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This Side of the Van Allen Belt
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The Path of the Soldier

The practical exams were easy. Not that I performed Herculean labors, but neither did any of the others, I could tell. Most could just as well have been eliminated after the first day. At night I lay in the youth hostel, staring at the ceiling, the towel dispenser, the mirror. I found it ridiculous to be staying at a hostel at my age, but I wasn't the only one. There were ten or twelve other applicants, you could tell by the portfolios.

On the third day, just before the oral exam, one of the guys in my room got sick. Franco Cosic. He came down with a sore throat and high fever, and we didn't know what to do. He had no health insurance. He spoke some German, but with a heavy accent. Every five minutes he threw his blanket to the other side of the bed, and sweat-soaked t-shirts hung from the bunk-bed above him like Tibetan pennants.

"My lips are on fire," he said, "wow."

I went to the pharmacy, pretended to have his symptoms and came back with some pain-killers and a bottle of cough syrup that was technically prescription-only. He stared right through me as he drank, his eyes glassy.

"My friend," he said.

The cough syrup contained codeine, and we passed the bottle around. Hendrik, the third man in our room, had a fit of logorrhea that persisted for hours. He looked like someone who'd listened to too much Sonic Youth as a kid. He kept talking about his girlfriend, his vacation, politics. He got a kick out saying, "the beast with two backs" and things like that. Now and then he placed a hand on the sick man's forehead and said it was his duty as a doctor to inform him that he wouldn't last the night. Franco laughed nervously, and Hendrik said he knew what he was talking about, he was an attendant at the Charité hospital in Berlin.

I no longer remember much about this evening, but one tenth of a second remained fixed in my head like a photograph. When I went to turn off the light, the mirror above the washbasin showed my most blissful smile. It wasn't just the codeine. I'd never in my life seen artists. I'd been expecting a company of supermen, or at least individuals with unbelievably interesting views, with Holbein eyes or Mengs mouths. Relieved, I fell asleep.

The next morning Franco was actually feeling a bit better, and he was able to get up. Only his forehead looked as if he'd gone at it with a piece of sandpaper, since he'd wiped off the drops of sweat with a linen cloth all night long. He was afraid they wouldn't take him because of

his imperfect German skills, and I reassured him by making jokes about our fellow applicants. Neo-hippies and high school girls with diaries full of watercolor sketches.

Hendrik was still every bit as long-winded as the night before, and in one minute flat he'd flunked the exam. It hadn't even been difficult. The exam committee just posed completely irrelevant questions, everything had already been decided beforehand. I got asked what I thought of Paul Klee, and I replied: not much. Franco was asked about his eating habits. In the afternoon they let us register.

Afterward we drove Hendrik to the train station in the Mercedes. My uncle had lent me the Mercedes for a week so I could get set up, as he put it, before beginning my studies. On the ride, Hendrik started to flip out. He wasn't going to stop working on his own development, he kept saying. The professors said his etchings weren't so bad, if anything overly subtle, next year he was going to apply again.

"That is the correct position," Franco said, chewing around on his fingernails.

"Well then see you next year," I said.

While we were standing on the platform seeing Hendrik off, the first doubts came to me. The Nuremburg train station has got to be one of the most depressing stations in the world, everything is spotless, it looked as if we were standing in a little town pop. 5000. Suddenly I no longer knew what I was doing here. Franco popped a couple of Tylenols and bought a six-pack at the kiosk, and since there was nowhere for us to sit down, we got back in the Mercedes and drove around the wall surrounding the historic city center. For some inexplicable reason this wall was still standing, all of it. It was a gloomy late-autumn afternoon. Franco was exhilarated and kept shouting "My friend!" and whacking me on the shoulder while I was driving. He hadn't been counting on passing the entrance exam. We kept driving in circles all evening, only stopping to buy more six-packs.

"Is all of Germany like this?" Franco asked after an hour. Frustrating little streets.

Frustrating sandstone-colored half-timbered buildings. Viewed from the car, all of it was somehow amusing. But staying here for longer than five days struck me as foolhardy. Franco was planning to return to Spain the next day to get rid of his apartment. After we'd gotten even drunker, he began to speak of his Mediterranean temperament (his skin was as white and scabby as that of a polar explorer), and later still he opened the window and tossed out all the work he'd made during the practical part of the examination.

"You can't take it with you!" he shouted, and large smeary pieces of cardboard sailed through the night behind us.

After we'd circled the wall for the thirty-first time, the car stopped without warning in the middle of the street. We were standing in front of a square called Plärrer at the southwestern corner of the town's historical district, and Franco began to giggle. He laughed, pointed to the street sign and laughed, and I leaned over the steering wheel in front of me and shut my eyes. Nothing happened. Traffic flowed around the obstacle, the streetcar caused the car to rock back and forth, but nothing happened. They didn't even know how to honk here.

It was easy enough to find a cheap room in a student dormitory. Before Franco left for Spain, the two of us had agreed that whichever one of us found an apartment first would let the other one crash at his place for a while. I tacked a note with my new address on the bulletin board at the Academy for Franco, but he never turned up.

