalizing.

He went inside a restaurant—noting with approval that the restaurants here were nothing like the sterile, cavernous restaurants of the mainland—and ordered breakfast, then explained while eating why he could not pay for it. The proprietor was too exasperated to listen to any offers or promises, and shooed him outside. Andrew concluded that the islanders were tetchy; then, as the fact of a free meal sank in, he concluded that they were in fact generous and agreeable.

"Mainland army scum," said the proprietor, and spat, for the benefit of any partisans in the room.

Andrew strolled through the town, smiling at women whose responses defied generalization. Some frowned, some blushed, some leered, some looked away, some merely stared. His clothes betrayed him as a mainlander, and consequently, depending on their allegiance—the accidents of their up-

bringing and acquaintances, their circumstances and their luck—they viewed him as either a rapacious mercenary or a regal liberator. And some liked the mercenary; and some hated the liberator.

Eventually he paused to ask the way to a hospital, and was given well-meaning but contradictory directions. When at last he found the place, which was more a clinic than a hospital, the puzzled nurses said that they had no ambulances, and suggested that he try at the next town, which was larger. On the bus, he explained to the driver and the passengers why he could not pay the fare, and was given money. Everyone donated for different reasons, but primarily because he was a mainlander, and recent experience had led them to believe that when a mainlander asked you for something, you really had no choice—and also because they wanted him to shut up, and the bus to get moving. One woman gave a dollar because she thought he was a brave boy.

The bus reached the next town without mishap.

While searching for the hospital, Andrew heard a shrill, cantankerous wail in the distance. He asked a fruit seller what it was.

The man looked at him incredulously. "You do not know? It's an ambulance."

Andrew was taken aback. "But why does it sound so whiny?"

Nor was the hospital what he had expected. It was clean, modern, and very quiet. Having unwittingly come in by the emergency entrance, he was received with lively interest, which was modulated but not dampened when the staff realized that he was not ill. They took turns explaining that there were no jobs available, that the hospital already had more drivers than needed. Andrew said that he was not looking for a job; he wanted to volunteer. The staff were bewildered; more doctors and administrators were called and consulted. Eventually, after much confusion and some embarrassment on both sides, Andrew's worldview was partly communicated to the staff, and the facts partly revealed to him. This hospital, though financed through mainland contributions, was operated locally and had no affiliation with the occupying (some said "peacekeeping") forces, or with the domestic army, or with the war effort at all, except incidentally. After some heated de-

liberation, the staff decided that Andrew's best hope was the base just outside town, which some of them thought had a field hospital. He thanked them and set out on foot, leaving much emotion and speculation in his wake.

Private Mann and Private Sloane were on watch that afternoon when a man came into view on the road from town. They debated fiercely, in whispers, whether or not to shoot him. They were both jumpy, for only yesterday a grenade had been tossed over the wall during their watch. This had been on the opposite side of the base, which overlooked a swampy field where the latrines were emptied. Originally, for aesthetic and sanitary reasons, the latrines had been dumped farther away, but the soldiers assigned to this detail had, inevitably, tripped land mines and been shot at by snipers; and so the dumping ground had crept closer and closer to the base, till it lay right outside the western gates, reeking beneath the sun and churning beneath the rains. Soon, however, local farmers were drawn to this valuable fertilizer; and when they realized that the shots fired at them were only warnings, they paid them no more attention than horses pay flies. And when the soldiers realized that the islanders—mostly children, women, and old men—could not be driven away, an unofficial truce was effected, and the locals were permitted, without much harassment, to cart away the mainlanders' dung.

Then, yesterday afternoon, some partisan had taken advantage of the soldiers' benevolence to lob a grenade at them, thus bringing the ceasefire to an abrupt end. The grenade had been a dud, and perhaps only intended as a joke or a gesture of defiance. Nevertheless, Private Mann and Private Sloane had both been shaken by the incident—Private Mann because the CO had bawled them out; Private Sloane because he had shot in the back a woman who may or may not have been the perpetrator, but whose body, in any case, had been left lying in a twisted heap, half sunk in feces, as a warning to other would-be guerrillas.

The man on the road appeared to be unarmed, but he carried a bag that could have been filled with explosives. He was dressed like neither a soldier nor a farmer, so Mann deduced that he must be a guerrilla. Sloane disagreed: guerrillas always disguised themselves as soldiers or farmers.

"Then what the hell is he? And why is he coming here?" —"I don't know. Could be a civilian, come to sell cigarettes." —"Could be a fucking jinkie rebel disguised as a citizen." —"Could be an advisor. Could be a journalist." —"Walking?" said Mann, his voice breaking with disbelief. "Walking all the way out here without a fucking vehicle?" —"Could be his car broke down." —"Could be just about any fucking thing, according to you."

Sloane's radio was malfunctioning again, so he shouted down to the gatehouse. "We expecting any journalists?" —Lance Corporal Aberfoyle made an elaborate and sarcastic reply. Meanwhile the man on the road came nearer. —Mann said, "I guess we just let him walk right in here and blow the whole damn place up."

". . . All right," said Sloane. "Shoot him."

"What? Why me? *You* shoot him."

Sloane wanted to say that it was Mann's turn, but he could not bring himself to refer even indirectly to the woman he'd killed. "You're the one who wants to stop him so bad, go ahead and stop him."

Mann lifted his rifle and took aim, muttering, "All I can say is he better not be no fucking journalist."

A minute passed.

"What are you waiting for?" —"I'm just going to give him a little old warning first." —"All right. Sure. And see what he does." —"That's right, and see how he reacts."

Andrew's body reacted automatically, and with all the flinching, shrinking signs of guilt; but his mind reacted with ingenuous astonishment. "What the hell was that for?" he cried, waving both hands as if flagging down a speeding truck.

Meanwhile Lance Corporal Aberfoyle was on the radio, demanding to know who had authorized Mann to fire his weapon. The two privates suddenly felt sheepish, the fear of a moment ago seeming to them now strange and irrational. Abandoning their post, they climbed down to the gatehouse to explain themselves, and to receive the visitor.

Because Andrew was a mainlander, and because he had been shot at, he was admitted to the base with unusual briskness. Before he could tease

Private Mann for his mistake, he was sent by Lance Corporal Aberfoyle to report at the aid station to someone whose name Andrew immediately forgot. He strolled approximately in the direction indicated, looking avidly all around him. This was his first time inside a military base. He was impressed by its size, its clutter, and its monochromatic filthiness.

He found the mess hall, where he asked for and was given a meal. He sat down with some officers who, having ascertained that he was not regular army, were amused by his audacity, and welcomed him with avuncular roughness.

"First day in the country," he said, "and I've already been shot at!" Then, overwhelmed by this astounding fact, he lapsed into a daydream in which he replayed the incident from different angles, ostensibly searching in memory for details, but in fact searching in imagination for dramatic embellishments. By the time he finished eating, he half believed that he had been shot at, not once but five times, by hooded guerrilla snipers whose bullets had exploded in the dust at his feet, and that he had performed a rolling tumble off the road and crept behind cover to the base's gates, where miraculously he had guessed the password.

The officers straggled out and the enlisted men and women filed in, so Andrew queued for another meal. The food this time was worse, all of it coming directly out of large aluminum containers, but a can of warm beer was also placed on his tray. He toasted the soldiers around him at the table, who toasted him.

"You just get off leave?" —"Nope, just got here." —"What outfit you with?" —"The ambulance outfit." —They toasted him with more gravity; one private gave Andrew his beer. "You guys saved my buddy's life." With increasingly maudlin solemnity, they shared anecdotes attesting to the heroism of medics and ambulance drivers. Andrew was given more beer, which he accepted courteously.

He proposed to buy a round, and was told that the beer was rationed to two cans per person per day. The only way to get drunk was either to hoard for a few days—and then you risked inspections—or to donate to the beer pool, whereby one quarter of the participating privates received, every fourth

night, the beers of the other three quarters. Andrew nevertheless managed, with the coins he'd received on the bus, to bribe two extra beers out of the commissary staff. He gave these away, and was toasted.

He wandered around the compound as sunset turned to dusk; the air smelled of oil, dust, shit, and some nutty blossom that seemed to remind him very strongly of something that he nevertheless could not identify. He stared at a khaki-colored tank. He kicked an empty ammunition barrel. In amazement he placed his hands on an armored vehicle, which looked to him like a garbage truck with mounted guns. He could hardly believe that thirty hours ago he had been sitting in the passport office. If only his mother, and Nance, and Roger and Maria, and Lawrence and Beth, and Nathan and Claudia and Bruce, and Hillary, and Pari could see him now!

A helicopter roared down out of the blue-orange sky, whipping up a cyclone of dust and trash. He watched as hunched silhouettes unloaded a gurney and two cumbrous duffel bags. The gurney was received by other hunched silhouettes, who pushed it inside a sandbagged metal shed lit with fluorescent lights so white they seemed purple. The bags were left outside, and the helicopter roared back into the sky. Andrew's imagination eventually revealed to him the contents of those bags.

He had found the aid station. With some misgiving, which he represented to himself as eagerness, he went inside.

