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2.40pm, JFK Airport

Two men in reflective jackets were standing at the end of the bellows-like airbridge. One was holding a clipboard to his stomach, the other was pressing the button of a hand-held counter with his thumb, one click per passenger. As Nele went past them the clipboarder and the clicker leant their heads towards each other. The clipboarder whispered something. ‘Mr Provoke’ was written on the breast pocket of his jacket. Even though she had firmly resolved — at the very moment she had swallowed the tiny Valium pill and stepped onto the airbridge — that she wouldn’t take in any little signs, honestly, she was never again going to take in any little pointers and try to interpret them, even though she had made this resolution so very firmly, it dissolved into thin air the moment she saw the man’s name. Look at the man, see what number’s on his counter, she said to herself, then I’ll know when we’ll be dropping out of the sky. The only thing she didn’t yet know was the precise moment. Somewhere over the Atlantic, that was for sure. Mr Provoke was scribbling on his clipboard with a smile all over his face. She took a few steps towards the oval door-opening, the counter clicked in her ear, she had turned into a number that would remain for ever undiscovered at the bottom of the ocean. The stewardesses inside the doorway smiled in sync with each other, they were in cahoots with Mr Provoke and the counter-man. They were in it together. They weren’t human beings. “Welcome on board”, said a recorded voice. Another specious stewardess came towards her, a fixed expression on her perfectly made up face, every hair on the back of her head locked in place as though someone had ordered her to imitate the smooth sweep of an aeroplane’s nose cone. In the background were the dented aluminium containers. The stewardess was offering a basket of consolatory sweets. There was the smell of reheated rolls and chalky tea, and an excessively florid perfume — odours that no one wants to smell in the final hours of their life. She heard heavenly harmonies and the splashing of a fountain. Nele’s ears had been full of noises ever since her boarding card had been handed to her at the desk and the woman’s tulip-red mouth had reminded her that the flight was non-stop and non-smoking. Aisle or window? What difference did it make. A curtain, then a cinema auditorium with rows of seats and aisles, expectant faces, people sitting bolt upright who were clearly looking forward to dropping out of the sky over the Atlantic. In the first row a man with a crew cut had his face buried in a book entitled *Think Hard and Get Rich*. Mr Provoke and the other

reflective jacket had finished their job and were disappearing for a beer after work. Nele looked behind her, saw the blue light marking the exit, the stewardess with the sweets and the frozen face, and turned on her heel. She couldn't go on with it. She collided with a man. Irrked, he thrust himself towards her. Behind him was one of the implausible stewardesses, who took the torn-off part of Nele's boarding card out of her hand. The man's stomach pushed her further into the cinema seats. "Here you are, Madam, 92A", said the stewardess. Nele searched through her mind for something approaching logical thought, but found only confusion. "I'd sit down if I were you," said the man, a tweed jacket on his top half, jeans on his bottom half. "The window seat's yours. Hope there'll just be the two of us in this row. That'd be cosy, don't you think?"

He looked like someone who knew what's what. Perhaps she could tell him the whole story? About Eric, the empty house, the incomprehensible signs of packing-up? About her encounter with her grandfather, about the stolen work of art, and about how the old man had asked her, no, ordered her, not to drag him into this whole darned business. Perhaps she could even tell tweedy-man about Gail, whom she'd picked up from the side of the road on the edge of Ohio and who soon afterwards had disappeared in the river? Nele levered her body into the seat. Her escape route was blocked by tweedy-man. In the space between the seat-backs in front of her she saw the made-up face of a corpse, already in the process of decomposing, then the page was turned, a pink bag dangling from the neck of a poodle, next page, a naked couple, half in the water and half on the beach, the man was hiding the woman's breasts with his arm, she looked as if she was drowning, but she was holding a perfume bottle out towards the camera. Nele shut her eyes and gave an involuntary sigh. Someone touched her on the shoulder. "There'll be something to drink in a little while, a snack of some sort...", and suddenly overcome with tiredness she heard herself blurting out in far too loud a voice "Sod your snack!" The response was the sonorous voice of a steward, yet again a recorded message. Or was it the pilot? Yes, it *was* the pilot! So he did still exist, then. He so enjoyed hearing himself talk over the loudspeaker system, after all no one ever saw him. Like one of those excessively long, excessively chummy handshakes. His professions of gravity were on no account to be trusted. Pretty faces, thought Nele, with sonorous voices, and they think they're completely in control of these huge machines, who's ever really in control of machines like these?