My studies were a disaster. Our professor put in an appearance exactly once a week, had us show her our pictures and talked to us as if we were five years old. She had a particular sentence for each student. Frau Reifkarst, you read too little. Herr Brüscke, give some thought to your image of mankind. It was unbelievable. My sentence was: You are emotionally detached. I never knew what she meant by this. Every time I showed my work: You are emotionally detached. My fellow students didn't seem to be losing any sleep over these verdicts. Most of them had been toting around pencil sketches and little landscapes in their application portfolios; and after a mere two weeks at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste they were attacking canvasses as tall as they were with paint-covered mops. Many of them came from Waldorf schools and read fascist literature. They sat there in class holding debates about so-called perceptions, and on weekends they went home to their parents lugging two big bags of dirty laundry.

It wasn't long before my professor was trying to get me kicked out. She'd been wrong about me, she said. The biggest problem being my attitude. Probably I would rather have become an entomologist, why else would I spend the whole day crawling around in the underbrush in front of the Academy? All the work I had done so far was rubbish.

"Rubbish!" she said.

I said this thought had crossed my mind as well.

"You see! You aren't making the slightest effort to understand me," she cried. "I give you good advice, and you don't listen. I tell you to delve into your own emotional life, and you refuse. Maybe there's nothing inside? Have you ever considered this? You may not be dumb, but that's not enough here. You have to feel. Feel! If things go on like this, I'll have you sent home at the end of the semester, I can do that." She drew down the corners of her

mouth in a sort of smile, and I, not wanting to disappoint her, assumed an emotionally detached expression.

But my studies were not my main problem. During the first weeks I was almost exclusively occupied with buying furniture and bedding and plates and pots at the flea market and dealing with Franco Cosic. Eventually he'd shown up on my doorstep, holding a duffel bag in one hand, an iron in the other, bubbling over with enthusiasm and stoned to the gills. He held up the note I'd forgotten on the bulletin board, waving it around like a love letter, and I gave him a hug. I had made no social contacts here since beginning my studies, I knew no one in a circumference of 500 miles, and I embraced him ardently. He smelled as if he hadn't showered in weeks. He'd found the iron in the garbage and taken it with him, thinking maybe I'd be able to repair it. At the beginning Franco was utterly penniless and I had little hope of getting him out of my one-bedroom apartment any time soon.

During the day we went to the Academy. In the evenings we sat at my table, which consisted of two cardboard boxes and a formica board. I was becoming more and more irritable. I need to have a few hours to myself every day, otherwise I flip out, and Franco was doing everything humanly possible to make sure I flipped out. His entire worldly goods consisted of nineteen items, but he managed to arrange these nineteen items in my apartment in such a way that they were always right on top and in the way. He told me about his childhood experiences in Croatia. I never had a moment's peace. It was impossible to avoid him. When I sat in a corner in the evening to read a book, five seconds later Franco was asking: What are you up to? What book is that? What's it about? Would you read me a bit of it? Out of revenge, I eventually took down the heavy artillery from the shelf: Schopenhauer. "What's that book?" Franco asked. "Would you read to me?"

And I read to him. For hours. Franco was delighted. He didn't understand a word, his German just wasn't up to it, and in all honesty I didn't understand a word of it either. But stopping was out of the question. Franco was beside himself at the thought that I knew such difficult books. After every other sentence he would ask for clarification. "What is the objectivity of the pure will?" I didn't know, but while I was explaining it to him, I sometimes began to comprehend. After every paragraph I gave him a summary. I read, I clarified, and whenever I got stuck, Franco would leap in to fill the gap and connect everything together with the Indian transmigration of souls and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, his two pet ideas. He asked whether I could agree. I replied that I considered him mentally unsound, and he threw a tantrum like a little kid. Nevertheless I continued to read Schopenhauer aloud to him for nights on end, since anything else would have been even worse.

At some point the heat stopped working. I borrowed a fan heater, but it only raised the temperature in the room to 50° or 55°. Now when I returned from the Academy in the evening, I would find Franco lying in my bed, from which he hadn't stirred all day long.

"I had a vision," he said in a stricken voice. "Do you want to know?"

"No," I said.

I put on the kettle in the kitchen without taking my gloves off, and looked out the window. From a yellowish-black sky, snow was falling, tumbling down across the four-lane road. A police car stopped beside a snowdrift. The man in the passenger seat got out and kicked the snowdrift, and I remembered that right from the very beginning I'd known this city was not for me.

"I was so terribly hungry," Franco was saying. "But I couldn't get up. I was too weak. Too cold. I had to think about being dead the entire time. If it had been possible to... Oh man. But I just stared at the wall, and then suddenly I recognized this word on the wall. In huge, clear letters. As if struck on my forehead. UNDERCOLD."

He paused for dramatic emphasis. I could hear him rustling about beneath the covers.

"Does the word exist?"

"No," I said.

"Isn't that fantastic?" he cried. "I am going to make an object. UNDERCOLD!"

"Great," I said. "You'd better write it down so you don't forget."

Finally I succeeded in housing Franco with Alexander, a classmate. Alexander had a two bedroom apartment and got along with Franco better than I did. Franco didn't even have to contribute to the rent. But once Alexander told me Franco was getting on his nerves with all the Schopenhauer. You couldn't so much as buy a bus ticket in his company without him starting to go on about free will. Alexander acted as if it were bothering him, but in reality he liked it. He was a faculty brat with a weakness for eccentrics.