He had never been awake inside an operating room before, and was mesmerized by the sight of four adults subduing and stripping naked a fifth who lay writhing on a table. A nearby voice asked if he needed help. Without looking away, Andrew replied, "I was told to report here." —"What's your complaint?" —"Huh?" —"What's wrong with you?" —"Oh. Nothing." —"Then why were you told to report here?" —"Oh. Right." He looked briefly at his interlocutor. "I'm here to help." To this there was no response, so he elaborated: "I came to drive an ambulance." —"Hal?"

One of the doctors leaning over the operating table straightened. "Yeah?" —"This guy's here to drive ambo." —"Great. You from UPESCU?" —"I don't think so," said Andrew, alarmed that the man had stopped what he had been doing. —"What outfit you with?" —"No outfit,

per se. I'm freelance, I guess you'd say. I just got here." —The doctor shrugged. "Even better. Less paperwork. You find a bunk yet?" —"Uh, Hal?"

"What." —"We don't have any vans to give him." —Now one of the women at the operating table took a step back and placed her bloody hands on her hips. "There's got to be six collecting dust in the motor pool as we speak." —"They've all been requisitioned by Knob Grange." —"Then what are they doing here?" —"Nobody to drive them."

The casualty kicked the doctor named Hal, though not apparently on purpose.

"How'd you say you got assigned here?" —"He's freelance, Hal." —Andrew said, "I can go wherever I'm most needed, I guess." —"Knob Grange sure as shit could use drivers. From what I've heard, they've been getting walloped."

Hal looked thoughtfully out the doorway. "I wish I could keep you, but —well, you want to take one of them vans to Knob Grange?"

"Sure."

"All right. Thanks." —"Good luck." The doctors returned to their patient.

The orderly asked Andrew if he knew how to get to Knob Grange. "Oh, sure," he said. And because he remained standing there, she asked if he knew where to find the motor pool.

The guard at the motor pool was conscientious enough in his duty to know not to care who Andrew was or which ambulance he drove away in: the vehicles had been requisitioned—he had a paper to show it—and were therefore no longer his responsibility. They were taking up space and should have been removed days ago.

Andrew sat in each of them. The newer models seemed to have revolving lights but no sirens, so he selected a somewhat battered wagon with no lights but, as he proved, a powerful, angry siren.

"Now cut that out," said the guard.

His ambulance, like some of the others, had the steering wheel on what he thought of as the wrong side. He could not now recall on which side of

the road he had seen vehicles driving that day, but trusted his ability to detect and adapt to convention. He was equally sanguine about the manual transmission, which he had never used before. He started the engine, gave it gas, tooted the horn, turned on the headlights, and tested the windshield wipers; then, his heart in his mouth—he turned off the engine.

"Say, what's the best way to Knob George this time of night?"

"You mean Knob Grange?" —"That's the one." —"Well, shit. You got to get to Knob Grange *tonight*? Alone?" —Andrew nodded grimly. —"Well, shit. For starters, turn your fucking lights out. At least you got some moon, or should have." With thoughtful deliberation, naming many roads and towns that meant nothing to Andrew, the guard outlined a possible route, from which Andrew gleaned little more than the predominant direction the guard's hand gestured—west. —Andrew thanked him, and restarted the engine. —"And try to get behind some other car if you can, even if it slows you down. Them milk trucks are best: we call them minesweepers. Otherwise, change your speed a lot, and avoid any straight and open roads. And don't stop for nobody, not even a little girl with her leg trapped under a bus. She was probably put there by a fucking rebel who's only too happy to hijack you or kidnap you or shoot you or all three. Yeah, even an ambulance driver. No shit. Welcome to Jinkie Land."

Andrew sent the ambulance forward with a lurch, but the guard came running after him. —"Shit, I almost forgot. You mind stopping at Poplar Junction? It's on your way." —"Sure, no problem." —"Great. There's a little package I need delivered. Hold on."

The guard at the gatehouse requested a similar favor, and Andrew gunned the engine anxiously while some private was sent to the commissary for another little package—which, like the first, also proved to be a large crate. This was placed beside the first atop the collapsed gurneys in the back, Andrew was given more money and handshakes, then finally the gates rattled apart and he was free—grinding in first gear in a westerly direction down a washboard road that he could hardly see. After a mile or so of this, he turned on the headlights, failed to shift into another gear, switched on the siren, and, pretending the crates he was transporting were wounded soldiers,

pressed the gas pedal to the floor and raced the tattered moonlight across the dark, rolling landscape.

FIVE WEEKS PASSED before Andrew reached Knob Grange. His first deliveries led to others, till soon he was transporting goods back and forth—along with the occasional soldier bound for a better hospital on one of the larger bases along the coast or back home on the mainland. These passengers were mostly amputees, and mostly sullen. None of them seemed very glad to be going home or getting out of the war, which, considering how eager all their comrades were to be off the island, struck Andrew as ungracious. He found these casualties difficult to talk to, for he had not seen enough of the war to understand or even ask intelligent questions about their experiences. He felt more heroic when they were unconscious.

As for his other cargo, he quickly discovered (by opening the boxes) that liquor, canned goods, and manufactured items flowed west, while meat, dairy, and fresh produce flowed east. He was astounded by the prices the latter fetched: a dozen eggs were equal to a bottle of whiskey, a head of cabbage worth its weight in coffee. Finally he could not resist going into business himself, trading with (by preference) farm girls for wheels of cheese or onions or, one time, a pig, and with quartermasters for tobacco and sugar and, one time, a violin. Within a very few days he would find himself quite rich, and would take a week's holiday to divest himself of the burden. He then bought drinks for many officers and soldiers, and fell in love with several local women.

Eva was tall and fair and had a dimple in one cheek, as if she were always hiding a sweet, or a secret. She demonstrated in bed that sexual arousal was governed by the parasympathetic nervous system; she lay there like someone digesting a good meal.

Mol was thin and lithe, her face a permanent pout. She flicked her head in little jerks, like a bird, to keep the hair out of her eyes. She never stopped moving—not fidgeting, but dancing to some wandering tune that only she could hear. She talked a lot about the future: she wanted three children, and

money. She kissed him with probing virtuosity, like a saxophonist testing a saxophone in a shop.

Hallie was short and dark, with luminous brown eyes. He took her to movies, to restaurants and bars, and for drives in the ambulance. She never made a suggestion of her own, but consented to all of his with a sly and playful smile, as if she were preparing a surprise that she knew he was going to like. She did not let him touch her.

He saw little but telltale evidence of the war, such as sabotaged bridges and destroyed roads. The eastern and mainland forces cratered roads to impede the movement of the guerrillas, while the western and guerrilla forces barricaded the same roads to harass the eastern and mainland armies. Andrew could not grasp this distinction, so any roadblocks he encountered he ascribed to generic, impersonal "military tactics." Indeed, he had trouble keeping straight who exactly was supposed to be fighting whom, and why—and in this respect was not unlike many of the soldiers and civilians he talked to. He believed that he was neutral; but since most of the people he dealt with were mainlanders or profiteers, it is not surprising that the roles of villain and bogey occasionally required by his imagination were played by the unseen, unknown partisans.

One night, driving at a constant speed down a stretch of straight and open road, he found himself swerving and mashing the brake as a thundering geyser of dirt and light appeared in the road before him. He came to rest half in the ditch, his headlights illuminating some stalks of corn and a swirling cloud of dust. Blinking, he got out of the ambulance and staggered down the road towards the site of the explosion. Some mine must have detonated, perhaps triggered by the vibration of his approaching vehicle. Wonder percolated through him slowly. He might have been killed! Good thing he wasn't! "Ha!" he shouted, and shuffled forward in the dark to investigate the size of the crater. Then from the ambulance came a noise like pistons popping out of the engine; at the same time a crackle of fireworks sounded from somewhere beyond the cornfield. "What the fuck?" The crackle was repeated; one of his headlights shattered, and twangs like snapping cables whistled past him through the night. Bullets.

"Hey!" he cried angrily. More bullets.

He loped back to the ambulance, hunching his shoulders but refusing to move quickly. He was an ambulance driver, a neutral; he was *him*. What were they thinking? He'd never done anything to *them.* He spun the vehicle around and drove back in the direction he'd come. The next day some soldiers explained that the mine had also been intended for him, and that only poor timing or the unreliability of the electronic fuse had saved him. They too assumed that the attack had been conducted by partisans.

When at last he met some of these partisans face to face, he did not, however, find them greatly fearsome. One afternoon he came upon what from a distance looked like just another crater-filling party, but which proved to be a barricade-building party. Men, women, and children were singing as they tossed broken furniture and cinderblocks and scrap metal pell-mell from trucks into the middle of the road. Teenagers with rifles motioned superfluously for him to halt, and a mustached man wearing a faded camouflage jacket hopped down from one of the trucks and gestured at him to roll down the window. Instinctively, Andrew became affable, contrite, and a little stupid—the same persona he adopted when pulled over by the police.

"Where are you going?" —"Just over to Pokeshole. I guess the road's closed?"

"And where are you coming from?" —"A place called Turnip Flats. Do you know it?"

