

Yttat

The reunion was at the Secretary's house in the suburbs, out where the city ends in gently rolling low hills and green fields stretching down to the river valley. Old friends came. The Secretary wasn't sure he'd ever known all of them, so many years had passed. There was plenty to eat and drink. People mingled. Recorded music played in the background.

Juliette and the Secretary stood in the kitchen, by a countertop laden with party foods, and talked about old times, back when they had worked together and the Secretary had wanted to have sex with her, but never did. They laughed about this and about how, when she had arrived at the reunion, the Secretary recognized her face but couldn't recall her name until she told him, It's Juliette, don't you remember?

Yes, he said, of course, how could I have forgotten?

Lucille arrived in early afternoon, driving up in her old, battered, blue two-door subcompact car. As soon as the Secretary, from where he stood talking to Juliette, saw through the kitchen window the sight of that little car he hadn't seen in so many years, he knew whose it was and who would be driving it. Lucille's was a name he did not think he would ever forget, absent a brain injury that erased or at least blocked access to that part of his memory where both the things that happened and the things that had not happened were recorded. He was surprised to see she still drove that car, he knew she had wanted much more from life in many ways.

She entered the house apologizing, Hi, hi, sorry I'm late, though in fact she was not late, there was no set time for arrival. Her face was slightly puffy, creased and reddened and shiny with the weathering passing years will inflict—though Juliette's face had aged differently and bore no distracting signs of the aging all had undergone—and Lucille's expression and affect were of someone clutching with a calm desperation at the last bits of flotsam bobbing on the waves where a life or a dream or some combination of the two had been wrecked, its ribs stove in on the unseen reefs.

She mingled with the other guests with the shallow intensity of a graduate student in sociology gathering data for a thesis. After a while, she saw that the Secretary was no longer in the kitchen talking with Juliette, but had moved into the living room and was alone for a moment, so she approached him.

Hi, she said.

Hi, he said back. There was between them still the subtle, charged tension there had been many years before, when they had been young enough to want things they couldn't have and too young to know what to do about it.

I know you were thinking it's strange I'm still driving that little old car, she said. She still had her way of seeming simultaneously both to look and not look at the person she was talking to.

I wasn't thinking that, but I had thought that, the Secretary said.

Things haven't worked out the way I thought they would, she said. She showed a faint smile and gave a faint laugh, shook her head once or twice, and now was unmistakably looking away from the Secretary.

Later in the afternoon, the Secretary saw her leaving. He was in the garage, talking to Juliette and a couple other guests, when he saw through the opened garage door Lucille walking down the drive in front of the house, talking back over her shoulder to someone he couldn't see who must have been on the front porch. The sky was clear and the sun shone brightly over the suburbs and the hills, the fields and the river valley. Lucille got into her little blue two-door and waved at whoever it was she had been talking to on the porch, and she drove off.

She didn't even say goodbye, the Secretary said, annoyed with Lucille and not for the first time.

Other guests left as the afternoon lengthened. It was a summer's day and the afternoon was very long. The Secretary was in the living room again when Juliette handed him a large manila envelope and said, Look, Lucille left this.

The Secretary took the envelope and opened it. He peered into it for a moment, sat on the sofa and shook the envelope's contents onto the cushion next to him. They

were a half-dozen photographs, 8x10 glossies.

What are they? Juliette said, peering over his shoulder.

Portraits I took of Lucille twenty years ago, the Secretary said. He looked at them one by one. They were from a time when he thought she was the most beautiful event that had ever occurred. He came to realize later that this judgment was skewed. He returned the photographs to their envelope.

Soon all the guests had left but Juliette. I'm going to stay, if you don't mind, she said. I don't mind, he said. He turned on the television. A football game was being broadcast, slender and muscular young European men in shorts and jerseys, athletic socks and shoes, scrambling around a field, kicking a ball. He didn't watch. Juliette was in the kitchen. It sounded to him as if she were tidying up, putting the food away and tending to the dishes.

You don't have to do that, he called to her. She didn't answer. He looked out the living room windows, large, plate-glass panes affording a view of the hills and fields and the river valley, and saw the sky had grown dark with a fast-building thunderstorm. Rain was already falling, in gray sheets he could see over the valley, and in a darker column blue over the nearby hills.

It grew dark in the house as the storm hit. The Secretary moved from window to window to see. A bolt of lightning struck the nearby hills and its thunder boomed and rumbled. He thought he should probably turn off the television to protect it against any power surges.