Vaguely remembering what she had just said, she turned to tweedy-man: “I didn’t really mean to give you offence.” He shrugged his shoulders, seeming to be fully preoccupied with trying to cross his legs. He couldn’t manage it, there was too little space between the rows of seats. Nele closed her eyes again. A mummy in a magazine, a drowning woman straight afterwards, these were portents; tweedy-man was slightly built, but the weight of his clothes would drag him under the water, and she herself, just as devoid of energy as she felt now, would give up straight away. It’s your own fault, she thought, what on earth are you doing getting into an aeroplane. You’re cooking up a meaty soup out of mere signs. Her stomach tightened, she wrapped her arms around her middle, she could feel her ribs with her finger tips. A hand on her back, her upper arm. The realisation slowly dawned on her that it couldn’t be Gail’s hand, it had to be tweedy-man’s. Sit up, sit straight, don’t peer through the gap between the seats and gaze at cosmeticised corpses, look through the window, these two windows here, a pair of them, like eyes, the blinds their eyelids. Deep breaths. Think about Eric rather than Gail. Think of the feeling of lying in a bed on terra firma. The bed sheet: the snow-covered Alps from above. Eric’s face, so very familiar from all those years of being together. She no longer knew what colour his eyes were. A few things she remembered in every detail: the way he scratched his ear with two fingers and massaged the back of his right hand with his left whenever he felt embarrassed; his laugh with a dimple in one of his cheeks; his habit of criss-crossing the room when he was on the phone. He rarely stood still. When he thought no one was watching his face would sometimes crumple into an expression of helplessness as though even the bare fact of being alive was too much for him. At such moments Nele felt close to him. At such moments she loved him, this hopeless blithe spirit. The way he nodded agreement and held his peace, avoiding conflict and remaining a presence solely by virtue of his sinewy body, a product of his days as a competitive gymnast. In the end there was doubtless just one thing that bound them together: their mutual fondness for running away. A sudden jerk and the plane started moving. “We’re going backwards” she blurted out.

“The terminal’s in front of us,” said the mouth of her neighbour, “looks like the pilot took a wise decision.”

A loudspeaker began murmuring above their heads: “We should like to acquaint you with the emergency procedures.”

“Now they’re telling us the truth”, Nele said to tweedy-man.

“Then we’d better listen hard.”

A stewardess took up position a few rows in front of them holding a seat belt above her head. The voice in the loudspeaker whispered away. The TV screens were showing a video to take everyone’s mind off things: beaches, palm trees, sunsets. Yes, of course, sunsets! It was suddenly wiped from the screens. Nele didn’t hear much, then caught snatches: safety belt; safety procedure ... loss of pressure; lifebelts for your safety; emergency landing on water ... safety procedures — everything ended with ‘safety’. With a fake smile on her face the stewardess made an oxygen mask drop out of the loudspeakers, held the transparent piece of plastic in front of her mouth, promptly slipped into a neon yellow life jacket, puffed to left and right into rubber inflation tubes while flashing her eyes in a poor imitation of Brigitte Bardot, held a whistle aloft and offered herself as a spectacle, perfectly shaped, perfectly controlled. Tweedy-man couldn’t take his eyes off her, that’s how it was with these girls, you had to look at them because they offered themselves up so willingly. The aisles were too narrow, the stewardess’s make-up had congealed into a mask, I’ll never get out of here, thought Nele, my safety’s truly at risk, what am I doing here, the plane’s too old, it’s ancient, it’s as old as me, it’s been flying for thirty years, the proof’s in those aluminium containers, the torn labels they’re covered with, the air that’s vibrating away behind the ceiling cladding and is surely not meant to be there. They were still rolling backwards, her seat was vibrating, the small windows were vibrating, the passengers were all trembling too. And the world outside was concrete, smooth, dependable and solid. And here she was, sitting on this mountain of wrong decisions, this vast heap of broken crockery following an engagement made then broken off the very next day. With a precision that startled even her, she took in her neighbour’s sinewy hands, the liver spots on the back of them, the greenish, bluish, purplish veins, the well-trimmed finger-nails, the absence of jewellery; they were very cultivated hands, lying there quietly folded on his thighs, hands that had never done any rough work. They had enjoyed an intimate acquaintance with paper, perhaps with