Franco was rarely seen in class at the ABK. If you asked him what he did all day, he would reply: Think. He talked all the students' ears off, no one could stand it for long. It got back to me that he'd started telling everyone behind my back what an incredible genius I was.

Anyone who stopped to listen would hear what an incredible genius I was, and when people asked for details he would hold his tongue conspiratorially. When he espied me in the distance at the end of a corridor, he would shout from one hundred yards away: "Ah, Herr Schopenhauer, salutations!"

Even among the nut-jobs assembled at the ABK, Franco was exceptional, including with regard to his work. Even though I consider conceptual art—along with guitar music and totalitarianism—one of the greatest follies of the twentieth century, I must admit that the things Franco tossed together shook me to the core. Beside the installations prepared by his fellow students, Franco's objects looked like the Christmas bazaar at an insane asylum. Looking at them, it was hard not to burst into tears.

Sometimes other students would ask me about Franco, and I always told them in the strictest confidence that he was the scion of a dynasty of Croatian war criminals. His four older brothers, I would add, were all high-ranking members of the military, and only he, the youngest, had turned out badly, pacifist scum. His father had him confined to an institution to preserve the family honor. Half a year ago he'd escaped to Spain, and was studying art on the advice of his psychoanalyst. Franco himself wasn't at liberty to speak of these matters.

The effect Franco actually had on those around him was plain to see: Eight out of ten people believed my stories. Years later they were still coming back to me in various new versions, daringly embellished with Ustaše chieftains and electroshock.

As hard a time as Franco had getting along with his fellow students in general, it was nothing compared to his interactions with the girls in our class. He wasn't particularly attractive, and his euphoric behavior could make even the best-natured of Rudolf Steiner bunny-rabbits turn tail. The way he went about trying to make contact with the opposite sex made me eventually begin to suspect he was still a virgin. He treated all females as if they were divinities. I tried to explain the mistake he was making, but everything I could think to tell him appeared to him even more incomprehensible than the history of Occidental philosophy. He declared he had no interest in meeting a woman.

One morning during a break in a nude-sketching session, Franco took a folded-up photograph out of his wallet. It was a scrap torn apparently from a Spanish daily, the pixilated, blurry and breathtaking image of a young girl. Regular features except for one eye that sat crooked in her head.

"My girlfriend," Franco said.

I had no doubt whatever that he had never before met the woman in the photograph. He told me he'd met her years before at an opening and that she was a great thinker. He wrote to her every day, though unfortunately she was rather casual about replying, but when he finally got his apartment from the welfare office, she was going to follow him to Germany. He gave a glowing report of the benevolence of the administrator at the welfare office, then started going on with great enthusiasm about his UNDERCOLD project, which had just proved a failure,

which, he insisted, was part of the concept. Then he told me how he had ripped a hole in his trousers and showed me the hole. All of this was related in a tone of extreme euphoria. And this was what depressed me most of all. Regardless of what happened or didn't happen, Franco's passionate embrace of life appeared unassailable. When he lost his scarf, he discovered how fascinating it was to freeze. When we walked an hour through the city in a snow flurry to go to the movies because we didn't have enough cash for both subway and movie, and then failed to get in because the show was sold out already, Franco was all enthusiasm.

"That's a savings of eight marks!" he said. "We're going to have a ball."

"With eight marks," I said.

In front of a supermarket he suddenly began putting one-mark coins into the coin slots of the shopping carts, eight of them at once. I called his attention to the fact that one could in fact unlock the entire row of carts with only a single coin.

"You're so smart!" he said, locked all the carts back together and then unlocked two rows of ten, one for each of us.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked.

It was exhausting to push the carts through the nocturnal streets. The dormitory on Kettensteg was located up the hill from town. Franco steered toward the wall that led to the Pegnitz fifteen meters below us, and asked me to help him. But getting all the carts over the wall as a unit was impossible. It had been all we'd been able to do to push them up the hill, actually lifting them was out of the question. So Franco invested another two marks and broke down the carts into groups of five. Groaning, we heaved them into the river, one after the other.

"You assholes!" Franco shouted. "Can you hear me? I hate your capitalist bullshit, you assholes!"

No one heard him. It was nighttime and people were sleeping, and slumbering along with them were whatever passions they may have felt for this particular social order. The shopping carts glittered flat and silver down in the river, with little waves lapping over them. Sooner or later, mud and flotsam would collect in them.

"Another twenty marks and you can dam up the whole river and sink the town," I said, and for a long time we remained standing up above amid the snow flurries, looking down and smoking, and Franco kept assuring me what an outstanding individual I was.

It snowed all week. Then came frost-clear days with a glaring sun low in the sky that slanted in through the windows of the cafeteria. I sat alone in the cafeteria, reading. My heat still

hadn't been fixed. When Franco sat down at my table, his eyes were just as transparent and feverish as they'd been the first time we'd met at the hostel. He scarcely touched his food. I asked what the matter was, and he leaned across the table and whispered: "Mara is coming."

"What's Mara?"

"My girlfriend."

"Did she write to you?"

"She's coming," Franco said and pointed straight ahead.