A bolt of lightning hit so close the white flash was all the Secretary could see for a moment, its sizzling sound filling his ears in the instant before the tremendous cracking explosion came. He dropped to the living room floor, frightened, and looked all around the room. The television was still on, the football game still being broadcast. He wanted to turn the set off, but he was reluctant to go any nearer to it. He was in the center of the room and didn't want to go any nearer to the windows, either. He didn't know where Juliette was.

Then she was there, come into the living room where she said, What are you doing?

Cowering in terror, he said. I need to turn the television off. He scurried, crouching as though he thought the storm might glimpse him through the windows and hurl a bolt at him. He reached the television, where he punched its power button with one hand and yanked its power cord out of the wall with the other.

There was no more lightning. Shortly the storm had passed and Juliette said, Let's go take a walk, I love to walk after a rain. We'll go to the hills and sit for a while.

The storm had left a chill in the air and Juliette and the Secretary donned light jackets before they went out. Juliette brought a blanket for sitting on. They walked to the nearby hills. The evening sun broke through under the storm's remaining clouds, golden light sparkling off the grass wet from the rain. A few other people had come out with the same idea of taking a walk to the hills and sitting there while the sun went down.

Juliette spread the blanket and sat on the gentle slope of a low hill. The Secretary squatted in the short grass a short distance away from her. The broad river valley was in front of them. Juliette smiled and said, This is wonderful.

Flocks of birds rose out of the valley. At first it was just a few, over the trees that lined the river, then it was more, then more, huge flocks, heading toward Juliette and the Secretary and the other people on the hills.

Look! the Secretary said, raising an arm and pointing, but anyone could see them, the flocks were a dozen or more species of birds, hundreds in each flock, many of them white birds circling in unison before landing on the slopes in front of the people.

Arctic terns! the Secretary said, though he did not know. The sky abounded in whirling birds, the white ones—arctic terns?—landing in wave after wave like an invading army of hang-gliders. Other, smaller flocks, of such birds as Robinson's wrens, wilcos, and drabbers' sparrows landed among the terns—if that was what they were—and set to pecking at the grass on the slopes, searching for food. A half-dozen yellow-bellied nutclutchers landed right in front of the Secretary. He was about to say something to Juliette about the iridescent beauty of their feathers when a gargantuan gruel parrot came in low and dropped a clump of what looked to be soft-furred monkeys behind the Secretary. He turned to look and saw the clump was made up of housecats and what was emerging to be a little boy of about four years' age. The boy

had light brown skin, a round face, and green eyes that were badly infected, yellowish crust all around their orbits. The infection didn't seem to bother the boy, though the Secretary hoped he didn't get any on himself, just as a precaution.

Where did you come from? the Secretary said.

I came out of the sky, the boy said.

I mean before that, where did you come from before that?

The boy shrugged.

Something's happened in the valley, Juliette said. She was standing now, folding her blanket and peering into the distance downslope. We have to go see, she said. She led the way, the Secretary taking the boy's hand and following behind her.

They arrived at a public school that had been turned into a makeshift rescue shelter. White Cross workers bustled about, each intent on their tasks of providing this or that component of food, bedding, or medical care to the crowds of people gathering in the school's corridors, cafeteria, and auditorium (the offices, classrooms, and library remained closed off, their doors locked). Voices, from the low murmurs and moans of loss and fear to the sharp calls and cries of instruction and pain, echoed through the building. A White Cross worker hurried by.

What's going on? the Secretary said.

There's been a terrible flood but the worst is over, the White Cross worker said, not stopping or even slowing down.

The Secretary, still holding the boy's hand, found a table to sit at in the cafeteria. Juliette sat at an adjacent table. Already the crowds were beginning to thin. The Secretary looked closely at the boy, at his encrusted, infected, but wide-open eyes, surprised the infection didn't seem to trouble him.

What's your name? the Secretary said, pulling a pen and a scrap of paper out of one of his jacket pockets.

You have a pen and paper? the boy said, his infected eyes open in surprised delight.

Yes, the Secretary said, I always carry something to write with and write on. I am the Secretary. Now tell me, what's your name?

Wyatt, the boy said.

The Secretary started to write the boy's name, spelling it aloud as he went along, forming each letter in careful, blocky strokes, W-Y-A—

That's not how it's spelled, the boy said, squirming on the bench where he sat.

That's not? the Secretary said. It's not Wyatt?

