# AN INTERRUPTION

*by Francis R. "Hand" Wisneiwski*

## MONDAY, A DIFFERENT ONE

I MIGHT AS WELL start here. This is Hand, writing almost two years after the action taking place in this book. I sit on the second floor of a house much too big for one. The house is in New Zealand, in the Coromandel peninsula, and its occupant, thirty-one years old, of strong body but a mind that swerves and sputters, is alone. There is rain here, in a village called Matarangi, in a valley facing a bay, surrounded by green hills, under a ceiling of rain.

At first there was no rain. I arrived on a cloudless Tuesday and expected the best for my stay. I have rented this place, old, leaning left, on the end of a wide beach, for just over two weeks, so finally I can do what for around two years now—since the initial appearance of the book you've been reading—I've wanted to do. It's appropriate, I hope, that I add my contribution here, at about the point when I personally found the plot, or whatever it was, to begin waning. There will be corrections here, and explanations. I'll try to keep my rage and bewilderment in check.

Here in New Zealand, I sat down with the book sooner than

I'd expected; I'd planned at least a few weeks of swimming and drunken evenings, fuzzy and full of rugby on TV, but instead I was given rain. So I got started. Here, until I'm done, I'm going to correct, delete and elaborate upon Will's text, which tells half the story it seeks to tell, and makes all kinds of things up, and, I think, does a rather half-assed job of all of it. Earlier readers of this book, I feel, read a diluted version of the week Will and I spent, a version afraid to speak, one which found solace in innuendo and gesture, as opposed to simple and declarative speech—one that left unspoken some of the most essential motivations and implications, and was built in large part upon at least three enormous and unjustifiable lies. I have never been one for outright untruths or so-assumed subtlety if it comes at the expense of the message, or realization of potential impact. See, just now, I came out and said something that Will, or those who convey things in the way he would choose, would find some fey, twee, or sublimated way of communicating. There is a time for twee, and a time for just fucking opening your mouth and giving it to you plain.

So I'm here to fix things, and this house seemed the perfect setting. I know no one here in Matarangi, so my distractions were likely to be minimal. I have only this book, the one you're reading, and my own more accurate notes and memories, and the photos I took, which I'll sprinkle throughout. There is a grocery store not far from this house, within walking distance if I'm feeling robust, and in it—a small place, no bigger than a living room—they sell all I would need, and the proprietor wears no shoes.

No one seems to wear shoes in New Zealand. On the drive from the airport, I stopped at two different malls, looking for pens, paper, scotch tape—things I knew I needed but couldn't carry on the plane from Phuket, where I'd spent the last eight months trying, as part of a fledgling pseudo-missionary (nondenominational) outfit, to convince teenage Thai boys not to sell themselves to German pedophiles, that they had alternatives—though my col-

leagues and I haven't completely figured out what those are, quite yet. For those who couldn't or wouldn't leave the sex trade, we tried to educate them about STDs and other perils of their occupation, which include the simple over-enthusiasm of many of their clients from Berlin's suburbs. Anyway, in both Auckland-area malls I entered—the first didn't have a stationery store or anything approximating or inclusive of one—there were barefoot shoppers. Whole families of barefoot shoppers! It was fucked up. I was jubilant but perplexed. I'm all for this kind of thing, get me right, the shrugging off of refutable or plainly uncomfortable habits, but it was a shock, all the bare feet indoors, as is any national custom of which you haven't heard but should have. Did you know this? The guidebook said nothing about this, though it did make clear why the residents of New Zealand are known as Kiwis; it has nothing to do with the fruit, which is what I'd assumed, with no evidence that that sort of fruit is native here. The kiwi is also a flightless bird no bigger than a robin, somewhat endangered here, with a long curved beak. I haven't seen one of the birds yet, though signs about the preservation of their habitat are everywhere, as are their images on logos, restaurant signage, and on the national currency, which is, with its clear acetate windows and bright colors, easily the most beautiful money in the world.

I have now been here, in my rented house, for three days, this being the fourth, and after a few hours of clarity that first day, there has been only rain. Sixty-three hours of rain so far. I've been counting, when I haven't been pacing, and doing push-ups, and re-reading Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, which I assume you've read and so won't get into much beyond recommending your revisiting the section on Poetic Wisdom and then trying to reconcile it with American foreign policy toward Khadafy in the late 70s and 80s. Seems impossible, though so many—far too many!—have tried.

But the rain has not stopped, that's my current point to make,

and this rain is keeping me from my present task. It's gotten me to re-read the book, which is a good thing, something I didn't think I'd do so soon after arriving, but at the same time the rain has impeded my ability to dig into my revisions, to amend and edify. When I chose this spot, on this island and on this thumb-like peninsula and on this bay and in this house, built like a wooden jungle-gym with boldly-colored Danish accents, I pictured myself much like Ernest H., swimming in the morning, writing a few hundred words just after that, then allowing the afternoon to drift on the slow river of five or six strong cocktails.

But without the swimming—which is impossible in this rain, for the water is already colder than I expected or would be desirous to anyone, my day is without a beginning—I flounder. I sit for long stretches with my hand in my pubic hair. I have picked my nose so much it bleeds. I wake up to rain and can't even walk outside. I have no car. I dropped it off in Whitianga, because I thought that would be distracting, to have a car here, a car making possible escape from the work at hand. So no car, but without one and without sun, things here are wretched and I'm losing my holy damned mind.

## TUESDAY, WITHOUT MERCY

Of course I'm mimicking the structural device of the book as a whole, and I'm finding it a comfortable enough contrivance to live within. It shapes my words and circumscribes my task. Today I've decided that I'm going to spend seven days, while the rain continues, illuminating this manuscript, and will do so in as orderly a fashion as I can manage, given that this is not my bag, this reworking of text, within red borders, in the midst of a book. I'm a scientist, really, not recognized as such by the Obeyers with their degrees and lab coats, but I have ideas, and provable theses, and I believe and many have noted my ability to see connections

that no one else can (including Brian Greene, who I met once at an airport and who told me, and I quote, "you've got some interesting ideas there, buddy." Beautiful man).

At the moment I'm typing onto standard printer paper, in green ink, to make as clear as possible the separation between my words and his, with the hope that if I send my pages to the book's publisher, they'll see fit to include my comments somewhere—ideally where I've placed them myself, between Will's Sunday and Monday, well before the assumption mentioned on the book's original cover.

Sweet people, I want to mention, tangentially but relevantly, before I get too involved here, that this is my fifth day here, and it's still raining. I call you sweet people because it's not your fault. The rain is not your responsibility. The rain! It's not always a downpour kind of rain, no, but often it is, at least once a day it is, and otherwise it's just constant. However unsettled I was before, I am twenty-six and one-third hours further along now. It's been almost a hundred hours of rain, and I wonder about their drainage ability inland, and what it's doing to the rivers. (On the news are reports of motorists stranded and houses drifting away, but the instances seem isolated, which is odd, considering that where we grew up, the troubles would be far worse, I fear.) I want to also apologize for my tone, when there is a tone to my tone, which I blame on De Profundis, which I was reading on the plane, when I wanted to be reading Teirno's microbe-hunter book, which I heard was definitive.

All the food I bought that first day is gone, everything but the beans, which I don't know why I got in the first place. I don't eat canned beans and never have. I would go get more food but I'd be soaked and then would catch something and lord knows where the closest hospital is, and will the doctors there be wearing shoes? I can't take that chance.

And I can't get the washing machine working, so I'm wearing

the same pair of underwear I came with, which was not my plan. True, I only brought two pair, and true, I usually wear a pair three days before rotating, but still this overuse was not my hope, and is always inadvisable for a man of my active lifestyle and fur-inclusive back end. Do you hear that accursed ocean? I have a few of the doors and windows open, anything to relieve the pressure in this place, so I hear it all day and all night. I'm supposed to be comforted by the sound, that unstoppable and wide white distant slow soft car-crashing, but it's starting to warp me. There's just too much weather here. I feel like I'm on a ship, surrounded by indifferent and relentlessly unsubtle forces of nature. I can close the door or the windows but at this point I'd still hear it; I can feel it, like you can feel bass in your heart or your mother's footsteps on the floors above.