a keyboard, certainly with a Montblanc, but never with such simple and superfluous things as training shoes and their constituent materials. On his wrist was a traditional-looking watch with two dials, one black one white, that showed different times and somehow competed with each other. His grey-brown hair, parted in the middle, fell onto his forehead in an almost completely straight line, and beneath the fine wrinkles of his skin a greyish tinge was visible. He had thin lips, only the slight jutting of his lower lip hinting at a fondness for contradiction. The set of his mouth also betrayed that air of cynicism occasionally evident in older men who have never in their life escaped from their own heads. He had enormous ears. They seemed specially designed to catch every least word. Or did he listen to music? Deep-set eyes, tired from reading perhaps. What did he see, the black letters or the spaces in between? At this point, lost in thought, he began twisting one of the leather buttons on his tweed jacket. Beneath it he was wearing a well-matched waistcoat, a light-blue shirt and a light-blue tie. Nele's sleepiness gave her courage. "Hello", she said, and held out her hand to him.

Needless to say, he didn't respond, he was offended, she had offended him, he simply looked up in embarrassment towards his bag hidden behind the white louvres of the luggage lockers. Nele shut her eyes and took refuge in the feeling of total self-surrender. Someone took her hand, it was a dry, warm hand. Liver spots, islets that no one would ever map. "We'll sort it out", she heard someone say.

In the black cavity of her head she stepped on the shoes lying on the floor in front of the built-in hall cupboard. In her and Eric's old house. She kicked out at them, and the shoes leapt into the air, one went flying into the cupboard, she took a second kick, and another shoe went flying against the door, bounced off and lay where it fell, looking as if it had bumped into the door on its own. She lashed out at everything within range of her feet, but shoes were the only things left in the house, everything else had been cleared away or sold. She took careful aim at the trainers, they flew the furthest, bounced off the floor and leapt off in different directions. She kicked them as if they were footballs. They went flying against the walls, the foot of the stairs, the open bedroom door, the edge of the bed, under the bed. She took a kick at her high heels, but they just tumbled around like so many pathetic creatures, apologetic and always slightly offended. She kicked at some high boots, which just skidded along the floor

and lay with the contorted necks of black swans. Another trainer, and a good laugh at the zest of its flight through the air. It collided with the radiator, an echo of that jab in the ribs. She felt an urge to open the front door and kick the shoes out onto the path in front of the house, onto the river of concrete edged with grass, onto the roofs of the cars parked in the street; to kick them right down the street and into the automatic revolving doors of the office building that she had entered every morning for five whole years of her life, kick the whole lot of them in there so that that they could be ground to a pulp. All the rest of the baggage as well, all the remnants, the memories that no one willingly harbours, shove them in so that the revolving doors can beat them together like a dough hook. Ready-to-eat bread made from ready-made goods and other dubious ingredients. And that would be the last thing she'd done before dropping out of the sky along with four hundred others. The Valium isn't going to work, she thought, she'd taken it much too late, just so that she could cope with the journey to the airport. The aerodynamic stewardess leant across the row of seats in front of them, a name badge on her lapel: *Shelley loves to fly with you*. Nele said to tweedy-man "I love Shelley"; "How lovely", he replied. He gave no further response, except that he was presumably holding her hand — yes, it had to be him.

The whole body of the plane they were sitting in shook, the plastic cladding creaked, the lower edges of the two small windows had misted over, beyond them a smooth, dark-grey sea of asphalt and a slender strip of shore, a wing stretching all the way from here to there, she'd have to step out onto that wing in order to be rescued. Past the jet engine, sucking in all the air in the world so that there was none left for them to fly through, and beneath them those pathetic little wheels, car tyres on bicycle wheels, held in their condition of surging stasis by brake pads alone. The plane's body was bound to burst asunder right now, right here, on this expanse of grey whose skid marks told their own tale of miscalculated take-offs, landings and acceleration speeds. Suddenly an image of the runway appeared on every screen, its lines of perspective converging on a central spot of nothingness. Planes were queuing ahead of them, there was a blockage. That's what I have too, she said to herself, a blockage. She pressed her knuckles against her eyes making patterns of white appear in the darkness, and after an infinite period of time — had she been asleep? — she felt herself forced back in her seat by the plane's acceleration. Don't take off, she prayed, don't go so fast, don't fall to bits, those tiny wheels won't take it, don't leave the ground, don't go up

at such a steep angle, we'll fall over backwards, what about gravity, it's like an arrow being shot straight up into the air, far too heavy, a boomerang made of iron, it'll fall back down, any second now, it'll crash to the ground and smash into houses, streets, shopping centres, the nose is tipping, we're tipping forwards, we've run out of fuel — her seat-belt was cutting her clean through the middle, this was quite a help. "Don't be afraid", someone whispered to her, "it'll soon be over." Over, she repeated, yes, over, and it could have happened in worse ways. She would soon be at the place where Gail had disappeared to. She would fall, ten and a half seconds of free fall, perhaps eleven, with nothing solid underneath until they met the concrete carapace of the sea or whatever else it might be that her seat would smash through. Then she would plunge down into the depths, she would arrive at the place where she had sometimes longed to be: down there with the leafy sea dragons, the flounders and the squids. . And there are worse things, she said to herself, than lying asleep in a thicket of seaweed.