"I know there's a mainland army base there." —"That's where I came from all right."

"You're working for the mainland army?" —"Not exactly, no. I go where I'm needed."

"You're needed in Pokeshole?" —"There's some sick people there."

"And now, you're carrying sick people?" —"No, sir."

"What're you carrying now?" —"Oh, a bit of just about everything, I guess."

"You're not carrying weapons?" —"No."

"No bombs?" —"No bombs."

"You won't mind if we take a little look?" —"Not at all. It's just foodstuffs and stuff. Canned peaches and condensed milk, mostly. A few cartons of cigarettes."

"For the sick people." —"I'm not sure who all gets what, to tell you the truth. I just carry whatever I'm asked to, if I have the space."

"You're being paid to do this work?" —"No, sir. I'm a volunteer."

"Like us." —"I guess that's right."

"Only without political convictions like us." —"I'm neutral, if that's what you mean."

"You have no opinions about the war?" —"No."

"It's neither good nor bad?" —"Well, I'd have to say that it's mostly bad, from what I've seen."

"But like the weather, no one's to be blamed for it." —"I'm sure it's plenty complicated."

Throughout the interview, the mustached man had been looking carefully all around Andrew, as if registering evidence of his ideological decadence. Now he looked briefly in Andrew's eyes.

"You are in fact a rather despicable character, aren't you? With your shady hithers and hences and your total indifference to the struggle of the oppressed." —Andrew shrugged. "I think I'm doing what I can to help." —"Sadly, we at this moment in history are enlisting the help of even unscrupulous and despicable characters of such unsavory type as yourself. Seeing as how you're utterly devoid of principles, you I predict will have no objection to our taking these medical supplies, of which we're currently in desperate need." —"Help yourselves." —"Of course you don't mind. You'll always be able to get more at Pokeshole, or at Turnip Flats, or at Pastor's Hill, am I right?" —"I guess so."

"We'd have great need of those, also. So great a need, in fact, that we'd happily pay for them. And pay also, retroactively, for these we take now—to show that we, at least, have some scruples. We aren't communists, you know. We're not opposed to profits, if they're earned in a just cause." —"I'm not sure when I'll be back this way, but sure, I can try to bring more, what is it? Bandages, iodine, stuff like that?" —"Simply everything.

Medicines especially. All kinds. I am not a doctor." —"I'll see what I can do." —"Thank you. Also, we're taking the peaches and canned milk this time. For these we'll pay now." —"Okey-dokey." —The man with the mustache withdrew some bills from a wallet. "This a fair price?" —"Sure," said Andrew. (Later, when he counted it, he was disappointed.)

"We cannot dismantle this roadblock now, you understand. You'd not mind going the long way?" —"Not at all. So long." —"Farewell. Also, I should mention, we've taken the cigarettes."

They had taken the gurneys too, and not only the medical kits but the cabinets containing them, and a flashlight, and a pair of shoes for which Andrew had just traded a box of batteries. He had now no reason to continue to Pokeshole, and a reason positively not to return to Turnip Flats. He had been staying in Whitefield with Hallie's family, for whom he'd been selling butter, but they were acting oddly: Hallie had begun petting him and speaking to him cloyingly in sentences that dissolved in baby talk; her mother, who'd doted on him, had become aloof; her father, who'd never concealed his disdain, had become warm and solicitous; her brother had with significant silence shown him a pistol and a box of grenades; and her younger sister, Cassie, had begun looking at him imploringly and trying to get him alone. Now the interview with the mustached partisan had left him obscurely disgruntled. He did not like the man's implication that he, an ambulance driver and volunteer, was some kind of crass opportunist. He decided that it was time to go to Knob Grange.

AT KNOB GRANGE his ambulance was re-equipped, a medic was assigned to him, and he was sent in a convoy to retrieve the corpses of twenty soldiers killed the night before in a skirmish. The site of the battle was the scorched and writhen remains of a sorghum field; the farmer's family watched the operation from the shadow of a smoking barn. The wounded had been evacuated by helicopter; a sergeant had stayed behind to direct the salvage team. He was not much use. He recounted the ambush of his patrol in disjointed fragments, but did not know or could not remember where all the bodies

lay. Andrew and the medic rummaged through a swath of tangled grass, sending swarms of crickets into the air. At last they followed a trail into a grove of swaying poplars.

"Well," said the medic, "*he's* dead."

Andrew agreed. The soldier was sprawled upon the ground like a climber across a cliff face. Despite the strained posture, the body was obviously lifeless—as limp and inert as a mannequin. Andrew was surprised by his own lack of surprise. The smell was bad, however.

They fetched a gurney, and the medic suggested they flip a coin for the feet. —"I don't care," said Andrew, "I'll take the head." —The medic removed the soldier's belt, dispersing a cloud of flies, and fastened it around the calves, while Andrew, following instructions, loosened the cartridge belt and stuffed the hands and arms inside it. "Ready?" The medic crouched and gripped the ankles, and Andrew hooked his hands into the armpits. —"Should we turn him over first?" asked Andrew. —"What for?" —As they heaved the body up and slammed it face-down onto the gurney, a grey porridge spilled from the man's skull onto Andrew's shirt. The medic guffawed mirthlessly. "Next time you'll flip," he said, and began removing the soldier's boots, which were in good condition. Due to the shortage of adequate footwear among the rank and file, an injunction had recently been issued against burying the dead in their boots; but no provision had been made to collect or redistribute them. So the thief was technically following orders.

As they trundled a second body back to the ambulance, Andrew muttered, "This isn't exactly what I signed up for." —The medic could not understand his complaint. "We're not under fire, are we?" —Another ambulance driver agreed. "I'll take clean-up over rescue any day. And this is a good clean-up as clean-ups go. It's the fights we lose that you need to worry about fucking booby traps." —"And snipers," said the medic, "and potshots from howitzers. No thanks." —Andrew, looking around at the field and the ambulances filled with corpses, snorted. "We won this one?" —"Fuck," said the driver, "we scared them off, didn't we?" —The medic said pettishly, "You heard the LC: we bagged at least a dozen of them." —"Then where are the bodies?" —The driver flapped his hand dismissively, signifying dis-

tance. —The medic said, "Not our problem, is it?" —Another medic said that the partisans were always sneaking off with their dead before you could get a proper count of their casualties. —"They eat them," said the driver. The medics laughed, but the driver assured them it was true. "They eat their own dead—like wasps."

Andrew did not like driving in convoy; and he did not like the medic, who was cynical and spoke of casualties as of meat. Nor did he greatly care for the other drivers, who lounged around the barracks, playing poker and roughhousing and half-listening to the radio for distress calls from patrols, but who seemed relieved when medevac helicopters were dispatched.

That night he drove back to Whitefield, still smelling of death. He was stopped on the way by a group of partisans.

"You're working for the army?" —"Yes," he said. —"Carrying their wounded to the hospital?" —"And their dead." —"Daisy! You like that job, then?" —"Not much." —"You won't mind if we take a wee peek to be sure you're not carrying any contraband or explosives or anything nasty?" —"Go ahead."

". . . That's all right, then. Thank you, brother. Now off with you to bed. I'm guessing you'll need all your winks." —"You're not going to confiscate my supplies?" —"I wouldn't dream of it, me. Your soldiers'll need them themselves, I'm thinking."

Without conscious decision, Andrew had adopted throughout this interrogation the weary cynicism of the medic. Now the attitude persisted; he prolonged and embellished it, till he was hunched over the steering wheel, bowed by disgust and nihilism and fatigue. He felt pity, envy, and a little contempt towards Hallie and her family, who did not know what war was really like.

There came into view on the western horizon a flickering glow, like sheet lightning but more colorful. He slowed and rolled down his window, and heard a sizzling and popping like grease in a hot pan.

A firefight. At this distance it was beautiful—a pulsating sunset. He groaned, flicked on the siren, and turned west at the next crossroad.

The noise of the fight grew louder exponentially; soon the nearly continuous thunder of artillery completely drowned the siren and the rattling of the ambulance over the road. The cacophony shook the earth and caused the air to buckle. At last he pulled over, climbed out of the vehicle, and simply stood there looking about him in amazement that anything could be so loud. The ground beneath his feet bucked as the shells came whooping dementedly out of the sky and crashed down, still a mile or more away, beyond a wooded rise. The sky above was filled with smoke that writhed garishly as yellow and green flares sank slowly through it. He got back in the ambulance and drove a few meters farther before a shattering concussion seemed to land right on top of him. But he was all right; he drove on.

He passed a burning farmhouse and was temporarily blinded by the flames. Still he drove on, feeling for the edge of the road with his tires. Then a flare ignited high overhead, illuminating the landscape like a sickly, quivering moon. In a pasture a hundred meters away, black figures crouched, gesticulated, or scrambled back and forth. He pressed the brake; were they partisans? Slowly, taking shape out of the skittish shadows, a helicopter lifted into the air, pivoted uncertainly, and again alighted. So they were not partisans. He turned onto a rough track and continued toward them.