A diminutive, dark female figure was just opening the glass door of the cafeteria. She was encased in a heavy coat that dragged along the floor, and had a suitcase in her hand. Franco placed his flatware so it lay parallel upon his plate. He made a great effort to place it there silently, with great concentration, exactly parallel, then he walked up to meet the woman and greeted her by holding out his hand. She ignored it.

Two days later they invited me to dinner. Franco had cooked and everything. Alexander was looking down awkwardly at his kitchen table, which was covered with candles and wine bottles. I added my six-pack.

"Allow me to introduce the Genius!"

I smiled. Mara remained silent. All evening long, Franco was the only one who talked. It was extremely stressful, and I took my leave of them early. I found Franco's behavior toward Mara all but sickening. He kept asking her if everything was all right, refilling her glass and jumping up from his chair the moment she allowed her eyes to linger on some random object.

"Would you like some more salt? Would you like some peppermints? Would you like to lie down for a bit?" Eventually Alexander said: "Leave it alone already," and Mara turned to look at Alexander. She wore a large silver cross upon her breast. I didn't even know if she spoke German.

Of course Mara moved in with Alexander as well. "Only until they have their own place," Alexander said. But it was perfectly clear that they would never have their own place.

Mara had all the usual cliché illnesses like sliced-up forearms, and she was always putting out cigarettes on her own knuckles when you weren't looking. But otherwise she was perfectly all right. And she really did look exactly like in the photo, just as breathtaking and also just as blurry, so that you always had the impression she was standing in the shade or a bit farther away. In her presence, Franco became invisible. He would talk twice as much as usual, but he couldn't avoid becoming invisible, an agitated shepherd figure in the background of an Adoration of the Virgin scene.

“It isn’t out of friendship, it’s only because I pity him that I haven’t taken her off his hands yet,” Alexander once said to me in his cups, and I thought: Alexander really is even stupider than he looks. But then it occurred to me that I myself had entertained more or less identical thoughts. To make matters even more complicated, for a long time it remained unclear exactly what it was between Franco and Mara. They were constantly running around after one another, but you never saw any physical contact. Mara didn’t enroll at the ABK, but she did work on Franco’s projects. The two of them spent a couple of weeks building computer parts out of matchsticks. At one point they—I don’t know if it was Franco or Mara—came up with the idea of swallowing a tin soldier and then making an x-ray image of it in the gastrointestinal tract. They flipped a coin, Mara lost and swallowed the soldier. Not much could be seen on the x-ray, the soldier had lodged sideways in her stomach. The second time around, the doctors were already refusing to x-ray Mara. Between her knuckles and her assertion that this time too she’d swallowed the soldier accidentally, they were ready to commit her. In the end, the two of them took advantage of a trip to Spain to have further x-rays taken in which the soldier was visible in profile. The Spanish doctors found it not at all out of the ordinary for someone to be swallowing soldiers day after day.

“The military heading for the shit,” Franco proclaimed, taping up the pictures on Alexander’s kitchen window.

“An important contribution to the history of pacifism,” I said, looking at Mara, who appeared not to have suffered particularly despite the cohorts of toy soldiers that had marched through her body.

“I am War,” Mara said. “I devour the soldier.”

“Mara is War!” Franco repeated emphatically.

“You two have a screw loose,” I said.

The next time I ran into Franco, he was dragging a second-hand light box through the Academy. By this time my own studies were old news. I’d begun temping at a paint and body shop, where it soon became clear to me that sixteen hours a week was enough to put food on the table. I found this reassuring. Nonetheless I continued to betake myself to the Academy on a regular basis to be humiliated by my professor. She continued to threaten to kick me out, but never did. I think she enjoyed having one thoroughbred moron among all the anthroposophical ones.

“Don’t get all worked up. Besides, I have something to ask you,” Franco said. He put down the light box on my feet and began beating around the bush for several minutes before demanding the key to my apartment. He was in need of neutral territory.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he said.

I couldn’t figure out what he was getting at. Eventually he started talking straight, and even then I couldn’t quite follow. “There’s another man,” he said.

“What?”

“I found hair. Long blond hair,” he said. He tilted his head to one side and started plucking at my hair, which, though not particularly long, was indeed blond. “I wrote him a letter. I intend to meet this person and clear the air.”

“And so...?”

“That’s why I need the neutral territory.”

“If you’re planning to orchestrate a bloodbath, lay down some tarps first,” I said and gave him the keys.

In the evening I met Mara in front of the Casablanca cinema. She wasn’t wearing makeup. I don’t think she ever wore any. But the contours of her face were so clear and at the same time so fuzzy that she resembled the faces on the huge film noir posters hanging all over the walls. I concealed my agitation behind a wall of cigarette smoke.

The selection that night was nothing to write home about. We decided to see *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying And Love the Bomb*, which was being shown in an auditorium with thirty seats. We were the only ones there. Mara didn’t know the film, and she laughed not a single time, not even at the part with the Coke machine or when the Russian spy comes in. Out of solidarity, I tried to laugh less myself. A few times Mara peered at the screen from between her fingers, and I said to her that she needn’t be afraid, that the end of the world was only a secondary plot strand. But in all honesty, I didn’t understand what was wrong with her. I would have suggested leaving if it hadn’t been for that business with Franco. I’d asked him how Mara was supposed to suspect he was meeting this guy in my apartment, and Franco had responded: “You don’t know much about women.”