This morning a really disturbing thing happened. I looked out the window of this home, at the ocean, which was grey like slush, and before it, on the sand, directly in line with this house I'm renting for almost nothing, was a black lump. It was long and bulbous in the middle, and immediately I knew it was a body of some sort, or a garbage bag filled with something, shaped like a body. It was not a log, or anything plastic or manmade. I could tell it was once alive. It's still there now, a few hours later. Damned if I'm going out there to see what it is. Usually I would, I suppose, but these three days of rain have done something to my sense of movement and my access to courage. It's like I'm carrying on a long-distance relationship now to these aspects of myself, previously so close at hand.

Even on the TV, the people are a little surprised by all the rain—uncharacteristic in February, they keep saying—but I don't believe them. They knew it would rain and knew I'd be driven half-way around the corner and down, the fuckers. I'm sure it rains like mad like this every February, that every February they have a wet season, but they don't want to lose all the tourist

money, so they lie through their teeth, or call it the Green Season or some shit. Lord I'm going soft and weird. I haven't swum in so long, haven't seen the sun in a week—it's been so long since I've walked out of the ocean licking the wet salt from my mustache and beard while the sun dries the water on my back. It's just wrong. I need these things. The storm has apparently dredged up all this seaweed, the beach covered in it, and in the shallows you'd be enveloped in it, so I don't swim—from what I hear this part of the world is plagued with lyngba, the hair-thin seaweed that causes stinging seaweed disease, which I've had once—like poison oak but a thousand times worse, itching with the power of speech, a baboon's screeching kind of speech—and refuse to live with again. I have no taste for the seasons anymore. Nothing is worth seeing in the rain, and all I really want to do these days is see things.

Well, what happened to us, to Will and me? Everyone asks that. You know he died, and that much is true. But there's much more you don't know, or that he fibbed about, for reasons justifiable and otherwise. This is our task, to untangle the cords. But right now I need sleep, because I've had a bottle and a half of Pinot Grigio and it was bad stuff, too dry, with the finish of a day-old salmon dinner, and I'm going upstairs now, to do better tomorrow.

## WEDNESDAY, TO WORK AT LAST

Day Six here, Day Three of my attempt at correction, and still I haven't begun. I will soon begin. But let me tell you first that it's rained without interruption for nearly my entire time here, all of the godforsaken hours since I last saw you, and the air in this rented house is humid with my own stench. A man has smells, I'm told, and though I'm not usually sensitive to them myself, or even cognizant of them, by this point, I am acknowledging that the place smells of me and my habits and my food and my habits with

my food. There has been no time for the air to replace itself, to wipe itself clean. The rain comes from the sky and is crushing us slowly. On the TV they show images of people paddling to work, and someone's house has floated away, to sea. Elsewhere, in a small burg where the streets leaving town were closed, a young childless woman stabbed her husband out of rage born of confinement (my theory, not that of the authorities).

And the black shape on the beach is still there.

It's been there two full days now, and I haven't had the interest, or inclination, or maybe courage, to go see what it is. I suppose I know it's a body and I just don't want to be the one to find it, to name it. Normally I'd be running out there to see it, poke and prod it, but there's something about this shape that's unsettling. Its size maybe. It's most definitely a person, but because it's a very large person, I'm held back from investigating. From here it seems to be about eight feet tall, which would make it almost as big as Robert Pershing Wadlow, the tallest man ever, born in Alton, Illinois—I knew a guy from Alton at UW-Lacrosse, named Denny Catfish, honest to God—and grew to be almost nine feet. But this body is rounder, blacker. Why is no one else finding it? The beach, on this remote bay on the North Island, is not crowded, ever, and has been desolate during this downpour, but still I wonder why no one else has claimed this body. It's so obvious there, and it needs to be removed.

And it's moved up the beach. It's farther into the sand today, closer to the house. Before it was on the break of the shore, pushed inches to and fro by the surf, which was gentle despite the rain and the winds. But now it's closer. It's moved fifteen feet inland, and now the water only kisses its black shape with its most far-reaching waves. If I were a superstitious man I'd think the shape was heading for me, slowly, to bring me some kind of message. But I choose instead to believe that the ocean will retake the body while I sleep.

There are so many things that are not true in Will's account of this trip, but his death is not among them. He is gone, almost three years now, I guess, and it's a stupid thing. No one should find it romantic, because there's never any romance in death. There would have to be at least commensurate romance in life, and there isn't—it can be beautiful but it's plodding—so in death there can only be a succession of ever-quieting minor notes. Anyone who's witnessed a death knows how unromantic it is. The man who falls on his sword bleeds for hours, and still ends up choking on his own blood. Will, I suspect, died in an unspeakably horrific way, surrounded by underwater screams. That it was plastered on the cover—written by a ghostwriter, if you'll forgive that dual-sided pun—is a disgrace. (I'll get to that ghostwriter soon enough, and will explain how it is that a dead man seems to be writing from the grave.)

But first, I need to give you a better picture of Will at this point. Maybe you don't want to trust me because he's been dead so long and I've been open about the fact that I'm losing my mind, but I don't see the point in your reading too much about this story when you know next to nothing about the man. He didn't describe his looks, but they're easy: he resembled very closely a young Martin Landau, though I'm not sure how helpful that is. Will was a handsome enough guy, with a large mouth area, but maybe too long in the head—he always looked more adult than the rest of us. There were those in high school who called him Munster, because there was a distant resemblance to Herman, but the nickname was too cruel, and he made it clear it pained him to hear it. Besides, the guy was handsome enough; his looks were not an aid, but they were rarely an impediment. His hair was black and his nose Roman. He did okay romantically, though it's telling that you don't yet know anything about how much he used to masturbate. Which was a lot, holy shit it was. It's hard to imagine just how often he was doing it as a teenager, when he discov-

ered the idea, when we were seventeen, late in our junior year. Before that, as often as the rest of us would mention it or joke about jerking off in one way or another, Will—honest to God—didn't think it was possible. He thought, and this is so hard to prove but you must believe me that it's true, that it was some kind of urban myth, like queifing or the existence of women possessing three nipples or men with three testicles. I don't know how he kept himself so ignorant of so many things. But someone must have walked him through the process at some point, because Will comes to school one Monday with this new and desperate look on his face, like the second he gets to school he can't wait to get home. Peter Moorehouse had the same look for a month or so, when his cousin Annette came from Norway for a month and used to sunbathe topless in the backyard drinking white wine. Will was pretty average in a lot of ways, in the ways you glance at—he didn't stand out in a group of strangers. But he had a haunted thing about him that everyone recognized, and some thought affected, but all wondered about, and it was something, contrary to the implications of the account he's written, that he's always had. He was always the sort who you'd expect to be having long and vicious arguments with his head, or with others, inside his head. You'd almost find him, occasionally but demonstrably, moving his lips while walking alone; still far from a self-talker or a screamer of obscenities on the city sidewalk, but nevertheless someone who wasn't moving through our world with a brain unequipped with the appropriate shock-absorbing equipment.

Which brings us to his imagination. He always dabbled in writing, as a lot of us did and do—I have three screenplays at the ready, if you're interested. Their titles:

"Humiliation Nation"

"A War Between the People of the Future and Today's Smallest Fears"

"The Less-Known Life of Louis Pasteur"

—but I have to say that I was impressed, perhaps most of all, by Will's account of the beating in Oconomowoc, which is pretty realistic for being completely fabricated. In terms of dispelling the largest and most unjustifiable fictions, it's good to start here. Will wasn't beaten by anyone, ever. The kid was never in a fight in his life. Nothing like that at least. I did some fighting in junior high, but Will was never that way. He was an athletic enough kid, but he really didn't have the outward-facing rage you need to fight; you just plain need some rage, some simmering zig-zag blood somewhere in there, blood that's either constantly at a boil or is prone to boiling, and Will had neither. You couldn't get the kid mad—outwardly—about anything, really, unless you took his hat off and threw it into the river. I did that once and he punched me in the stomach. I admit that he did that, and that it hurt, a lot, and that I was impressed by how hard he could hit. I took off the hat for no reason, and meant it to be—well, I didn't think much about it either way. I saw the hat and was convinced that it needed to be removed and thrown into the river. And looking back, I still get a chuckle out of it—the hat! in the river! oh lord the comedy!—but Will was afraid the girls would see his bed-head, I think, and that he'd always be called Bed-Head, and thus he'd never have love, so he punched me in the stomach, tears in his eyes. The kid was frustrated, and he hit me hard.