"There, you see, we're up", someone said to her, "cruising altitude."

"No, this is when it's all going to start. Any second now and we'll have disappeared off the face of the earth."

"I rather think we'll land in Europe first."

People had been replaced by backrests. "There's something just as absurd about a half-empty plane", she heard tweedy-man say in his clipped, ice-cold voice, "as there is about a half-empty church. Come to think of it, it reminds me even more of a swimming pool devoid of swimmers."

She concentrated on her breathing, all the way from the buckle of her safety belt to the bump on her throat. "Why not just tell me about something", her neighbour said quietly, "talk to me, then we can forget all the rest." Forget, she parroted to herself, that's just what I want to do. I want to talk. "Yes", she said, "I'll tell you everything."

"If they'd allowed it", began the man — and only now did she notice that at some point he must have put on a pair of round horn-rimmed spectacles, a clear sign of

kindness; people who wore unfashionable spectacles were incapable of doing you any harm — “If they’d allowed it, I’d be sitting in the hold right now.”

“It’s cold there.”

“No matter. As it is, I have this vision of all the straps down there coming loose, I see a smouldering fire, our packing cases blackened — ”

“Oh my God, talk to me about something else!”

“The majority of our pictures, lost for ever. All because there’s this idea abroad that pictures need to be moved from place to place. They have to be everywhere — *they* come to the people, instead of the people coming to them. At the moment we’re taking Americans to the Europeans. We’ve a few European greats in our luggage as well, who are thus being taken back at all this vast expense to where they came from in the first place. Paintings, our Director’s always saying, are meant to be mobile. He actually wants to get rid of the museum side of things completely, and I sometimes get the impression that he wants to compete with all the other pictures that are circulating out there. And at the same time, according to him — though he’s probably in a minority of one on this — great works of art would lose none of their aura, on the contrary it would be enhanced because of their global presence. Oh dear oh dear, my colleagues are more laid back about this, or at any rate they play it really cool. They’re in other planes, we all travel in different planes, it’s like when there’s a skyjacking.” Nele gave a little moan, and tweedy-man whispered “But you’re not allowed to say that sort of thing any more, or they’ll take us away as well.”

“Us?” she asked. The man didn’t respond.

“It’s a quarter of our entire collection, can you imagine that?” She shook her head; what collection? She concentrated on leafing one-fingered through the advertising material in the seat-pocket in front of her, she was looking for the jagged-edged bag that must be lurking there somewhere amongst all the glossies.

“What’s a quarter”, she said slowly, trying to concentrate.

“An inconceivable amount, an amount worth almost two billion dollars — and that’s just their insurance value.”

“Two billion dollars! Down in the bowels of this contraption!” I’m talking so slowly, she thought to herself, I must be boring him to death, the poor man.

“Not dollars,” he said, “pictures. Pictures to the value of. Completely unique. Lost for ever. I wish I was sitting in the hold.”

“Go down there, then. Someone will bring you a blanket. Then you’ll be warm.”

“Have you any idea what that means,” the man asked after a while, “completely unique?”

There was the jagged-edged bag, right at the back, the very last thing beyond all the glossy stuff. Open the bag carefully, how beautifully white the inside is.

“We could introduce ourselves, seeing that we’re clinging to one another like this.”

She turned to face him. At the very edge of her field of vision she could see that the armrest was frayed like mohair, everything frayed like mohair, whose idea was it for everything to fall apart like this?

Only the tweed of his jacket was scratchy and stiff to the touch, it felt really good compared to all that mohair, the firm tweed between one's fingers.

“My name?” she said, wishing the words weren't stuck to her tongue so, they too were entangled in mohair. Mustn't swallow one by mistake, it would be bound to get stuck in my windpipe.

“I'll start. After all it's easier for me to say who I am.”