“How could I?”

“Women have a radar system.”

He’d really been getting on my nerves that day. What I found especially annoying is that now and then he scored a direct hit. It’s not as if it had never occurred to me before that I didn’t know much about women. I didn’t know what the problem was, but for some reason I kept getting involved with the wrong ones, and for a while there hadn’t even been wrong ones around, and I was so sick and tired of my own suffering that the prospect of my grotesque

friend sharing my misery was actually quite appealing.

When the movie was over, Mara went on staring at the blank screen. I asked if she was up for having a drink with me, and she replied that she found this a fantastic idea. I had the impression that whether or not we had a drink was a matter of the utmost indifference to her. I think that if I'd asked her to set off on a bicycle trip with me, start spitting at passers-by or open a swingers' club, she might also have said it was a fantastic idea.

She ordered beer for both of us and I talked about the film, because I thought she could at least decide it was funny in retrospect, but she wasn't listening. Or at least I had the impression she wasn't listening. She was busy folding the menu into paper figures while looking out the window, and in the end I gave up in the middle of a sentence.

Mara turned around.

"That," she said, scratching her wrist, "was the most profound film I ever saw in my life. And your view of it—is also the most profound. Franco is right."

She drank a sip of beer, set the glass down, and then a few seconds later picked it up again. It was only a perfectly simple arm motion, but you had to have seen it. She raised the glass through the air as if it were on rails, cautiously and with somnambulistic precision. In old movies sometimes there's a shot in which a ramshackle double-decker bus passes infinitely slowly beneath a bridge.

Then Mara got her wallet out of her bag and summoned the waiter.

When I got home, the key was lying atop the doorframe, and there had been no bloodbath. It smelled like marijuana. But besides the fact that the nameplate had been covered over with a scrap of paper reading Cosic, nothing looked suspicious. I opened all the windows, and when the smoke had dissipated, the place started to smell of something different: human beings. In the kitchen garbage can lay two smeary condoms. My sheets were full of long blond hair. For a few days I didn't hear from Franco, and I didn't call him either. It wasn't my job to go running after him on top of everything else. Finally the phone rang.

"If you plan to run around fucking everyone in sight, at least spare me your bullshit stories," I said furiously. I wasn't really furious, but when I heard Franco's voice, I couldn't help remembering him saying "You know what I mean" and "My friend" just a few days before, and being lied to like that ticked me off.

“I wasn’t lying,” Franco said. “It was just like I said. Everything perfectly planned. But I hadn’t taken into account, I mean, I was prepared for anything but that. Chance and spontaneity. And then that.”

“And then what?”

“I open the door, and who is standing there?”

“Britney Spears?”

“Who?”

“Forget it. Who is standing there?”

“An Adonis!” Franco cried. “A real Adonis!”

“That’s fantastic,” I said. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Yes,” Franco said. “I was immediately relieved.”

“You were what?”

“Relieved. Because I understood Mara, do you understand? I immediately understood Mara. Mara and I are always on the same, how do you say, wave?”

Franco was calling me from a pay phone on the street, he was a few kilometers away, but even so I could sense how he was waving his arms about. He spoke of love at first sight and passion. They’d torn their clothes off, there was nothing in all of life that brought one further than the experience of bisexuality, he recommended I try it too. I held the receiver a bit further from my ear.

“What about Mara?” I asked, and Franco again began spouting incomprehensible phrases. All I could make out was that Mara didn’t want to have anything more to do with the boy but had no objection to Franco’s continuing to see him.

“Don’t give me this bullshit,” I said.

“What we have now is practically a three-way relationship except that the triangle is missing its hypotenuse.”

“Stop feeding me this goddamn bullshit,” I said and hung up the phone.

Fortunately I never saw hide nor hair of this Adonis, and I also made a point of not seeing him. The whole thing was revolting. Besides which, I didn’t believe he existed in the first place. If this Adonis were really so irresistible, that explained only why Franco absolutely had to go to bed with him, not the other side of the equation. Franco corresponded to no ideal of beauty anyone had ever heard of.

Twice more I invited Mara to go to the movies with me, once she said no, and the other time was just like the first had been. I felt ashamed. I stopped going out, stopped doing anything

at all. I would start drinking at noon and fall into bed around eight or nine. I painted cars. At some point during this period I began to suffer from depression. I don't know if it was true depression, but whenever I wasn't working I lay in bed staring at the wall. I didn't think about anything. When I thought about anything at all, it was about how Mara had sat in Alexander's kitchen smoking cigarettes. I thought about Mara's hands and the red plastic ashtray on the kitchen table. But for the most part I really didn't think about much of anything. From the bed, I stared over at the wall, which didn't have anything written on it. Probably it wasn't a depression to begin with, just a sort of paralysis. And then it was over. When I increased my number of hours at the paint shop, it passed.