When I first read this part, about getting his *ass handed to him* in Oconomowoc, I was deeply confused, and at first thought there was something I didn't know. Had this really happened? I forget things every so often, and so wondered if …. The scene is so vivid, so I asked around, to other people who knew him, and no dice. No one beat up Will; Will went to Africa with a face as clear as could be, while still bearing a distant resemblance to Herman Munster.

Thus, this beating nonsense is one of two major devices he's used—the other one concerning Jack—to, I guess, thicken the plot a bit, to give it some kind of pseudo-emotional gravitas. But

why would he find it necessary to have himself, the narrator, get beaten up? And by three men in Wisconsin, no less. It makes no sense. I've been thinking about this, and a few times in the last year I've understood why he might do this, why he'd have himself beaten up, traveling the world with a face showing pain in the most obvious way, all bruises and scabs.

I read Will's account of his trip to the storage unit shortly before I had to do the very same thing—only in this case, I was retrieving Will's stuff, after his own death. I had never done that kind of thing before, but there was no one else to do it. Will was an only child, and his dad was never around, and with his mom gone, too, it fell to me. (Another piece of news I have to unceremoniously dump in your lap, for lack of time and suspense: Will has no brother named Tommy. The name was likely taken from a mutual friend of ours, Tommy Wells, a year older, who we'd both liked but who moved away just before sixth grade. Will always wanted a brother, though, and envied those with larger families, and I suppose then it's natural that he, when creating this semi-fictional backdrop, would throw in—unnecessarily, I think—an older brother, a Tommy, a guy who likes cars and mustaches. It wasn't the only wishful fabrication in the book.)

It was up to me to clear out Will's things, most of which had been there for a long while, though he updated its contents once or twice a year. I did the drive, which I'd done of course a thousand times before, on a good day, clear and bracing. It was March. I got there to find that the place does sit between Wall and Industrial streets, a fact I'm sure Will relished mentioning in a book in part about economic disparity (for it was, aha!, an area in great need of repair). The place was really just a decrepit parking lot cut by three parallel buildings set into the uneven pavement. I pulled in, my tires licked puddles and then gravel, and I stopped next to the Citgo.

When the door of No. 503 rolled upward, I saw boxes. They

were crooked, all of them, because Will was organized but never neat. I've never seen so many bent boxes, leaning every way, for some reason evoking a forest of mushrooms. There was moisture in there, and the cardboard was soft. I thought of graham crackers left outside, at a picnic, half-spoiled, chewy.

Will never expressed to me any sort of idea that when he was leaving for South America—I think he started in Guatemala—that he would not be coming back. And his storing of his possessions leaves the question open. On the one hand, I know that before he left, he did give up his apartment. On the other hand, the range of things he decided to store, and the recent visit he'd obviously made to the unit, would indicate that he was storing things not for my probing afterward, but for safekeeping until he could get back and better edit his belongings. I knew that I couldn't leave anything in this unit. I stood before everything Will had left, knowing I couldn't leave until this steel container was empty. I was hoping that there was enough that could be remorselessly thrown away, and that the rest would fit in my car. I went to work, though my heart had moved up eight inches and was thrumming against my chest. This was sorrow.

There is a sensation when you're looking at the physical remnants of a person's memory when you are sure that you shouldn't be there. I'm of the opinion that secrets kept in life should be honored in death, that nothing changes simply because you're not there to defend yourself. So I decided quickly that I would not read or open anything looking private—would only sort between those things I should dispose of, and those I would bring back to Chicago with me, to be stored in my basement. I wasn't thinking far ahead, really, though I vaguely recognized how strange it would be to be keeping his possessions, and to be storing them in my own place, and had no idea what would eventually become of them—the best I could hope for them, I acknowledged, was that they would be kept safe and dry for a few more years, but that

when next I moved, I would dispose of a few more boxes, until eventually there was very little left of his things, and that someday, far in the future, they would either be confused with my own things by my own decedents, or be sold at estate sales or thrown away by strangers. There is no dignity to these things, and their destiny is invariably grotesque. Memory, perhaps, should have no physical shape.

Thankfully, the first boxes I opened were the easiest—anonymous and disposable. There was a dumpster beside the building, and I knew great satisfaction in heaving boxes over the green steel wall and inside the empty container, where they thumped or clattered.

There were three boxes of coat-hangers. Clatter.

There was a box of blankets. Thump.

A box of very old and unusable sheets and pillowcases. Thump.

There was a box of plates and glasses and cutlery. Clatter.

I should stop here and tell you that everything, absolutely everything, was covered in mouse droppings. I assume that's what they were, though I saw no mice. I thought for a second that the tiny hard pellets, smooth like Tic-Tacs but black, could be the result of bats, but then remembered guano, and guano doesn't come in pellet form.

Every box I picked up, to move or inspect, rattled. Sometimes there were thousands of pellets in one box. I knew there was no food in any of the boxes, so I was baffled as to why the mice not only chewed their way into each and every one of forty-one boxes in that storage unit, but why they stayed there, perhaps *lived* there. There was nothing to live on in that room.

But let me back up. Opening the door to the storage unit gave me that immediate acidic taste on my tongue—I last got it when I saw a man on Navy Pier kick another man in the head; it appeared in the nanosecond between when I knew the fight was getting out of control and when I knew the victor was going to

throw his foot into the back of the man's skull. The door was padlocked, and fittingly enough, the guy on duty had to break it open; the metaphorical clarity of the action didn't escape me. Immediately after the broken lock dropped to the floor, the door rose up, rolling into the roof of the room, and I cried immediately and didn't stop for five minutes. What a strange fucker he was. There was a box full of bathroom and shower things—shampoo, conditioner, scrub brushes, a loofa, a six-pack of Dove soap, more shampoo, two empty bottles of some kind of body wash. In the same box, combs, a pair of brushes, an electric razor, a bunch of brand-new hand towels. Three boxes of books, paperbacks mostly, some legal textbooks, from when he thought he could pass the bar without law school. His few college textbooks. Mattresses, a bedframe, end tables, lamps, posters, and yes, a giant cardboard cutout of Jack Sikma. An antique globe, before Israel, with a lightbulb inside.

I began throwing the clothes into garbage bags I'd brought. For some lucky reason I didn't recognize a lot of them, and this made it easier; I didn't need to stop. But every so often, something would come up, a CB jacket or a woven belt, and for a second Will would inhabit that thing. His old backpack, still with the word FLAMER written and crossed out in Sharpie, sat flattened at the bottom of one soft brown box, and when I took it up I could see it moving on his shoulders, could see it sitting under his desk, could see him throwing it into the backseat of my car, could see his strange grimacing smile and his dark eyes, his dark lashes. He had scars all over his knuckles. Did he ever mention that?

I was trying to get the task done, but was fighting too many fronts. I was all too aware of the strangeness of actually doing something that Will had described, fictionally, in the book about us, and it was scaring me. I felt like I was being watched, like it was all too neat and circular to be happening randomly, unplanned. And he'd gotten it right, in the strangest way, that

feeling of being attacked by shadows, on every side, of breathlessness, of being beaten. I stuffed the clothes in four black garbage bags, and tossed the books, but I took a number of breaks, walking over to the Citgo for snacks, hiking around the area, up to the National Guard building, which indeed exists, just where he said it did.

There was a small box of maps and tickets and money from our trip, and I kept that.

There was a bass guitar, with no strings strung.

There was a box of puppets, all of them ancient, certainly something he'd inherited himself. Their heads were large, the size of a cat's, and their clothes were made of silk, harlequinned but filthy. I'd never seen them or heard anything about them. I put them in my car, the box of them.