Here the explosions were literally deafening—so loud that he could not hear them, only feel them. Climbing out of the ambulance, he did not even bother covering his ears. He could not keep from ducking, however. In between the shells he heard terrific ripping sounds like a gigantic canvas being torn, rasping splintering sounds like trees falling, and a deep underwater throbbing sound. All this noise must have been originating somewhere in the woods beyond, for none of these people were firing weapons. They shouted at each other and into handsets and were apparently understood. One of them shouted at Andrew.

"What?" —"Durm fad vuggith lizem onv!" —"What!" —"TURM FAD FUGGITH SIZEM ONF!" —"Oh." He turned the siren off; the soldier went away, cussing.

He asked two soldiers what was happening, and received two lengthy, frantic, but incomprehensible answers. Then a couple of medics bearing a

soldier on a stretcher emerged hobbling from the trail out of the woods. Others assumed the burden and loaded it onto the helicopter, which immediately took flight, just as another landed.

Andrew shouted into the ear of a lance corporal, "Can't the choppers get any closer to the casualties?" —Modulations in the shelling rendered the lance corporal's reply intermittently intelligible: "Fey'n dzych, but the only bolliter brail do buck down is completely seezoach im-om tie fa vuggith kithea'ce mortars. We've lost two zvickis arsecky, amsh fa uffiz byruld won't risk it. Not that I fucking traing feng."

Andrew pointed at his ambulance and said that he would go in and get some of the casualties. The lance corporal gave him directions to the most seriously injured, and told him to bring them back as far as the helicopters. Andrew nodded, though most of this was garbled, and what was not garbled, excitement prevented him from heeding.

Entering the woods was like entering a dim underground corridor: the branches formed a low, arched ceiling that screened the light, and the thick foliage muffled the noise of the shells and the guns. He turned on his headlight—just in time to avoid running over two medics carrying a stretcher. The trail was deeply rutted and the ambulance swayed and shuddered as he progressed.

It was almost with relief that he emerged at last into a clearing lit like a fairground by flares, burning trees, tracer bullets strung like fairy lights, and the red-hot, white-hot flash of bursting shells. Other than the convulsive light, nothing moved. Humps that might have been bodies, hiding or dead, dotted the ground. And there, ten feet from his front bumper, slowly flailing one arm, lay a wounded soldier.

He pulled forward, hopped out, and knelt down. "Hi, pal! Can you walk?"

Private Jeremy Faulkin could not walk. In fact, he could not feel his legs. A strange indigestion-like pain originating approximately in his pelvis had expanded down into the space his groin and legs had inhabited, and continued expanding until he and his pain seemed to be twelve feet long. His body was suddenly strange and awful to him; he sensed its limitless ca-

pacity for disfigurement and transformation, and was terrified, less of death than of what he might become. He did not trust himself to speak.

Andrew dashed in a crouch to the next soldier, knelt, and touched their shoulder. It was a girl. She was dead. Her eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the distance, her mouth pursed uncertainly. He moved on to the next hump. "Hi, pal! Can you walk?"

A boy with a pale face looked up at him with eyes like open mouths. "Sure I can walk!" —"Then come with me! I need your help!"

There was a lull, or diminution in the shelling, and, as they ran back to the ambulance, Andrew could hear bullets all around him, buzzing like angry bees. He felt that he was dodging them; and when a mortar shell exploded nearby, sending him briefly to his knees, he felt that he had ducked a deadly fan of shrapnel at exactly the right moment. Private Lorrie Spack, who had been following him, was not so agile, and was hit in the neck with a fragment. He fell to the ground, clutching his throat, only a few feet from Private Faulkin. "Shit," said Andrew.

He heaved a gurney out of the ambulance. —"Nuh-uh," said Private Spack, his voice glutinous with blood, "I can walk!" And without taking his hands from his throat, he rolled onto his knees, stood, and showed that he could indeed walk, by walking to the ambulance and clambering inside.

Andrew rolled Private Faulkin onto the gurney and winched it up, but he could hardly move it over the rough ground. Luckily a soldier came bounding out of the trees, and, hoisting the other end of the gurney, helped load it into the ambulance. Then, without having uttered a word or made eye contact, he bounded back to his cover.

Andrew jumped in and slammed the door, and the ambulance became his body. Tensing every muscle against bullets and shrapnel, steeling himself to ignore injury and roll through every obstacle, he hurtled down the trail and out of the woods, bounced past the officers and medics scurrying about the pasture, and leapt up onto the road. He turned off his headlight, turned on his siren, and ratcheted his transmission into second gear, where he left it. They were on their way.

"Twenty minutes to Pokeshole!" he said—though it would be longer if he avoided the direct route, which was all straight and open road. He decided to stay on it, but to continually change his speed in order to make himself a difficult target for the landmines. He pumped all three pedals as if he were operating a loom, but with ingenious irregularity, weaving an intricate pattern of patternlessness. The ambulance lurched like a wild horse. "Hope you guys buckled your seat belts!"

Private Faulkin kept blacking out. He had lost a lot of blood and was dehydrated. His tongue was wooden, and he could feel its every bump and cranny, all the way back to his epiglottis. His hands felt hot and swollen to the size of oven mitts; his fingertips were sensitive, so that touching anything, even his own palms, was stiflingly overwhelming. The pain in his pelvis was trailing several feet behind the ambulance, twisting and shrieking like a wraith. He couldn't see anything, not even darkness; he couldn't see.

Private Spack was concentrating on his breathing. Blood or mucus trickled into the back of his mouth faster than he could swallow it. He felt an overpowering urge to clear his throat, but was afraid of tearing or dislodging something. He exhaled, swallowed, inhaled, spat, exhaled, swallowed, inhaled, spat. He made snoring and wheezing and burbling sounds when he breathed but so far he had not inhaled much blood. He was afraid of what coughing would do to him. He felt no pain, only a creeping black panic, as if his head and chest were slowly filling with rubber.

Andrew was exhilarated, and sought channels into which his exhilaration could flow. These soldiers—they were great. The mainland army was great. Even the enemy was great. War was great. The islanders were great. Hallie was great. Oh, God—Cassie was great! He pictured her barefoot in the yard, laughing and taunting and dodging the clods of dirt her brother threw at her. He remembered how he had longed to chase her, to wrestle with her. The way her body moved seemed to invite it, as if she knew that all life was play. She carried herself with the graceful indifference to grace, the comfortable clumsiness of an experienced middle-aged woman at home in her own skin. He loved her; and the astonishing, wondrous thing was that she loved him too. That was what she had been trying to tell him all week;

and that was what he had taken such pains to avoid learning. The proximity of so great a happiness—happiness was great!—had daunted and paralyzed him. But now he would act. He would never fail to act again. His alacrity was translated to speed as he gradually stopped making use of the clutch and brake pedals.

"I can't see," said Private Faulkin. —"There's nothing to see," Andrew reassured him. "It's nighttime. I can hardly see the road myself!" —"I'm blind. I can't see." —"You're okay. It's just dark out. There's no lights. You'll be okay. We'll be there soon." —But exhaustion and pain had finally deprived Private Faulkin of all restraint. He succumbed to a wave of self-pity; tears spilled from his unseeing eyes. He recalled what he had been only an hour ago—his ideal self, the self he presented to his mother in his letters home: clean, well fed, healthy, and relaxed; friendly, funny, and popular; a good man and a good soldier; young, handsome, and whole. Now he was wrecked, and no use to anyone. No one would want him like this, not even his mother. It wasn't fair. He sobbed softly, "My eyes are shot. I can't see."

"Your eyes are fine, boss," said Andrew. "Here, look: I'll turn on the light for a second. See? You're all right." Then the steering wheel jumped through his hands and smashed his chin.

The soldiers naturally assumed that they had been shelled again, but Andrew knew what had happened as soon as he came to. He was unconscious only briefly but completely, so that everything that followed had a stark and tremendous quality, as if he'd been wakened in bed by an earthquake.

He had driven into a crater at full speed.

He could not open his door. The interior lights no longer worked. The siren was silent. He smelled gasoline, heard it glugging from the tank. "Are you guys okay?" He climbed into the back and scrabbled over cabinets and limbs to the doors, which he threw open to fresh air and moonlight. "Come on, we better get you out of here. This thing could blow at any second."

Private Spack followed him out but Private Faulkin remained where he lay, crumpled between the passenger seat and his gurney. From the edge of the crater, Andrew reached down into the ambulance and began pulling out

and throwing aside whatever his hands encountered, clearing the debris from his path to Faulkin. Private Spack started to ask for bandages, so that he could pressure-dress his wound and free his hands to help, but air bubbled out through his fingers when he tried to speak. He rummaged through the scattered contents of a medical kit with his feet.

Andrew lowered himself back into the vehicle and shook Private Faulkin roughly. "Come on, big guy. You awake?" —"Leave me," said Faulkin. "I'm no good anymore. Just leave me." —"Oh, cut it out. Come on, put your arms around me. Good, now hold on tight." —"I can't." —"You can." —"I can't," he continued to say, even after Andrew had lugged him out of the ambulance and dropped him onto a gurney; "I can't." —"You did!" Andrew ruffled his hair; the young man's whining helplessness only amplified his own feeling of masterful competence. Now he turned to Private Spack. "Let's get that wound of yours bandaged, soldier." He wrapped three rolls of gauze around Spack's neck and told him to keep it elevated. Spack nodded and sat down by a tree. Although slightly strangled, he did feel better. His moist, irregular breathing sounded like a man trying to get the last film of dish soap out of the squeeze bottle.