Gradually I was getting used to the city, to my studies, and to the thought that I was going to paint many many more cars. When the guys at the shop learned I was studying art, I was given a few airbrush jobs and soon was spraying bikini-clad Amazons on the hoods of cars. During the summer I received a postcard from Hendrik addressed to me at the Academy. On the front was an exotic slum featuring shacks made of corrugated metal, with fire-spitting dragons in the foreground. A ballpoint arrow pointed to one of the shanty windows, which had "me!" written on it. On the back were four utterly incomprehensible sentences, the general gist of which seemed to be that Hendrik was no longer planning to apply to the Academy again (which we'd been counting on), but that he wished us the best of luck on the path we were pursuing, and that he himself had found his vocation. Unfortunately there wasn't enough space to describe this vocation in any detail. He closed with the words: Hello of course to Franco I always thought he was incredibly nice unlike you.

Franco was far less puzzled by this postcard. His only question was what the word vocation meant, and I explained to him that Hendrik had joined a sect in the hinterlands of India and now was standing around on the street somewhere haranguing passers-by.

"Something amazing just happened to me too," Franco said. He and Mara had just won the Danner Prize with their x-rayed soldier. This prize came with a relatively large sum of money, and they were inviting me to dinner.

Let me say right off that the part of the story that comes next can't necessarily be described as scintillating. There are various reasons for this, including, for one thing, the fact that everything I'm telling here is the absolute truth. Secondly, the impression I'm about to give the no doubt baffled reader is one of being emotionally detached, since after I finished writing

my account of this trip which led to the end of my friendship with Franco, I went back and deleted all the feelings.

So. We celebrated Franco Cosic's first art prize with large quantities of alcohol, and the following transpired. Franco had bought a car, an Opel Corsa for exactly one hundred marks, and the only thing that can be said about this car is that it did still run. The paint was a rusty green, and the passenger door was attached to the body with thick layers of packing tape. Shortly after midnight Franco took us down to the parking lot and solemnly declared that we were now going to drive to Italy. Just as Dürer traveled to Italy, Holbein and van Eyck.

"Look!" Franco said. "The weather! The night! The stars! Fantastic."

"And van Eyck was never in Italy," I said.

Franco got behind the wheel, and Mara and I pulled him back out of the car. After a brief speech on the subject of Willibald Pirckheimer and Venice, Franco got back in the car, and we yanked him back out again. Somehow or other we managed to persuade him to at least get a good night's sleep first.

Standing at the agreed-upon meeting place the next morning with plenty of residual alcohol still in my blood, I already regretted having said yes. The sun stood white and headachy above the horizon. The street was deserted; besides me and my backpack, there was no one to be seen. Then at the end of Bahnhofstrasse the Corsa came into view. Mara was at the wheel, she had to get out to let me climb through the door on the driver's side into the passenger seat. In the back sat Franco, who looked terrible and exhausted, and a pimply youth with a stupid grin and long blond hair. I estimated his age as seventeen.

Until Munich none of us said a word. I was sleeping off my intoxication. I had to hold my backpack on my knees because the trunk didn't open, the lock was broken. "The lock isn't broken, we have a corpse in the trunk," Franco said. He enjoyed this joke so much he repeated it five hundred times. At the Austrian border he rolled down his window and informed a group of uniformed men as to the contents of our trunk. The Adonis was giggling with excitement, he had most certainly never before experienced anything so crazy. But the police took no notice of us. It wasn't the day for corpses in trunks.

Mara drove at a steady pace of 60 miles per hour, that's all the Corsa could manage. The Adonis told tales of his labors as an assistant at a lawyer's office, incredibly tedious. Until I couldn't stand it any longer and told him to shut up. Hereupon he held his tongue for the remainder of the trip. When Franco wasn't busy describing the contents of the trunk, we heard quiet whispering and smacking sounds coming from the back seat. I didn't turn around.

Mara stared intently at the road, as earnestly and intently as it is possible to stare. Now and then she pointed to a traffic sign and asked me what it meant. Some signs she asked about twice, she couldn't remember their meaning. I didn't know whether Spanish traffic signs looked so different, and began to draw the most important symbols on a notepad for her. Who knows if she even had a driver's license. But she was an excellent driver, so it really didn't matter.

By the time Mara announced she was too tired to keep on driving we were already in the mountains somewhere. The drive was most certainly taking much longer than any of us had bargained for. In truth it was really only a couple of hundred miles, but going uphill in the Corsa was all but impossible. The wheel kept pulling to the right, which was tiring. Mara said her back was all in knots, and the Adonis placed his hands on her shoulders from the back so as to massage her on either side of the headrest. Should he ever, thanks to some lucky chance or good fairy, be given the opportunity to live his life all over again, I suspect he will not repeat this gesture.

At the very moment he made contact with Mara's shoulders, Mara let go of the wheel. Her hands flew up in the air, and her torso shot back between the seats like an axe-blade.

"What!" she shouted.

The Corsa immediately veered to the right. I grabbed the wheel, but couldn't prevent the trim from being shaved off the side of the car. A ridiculous bush scraped across the windshield.

"It's ok, it's ok," the Adonis said.

"What's ok?" Mara said. "What's ok?"

"Please, turn around, please — therrrrrrre!" the Adonis screeched, while all around us cars were squealing and leaping to the side. Meanwhile we were in the passing lane, I'd turned the wheel too far. Mara had taken her right foot off the gas but pushed against the clutch with her left to gain momentum as she swung around, and now we were hurtling silently downhill.

"Mara," Franco said.

"Shut up," Mara said.