I was there for three and a half hours, but I don't know why. There wasn't any reason for me to stay, really. I came to the conclusion that this was just punishment, that no good was being accomplished. I had my memories of Will already—I had a hundred pictures, easily, and a thousand objects that brought him back—and this was just unnecessary. I should have left everything there, should have allowed the owners of the storage facility to empty the room; no one could have objected. My going up there was doing nothing for anyone; it was a suffocating afternoon for me, when I felt the air become thinner, the breathing more difficult; I didn't trust my hands, and wanted to become an animal. I didn't like being a human, and thinking this was something humans should do, and though part of me had wrapped this up somehow in the idea of fairness and rightness and dignity, it was more correct to see this as the opposite, as playing in the slop of a dead man's past. Dignity would be to incinerate this stuff without a look, and to then rely on my own memories to do Will justice. I just hate all this work in the physical—the funerals, the clothes, the caskets and makeup and pulling of flesh! The writ-

ing of checks to those who handle the dead! I refuse. I will not do it again.

Will's possessions filled my car. The dumpster next to the unit was full, too, of mattresses and frames, Jack Sikma, pillows and cardboard. I would recycle some other day. I drove off, feeling a hollow around my eyes, knowing my hands were fists, wanting to swim, wanting to watch a lot of TV, wanting to masturbate for days, wanting to watch basketball on cable while drinking from a mug, wanting to have someone waiting for me at home, wanting a dog at the very least, wanting to go deep-sea diving, wanting to be seventeen again, before we left a time when our hands didn't know how to pack up the possessions of the dead, wanting Will to rise, to refind human form in the thicket of his things in my backseat, to speak again so I could knock his fucking head off.

On the way home that day I thought about the perfect parallel of Will's experience at Oconomowoc and mine, his fictional and metaphorical, mine so mundane and worthless. It's my guess that what Will was describing was his packing up of his original house, the one he and his mother lived in until her death. I'm not sure there was a storage unit involved, but my guess is that he was extrapolating, using his own unit as a model, and because he couldn't describe the shame in the disposal or sale of his own family's heirlooms and incidentals, he created a stand-in setting, and for his mother, another stand-in: Jack.

For there was no Jack. As long as I have known Will, there was no Jack. Throughout the book Will talks of Jack, and the death of Jack, a death that in some circuitous way leads to both the beating at Oconomowoc and to this trip. But both of those things are fictions. I have addressed the second fiction, and now will address the first.

I can't tell you how confused I was when I read that first paragraph, with all that shit about Jack. He's in the first sentence, and he's a lie. I thought at first that it was another cute little device

by the ghostwriter,* like the implication that Will is writing from the grave, but then found all the references to Jack within, and was shaken to my core. Will and I had always been a duo—there is comfort in a mutually acknowledged and exclusive duo—so you can imagine my frustration when I see this manuscript and throughout there is this third person, missing but present, named Jack, who is painted on glass, with the sun forever shooting through. He's a saint of some kind, better at everything—basketball, drafting, romance—and why the fuck why? I can't understand it. He is, like any creation of friend-fiction, an amalgam of a bunch of people we know, and then an idealization of that amalgam. Worse, Will gives him more than a few of his own Will-characteristics, like the tendency to drive slowly, checking the speedometer by giving a double thumbs-up.

I don't know why he would begin the book with such a premise, with the death of this third friend—or rather, I understand it all too well, and I'm disappointed in him. It's my opinion that the book didn't need the lies. This is something Mark Twain wrote, or Samuel Clemens wrote, or whatever: "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art." And I like that—it invites Will to just put the truth down, in order, and let the facts underline the absurdity in the situation, our motives, the results, everything. But Will chose instead to set things up in a more conventional way, and I guess it makes more sense, to some, to provide this kind of motivation for our trip, it thus seeming like a kind of flee-

* Though the text as printed before and after my interlude is as Will wrote it, there's no way, of course, he could have written that first page, being no longer with us, and therefore not close to a word processor. His manuscript was sent to the publisher before his second departure, for South America, and after his death there, they shopped the task of writing a neat opening paragraph to a writer of semi-fictions with a tendency toward the clever setup. The result speaks for itself.

ing. But the fact is that it wasn't. There is no correlation between the trip we took and any particular death, I don't think, but then again something must have given him that sense of urgency about things, and probably inspired the idea of such a quick but potent trip, with such tight parameters but with the outward gestures of his inner mix of confusion and love, the outward expression of an inward grace… but that's another issue, the issue of the sacrament. More on that later.

I just want you to understand, though, how much it could piss a person off to have him supplanted by a fictional dead person. It's already bad enough that Will's cartooned me to the point where I'm half-insane and half-insufferable and always puerile, but it's so much worse to have the object of his fraternal affections be some imaginary deceased person, who's apparently so soft and saintly that he couldn't survive in this world (the run-over by a truck seems to me a little heavy-handed, but whatever). It's a comfort, a small one, that at least you few people who will read my comments will know that there were always just two of us, and our motivations were self-made and without tragic source.

It's dark now and still raining. I forgot to even step outside today; I've scarcely left the couch. Living this way makes you feel both captive and complicit in your captivity. I could certainly walk outside, into the rain, and take some air in me. I could walk a bit on the porch, with its greasy-wet surface, with the rain still coming in vast armies never tiring. I could step from the porch onto the sand and continue, down to the water, and within a few hundred feet, walking straight to the ocean, I would come upon the body on the sand, which as I look out the window from the kitchen, I see has moved even closer, and now is equidistant between the house and the water, and now there's no chance it's there by chance.

* * *

## THURSDAY

You don't want to believe this, but it's still raining here. You're sick of hearing about it, I know, but still, isn't it kind of weird? Are you with me now, believing that this country is promoting some vast tourism-hoax, pretending to all the world that their winters are inhabitable? These Kiwis are becoming ever-more mysterious, ever-more intriguing, ever-more likely, I'm thinking, to be the small nation probably hiding other secrets, like perhaps human clones, alien life-form tissue, cave paintings pre-dating those in France, whatever. It's now been eight days, I think, and in that time we've had only six or seven damned daylight hours where the skies cleared. This morning the rain slowed for about twenty minutes, and in the mist and drizzle, blinking and shuddering, I took a walk.

I stepped down over the dunes, heading to the shore, and stopped. It was still there. It was closer this day than ever before—no more than fifty yards—but still I couldn't make out just what it was. It looked, to me, like a human form, wearing something black, a black uniform, a jumpsuit maybe, with his back turned to me. It was a man, or a large woman. Its back was fleshy and wide, and so I assumed it was a man but now am thinking it's just as likely a woman. It would be more likely, wouldn't it, for a woman to be wearing a unitard of some kind? I went inside, and stayed inside while the sky remained dry for another few minutes, still swallowed by the interminable grey.

This morning, when I cracked from my bed and opened the curtain, first I laughed. I knew it would rain, and there it was again, rain. So I guess I'm a little surprised. Surprised that I'm right that it's raining again. So I guess I actually figured it would stop. Then I wonder how the fuck I'll spend the day, when there's really nothing to see but some body on the beach, dead and getting soaked. But I have country music here—music kept by the

owners of the house, who are gone indefinitely. I have Glen Campbell here; have you heard that "Galveston" song? It's incredible. This stanza:

*Galveston, oh Galveston*
*I am so afraid of dying*
*Before I dry the tears she's crying*
*Before I watch your seabirds flying*
*In the sun, at Galveston, at Galveston*

The song itself is very sad but somehow soars. Otherwise there's some very early Johnny Cash here, and lots of Dolly Parton, and Roger Whittaker, and some Emmylou and Tammy. And then some Billy Joel, some Lionel Richie, a good deal of Tom Jones. The people who own this house, for the most part, know the good stuff, and the fact that Kiwis are listening to this much American country music is a comfort to me.

Today I want to talk about the idea of the trip in general. I will return to why and how Will's many fibs fit in soon enough. I mentioned before that the germ of the notion of the trip wasn't a result of any recent death. It wasn't even a result of some recent cash influx. That money he'd had for eight years, and I'll explain how later. The fact is, since he'd run into the money, he'd never touched it, not a cent, it was in some kind of mutual fund plan, unchanging, really, even while every other fund in the world was making 15 to 20 percent a year. He had about $82,000 and wanted to get rid of roughly half of it. How he came up with the number $32k I have no idea, but it still seemed insane, at first. Insane that he should feel so strongly about ridding himself of so much cash in such a strange way, and insane also because it was my opinion that if you're going to do it, to make a statement like that, sweeping and bold, why not go the entire way and give away every last penny? But maybe I'm picking nits here.