It *is* Wyatt, the boy said, but it's spelled Y-T-T-A-T. That's how we spell it where I come from.

Where do you come from?

Oh, I come from lots of places, the boy said, as though he were telling a wondrous secret. Mostly I come from Brazil, but before that I came from Africa, and before that there was some place in Europe that we lived. But mostly Brazil. And Argentina. And some other little places in South America and Central America, too, I think. The boy wiggled his hands in the air, pointing to trace a squiggly migratory route.

We need to find your parents, the Secretary said. You have a mommy and daddy, don't you? Where are they?

I don't know, they were there but now I don't know where they are.

What are their names? Maybe if I know their names I can help you find them.

Okay, the boy said, My mama's name is Lucy, and my papa's name is Dan.

No kidding? the Secretary said. *My* name is Dan, too.

Wow! the boy said, But you're not my papa.

Juliette had been talking to a robust, dark-haired woman who was not evidently a White Cross worker but had about her the air of a minor government authority whose word was law in her minuscule domain, which this was not. Juliette turned to the Secretary and said, She says all the lost children that were here have been reunited with their parents, except for Wyatt and one other.

We have to find his parents then, the Secretary said, maybe I can find someone here who can help. And the Secretary thought, I hope we can find his parents, I don't want to have to take care of him, especially with that eye infection.

The dark-haired woman, her air supercilious, said, There's a place up front where they might be able to help, but probably not, you're probably going to have to take care of him and his eye infection, and I don't think you can, what could you possibly know about taking care of a little boy?

The Secretary slowly stood, saying, You know nothing of me, I raised my son for years, from diapers until he was a fine young man, you know nothing! And with this the Secretary began striking the woman, slapping her arms and face and punching her in the chest. She uttered a few muffled, frightened cries as she turned to escape the cafeteria. The Secretary pursued her until she was out the door.

He returned to Juliette and Yttat and saw that Juliette had obtained a small bowl of red chile sauce with a spoon in it, and some small, individually-wrapped chocolates, and given them to Yttat, who was happily unwrapping one of the chocolates, his bulging cheeks indicating he already had one or more in his mouth. He looked up at the Secretary and said, This is the way we do it in Brazil!

I need to find his parents, the Secretary said to Juliette. He left the cafeteria and followed the growing sound of voices and clamor to a counter in the hall near the school's front door. A White Cross worker was behind the counter, looking harried and weary, while in front of the counter, a crowd of people noisily sought information of loved ones they'd been separated from in the flood. I've lost my sister! one shouted. I've lost my mother and my daughter! another called. My whole family is missing! cried a third. You've got to help me find them, please, somebody, anybody! There was pushing and jostling and the sound of someone cursing, Stop stepping on my toes!

I have a lost little boy and we need to find his parents, the Secretary told the White Cross worker, then more loudly to the crowd, Has anybody lost a little boy named Wyatt?

Yes! Yes! an unseen man's voice came from the back of the crowd, Let me through!

The man pushed his way up to the counter. He was a short-haired, middle-aged man whose round face bore a serious expression and who looked like what the Secretary imagined a man from Brazil could look like, but one couldn't be sure, how was the Secretary to know if this man was really Yttat's father and not simply someone looking to take advantage of a terrible situation? He said to the man, How do I know you're Wyatt's father, what proof can you offer? Tell me your name and the name of Wyatt's mother.

Wyatt's mother—my wife—is named Lucy, and I am Nathaniel, the man said. Take me to my son.

The Secretary, still suspicious but wishing to be relieved of the burden of looking after a strange little boy with infected eyes, said, This way. He and the man left the counter and the crowd and walked down the hall that led back to the cafeteria, the clamor receding behind them.

Wyatt told me his father's name is Dan, but you say your name is Nathaniel, I can't let you take him if you can't prove he's your son, the Secretary said, but the Secretary was thinking, I will let this man take Yttat if at all possible.

Dan is my middle name, the man said, but here, I will tell you something unusual about Wyatt and that you may accept as proof—we spell his name Y-T-T-A-T.

That's it, the Secretary said, smiling and relieved, that is what he told me.

They were arrived in the cafeteria now, approaching the table where Yttat sat with Juliette, drawing something on a piece of paper. Nathaniel said, Wyatt! and Yttat looked up, squealed, Daddy! and ran to Nathaniel, who reached down and scooped him into his arms. Juliette and the Secretary, both relieved at the outcome, left the school and returned to his house, but she did not stay, though she did hang the blanket up to dry before she left.