“Nele Niebuhr”, she said, interrupting him. ‘Neighbour’, she thought, it sounds like ‘neighbour’. It must always have sounded like that. “I'm your neighbour”, she said, and watched the old man laugh. When he laughed he leaned his head a little to one side. Very elegant. And vulnerable too, baring his soft neck like that.

An aluminium trolley came trundling by, topped off with a forest of plastic bottles, and in a flash her knees were tucked under a fold-down table and two different-coloured eyes were staring at her, one orange, one red. “I thought it would do you good”, said the man's voice, “if you drank both of them: something sweet, something savoury. That's orange juice, and that's tomato juice. Don't get them all over you.” The stewardesses were in high heels, how uncomfortable, and sported gold pins stuck into their neckerchiefs. Perhaps the neckerchiefs were permanently attached to their

necks, thought Nele as the mohair edges of the seats grew softer and softer, perhaps all those golden buttons were sewn right through onto their skin, fastened directly to their spines, to ensure that the buttons could never get lost in the aisles, for there were other things glinting and gleaming in the aisles already — illuminated arrows, green lights, flashing light trails.

The voice said “Miss Nele, you really can put the bag away now. Here, this will do you good.”

The fold-down table provided room for a miniature, plastic-grey industrial landscape with white cladding, transparent roofs, a salad garden, a sandstone-coloured, torte-shaped little house, its roof patterned in yellow, chocolate-brown and strawberry-red; perhaps it’s a circus, she thought, one that’s erected its big top on the edge of no man’s land. Just like home, she thought inside her head, just like my own old home, the one I’m going to now. What an idiotic idea, going back to such a godforsaken place. It couldn’t be a circus. Who would ever go to it? There weren’t any people there now. Just autobahns.

Look into the houses from above, study the asphalt roads between the blocks of buildings and see if there are signs of movement down there. Where had all the people gone? Had they gone into hiding? Of course they’d gone into hiding, they made themselves invisible, they disappeared just as everything else disappeared, there was nothing left but the streets. Some pettifogging ignoramus had named them all after trees. These rapidly tarmacked roads thus sounded slow-grown. Her street, the street she had grown up in, was the only one not graced with the name of a tree. Whoever

was charged with disguising reality simply ran out of ideas. The street where she had spent the greater part of her life thus far was called Industrial Street. How could there be anything there for me to go back to, she thought to herself, given that people say the industrial age is over and done with.

“Not hungry?” she heard the familiar voice ask, “May I have your yoghurt?”

Soon afterwards an aluminium trolley came rolling by full of bottles of whisky and boxes of perfume, the stewardess with the Brigitte Bardot flash of the eyes held out a price list, there was scent in the air from somewhere or other, and Nele suddenly knew that right at the back of the plane there was an old man mixing and packing the perfume, distilling the liquor, sending out the trolleys, and calmly, casually sharing a few glasses with his pals, the pilot, the co-pilot, the trainee pilot. The pins in the stewardesses' neckerchiefs weren't pins at all, they were globules of pure whisky, and she said “I'll take a bottle, you buy me something or other, my money's in my bag”, and the man did the whole thing, even though his hands and face were already entangled in mohair and he sometimes seemed to have four eyes and looked as if he'd been painted by a cubist; and when after a while Nele looked at him again, it was as if Ken'ichi — that interior architect, silent programmer and expert in virtual realities of every sort, that amiable American who was always so full of concern for others and who had now gone off to Las Vegas with Eric to open a cathedral for her training shoes — it was as if Ken'ichi had used the Gaussian blur tool too heavily on his face in Photoshop: it had gone completely out of focus.

“No, you don’t need to pay, let’s have a drink together, Miss Nele. Then I’ll do the talking, It’ll take your mind off things. What can I talk to you about? My approach to art, perhaps. The only thing that counts is what’s actually there. It’s all about an idea that has been made graspable, it’s about the *materiality* of an idea. You know, I dream about pictures and then when I wake in the morning I can feel the picture in my hand. I feel the very light of the picture in my hand. The light in Vermeer.” He laughed with an air of happiness and sudden ease, he spilled towards her from his seat, the edges had all gone completely soft, the world was indeed capable of dissolving thus, and she withstood it, she withstood it this first time with utter amazement. “Vermeer was a magician, he was able to refract light by means of a single colour. He most liked using a blue, blue-green colour. The colourfulness of paintings doesn’t arise from the colourfulness of the light, but from the actual objects depicted: the figures come to life thanks to their own intrinsic colour. But he painted these colours, the colour intrinsic to each particular object, as light, he resolved them into tiny little reflections, into shimmering bits of movement, and as a result every last thing in his paintings makes you feel you could lift it up out of the light, lift it clean out of the picture, so that even quite ridiculous items such as a scrap of paper, a mirror or a wine glass are made to seem graspable in their beauty, as though they were warm or cold, light or heavy. It’s the light that brings the objects so close to the beholder that you want to grasp hold of them. I mean, what does light normally mean to us? Light on, light off, neon lights, advertising lights, the lights on computers, stand-by lights, and we adulate light-bulbs that last a hundred years. Do you know Vermeer?” He looked straight at her, for a few seconds the Gaussian blur effect was gone: Apple-Z, thought Nele, Ken’ichi has responded, Apple-Z, one step backwards, the man’s gaze was grave and insistent, and Nele said “I do know the mere. A mere made of light. My friend’s there