I do want to say that though the trip wasn't remotely my idea, I never objected to it. Later in this text, just before Will suppos-

edly collapses on the pavement of the Djamaa el-Fna—didn't happen—I am made to object to the whole concept, or at least the carrying through of it. But this never occurred. I knew, when Will first called me about this notion, the idea of this week, that he was serious, and I knew that he would go through with it, to the end, or further. We had been talking about something like this for a few years, about taking a week, starting on a plane, traveling incessantly but randomly, pushing every button we could, acting on every impulse. For Will, part of the point of the trip was a means to break through the many social boundaries he lived within, or felt he lived within. He'd been born Catholic, as I had, and I guess that mattered in some way to him, actively or subliminally. His mother had been protective of him, and thus he'd been protective of him, too. That is, because his mother sheltered him from the cruelties and unpleasantnesses of the world—everything from the nightly news to coarse words at home—he did the opposite of what we're inclined to believe a kid might do. Instead of rebelling, and seeking out the things kept from him, he kept himself from them. That's a long way of saying that Will was shy and leaned not toward the dark but toward the light.

When the trip begins, he'd never been to a strip club, he'd never seen a violent act in person, he'd scarcely left the Midwest. And so his idea of trying to get around the world in a week, while acting on impulses along the way, was quite a big deal, and achievable, I think, only because he could gather and compartmentalize his courage—and he did act courageously—within this one week. Because for him, approaching strangers, or interacting with them much at all, took some good measure of strength. He was absolutely shy—without being strange, or agoraphobic—and he didn't like this about himself. He longed to be more like I used to be, when I could walk into any room and ask anyone any question, would approach any woman anywhere and try anything in the way of conversation, without any sort of fear of rejection, like-

ly as it was. But Will feared rejection of any kind, and would never purposely put himself in the path of the word No. He feared bouncers, and low-level gatekeepers of any kind, and I know for a fact that he avoided everyone of the kind with great success. That's why—well, one of the reasons—why he was a reasonably happy person, at least on a day-to-day basis, at least on a person-to-person basis. He was friendly. He smiled a lot. He looked you in the eye when he shook your hand. He patted you on the back when there was fun being had. He knew how to relish something that was going well. And things had been going well for him, for a number of reasons, in a number of ways, and thus this trip was born not from tragedy—or rather, from a death—but from I would like to call the shame of contentment.

I knew generally why he wanted to do this, and knew that he'd eventually write about it, even though, again, all the fictions were a surprise to me. Yes, I do object to much of this original text, because frankly I just don't know why the little bastard—and he was shorter than the 6'1" he claims—didn't just tell the damned story the way it was. I want to find and slap around the people who told him—and it must have been someone; he never would have found it insufficient himself—that the story needed embellishment, needed all this background, all this Jack and Oconomowoc, a mother with Alzheimer's, all of it as fictional as the day is long and drenched with grey filthy rain. It is and has been my vocal opinion for twenty-two months now, since the book first made its way into a semi-circulated final form, that a story about two friends leaving Milwaukee for Senegal to give away $32,000 would be good enough, back story be damned. I thought the story, as it unfolded, was, for one thing, a rather neat and tidy allegory for any sort of intervention, whether by governments or neighbors—but mostly the idea of humanitarian aid, on whatever scale, micro or macro—from NGOs to panhandlers and passersby. The story, when we lived it, was about economics, and

about desperation, and about inequity brought to levels that are untenable. And more than that, as I will come to reveal, it was about what we called, in Sunday school, a sacrament. But more on that later.

On the surface the story is ludicrous, and all of its terms are absurd. It's absurd, I believe, that humans can travel around the world in a matter of days. It's absurd that some have the funds—as we did—to do so, while thousands go without necessities every day. It's ridiculous that we still would go on such a trip, thinking it justifiable that if we gave back along the way, all would be somehow rectified. And of course it's without logic or any sense of rightness that Will and I would be in a position to do this, given our unremarkableness in so many ways. That we would have this idea, and be able to act on it, simply because of the location of our birth, is itself absurd. In the face of this absurdity, there is Will, who not only turns to face it, but dives into it, with his $32,000, and with the intention of personally addressing the inequity, not from a distance, but from the nearest possible proximity—by handing large and random sums money to as many people as possible.

But in telling about the dissemination, Will disappoints. If he was going to do it, and write about it, why fictionalize so many things? The odd thing is that I know for a fact that Will wanted more than anything, at the outset at least, that everyone should know that we actually did this, did precisely what is described in the book—stopped alongside the roads of West Africa and Eastern Europe, unloading $32,000 in cash, in local currency. He wanted to indicate that it could be done, and that it could be good. But even while we traveled he began to have misgivings about writing about this in a nonfictional format. He feared what people would say, to tell you the truth—he feared that people would accuse him of being reckless, misguided, stupid, showy, preachy, whatever. There were a thousand pitfalls to writing it as fact, because quite frankly, from a distance, it appears to be a monumentally silly idea.

But the strange thing about this business is that nonfiction, when written well, is unequivocally more powerful than fiction, because if all details and evocations are equal—meaning, if the writing brings alive the people and places described with equal skill, then the story that is true will evoke a stronger response in the reader, for the same reasons that we feel stronger about a real person than a fictional person, or a person we've met in person, versus a person we haven't. I am a fan and reader of the occasional fiction, but a real book, like *Guns and Germs and Steel*, describing the movements of actual people, and their deaths, just has to hit us at a more visceral level. I am here to express the opinion, no one's but mine—not Will's, not this publisher's, not the wretched ghostwriter's—that those who prefer fiction to nonfiction prefer game shows to the news. It's a decadent mind, a mind that has known ennui and passed through it to something more dangerous, that wants fictional contraptions over the more difficult—sometimes more obvious and clear, other times utterly incomprehensible—truth of fact. But this is the opinion of a man who knows nothing, and it's an opinion that I throw at you to make you angry. Anyway, I read news and look for and collect facts because so far they haven't added up to anything. I had pictured, as a younger man, that the things I knew and would know were bricks in something that would, effortlessly, eventually, shape itself into something recognizable, meaningful. A massive and spiritual sort of geometry—a ziggurat, a pyramid. But here I am now, so many years on, and if there is a shape to all this, it hasn't revealed itself. But no, thus far the things I know grow out, not up, and what might connect all these things, connective tissue or synapses, or just some sense of order, doesn't exist, or isn't functioning, and what I knew at twenty-seven can't be found now.

I miss the things he left out.

I miss the time in Senegal, near Saly, when a group of young men, twelve or so of them, converged on us, as we did a tight

three-point turn at a dead-end. We will have no idea what they were looking for, and I know why Will left the episode out, but it would have underlined how often things were genuinely fraught.

I miss the fact that we actually trounced those boys near Mbuu; we could both play basketball, Will and I, and we wiped that dusty court with eight of them at a time.

I don't miss the old woman in Marrakech, the Resistance survivor, who was fabricated. We were alone in that bar, and nothing happened. Nothing much happens in bars, and we will not make that mistake again.

I miss the time in Riga when we watched the street performers, two young dancers, no older than eight, do some kind of samba on the street, in the dead of winter. We gave them about $100.

I miss the time, on the flight from Dakar to Casablanca, when a pair of siblings, sitting next to me—Will was on the other side of the aisle—asked to borrow my walkman, which I lent to them. They were wealthy, each studying English in Morocco, and they loved my CDs: Air and Tricky, but not Reverend Horton Heat, which the woman described with a twirl of her finger around her ear. I didn't know they did that in Africa, too. At some point, while her brother closed his eyes while wearing my headphones, I had this conversation with the woman, who was young and allowed me to flirt with her.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Kinshasa Congo. You know where this is?"

"Of course," I said.

The woman was still smiling. Her teeth were startlingly white and without flaws or gaps.