Then nothing at all happened for a long time. I entertained myself by driving in a gentle zigzag, and when we reached the bottom, Mara turned back around in slow-motion to face forward.

Until we hit the Brenner Pass, all were silent, then we turned off the road. I needed a bathroom, the Adonis did as well. Because of the heat, we'd taken off our shoes and now went barefoot, which proved to be a big mistake. In the yellow-tiled bathroom, the floor was submerged beneath a centimeter of water and urine. For me this was no problem, I was once

again drunk to the gills. But the Adonis tiptoed back and forth for half an hour before making up his mind to go into one of the stalls, where he fashioned himself a seat cover out of toilet paper, I could hear him.

When I returned to the car, Mara was just backing out of the spot. She hit the brakes and spun around in her seat, striking Franco in the face. I knocked on the driver's side door for them to let me in. They continued their shouting match as I clambered across the front seat.

"God damn it," Franco said.

"Give it here!" Mara said.

"Mara," said Franco.

Mara put the car in first and stepped on the gas just as the Adonis was coming out of the bathroom.

"Give it here, damn it!"

"I don't even care," Franco said in a squeaky little voice and passed a backpack up to the front seat. Mara rolled down the window and heaved the backpack overboard, the highway snatched it away. Through the rear window I could see the backpack rolling excitedly, enthusiastically in our direction, and the backpack's owner was also running excitedly and enthusiastically behind us. But nonetheless the distance between them and us continued to increase, their pace slowed, and eventually they remained standing there, looking rather forlorn, like a dog and its master.

Franco had ducked far down in the back seat the moment this scene got started, his head between his knees, and now he began to giggle. The last I saw of the Adonis before a curve in the road spun him out of my life forever was a sort of free dance. Like a stork with shards of glass stuck in its feet he hopped from one foot to the other, striking his hands in alternation against his ankles. I leaned back and fished around under the seat until I found the sandals belonging to the Adonis and pitched them out the window.

For the next hour no one said a word. Franco drank several cans of beer in the back seat and then keeled over and fell asleep. I asked Mara why they'd taken the Adonis along in the first place, and Mara looked in the rear-view mirror to make sure Franco was really asleep. Then she returned her gaze to the windshield.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Forty miles."

"And what's in forty miles?"

"It's the minimum speed, you aren't allowed to drive any slower than that."

I added this sign to the notepad. Then I placed the pen back on the dashboard and looked at Mara.

“Do you know why I was excited when I came to Germany?” Mara said. She waggled the rear-view mirror back and forth, pressing the glare adjustment button four or five times, and then lowered her hand again and fumbled around for the cigarettes. “Franco told you.”

“Told me what?”

“In the youth hostel, when he was sick. He called me, I was just— and Franco said: I’ve met someone who’s just like me.”

“Like who?”

“Like a mirror,” Mara said.

“Who, me?” I said, and started coughing.

Mara pressed her head against the headrest and with a groan arched her upper back. Then she leaned far back again in her seat and steered the car with her arms held straight.

“I’ve got to ask you something,” Mara said.

We were driving between walls of rock that looked like something someone had dreamed up. Excruciatingly slowly a white tour bus passed us. I saw Mara’s profile, the one eye slightly askew, the gleaming skin, this portrait of a court lady painted somewhere in the sixteenth century around Milan. The tour bus in the window behind Mara went on and on, and suddenly I remembered how I’d spent half the spring in my bed staring at the wall. This in turn reminded me of the long blond hair in my sheets. That reminded me of Franco and the way he’d lain there in the hostel with the sweat pouring down his face, which then reminded me of Hendrik’s naked torso as he brushed his teeth, which called to mind the “beast with two backs.”

“Do you believe in Jesus?” Mara asked.

I drew in a breath and held it, glancing at Mara from the side. The regular features, the strange, solemn look in her eyes. I knew I wasn’t going to strike the right tone and let the air out again.

“Jesus,” I said. I rolled down my window a crack.

“You are a person who thinks a lot,” Mara said.

“What are you getting at?”

“When you think Jesus, what are you thinking?”

“I’m an atheist. I mean—“

“Do you know the saying God doesn’t play dice?”

I'd never heard her say so much at one time. It was the first long conversation we'd had in all the time we'd known each other, and I certainly hadn't been expecting we'd start tearing our clothes off five minutes later. But the fact that we were now chatting about Jesus confused me. Mara kept talking about this and that, God and the world, the Adonis and the New Testament, and I was having trouble following. Which wasn't her fault. I was looking at her and listening to the sound of her soft voice that seemed to be coming from far away, I heard the words kindred spirit and Heisenberg, and suddenly I experienced a sort of déjà-vu. Or rather a déjà -vu in reverse. The landscape hurtling past, the vanished tour bus, the complicated striations on the windowpane, Mara—all these things suddenly struck me as so immutable, so indestructibly existent that I was overcome by the impression that what I was seeing was not the present or even a memory but a glimpse of the future. Someone turned the sound off. Mara's face was less than an arm's length away; I stuffed my trembling hands beneath my thighs.

"Franco is a saint," Mara was saying earnestly.

Propping herself on my knee, she leaned far over toward me and gazed into my eyes. Slowly, almost imperceptibly the car crept over the solid line on the right. Mara took the silver cross around her neck, kissed it and said: "But you will never understand this."