with Ken'ichi. They're building a church for a shoe. For Jesus. For this one here on my foot. I wore it to go to my grandfather, I really did go." That's it, she thought, I really have given myself away now.

"Well, so much for that", said the man, and he sounded terminally disappointed, like a father who had caught out his child in a lie. There could be no comeback from this. "Miss Nele, what *can* I talk to you about then? Turner, perhaps? We've got a Turner down there in the hold as well —admittedly not his wonderful 'Rain, Steam and Speed', alas: the National Gallery has got that, of course, and most of the rest are in the Tate, that's just the way it is, you can't have everything, we've got 'The Burning of the Houses of Parliament', do you know that one? Do you know there's a lamp burning in the foreground at the point where the people are standing gazing at the opposite bank of the river, looking across to where the fire is devouring everything in its path, a raging fire eating its way into the night-blue sky, and the buildings built by men are all so puny compared to the fire, and the fire itself is so infinitely beautiful, so fluid, so dazzling, whereas the people are so ugly, so mute, so pestilentially green. The river between the fire and the people is divided into two, one half reflecting the fire, and the other the moss-like cluster of onlookers, and these people at the front of the picture have tamed the light of the fire in their tiny lamp, it looks so pathetic, this tiny lamp, compared to the boundless fire, just as all the buildings look ridiculous because they're simply disintegrating in the inferno, as all things disintegrate that are conceived and constructed by man. Because man has never got on top of fire, or light. But Turner did, he got on top of it, he exorcised the fear of fire by putting it into his picture. What else was art invented for if not to exorcise our fears?" A stewardess went prancing past on her high heels; poor thing, thought Nele, I ought to tell her it's

much easier to run in trainers, I just wish someone would give her a lovely pair of Monzas or Galaxys or Superstars, and preferably Jesus as well, he'd go well with their gleaming whisky pins. "Tell me another story."

"I don't tell stories, I'm not a liar", said the man sadly, "I'm a lawyer and I adore these pictures. I may be retired, but I still feel completely committed to the cause, otherwise I wouldn't come along on these trips, I pay for my own ticket, simply because I can't bear the thought of the pictures being out there on their own, I pay for the entire trip out of my own pocket, but it's the very best thing I could do, in any case I wouldn't be able to sleep a wink until I knew they were hanging on the wall in a safe place somewhere with people watching over them and no risk of them dropping out of the sky or being damaged or disappearing, unless of course some lunatic has a go at them, that's always a possibility, some nutcase who wants to take vengeance on a picture, God knows why it happens, why do people want to take vengeance on pictures? Do they take vengeance on TVs? On cinemas? I'm really enjoying this whisky, Miss Nele, you too?"

Yes, the whisky's very enjoyable indeed, especially in conjunction with that little tablet. If only this aeroplane thing that they were sitting in would shudder less.

And then an idea struck her with that kind of absolute clarity that is the obverse of intoxication. She'd be able to ask this man about the painting, about everything. He really knew what was what.

“The picture that my grandmother talked about on the tapes — I went careering into the life of this stranger who is my grandfather, and then gone, disappeared”. The words weren’t coming out right, the unfocusedness of everything was not diminishing.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about”, began the man. Nele could hear her heart beating in the whisky. What she wanted to say was: Not *everything* can disappear, there must be *something* that endures.