"Your teeth," I said, "they are remarkable."

She thanked me.

"Did you ever hear," I said, "about Mobuto, how he wanted to export an 'all-natural toothpaste' because the Congolese teeth were so superior to the rest of the world?"

She had heard this. She was a fan of Mobuto, which was disconcerting, so I changed the subject. She asked if I was married, and I said no. She asked if she could buy my walkman from me, and I said yes. Which she did, after customs, and after I kissed her cheek, which smelled like simple powder.

A few small corrections:

**MO AND THOR:** there were twin girls in Will's life, but they were babies when this trip took place—no more than two years old. Did he mention them on this trip? He didn't once. Did he write notes or postcards to anyone? He didn't. When we were traveling, he was entirely there, in Africa, in Latvia, because there was little time to think backward, to think of anyone at home. That's the simple and unvarnished truth. I would venture to say that even if Will had kids himself, a wife and twin daughters he'd nicknamed Mo and Thor, or Thor and Odin, for this one week his mind would be seeing, doing and seeing, and might not rest upon them more than once or twice. This is the truth, and it's either unromantic or infinitely more romantic than you can imagine.

**RAYMOND:** His name was Sean.

**$80:** When Abass asked for $80 after accompanying us to Saly, we gave him the $80, and we thought it was too bad, because we wanted to give him more. I didn't want to give him anything. As he walked away, though, Will chased after him and gave him another $500 or so. "You can't penalize him for being unsubtle," he said.

**YOU SHALL KNOW OUR VELOCITY:** I really loathe that title, and that's why I've changed it. I'm sure Will didn't come up with it, because his notebooks weren't labeled as such. I've retitled the book in accordance with a theory that I will lay down as soon as I get a chance.

Good people, everywhere we went our plans were compromised. We were limited to our access to Will's money by the banks and their hours, by what we could and couldn't travel with

on planes, by our own fatigue. At the same time, our urges were sometimes the wrong urges. Driving between Casablanca and Marrakech, we wanted more than anything to pull off the highway and explore the red city of Benguérir, and we did pull off, momentarily. The place hadn't changed in a thousand years, it seemed, and we really thought we'd be seeing something new there; we'd be swallowed up in a good way. We sat at the roadside, watching as a man selling asparagus was about two hundred yards ahead of us, on the gravelly shoulder. We had a few minutes to debate, because the man was walking toward us, and would soon enough be upon us, wanting us to buy his rancid asparagus or something. I was in the driver's seat.

"I want to go into the city," I said.

"Like, walk around and everything?" Will said.

"Yeah, walk around, meet people, get invited into someone's house for dinner, sleep on someone's floor in exchange for some pens and batteries. Something like that."

"But then it'll be a day before we get to Marrakech. Two days till we leave Morocco—"

You know where this conversation went. I just peeled and drove into Marrakech, where eventually Will has his most pronounced breakdown, on the floor of the Djamaa el-Fna, which did not happen, unless he did it while I was watching this one monkey-performer steal hats from members of the audience. People like us just don't emote in the way he describes. I have never seen Will cry, though I know he has, and I have never been near him when he's done anything like this, and if there were ever someone who would not bawl in public, on the ground, in front of strangers—especially not in front of strangers, for it was their judgment he worried about most—it was Will.

Really, why do we disguise these true things, why do we take the actual events of a life, which I would expect to be transcribed with art but without fabrication, and distort and dilute and

obscure them? Why this blurry fiction? I don't, I should say, find his book blurry, or even vague—for it tells the plain truth eighty-five percent of the time, day to day, of what we did. But when pressed to explain just what about the trip made it so worthy of transcription and dissemination, instead of breathing life into the story, he simply diverted attention, threw in random cookie-cutter background tragedy, and embellished. I find the technique kind of cheap. And given Will's enormous sense of urgency, his awkward but buoyant spirit, that he fell back on this is, to my eyes, a shame, and an uncourageous way to leave this earth. I realize how difficult the world makes it for those who want to lead and talk about unusual lives in a candid way, in a first-person way. I understand that to sublimate a life in fictions, to spread the ashes of one's life over a number of stories and books, is considerably better-accepted, and protects one greatly from certain perils—notably, the rousing of the anger or scorn of all the bitches of the world (more often male than female). But then again, I don't know—maybe he wasn't afraid of that sort of thing. Maybe he just wanted to fictionalize for his own entertainment. Maybe he found it artful. I don't know. But I do know that while we traveled, his idea was this would be an experiment and would make its way onto the page unadorned.

That was why we didn't sleep! We were, goddamnit, trying to live a week that would be worth documenting, worth writing down, minute by minute, so for him to embellish is counter to our aims, and I think a great betrayal of what might have been a great thing. The idea we came up with, well before we left, was something we coined Performance Literature. Excuse the use of that second word, because I realize it's presumptuous. Also, excuse the first word, and the term in general. I know better than you how fatuous it is. But it is accurate, and concise, in that what we had planned was a book conceived, then acted out, then transcribed, then ostensibly made into art. Thus, our actions in Africa and

onward were predetermined to be transferred to the page, and we were therefore actors performing in a book not yet written. And we found this to be a new sort of concept. I can't guarantee that it hasn't been done a hundred times before, but I haven't personally seen it.

But then again, there are a number of ways one can take personal experience and make it into nonfiction. (For now we'll ignore the semi-autobiographical stuff.) The first is to decide, years after the lived life, to write it down. If I am eighty and decide to write about a summer when I was sixty, that's what I'm talking about. It's far after the fact, and not premeditated. Second is the travelogue, where one goes somewhere, intending to take notes, to later write something coherent about a place. But in this case, the observer is, more often than not, passive, writing chiefly about his or her surroundings, and the people he or she meets. The writer reacts, instead of acts. Well, I suppose they do act, in that they have to do the traveling, choose the destinations, and so forth, but again, largely they are observant cargo, being shuttled from place to place, notebook in hand.

We weren't passive observers, we were active characters. It was our motivations that drove the story. It was our actions that would be of equal or greater interest than our surroundings, and the two would no doubt play off each other constantly, essentially. And lest you think that doing so, traveling and interacting with the intent to write it down, would, via Heisenberg, necessarily influence the very interactions we were documenting, well, then you're missing the point. Here's why: Because we had the stated intent of documenting our trip, and because our minute-to-minute motivations were to act in a way that would deserve documenting, it's therefore not accidental but essential that our presence influence the outcome of events, and that our knowledge of such so-called perils were at the forefront of our minds, not buried within.

That said, we didn't think as often as we'd expected to about

the transferability to the page of what we were doing. We tried to be exciting, but knowing what's interesting while you're doing it is sometimes very difficult, and in the event that you find yourself hours from anyone or anything, in the middle of the Latvian countryside, for example, you have no choice but to do something stupid, like driving with your tongue. Which we did on more than one occasion.

The other term we coined was Conceptual Life, which I guess isn't all that different from Performance Literature, with the one chief distinction being that Conceptual Life doesn't depend on the participants planning to write about the experience afterward. The liver of a Conceptual Life sets forward, ahead of time, certain goals and a framework within which he or she will live. Much like the artist who pledges to spend a month on a platform atop a telephone pole, for one example. The act of living, of eating and sleeping and defecating, is all included in the larger concept set forward—in this case, of living an elevated and observed life. As long as the liver doesn't leave the pole, all of his actions are still small marks upon the canvas he's sized and stretched.

Now I'll stop. I've been drinking vodka and Orangina, trying to put myself to sleep, and now it's working. I guess the last thing I'll say on this subject is that whatever you take away from this book, his text and mine—and I have no idea what you're taking away—please take away this one thing about the trip:

It happened, and it was good. It was good because it happened.

## FRIDAY

Today was a day without rain and I walked out onto the deck at dawn and it was magnificent. The sun popped whole at 7 and kept rising, faster than I could track. At about noon, after I read some local paper on the deck, feet up and face tanning slowly, I heard a voice, a woman's. I turned to see a woman with a bountiful head

of hair, colored somewhere between blond and ivory, racing away from a face that looked familiar in the way that classically beautiful faces look. You feel you've seen them before, but what seems familiar is the demonstration of perfect symmetry. She was talking but I had missed the first few sentences and so gambled.