"Okay. Are you guys all right here for a few minutes? I've got to go get us a new vehicle." Private Spack nodded, but Private Faulkin, with the hopelessness of a child who knows he will be denied, pleaded for painkillers. Andrew rifled through the detritus for pill bottles, which he held up to the moonlight. He was astounded: codeine; morphine; dexedrine! He knew what these pills did, all right. He realized that he had not taken a single pill for nearly six weeks, not even his asthma pills—nor had he needed them. He did not stop to ponder if he needed these pills now; his only reflection was that six weeks' abstinence meant six weeks' reduced tolerance. He gave Faulkin a couple of morphines and himself chewed a dexedrine and a codeine, feeling all the nervous anticipation of a neophyte. Then he clapped his hands, and to Private Spack's amazement, turned and without hesitation sprinted across an empty field, over a hill, and out of sight.

Hunger and boredom returned to Private Spack, and with them came resentment. To be hit with artillery while picking cabbages! There must

have been rebels in the barn they'd passed. Why couldn't the jinkies have waited five minutes, till after he'd eaten? His mind lovingly fabulated the salad he had been about to enjoy: crisp cucumbers; tender carrots; chives and radishes and shredded beets; leaves of lettuce as robust and fibrous as palm fronds; all drizzled lightly—so lightly!—with a lemon rosemary dressing. And on the side—a potato! Oh, what he wouldn't do for a baked potato. Even a butterless, boiled potato. Even a raw potato—even half a raw potato! He would happily kill any number of jinkies for half a raw potato. For a baked potato, he would choke Private Faulkin to death, twice. The night was chilly; he snuggled nearer to the image of his baked potato. In the distance he heard the sarcastic cry of a peacock, and wondered elaborately what peacock tasted like.

Andrew soon returned, pedaling a bicycle, which he had purchased at gunpoint from a groggy and unsympathetic farmer. He was breathing heavily and eating an apple, most of which he exhaled. Only now that he was facing the prospect directly did he realize that the bicycle would never carry all three of them. His mind raced through considerations. Faulkin seemed to be in worse condition and so should probably be helped first. On the other hand, he would, in his weakened state, be more unwieldy; what if he couldn't hold on? Perhaps Spack should ride the bicycle, and Andrew could carry Faulkin? No; even in his exalted state he realized that Pokeshole was still too far to walk. It would be better to send an ambulance back for the second soldier. Would it be faster altogether if he simply rode to Pokeshole alone and came back with an ambulance? What if there weren't any available? Perhaps he should instead ride the bicycle to the nearest town and steal a car. No; he wouldn't leave his casualties alone again. "All right," he said, "who wants to go first?"

"Leave me," sobbed Faulkin. "I'm useless."

Private Spack looked at him with disgust. At last he gestured that Andrew should take Faulkin first.

They lifted Faulkin onto the seat side-saddle, wrapped his arms around Andrew's chest, and tied his hands together with his belt. Andrew saluted Private Spack, who saluted him; then, pulling hard on the handlebars for

leverage, he pedaled away at top speed, Faulkin's feet dragging behind in the dust.

Private Spack watched them till they were out of sight. Then, dreaming of apples, he started out across the empty field and over the hill.

Private Jeremy Faulkin died in surgery. Private Lorrie Spack survived, eventually being operated on by a local nonpartisan doctor. A year later he married an islander, and was arrested and court-martialed for desertion when he tried to bring her back to the mainland with him.

Hallie's father, seeing Andrew return the next morning covered in blood, decided not to denounce him to the rebels when they entered the town (they never arrived), but instead warned him to get away. Andrew asked Cassie to come with him; startled, she said no—and always regretted it. He spent three more months on the island, driving ambo at Knob Grange and other enemy-proximate installations, before he was shot in the leg, and flown home at the taxpayers' expense.

CAPTAIN AUGELLO HAD been killed by a mortar, and no replacement had yet been sent. Major Jenkman knew nothing of the medical corps, and wanted to know nothing. He gave Doctor Vadilevaniakis and Doctor Latroussaine free rein, and told them to do their best.

Hillary, uneasy in this vacuum, thought that one of them should assume command temporarily. As an army doctor, she had the higher rank, but Eric had more experience, both since and prior to being drafted. They flipped a coin. He took command.

At first, Eric liked Pastor's Hill very much. He had no one to report to, and nothing to do. Once a week he spoke to Major Lopez on the radio, and asked for supplies that he knew would not be sent. He had no duties, for the casualties wounded on patrols were evacuated by helicopter directly to the field hospitals at Hard Top River or Poplar Junction; anyone seriously injured by the incessant mortar fire was also evacuated, because the medical hut contained little more than an instrument cart, resuscitation box, and a cabinet of expired antibiotics. He soon grew accustomed to the shellings, and ceased even to wonder why the air force didn't simply raze the forest surrounding the base. He had enough money for whiskey, and time enough, at last, for Pascal—the only book he had brought with him from the mainland. His French was poor enough to render the text richly unfathomable. He could daydream entire afternoons over such teasing obscurities as (in his own translation), "We are so miserable that we cannot take pleasure in a thing designed to make us angry if used badly," or "When everything moves, nothing seems to move—like in a something; when everyone moves towards the something, no one seems to move towards it." His leave had twice been

canceled, and was three months overdue. Now, instead of leave, he had been sent to the front. So he had no qualms—at first—about treating Pastor's Hill as a holiday.

The only problem was Doctor Vadilevaniakis. She did not know how to relax, and her vigilant industriousness made it difficult for him to relax. He found some reassurance in his newfound rank, telling himself that, naturally, the subordinate should handle most of the routine tasks, leaving the superior free to address crises, should such arise. At other times he reasoned that there was not enough work for even one of them, and he was doing Doctor Vadilevaniakis a favor by letting her keep busy. She had more to learn, and was learning.

But these rationalizations were less effective at alleviating disquiet than whiskey; and when he was drunk, solitude made him maudlin. So he drank with the privates, who were friendly and boisterous, but with whom he felt little rapport. For one thing, they were all a decade younger than him. For another, unlike him, they were not on holiday: they went out on patrols most nights of the week, from which some of them, sometimes, did not return. Consequently, every few days, Eric got up from the mess table where they drank, bullshitted, and gambled, and carried a bottle to the medical hut, where he attempted to persuade Doctor Vadilevaniakis to unwind, to cut loose, to have a little fun.

Hillary was sitting at the desk, rubbing her scalp and watching flakes of dandruff fall tumbling through sunlight to the page below. She was vaguely surprised that her hair was almost long enough to twist around a finger; but otherwise her mind was empty. When Doctor Latroussaine entered, she stiffened with shame. She stood and saluted him, though they had agreed this was not necessary.

"Fuck off, Doctor. As you were. Have a drink."

"Thanks, but fuck you all the same, Doctor. I don't drink when I'm on duty."

"Are these sterilized?" —"They were this morning." —He poured whiskey into two graduated cylinders, but set both before himself. He pro-

ceeded to sip from one with demonstrative relish. "Sure you wouldn't like a taste?" —"Quite sure, thanks."

Aside from the fact that his conversation was sometimes repetitive, Hillary did not mind these visits from Doctor Latroussaine. Though she felt guilty whenever they were in the same room, as if they could best serve the base's medical needs only by spreading out, she did stop worrying, when he was here, about what she should be doing. If they were idle, it was his decision—his order.

"What's that you're laboring over?" —"Oh," she said, putting it away, "just a letter to my brother." —"Which one?" —"Ben." —"Ah yes. Ben. 'Ben.' How is Ben?" —She told him how Ben was. Sweet, imprudent, and naive, Ben had married a harpy, who he now realized was a harpy. He wanted to know why no one else had noticed, or if they had, why no one had warned him. Hillary was torn between explaining exactly why nobody had thought fit to tell him that the woman he was in love with was a bitch, and encouraging him to make the best of a bad situation. So far, after five hours, she had written a paragraph of greeting.

Eric, however, was impressed, and contrite. He had not written to his mother in over a month. "You don't believe in divorce?" he asked. —"My family doesn't. My brother doesn't, I don't think. Anyway, they've only been married a year." —"I was married five years, and I wish someone had told me to get the fuck out after a year." —"What happened?" —"The short story, I guess, is that I was a workaholic. Do you want to hear the long story?" —"If you want to tell it."

He told her the long story.

She commiserated, and refrained from pointing out what he might have done differently.

"That's probably why I'm here," he said. "Probably I wanted to get away from everything—her family, all our friends. Otherwise, wouldn't I have fought the draft a little harder?" —Hillary sighed. "You didn't fight the draft because deep down you knew it was your duty to your country."