She stared out of the window, it was an indefinable time of day. The earth was hidden beneath a blanket of clouds. She heard the man say “Hopper’s Sunday morning picture, the row of shops, do you get me?” She turned towards him, he was opening and shutting his three cubist eyes one after another, the one by the root of his nose was bigger than the other two. “Hopper’s Sunday morning, that’s what I can’t help thinking of, the sunlight comes in from the right hand side casting infinitely long shadows, leaves dance along the pavement, a bit of sand as well perhaps, all the shutters are down and no one says a word. People can’t be living behind those windows any more, can they? The barber’s shop with its barber’s pole right at the centre of the picture: its stripes never stop turning around. Do you know what the colours stand for? Blue for the arteries, red for the blood that flows when he cuts you, white for the bandage that then becomes necessary. The colours of the American flag. A spiral works by remaining ever the same, it chases itself round and round looking as if it were constantly in motion, we find that pleasing. It serves to remind the barber that he’s simply shortening something that will grow long again all on its own. We make it go away, but it pops straight back up again.

Yes, thought Nele, a place whose denizens have gone elsewhere. The sky grey with storm clouds, a wind sweeping through unimpeded, a street that goes off into nothing on both sides of the picture. “That’s how I lived too,” said Nele quietly. “With my parents for years and years in Industrial Street, and our neighbour Ade Schleichweg’s swimming pools leant up against every wall, even the acoustic wall protecting our little clutch of houses from the noise of the autobahn. The steps for getting out of the pools stuck up into the sky like stairways. A North German sky, quite like Chicago’s. And beneath them the pools themselves gave off a turquoise glow, most of them had acquired a patina of green, and some of them had a price written on their underside in white house paint.”

“Wonderful,” the man said dreamily, “just like his *Gas*. We’ve got that one with us too. There’s this fire, think of Turner, but here it’s just the dry grass burning. Three petrol pumps, right in the middle of the picture, all of them with heads, the diminutive attendant’s standing by them in his tie and waistcoat, an upright, lonely man. He makes sure our thirst is slaked so that we can stay constantly on the move, he stands there without moving to ensure everything keeps moving. People say that Hopper ...” — Nele clutched at her stomach, a feeling of nausea overcame her, it made her think of Gail and how the two of them had sat side by side in the car for hours and days and had got to know each other, really quickly too because they were constantly on the move. A dull ache was churning her insides. “... and the shaft of light coming from the door of his little hut goes straight past him. Behind him the grass is on fire. But he doesn’t notice. This is the trick in Hopper’s pictures: the people in them pay no attention to the forlornness of their surroundings or the danger it portends, they themselves have brought about this rootlessness and have meanwhile accommodated

to it and now live in the certain knowledge that they have everything they have ever dreamt of. And are no longer aware of their poverty. In a sense they are already dead, they've given up the struggle against their doom, they've struck a peace deal with their own abandonment, it's not a bad deal, it's one whereby they make do with such territory as they may have gained. That's what Hopper the magician made visible in his pictures, Miss Nele, what were you saying — are you feeling unwell?"

Sitting quite still with the jagged-edged bag. What a relief, what a huge relief. Such strong paper, it's got some company's imprint on it, all in colour, what does it say? We'll develop your holiday photos! Pop your film in the bag and hand it to a stewardess! Just think how quick it would be! So many exclamations marks on such a small bag. Or is it *acclamation* marks? The old man stroked his hand over his tweed jacket with a gesture of elegant reserve and slid out into the aisle. Completely drained, Nele remained slumped in her seat; she suddenly couldn't see mohair any more. A stewardess held out a royal blue plastic tray. Nele folded the jagged edges over and put the bag on the tray, the man's face bore an uncertain smile, a smile of concentration rather than of dismissal; and Nele wanted to thank the stewardess who had removed the bag without a moment's hesitation, "Don't have it developed", she said, but the stewardess was already gone. The passenger cabin was bathed in artificial noonday light, curtains divided off the aisles, a film was running on the screens without any sound, the same flickering image again and again. The stewardess returned. Without photos. Instead she offered both of them pillows and packs containing eye masks.

Tweedy-man ripped the pack open, put his horn-rimmed glasses in his shirt pocket, and pulled the oval of black material over his eyes.

“A bit of a rest”, he said, “then I’ll be able to forget my worries. About the Rothko. Oh my God, the judge. I simply mustn’t think about it. I’m going to stop thinking right now.” He lay there, his head pressing against the backrest, like a crook in a mask who’d forgotten to cut any eyeholes in it. A boy in striped socks came bounding along the aisle, a trainer in each hand, a baseball shirt stretched tautly over his stomach. He slid into the row of seats in front of them, taking a quick look backwards above the seat-rest, his face was round and freckled, his gaze empty. He slumped back into the seat with an irritable grunt. “Do you want any more?” asked a motherly voice. “Shove off”, came the reply.