"Hello!" I roared, to make up with enthusiasm any error I'd made in response. Had she asked to borrow a rake or bag of rice? It didn't matter. A hearty hello would break through and at least color me friendly, if hard of hearing.

"Hello yourself," she said. And then I noticed that she was holding a hose. "Is this yours?"

I looked at the hose. I had never seen it before. It was brown.

"I have no idea," I said.

She owned the house next door, or rather she and her husband did, but she frankly didn't know where her husband was. Were they divorced? No, she laughed. Separated? No, no, she said. But he is a strange man. He disappears for many months at a time, she said.

She was lovely. Lovely is a word I usually use when commenting on my nieces, dressed as bridesmaids or for proms—it's a word for a young flower, or a view of rolling hills gauzed with mist. But I looked over at Sonje—that was her name, and I was thrilled that I'd caught it and pocketed it in time to lock it—and I thought of the word lovely. She was about forty, wearing overalls and a gardening hat of straw, and had those kneepads on, for enthusiastic gardeners with bad knees. Everything she wore was blue, except for a scarf around her neck, the color of margarine.

I explained my presence, going a little vague on the details, calling myself a researcher working on a very demanding project, due in two weeks. She was intrigued but respectful of my privacy. That, or she was bored silly and was glad to leave the details alone. She smiled at me in a way I hadn't been smiled upon a while. It was a sympathetic smile, which I'll take in a pinch.

"How long are you out at the house this time?"

"Just a few days," she said. "I have work back in the city. I have to get back late Sunday."

"To Auckland?"

"Yes."

I was trying to get a grip on her accent. It was not British, but it sounded more British than it did New Zealand… ish.

"What day is it today?" I asked, and hated myself for asking.

"Thursday. Don't tell me you're one of those."

What did that mean? I didn't know. I said:

"If I was, I wouldn't tell you," and confused myself more. I didn't know what she'd meant, and I have no idea what I meant in response. It was a wash, and we moved on. When the sun had appeared today I felt awake again, felt locked in battle with the sun, and felt good about that. I'd felt strong, and when I'd seen Sonje I felt so much stronger, but what was coming out of my mouth?

"Have you seen that thing out there?" I said, pointing to the black shape on the beach. Sonje was lovely, but already I was back to the shape. I couldn't help it. She turned and cupped her hand over her eyes.

"I thought it was a log, but I suppose you know better," she said.

She brought to mind English actresses. She had a straight back, was thin without being shapeless, and had a nose that I associate with aristocracy in film—straight, small, but strong. Her voice projected like an actress's, an actress who was also a wit, who could tell stories, who could make a group of children laugh but who also knew dozens of filthy limericks.

"We'll have to investigate it together," she said and I almost flew. I was so shaky in the head that I blurted something about dinner and she accepted, as long, she said, as we ate early, around five in fact, because she was expecting a phone call, from Amsterdam, at eight. Then she went back to her hose, and waved,

though I hadn't moved.

I went back inside, determined to get as much down as possible, in the five hours before I'd knock on her door and we'd drive around the bay, and through the twenty or so turns, all coastal, to Whitianga—the closest town for a good dinner out. And now I'm here, and what I want to talk about is the idea of the sacrament. I want to explain why I've retitled this formerly-mistitled book, and the explanation starts in Copenhagen, at the airport chapel.

There was a priest there, an Episcopal priest, heavy-set, with a neat beard of black and grey, and wire-rimmed glasses. Around him were a group of travelers, mostly businessmen, and one family of six, all Indian. Will and I walked in, having time to kill; neither of us had ever been to an airport chapel. The priest, who was American for no apparent reason, was talking to them about the uselessness of what he was doing. He was noting, and I paraphrase: "What I'm doing here, and what the church is doing here, and to some degree what you're doing here, is not of much utility. But you do not need me to tell you, while here, what to do. You are doing what your soul tells you to do, without my help or the help of God. The Bible, in some part, is a handbook for those who might forget our obligations to each other. And those obligations are obvious, and constant, even though they become more obvious, more pronounced and more urgent and immediate at a time such as this. [His voice carried, and was a beautiful voice, I should add. It was obvious that he was a singer of some kind, and one who sang from deep in his chest, his core.] What we are doing is much like the sacrament I will be handing to you shortly. For what is the sacrament? It is not in itself nourishment; it is, rather, an outward symbolic act of an inward grace. It is the external, social demonstration of how we feel within. It is not practical and without it we would feel the same way; it is a reminder only, and a relatively unnecessary one at that. But that does not mean it is dispensable, nor does it mean it is unbeautiful."

This was the first time I'd ever heard this word, unbeautiful, though since hearing it I have stolen it and now it is mine. It was clear he was a theologian, a scholar, but one with a taste for the irreverent. Will and I knew, with a brief glance out of the corners of our eyes, that our own Catholic priests wouldn't agree with his assessment of this particular sacrament as in some way unnecessary, but we liked his style. We always loved going to the Presbyterian church Youth Night, wherein we were given the run of the church basement, full of pool tables, ping pong, pinball machines and couches, in exchange for listening to twenty minutes of the minister's thoughts, which were, we always had to admit, a lot more applicable and comprehensible than what we got at our own church. And as I was listening to the airport priest, I was loving the notion of the sacrament, or rather was quickly forming my own version of it, a secular version of the sacrament, because the only way I ever could make it through any Mass, or any Youth Night, was to take whatever message they were sending and bend it, sometimes beyond reason, to give some holy weight to the things I was already doing or already believed. In that airport chapel, I nudged Will, and he smiled. I want to think he knew what I was thinking about, but we never had a chance, afterward, to talk about it, because he was late for his flight to Mexico City, and afterward all we had a chance to do was shake hands and say good bye. (He nodded a few times at me, like he was taking my picture, mapping my body, and then backed away. It was the last time we saw each other.)

But what I was doing was connecting the idea of the sacrament to what we were doing that week, on the road, with those strangers. First, what we did was intensely ritualistic, in that the procedure was very similar each time, and involved the observance of certain rules, namely that the recipients should seem needing of the funds, and that, whenever possible, they should be asked for directions, given them, or should have helped to take us along our

journey. Second, the exchange of the money was much, if I may be so bold, like the exchange of the Holy Eucharist, in that in each case it is preceded by a brief and seldom-changing dialogue. In the case of the Holy Eucharist, the recipient is told of the symbolism of the communion wafer, and accepts this symbolism and reinforces his or her Catholic faith, by ingesting the wafer. In our case, we asked directions, and were pointed where we were already headed, and the recipient, by acknowledging the significance of the funds, accepts the symbolism of the money, and the symbolism of our giving it to them, and perhaps even reinforces his or her faith a little, too, in this case a humanistic faith, which I personally find even more difficult to keep…

I am being called away. It's Sonje. She's knocking on the glass—it's 5 already, gah—that separates this home from the air outside, and I am going to answer that door.

## SATURDAY

Before I make some notes on the preceding passage, let me first say that Sonje makes an extraordinary bundt cake. When I left you last, she was knocking, wholly unannounced, on my sliding porch door of tempered glass. I was surprised but not all that surprised, because when you're one of a pair at the cusp of something brief but strong you know when someone might arrive. Her hair was down, and her hair is a thing of such extravagance that I sucked in a quick breath. I hadn't seen her with it down yet, and it was like something painted by a Wyeth, any of them—I thought first of Helga, because wasn't she Andrew's neighbor, and wasn't her hair, though rust-colored, rendered strand by strand?

She drove us to Whitianga, her Volvo tight around the coast. She drove like a lunatic; she knew the road and its many turns, and even in the rain she slowed for nothing. We ate on the second floor of a casual place, tables without cloths, where we both had

sea bass, after I confirmed—I had to make sure with the manager because the waiter couldn't verify anything—that it wasn't Chilean.