Eric denied that one had any duties to one's country; countries had obligations to their citizens, not the other way around. Indeed, one had a

duty to flout one's country, to practice civil disobedience, if one disagreed with its policies. One must obey only good laws, and fight only good wars. —Hillary, borrowing from her father an opinion she at other times had repudiated, said that it was attitudes like his that were causing them to lose the war. "Nobody likes war. So if you send over a bunch of cameras and journalists to show the average person what the war is really like, of course they are going to object." —"What's your alternative? Censorship and propaganda? A mushroom electorate, kept in the dark and fed on shit?" —"The time for discussion is before the decision is made. Continuing the debate, protesting the decision, just hamstrings everybody and undermines all our efforts. You see it all the way down the line. Why can't we get a fucking cardiograph in this room?" —"I don't remember any discussion. I don't remember being asked if we should go to war." —"It's called a representative democracy. They're not going to consult you personally on every matter. And anyway, it's too much to ask that every civilian be informed on every matter. Don't you think it's too much to ask every private here to search his or her heart every morning after reading the newspaper and to decide whether or not the war is still a just one? Isn't there enough pressure on them already? You'd have them held responsible for the president's decisions. You'd have them subjected to being spat on and called murderers when they come home." —Eric made violent clearing gestures, as if he were climbing through cobwebs. "The truth is that war *is* murder. Neither the generals nor the populace should ever be allowed to forget that. If we're going to bomb a village, we'd damn well better have a TV crew on location to interview the survivors and show the carnage. That'll keep us from making the decision lightly. And if soldiers are spat on as murderers, they'll be damn careful about choosing their wars. They *should* be spat on." —"You don't really believe that." —"Fucking right I do." —"All those privates you carouse with, all those men and women whose lives you've saved—they're all murderers?" —"Yep." He laughed bitterly. "No. I don't know. They're just a bunch of dumb kids." The crash of exploding mortars drowned out their conversation for several seconds. Automatically, they climbed down from their chairs and sat on the floor, their backs against the desk. "All I'm say-

ing," he continued, "is that at least we have the decency, while fighting a pointless and unjust war, to hamstring ourselves. At least we're doing this fucking thing half-heartedly. You can say that much for us."

"And what about you?" she asked. —"What about me?" —"By your own logic, and given your scruples, shouldn't you be refusing to participate? Where's your civil disobedience?" —"I, Doctor," he said, taking a sip from his graduated cylinder, and retrieving the other and placing it on the floor beside Hillary, "I am in the process this very moment of incapacitating the occupying forces' medical personnel." —She slid the glass back across the floor till it rested against his leg. "Shouldn't we get the fuck out? Aren't we contributing to the problem?" —"Aw, hell," said Eric. "We're here. We've made our decision. Now we've got to live with it."

The conversation had been vehement; now it grew lugubrious as they each acknowledged the validity of the opposing view. Hillary admitted that the war was immoral, that the eastern government was a repressive regime, and that his and her work here, making soldiers fit for more fighting, was indefensible. Eric replied that they were too close to the war to judge it objectively, and that their duty was to follow orders, and to save lives. "Besides," he said, "you can never know whether the private you patch up today will go on to kill more civilians, or fly home to their four kids tomorrow. You're no more responsible for their future crimes than you are for the reporter's future slander or the lawyer's future embezzlement. These people need medical attention. We give it to them. End of story."

Far from having its intended effect, Eric's thesis only made Hillary feel culpable for all of her patients' future crimes, and made her doubt, for the first time, the worthiness of the medical profession. She overlooked an abyss: what if doctors actually did more harm than good?

"We all do about as much harm as good," said Eric. "Even our good does harm, and our harm good. The trick is to do the best one can in the circumstances, and to enjoy oneself in the meantime." He climbed to his feet to elaborate on this theme, but quickly sat back down as an exploding shell rattled the walls and rained debris like hail on the metal roof. "The world is in as bad a state as it ever was—" —"Worse," said Hillary, and

cited examples. —"All right, worse than it ever was, despite (I'll not say 'because of'!) hundreds, despite thousands of years of attempts to improve it. So the best any of us can do is take pleasure where we can find it." And he sipped whiskey. —"Hedonism," muttered Hillary. —"No; utilitarianism: the greatest happiness for the greatest number. But you can't make others happy. So it's a moral imperative to enjoy *yourself*—that's the only certain way to increase the total happiness on the planet."

His argument mollified Hillary, less by its convincingness than its bravado. She admired the sanguine ingenuity with which he defended his hedonism; and she was touched, too, by his self-contradictory attempt to win her over to this hedonism, and to make her happy.

"If you, at this moment," he went on, "are healthy and well fed, it is a sin not to rejoice—even if, *especially* if, someone somewhere else is miserable. If we don't get into the habit of enjoying ourselves now, while the world is a mess, we'll lose the capacity for it by the time the world is put in order." —She smiled. "I thought the world was never going to get put in order." —"Exactly!" he cried. They laughed at his inconsistency. "The bottom line being," he said, "that you should seize the day, *carpe felicitatem*, and have a goddamn drink with me, Doctor."

—"I think you drink too much, Doctor." In fact, she liked him better when he drank—he was friendlier—but she worried about his health. However, she did not have time to elaborate. —"On the contrary," he declared, "I drink too little. To prevent habituation, I should really drink more, less often, and less more often. But I'm weak; I like being fuddled too much."

Climbing onto his haunches, Eric delivered a paean to drunkenness, pacing and gesticulating as expansively as his posture allowed. Drunkenness was light; drunkenness was wisdom. Drunkenness allowed one to see the truth: that the world was a garden of delight teeming with plants and animals as lovely and various as colors, as dense and numerous as stars, as vivid and insubstantial as sparks, each one itself comprising a dense, vivid, and various universe of cells, every cell in turn a bogglingly fine-tuned society of organelles, which were themselves made of intelligent proteins, and so on.

He spoke almost angrily, for the vision was one that he cherished, but seldom possessed.

Hillary, reluctant to acknowledge the beauty of any system revealed by inebriation, agreed that the human body was a complicated machine, but reminded him that that very complexity was a liability: the machine often malfunctioned, and was all too easily broken. "And frankly, I find the microscopic view rather depressing. All that intricate technology, and look what we do with it! Playing solitaire, collecting stamps, washing dishes, buying shoes. It's like using a supercomputer to hammer nails." She confessed that sometimes, listening to two ordinary people converse, so clumsily, so trivially, she was appalled to think of the sophistication and tireless heroism of, for example, their immune systems. "If we're galaxies, we're transmitting inanities in morse code across light-years of emptiness."

"But that's just what makes our communication so precious! Every conversation, however stupid, however inarticulate, is as momentous, as miraculous, as worthy of celebration and awe as interstellar contact with an alien intelligence. Maybe we do only touch at a point; but how amazing that we touch at all."

And he touched the tip of her knee with the tip of his finger; and to their mutual surprise, something nontrivial was communicated.

Private Bicyk entered, and Hillary scrambled to her feet. "Is everyone all right?" —"Huh? Oh, sure." —"What's the matter, soldier?" asked Eric, lifting himself onto a chair.

Private Bicyk had come to ask Doctor V. for pills, but was obscurely discomfited to find Doc Eric there. He sensed, first, that he was interrupting. He felt, too, that it would be immodest, even obscene, to be treated by two doctors at once. Besides this, he had steeled himself to confess to one person, and found his will now insufficient to face two. And finally (though he was unconscious of this), he did not like the idea of revealing his weakness to a man whom he drank with, and whom he considered a friend.

His platoon had been picked to go on patrol that night; the route would take them through the minefield. Private Bicyk was terrified of mines. More sudden than mortars, more impersonal than sniper fire, they filled him with

the kind of primal dread that he felt in dreams towards snakes and deep water. He was certain that, without some kind of nerve pill, he would be unable to cross the field this time; and the thought of delaying the patrol, of being physically unable to move while the others pushed and screamed at him, was more tormenting, because more tangible, than the thought of injury, pain, or death.

"Oh, nothing, really," he said. "I'll come back later." And, neither crouching nor hurrying as the sky retched another barrage of mortars, he walked back out the door.

When the explosions had dwindled to an intermittent roar, Eric, again seated on the floor, said, "You know, I think the privates find you a little remote." This was not quite true. Eric had noticed Private Bicyk's discomfiture, and was eager to attribute it to some cause other than himself. —"Remote?" —"You know: Distant. Unapproachable." —Hillary was aghast. "I certainly don't mean to be." She fell into a reverie of self-interrogation. Was it true? How had it happened? —Embarrassed by the effectiveness of his pretense, Eric now tried to restore levity. "It's only because you never drink with us," he joked. —Hillary looked at him beseechingly. "You know I'm not a prig. I can't drink when I'm on duty, and I'm always on duty." —"You don't need to be. Nothing ever happens." —"But if something did!" —"We'd evac them." —She shook her head; but she had already conceded much. Finally, by promising to stay sober himself, Eric persuaded her to come to the mess hall the following evening.