Nele wiped her hand across the plastic inner window. Frost had formed in the void beyond, flowers of ice at once untouchable and unmeltable, like memories.

“It’s no good,” said the old man, “I can’t do it.” He pushed the eye mask up onto his forehead and gazed at Nele. “I’ve never been able to do it — to let my little treasures go. It’s a terrible character trait. My wife always said so. Before she left me. That’s why I’ve never entered into a contract involving the sale of a picture, I’d never have been able to work at Sotheby’s. It would have killed me, selling something that’s unique in the entire world, just that one single copy.”

“Like us”, said Nele, and all of a sudden she couldn’t help laughing.

“Let’s get talking again. Quick. About light? The way Vermeer intensifies light. Or light in Goya. Franz Marc. Monet. When the thing that is illuminated itself becomes luminous. I feel on safe ground there. The night prompts erratic monologues, for humans are dark creatures, they know the truth about themselves only at night-time, and slip back into their lies during the day. Let’s talk about light, even if it’s only a lighted cigarette I’m clinging on to. It’s better, always better, than when it’s too dark.”

A question was slowly taking shape in Nele’s head. It seemed to her an absurd one, but her body was in such turmoil that she couldn’t really concentrate, and she simply opened her mouth.

“Then can you tell me what pictures are worth these days? I did a course in art history once, but that was ages ago. I’ve never worked in the field. I’ve ended up designing trainers. What’s one of these pictures worth these days?”

“I’m not the Art Sales Index, but do you have anything particular in mind? “

“Let’s say, a picture by Degas.”

“Drawing or painting?”

“Painting.”

“You can’t really lump them all together.”

“Just very roughly.”

“Does it belong to a museum?”

“No.”

“So it’s in private hands?”

“More or less.”

“A Degas? Well now, some of his pictures, especially his ballet scenes obviously, but also the others, they do fetch seven figures. His pictures are so light, so modern. Fragile, I’d call them. Not my thing. But Degas is Degas.”

Nele didn’t respond.

“Are you thinking of buying one?” tweedy-man asked with cheerful irony.

“I sort of own one”, said Nele, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“Oh, really.”

Once again Nele said nothing. These figures were beyond her comprehension. Could that really have been a seven-figure sum in dollars hanging on the wall of an ordinary American home in that ever more decrepit looking neighbourhood? She had taken it

off its hook and touched its battered frame. So the old man could look at it and forget his vertigo. One, two, four million, it was beyond imagining.

“Would you like to sell it?”

She looked at him. His eye mask was up over his forehead. Four eye-regions, two light, two dark. Four eyes. She felt a desire to touch something with her hand that was warm — a body, a human being. She was tempted to lay her fingers on the back of his hand with its bluish-green veins. She recalled someone once telling her that at seventy metres down, blood looked green.

“It was just an idea.”

“An idea”, tweedy-man repeated; he turned on the reading light above their heads, and for a while Nele joined him in gazing at the cone of light that fell between them.

She shut her eyes and held her eye mask in her hands. No more swindling, no more excuses.

The old man cleared his throat. Beyond the darkness of her closed eyes she thought she could see him pushing out his lower lip, the mark of his fondness for contradiction. “You could be my own daughter”, his voice whispered suddenly, it sounded almost pleading. “How on earth do you come to own a Degas. Don’t let yourself get cheated. I can offer you my help, that’s all. The art market is as crazy as the stock market. Prices are extremely fluid, they depend on moods, feelings, tittle tattle. I get the sense

that there's some kind of problem with this picture." He was still whispering, Nele abandoned herself to the feeling that she was involved in conspiratorial goings-on of some kind. "Looted art? Is that a term that means anything to you? Claims for restitution by the original owner. I've had a bit to do with that as well. Where's the picture now?" As his voice carried on Nele heard it in her darkness, it was a voice that reminded her of another voice, the voice of her grandfather who had to stare fixedly at a point on the wall to stop his giddiness wrenching him out of his armchair, this stranger who was her grandfather, the father of her mother; who had suddenly reemerged after all these years; who was still alive — old, but alive.

"Oh, let's talk about something else. Your light, perhaps."

"So you think that's it, do you?" He laughed out loud with menacing affability. "Oh no, you won't be giving me the slip that easily, that's for sure."

Larissa Boehning, *Light Fabrics*

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