Just then Franco woke up because I was having a particularly bad attack of coughing. His white head poked up from between the seats.

"Man man man man man," he said. Then he flopped back on the seat. The next thing we heard was a beer can popping open.

"Me too," I said, sticking a hand into the back seat.

Perhaps I'd been blind, perhaps I was just slow on the uptake, but it's really true that it wasn't until now, somewhere or other between a pair of unreal-looking mountains, that I realized this car contained more lunatics than I'd originally reckoned with.

We turned off at a rest stop, and Franco relieved Mara at the wheel. Now he seemed for once to be in a bad mood, whether because of the Adonis or because the trip was taking so long or for some other reason. Mara crawled into the passenger seat and gave me a long, meaningful look. I replied in kind, and then lay down on the back seat under a blanket. I was tired. Only my face was still sticking out. The first cypresses flew past in the rear window. Already half-asleep, I checked to see whether Franco was actually able to drive a car, and when he shifted into fourth, I fell asleep.

It was dusk when I awoke, and all was still. The car was standing before an isolated gas station somewhere a bit off from the highway, and Mara and Franco were nowhere to be seen. I peeled off the blanket. The air smelled of thyme. There was no one at the gas station, so I went to the restaurant next door. It had been a long while since we had eaten. In the restaurant, the torso of a waiter lay sprawled on the counter. I woke him up and tried to buy a bar of chocolate from him, then realized I'd left my wallet in the car. He rolled his eyes and groaned.

When I returned to the parking area, the Corsa was gone. I sprinted to the road. You could see streetlights stretching on for miles, but not a car in sight. Even my backpack was nowhere to be seen, they must simply have forgotten me. Presumably they'd just stopped for gas and went to the bathroom and then drove on without checking to see whether I was still lying under the blanket asleep. At first I thought I'd just wait until they realized their error. But five minutes later I decided it would be better to hitchhike until I caught up with them. From the north came yellow, elliptical headlights that stopped beside the gas pumps. A small Italian family in a Peugeot, the father clad in white tennis shorts. I ran up to him, pointing in the direction in which my friends had disappeared. I'd never been particularly good at English, but at this instant there really wasn't anything left of it at all. It took me the entire time the man was filling his car to explain to him that I wasn't some fucked-up hitchhiker that one could simply ignore. From the passenger seat, an ugly Italian woman was staring at me, and from the back a plump, childish face peered out from between the seats, a fat little girl with a Prince Valiant haircut and ladybug barrette.

"It's just five minutes, they have five minutes—advantage. If we hurry—"

"OK, ok," the man said.

He opened the driver's side door and said something to his wife. The woman said nothing in response, but snorted several times, looking neither at me nor at her husband. The fat little girl asked a question no one answered.

While the man went to pay, I bent forward the front seat and tried to squeeze into the back. Half the seat was covered with Lego pieces. In order to sit down, I swept the Legos to one side and onto the floor. The child looked insulted and said something to her mother. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but according to the tone of the mother's voice, she was telling the girl: Complain to your father. She peered over anxiously at the gas station's booth.

"They can't drive faster than fifty," I said to break the tension. I would have liked best to get out again, but at just this moment the man returned at a trot and got into the car. He

accelerated, rocking his torso back and forth to demonstrate how seriously he was taking this chase. The numbers rolled by beneath the needle of the tachometer, in less than ten minutes we would catch up to the Corsa. Just before an underpass the car almost skidded out of control as we swerved to avoid a backpack that lay in the middle of the road.

“Fasten seat belts,” the driver said.

At the toll booths, I demonstratively turned around to look at the other lines of cars, and the child, imitating me, stared her eyes out although she didn’t even know what color the car was that we were looking for, or what make it was. The husband and wife were having a conversation, and when half an hour later the man turned around and asked me how much ahead of us my friends had left, I replied: “Fifty minutes.”

I had no reason to continue on. But I also had no reason to get out. All I was was tired. I slid down in the seat until my back lay against the cushions and my knees stuck out to the right and left of the driver’s seat. The warm Italian air tousled my hair. Beside me, the girl was babbling non-stop to herself while assembling a Lego construction that resembled an electric razor.

I closed my eyes and at the same moment gave a start. Something had crawled under my back, twice, three times. The babbling childish hands were trying to push me to one side like a sofa pillow.

“Hey,” I said.

The girl refused to be dissuaded. The fourth time around, I pressed my back against the seat with all my strength. The senseless babbling ceased on the spot, and the hand tried in a panic to get free again. When it had succeeded, I felt something small and sharp poking me at kidney-height. I retrieved the Lego piece she’d been looking for and held it up before the girl’s nose. She squinted to look at it, not particularly bright, the little hand rose to grasp it, and I popped the piece into my mouth and swallowed. The girl’s expression derailed in slow-motion. Mindlessly she looked first at the front seat, then at me. Her mouth turned into a rectangle, water collected in her fat little eyes.

Exhausted, I leaned against the side window, allowing the images to slip into me as I dozed. I saw low, dusty hills and isolated cyclists between the black cypresses. I saw white houses and green street signs and more and more cypresses, infinite rows of cypresses, of which Schopenhauer once wrote, not without justification, that they were the dumbest of all trees.