The soldiers were honored, and nonplussed, by her presence there. They were formal and solicitous, and pressed food and drink on her. Hillary was charmed by their kindliness, and though she drank little, she was soon pleasantly and unwittingly intoxicated. Eric acted as master of ceremonies, encouraging conversation and eliciting old stories and favorite anecdotes. But the privates' esteem for Doctor V. was an obstacle to intimacy; and some were constrained by the memory of infections or rashes she had treated. Some, like Private Bicyk (who had crossed the minefield the night before like everyone else), were abashed to think how close they had come to confessing to her their worst fears. And for her part, her feelings of good-

will were not untainted by condescension. They were all so young, and so adorable—even the unhandsome ones. Every face seemed to glow with its own uniqueness; she felt that she could read in each one an eloquent expression of its owner's character, desires, and passing emotions. She enjoyed watching them and listening to them speak, but felt no inclination to confide in them. To Eric's chagrin, the talk repeatedly stalled; he began drinking surreptitiously. At last Private Maldau suggested they play a game.

There was an implicit consensus that the doctor would not care to gamble, so card games were ruled out. With the enthusiasm of nostalgia, the privates named different games they had played as children: Mumblety-peg, Lapjack, Hot Buttered Beans, Mother May I, Follow the Leader, Bloody Murder; but the only game that they all knew was Hide and Seek. Private Patello was elected to be "it," because he could be relied on to resent it. "Aw, fuck you guys," he whined, and everybody laughed. The ammunition shed was chosen as safehouse, the entire base was ruled in-bounds, and Private Patello began counting down from one hundred. Everyone scattered.

Hillary crossed the base briskly and squeezed between a concrete revetment and the wall of the motor pool. Someone was revving an engine inside; she could not hear Patello's count. Then the noise ceased. She listened intently, but could hear only the wind rattling an aluminum roof panel and the chirring of cicadas in the tall trees beyond the perimeter fence. The evening was warm, the air soft, the sky a lingering lilac. A tiny beetle with legs like wire brushes clambered onto her left index knuckle, then seemed to pause to catch its breath. She realized that she was holding her own breath, and let it out slowly, stirring the dust between her fingers. Her face felt strange. She was smiling.

Eric found her at last, and joined her noiselessly, crawling forward on his belly till their foreheads almost touched. "Where is he?" she whispered. He mouthed the words: "He's coming," and every muscle in her body tensed, making her feel like one solid unit of poised readiness.

Eric scrutinized her face in the darkness with an attentiveness bordering on anxiety, as if he were memorizing an escape plan. He too was smiling,

but painfully. His only thought was one recurring word: "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Then from the woods, closer than either of them had ever heard it, came the familiar *fwump, fwump, fwump* of mortars being fired, followed a few seconds later by the screaming falling shells, and then all around them the shuddering explosions. They did not have to move to take cover, and this novelty made them feel absurdly safe, as if all the world were a hammock cradling them. Eric stopped worrying that he would have to kiss her, and simply lay there, riding the earth like a raft downstream. And Hillary's happiness was so great that it frightened her; suddenly she felt sick and dizzy and disgusted. Her imagination provided a reason: someone was hurt, and she could not help them, because they could not find her! And she had been drinking, and could not do her job properly. Doctor Latroussaine too had been drinking, she knew, but this only made her angrier at herself: she had smelled whiskey on his breath, and ignored it. The great hammock was now a suffocating cage. She climbed to her feet, and, oblivious of the bombardment, which twice threw her to her hands and knees, hurried to the medical hut. There she sat on the floor, writhing with dismay and willing herself sober, and awaited the casualties.

In fact, no one was hurt; the shelling ended, and the game continued. Eric, assuming that she had made a bold dash for the safehouse, was filled with admiration. When finally he realized that she had simply quit, he made excuses for her, then for himself, and retired to his bunk and stared for hours at the meaningless code of Pascal.

THE NEXT DAY, Hillary visited the village of Pastor's Hill—something that none of the soldiers would have done alone, never mind unarmed, for the village was known to be held by rebels. Eric was organizing a rescue party when she returned in the late afternoon, carrying a somewhat depleted first-aid kit. He harangued her for taking unnecessary risks, and she harangued him, and, by extension, all the mainland forces, for ignoring the plight of the local populace.

"If we only treat our own people, we're not a medical service, we're a military one. Besides, I thought part of our mandate here was to win the islanders over to our side." —Eric spluttered, able to sense but not to identify the contradiction in these two statements. "Look, you can't just hand out meds to a partisan village. That *is* a military act." —"I saw no evidence of any allegiance to the partisans." —"They aren't going to stand up and announce their allegiance!" —"No, but we can't assume every islander is a rebel, either. Most of these people just want to be left alone—by both sides." —Eric sighed and rubbed his eyes. He admitted that most islanders were probably nonpartisan, but he could not see how a unilateral withdrawal would benefit anyone but the partisans. "The more we leave them alone, the less the rebels will." —But Hillary was not, at the moment, advocating a withdrawal, or even addressing the larger morality of the war. She granted him that most of the locals probably *were* partisan, but that was no reason to deny them medical attention. "We do our job. End of story."

She argued the more forcefully for the abstract good, because the specific good was in this case somewhat hazy. That day, she had been welcomed warmly enough into several homes, but none of the villagers would admit to any ailment more severe than psoriasis. Nor did they seem to be suffering from malnutrition: cauldrons of stew bubbled in many kitchens, and the larders she caught glimpses into were crammed with canned goods. Thus she felt some misgivings when finally Doctor Latroussaine capitulated. The next day, with Major Lopez's authorization and Major Jenkman's blessing, Hillary returned to Pastor's Hill in a jeep, accompanied by Doctor Latroussaine and three jumpy privates acting as bodyguards, among them Private Bicyk.

To her relief, the village bore a very different aspect twenty-four hours later. Now no food of any kind was in evidence, and all the villagers, even the children, complained of headaches and stomachaches, fevers and chills, insomnia and fatigue. The change was puzzling, but too gratifying to analyze. She supposed that they had been shy, and that now they trusted her. She and Doctor Latroussaine did what little they could with what supplies they had. They swabbed and sterilized; they palpated and massaged; they

auscultated; they bandaged. They dispensed salt tablets and their least expired metronidazole pills. Mostly they took notes and made plans to return, to see if the oddly elusive symptoms persisted.

In fact, the villagers were shamming. The local partisan militia—that is, all the boys and most of the girls aged fifteen to twenty-five—had instructed their parents, grandparents, and younger siblings to defraud the mainland doctor of as much food and pharmaceuticals as possible, which could then be sold back to the mainlanders stationed or on leave in the cities. In the same way, partisans across the island had found it more profitable to sell their produce, dairy, and meat than to eat it—the occupying forces' need for these things being great, and their dollar being worth so much more than the island currency. And the partisans, who were young and zealous, happily subsisted on canned rations—which were for them, indeed, a delicacy, because foreign and machine-produced. Besides, they could always raid a non-partisan town if they wanted to eat, say, a carrot. (Although, to be sure, this practice had a discouraging effect on the farmers, and had helped contribute to the food shortages—which, happily, raised the prices of what remained.)

Mrs. Karla Zapolitz refused to participate any longer in this scheme. She sensed that her grandsons, profiting by the presence of the very army that their rebellion had drawn here, had no intention of ever allowing the war to end. But she, for one, was fed up with the guns, the bombs, and the deaths. With heroic defiance, she told the doctors that there was nothing in the world wrong with her. "I am perfectly healthy!" she shouted out the window. "And am not the least bit hungry!"

To most of the thirty young partisans in hiding around her house, this declaration seemed merely odd; but it filled one young man with consternation and anger. Her grandson, First Cadet Ice Sword, who was crouched just outside the window, recognized her defiance, and realized that she was betraying the militia's presence to the enemy. She was a traitor to the rebellion. He hesitated only a moment.

Everyone inside the house—Hillary, Eric, Private Bicyk, Private Talomey, and Mrs. Zapolitz—watched the grenade roll on the floor in di-

minishing circles until it came to a stop. Then Private Bicyk threw himself on it.

Still no one else moved. Slowly the grimace on Private Bicyk's face slackened; eventually he opened his eyes. The grenade was a dud.

Private Talomey took charge. He shouted to Private Allgood, posted outside the door, that they were under attack; he shrugged the radio off his back onto the table and began tuning it; he advised the doctors and Mrs. Zapolitz to get low and out of sight; and he told Private Bicyk to toss the fucking grenade back out the fucking window already. This was done—and instantly there came a tearing burst of semi-automatic fire. The militia, who had not been expecting three soldiers and a jeep, were jumpy too. Bullets raked across the walls of the house; a porcelain jug in the kitchen exploded. Private Allgood somersaulted inside, and everyone got low and out of sight. Mrs. Zapolitz muttered phrases of amazement and disgust to herself. Eric and Hillary exchanged a glance, each finding comfort in what they took to be the other's look of calm reassurance. Meanwhile, Private Bicyk squirmed on the floor in a puddle of blood. He had been hit.

The gunfire ended as abruptly as it had begun. Voices outside screamed questions, accusations, and orders. Hunched over Private Bicyk, Hillary and Eric worked obliviously, cutting away the collar of his uniform and stanching the blood that poured from the hole behind his ear while simultaneously trying to determine the extent of the wound. —"Don't see an exit, and I don't see the projectile." —"Looks small caliber, at least." —"But it could have got anywhere." —"Doesn't seem to have interfered with his airway. Give me a deep breath, private." But Private Bicyk wouldn't open his mouth. "Through your nose. Excellent." —"You're going to be all right, soldier." —"How long till we can get an evac helicopter in here, Private Talomey?" —Private Talomey swore, slammed down the radio headset, and immediately picked it up again to resume negotiations. "The fuckers say they can't land with the rug this hot." —Private Allgood, with one eye above the windowsill, said, "I'd say the rug has cooled down some."

In fact, the militia, expecting retaliation, had already retreated to the woods, leaving the village to its fate. They all rebuked one another for start-

ing a firefight so close to home; but their bitterness was alleviated by the romantic prospect of building a new community in the treetops, or underground.

Private Talomey said, "What they really mean is they won't drop into a partisan village. The best they can do is Hill 70." —Hillary objected, "That's halfway back to base!" —"We'll have to run for the jeep," said Private Allgood. "Can he move?" —"Ask him," said Eric, pressure-dressing the wound. —Private Bicyk, by narrowing his eyes and clenching his jaw, seemed to nod.

"Bullshit," said Hillary. "Can't we get an ambulance out here?" —"Driver shortage," shrugged Private Talomey. —"Bullshit. I am going to shit down someone's throat for this." But she helped Eric get Private Bicyk to his feet, and together they supported him as far as the door. Then, at Private Allgood's signal, they staggered from the house—leaving Mrs. Zapolitz to fend for herself. Half an hour later, still grumbling, she stood, dusted herself off, and surveyed the damage desolately.

In the jeep, Hillary kneeled next to Private Bicyk, who lay on the back seat. Eric sat in the front, wedged between Private Talomey, who drove, and Private Allgood, who aimed his rifle at the trees hurtling past.

"We don't necessarily need to stop," said Hillary tentatively. —"What do you mean?" —"At Hill 70. We can just keep going, back to base." —Eric turned around; his eyes grew wide with understanding. "Oh, no. No, no. This soldier needs to be medevacked. He needs blood and fluids, and a full exploration of the wound and a radiograph to rule out hematoma, and—" —"We've got ultrasound, and we've got two units of packed red cells, which will surely tide us over till we can tap the walking bank." By this she meant that they could draw blood from other soldiers—the 'walking blood bank.' —"How on earth are we supposed to do a crossmatch?," Eric asked disingenuously. —"White tile method." She went on quickly: "What if there's a backlog at Poplar Junction? He's going to sit in the triage tent for an hour. Meanwhile, we could be debriding and exploring and repairing. If we find nerve trauma or hematoma, which I don't think we will, we can still call in the medevac, and our chart'll push him to the front of the queue." —Eric

chewed his lip. "We don't have the resources they have." —"But we've got the time and the personnel, which they may not have."

The helicopter came into view. "What are we doing?" asked Private Talomey. "Stopping or going?"

"Come on, Doctor." Hillary's eyes said what she did not: that this was her fault.

"I'd feel a lot better," Eric murmured, "if we knew the trajectory of that projectile."

"Oh, we know that," she said. Private Bicyk, who was afraid of crying out, was grinding the bullet between his teeth.

"Stopping or going, Doc?"

"Going," Eric sighed. "Fast."

OVER THE DAYS that followed, all of Hillary's energy, anxiety, and compassion found an outlet in Private Bicyk. She confined him to bed and prohibited him from trying to speak until his wound had fully healed; and his mute immobility made him seem as helpless and needy as an infant. Twice daily she redressed his wound (which, aside from a shattered tooth, was not serious); she sponged and shaved him; she emptied his bedpan; she improvised a feeding tube from a nasal trumpet and an infusion pump, with which she sent a continuous diet of mashed rice, potatoes, and bananas directly into his stomach; and she gave him morphine for his pain. She slept on a gurney in the medical tent to be near him at night.

Eric took over her neglected duties—treating the cuts, abrasions, ulcers, and sexually transmitted infections that appeared sporadically on the base. He was still left with much free time, which he spent less often in the mess, and more often with Hillary at Private Bicyk's bedside.

Together they soothed and entertained the patient with tales, riddles, and simple children's games; occasionally Eric read a few pages of Pascal. "It's not necessary to have a very elevated soul to realize that there is no true and solid satisfaction here, that all our pleasures are only vanity, that all our evils are infinite, and that in the end death, which menaces us at every in-

stant, must inevitably, in a few years, place us under the horrible necessity of being either eternally born, or eternally unhappy." Finding some of these passages rather bleak, Hillary asked Eric to refrain from translating them.

But mostly the doctors gave Private Bicyk lessons—for they believed that conversation was salubrious, and they found it easier to talk about biology, chemistry, and physics than about themselves. Since he could not tell them what he already knew, nothing was extraneous. Every object around them, every spoken word, every invoked concept suggested new topics for their lectures. One would tell him everything they knew, everything they could remember, about spiders; or glass; or dust; or the water cycle; or white blood cells; or static electricity; or carpentry; or harmonics; while the other, acting on Private Bicyk's behalf, would play the role of naive interviewer, posing the endless series of "why" and "how" questions that are the despair of so many overtaxed parents. But Eric and Hillary were not overtaxed, and their unhurried investigations, rather than leading to frustration or annoyance, ended only in wonder and delight. They looked at everything with the fresh, inquisitive intensity of children, and admired everything with the adult's capacity for understanding and awe. They imagined that they were seeing the world through Private Bicyk's unclouded eyes, and that they had him to thank for this vision of glory.

But in fact, when Bicyk was not voluptuously stupefied by morphine, he was alternately bored and mortified. He was appalled at having so much attention paid him, and his shame was only aggravated when his friends came to visit. He could not demonstrate his strength or his stoicism while lying speechless in bed, and his injury was not horrible enough to constitute its own heroism; so he resorted to implying—from his bearing, or his gaze—that he was in a great deal of pain, which he was withstanding manfully. Doctor V. detected these hints more readily than his fellow soldiers, however, and was always quick to administer another dose of painkillers—thus depriving him of both the means and the desire to continue miming distress.

On the day that Captain Augello's replacement finally arrived, Eric and Hillary took Private Bicyk for a walk around the base. They had a wheelchair, so they used it. This humiliation was more than Private Bicyk cared to

bear; he allowed Hillary to conclude that his tooth was hurting him. With the morphine in his body, he was content to be rolled around like a well-fed baby in a pram, absorbing sunshine and oxygen. It had rained heavily the day before, and the slimy puddles lying everywhere prompted Hillary to tell him all about freshwater algae.

"Most of them are too small for us to see individually, and in a mass they often just look like green scum. But when you view them under a microscope, you discover that there are actually more different kinds than there are species of plants in a rainforest. The algae are plants, too, of course —at least, they convert sunlight directly into nutrition like plants do—but some of them swim around like little fish. They're as varied and colorful as tropical fish, too. Even the single-celled ones come in dozens of shapes and sizes. Some are spherical, some long like needles, some crescent shaped; some are like balloons, some like canoes, others like jellyfish, others just blobs; some are smooth, some spiny; some look like S's, or C's, or J's; some are triangular, some cubical, and some are perfect pentagons. And sometimes they get together in colonies, or many-celled bodies, which in turn can take the form of discs, or globes, or sheets, or rods, or cogwheels, or even branched filaments, or broad leaflike fronds. Unlike plants, though, they don't actually have leaves, or distinct stems, or even proper roots. And they don't grow fruit, and they don't have seeds!" —"How do they reproduce?" asked Eric. —"All kinds of ways. Sometimes they just split in two. Sometimes two cells come together to make new cells. Some give off spores, which are tougher and simpler than seeds, and can survive indefinitely—through freezing cold, or drought, or even fire. There are spores everywhere, which is why a rain puddle that wasn't there yesterday can be flourishing with life today. And some spores can swim—even those of certain stationary algae. Imagine if an apple tree dropped apples that could walk!"

But Private Bicyk, who was an amateur photographer back home, was more interested in the way the reflection of the sun shrank and expanded on the rippling surface of one puddle, but without growing brighter or dimmer. He realized that the sunlight was falling equally on every part of the puddle, indeed on every inch of the earth, and that with just the right combination of

waves, the entire ocean could become a blinding spotlight. "The light's nice," he murmured, and gestured at the puddle. Immediately Doc Eric launched into a lesson on the physical properties of color.

"The funny thing about color," Eric concluded, "is that it's what's *rejected*. The redness of the rose is due to the fact that the petals absorb blue and yellow frequencies of light radiation, but can do nothing with red. Red gets reflected, and that's what reaches our eyes." —"So," said Hillary, "it's almost like what we *see* is the opposite of what really *is*?" —"Exactly!" And, searching for a dramatic illustration, he became somewhat fanciful: "Take the darkness of the night sky, the blackness of deep space. It's actually brimming with sunlight; a rainbow shower of electromagnetic waves pours through it constantly. But nothing stops it, nothing deflects it—except occasionally a planet, or a comet, or the moon."

Private Bicyk smiled and nodded, hearing in this description a beautiful echo of his own unexpressed idea.