At dinner, in the soft light from the room's corners, Sonje looked older. Her eyes, when she smiled, pulled a dozen tiny lines from her temples, I liked her more and though the food was plain it tasted fantastic. Her mouth was still full-lipped and while a baby downstairs wailed I wanted to be alone with her in her house, to see how she arranged her pillows. She was a banker, she said, or used to be. She'd also been a lawyer, almost a judge, and once worked in Connecticut for the World Wrestling Federation. She liked professional wrestling a lot.

"We have to go see it," she said. We were now talking about the shape on the beach.

I didn't want to.

"I can't understand why," she said. "You don't seem like someone who'd be afraid of a shape on a beach."

Back in her house, with all the lights turned on, she gave me a tour; the house was full of outsider art, much of it American, and African sculpture, which always looks the same to me, indistinguishable from anything you'd get at a flea market, but again, I know nothing. We walked in and quickly out of her bedroom and I understood but by the time we were in the second guest room, and she was pointing out the view from the shower, I couldn't hold back and from behind I wrapped my arms around her and sucked on her neck.

This morning we walked over the dunes and down to where the beach was flat. The shape was no more than fifty yards away. I stopped and squinted at the shape. Sonje waited for me.

"You notice the colors in this country are so bright?" she said. "I was in Massachusetts last year, in February. There weren't any colors. It's not that there was snow, because there wasn't. But it was monochromatic anyway. Just a kind of grey-brown every-

where. And I know it was winter and all, but I still missed New Zealand. It's a kind of cartoon palette down here, wouldn't you say? The ocean is blue and the hills are green. They keep the good colors handy."

"You don't think it's a body, do you?" I asked.

She smiled and shook her head.

She hadn't let me stay long the night before. We groped each other while standing in the shower, and for a time with her sitting on the sink, but she'd wrapped things up.

"That was needed," she said, and led me to the door.

I couldn't concentrate when I woke up, knowing she'd come over after breakfast to take me down to the shape. She had her theories about it, which she wouldn't divulge, and she wanted to prove herself right. I hadn't slept much; I fell asleep after getting home, but already the bed was stupid with just me in it, and I had to use the vodka and Orangina trick again, which brought me awake at six, before the sunrise, which came without rain.

Sonje was wearing shorts, blue plastic sandals, a long-billed baseball hat and her margarine scarf. We walked to the shape. It was bigger as we walked closer. If it was a person, it was a very large person, at least three hundred pounds. Still the body was laying on its side, but now perhaps a third of it was beneath the sand, and as we walked closer, the smooth blackness of the shape became dotted with sand, and what seemed to be hair. The shape was wearing black everywhere. I stopped again.

"Hand, you're being irrational now," Sonje said, and she took my fingers in hers and continued.

Within seconds we were upon it, and the smell was upon us. A farm smell, thick and meaty.

"I had a hunch," she said. "There's the snout."

"I didn't know pigs got that big," I said. The thing was enormous, the size of a cow.

"Beautiful thing, though. Look at that coat. It's still in good

shape."

"Don't touch it!" I yelled. She was leaning down to touch the damned thing.

"I'll wash up afterward," she said.

And she did, and I was there.

**SUNDAY**

Sonje has a great walk. It's slinky, in that her feet precede her shoulders, and she has a fluidity that's reassuring. We played Hide and Seek last night, we really did, and it was one of the most oddly intense things I've ever done. We took it very seriously, and because neither of us knew my rented house too well, there were many places to hide. Afterward, still walking around the house, we drank most of a bottle of red wine the owners had left in the pantry, and eventually were laying on the couch, where we were temporarily too tired to move.

I'd been telling her about my work on Will's book, and about that trip, and about Will generally. She asked if I missed him and I said yes, reflexively.

"That's normal," she said, and finished the wine. We were

drinking from the bottle.

"I don't miss my brother," she said.

I hadn't known that she'd lost a brother.

"He drowned two years ago," she said, taking off her socks and placing them in a bowl of oranges I'd arranged earlier in the day, to impress her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I think I'll miss him eventually," she said, "but I'm not going to force it."

It seemed like a perfectly logical answer that would have horrified most people. It was an answer that freed me, completely, too, because I haven't missed Will in any familiar way yet. Will's own account of his tears over Jack were a mystery to me, because I hadn't shed many over Will. Maybe it hasn't been long enough. There were times during our friendship when we didn't talk for months, even six months at a time, and so far it hasn't felt any different. Or maybe I just always figured he'd die young. That's the most true I can be, but I have no idea why that's the case.

"But it's awful, I think, to die like that, in a dirty river," Sonje said.

"Where did your brother die?"

"Out on that bay," she said, and pointed through the dark window, past our reflections, where we could make out the pink horizontal line of the breaking surf.

"Jesus," I said. If I had lost a brother here I would not return to this beach. I didn't tell her this.

"I don't come here for any ghoulish reason," she said. "But I must say that it just doesn't really move me one way or another. I don't look out into that water and see Adam. He's not some body for me any more. Even if a body like his did wash up someday, I wouldn't see that body as Adam. Does that sound strange?"

I shook my head and kissed her shoulder, half-hoping that she would adjust it. Where it was, it was digging into my sternum

but I hadn't wanted to interrupt her.

"My point," she said, "is that for me there's a difference between drowning alone, while sailing, on a clear bay, and dying in a brown river full of people. And with your mother! It's so much worse."

"Oh lord, that didn't happen," I said, blurted really, and it occurred to me that I haven't told you this, either.

Will's mom had been gone eight years when we left for Dakar. This is a fiction that I can't be angry about, and one of which admittedly I could have relieved this text long ago. I have been writing this, as promised, in order, no looking back, and though I'd meant, time and again, to explain this part to you, I didn't, and now I wonder if I'm somehow complicit in this particular fiction. Will's mother was never available for phone calls while we were traveling. My shock at reading the first lines of this book, those giving birth to the fictional Jack, was only matched by my surprise and then sympathy when, a few years, it's implied that Will's mom was alive and present at the point when Will was lost in Colombia. It's my guess that even the ghostwriter was fooled at this point, because I have no doubt that Will wrote every last word, throughout this text, of the passages that render various conversations with his mother. I remember where I was—riding the Northwestern community train from the city to Milwaukee, on the upper level, trying not to touch the window, which was frozen—when I read the first conversation between Will and his mom, dead ten or so years. I dropped the book and my throat went coarse. I didn't know, for so many years, that he was still so close to the grief. Or perhaps he wasn't; perhaps he had to have the distance he did to feel comfortable rendering her again, resurrecting her in this form. But I couldn't help picturing him, writing the story, with a pen on a series of spiral-bound unruled pages, and wanting to be able, as he did so, to tell his mother about the trip. She would have loved it all. She was a great lady; the story

about Great America is true, though of course it was just the three of us, without Jack. She was a woman that always teetered close to the sort of parent who tries too hard to be liked by the young, though she never went over that line. She was comfortable with her age, with her role, and I came to understand that she went to arcades and lasertag with us not because she had to prove her understanding of us, but because she plain liked that kind of shit. And so there she is, sort of, in these brief conversations, while her son traveled through Africa and while she was slowly slipping into senility. (Another fabrication: in life, she died of complications from surgery on a lymph node.) But even when she was scolding or harping, Will would have found solace in hearing her voice again, and it does sound like her, precisely so, even though I could hear little of her as I read, so preoccupied was I with this new insight into Will, and how badly, it was obvious, it was breathtaking, he wanted her back.

As would any mother's son, especially if that son was the only child. His journal from his days after Cuernavaca, in Colombia, etc, incomplete as it is, also includes his mother as his constant companion. I don't want to think that Will was losing himself or his mind; I prefer to believe that he was fictionalizing different things for different reasons, but anyway, only broken men and dictators can be made from the separation from their sole parent, and if that only parent is his mother, the extremes would seem more likely. So of all of Will's fabrications, I want to emphasize that it's this one that I understand the most, as much as it slashes my heart diagonally. We do know this: Jack is there so Will could write about pain. I see his mother every time he mentions Jack, and every time he lies awake, mouthing the words of a silent debate, he's giving voice to his outrage that he's still separated from his mom, and that they were picked on, singled out, when they had no one but each other to begin with. But this is just a guess. Another: I think the book as a whole is a sacrament of sorts, a

physical representation, of too many things otherwise ephemeral—a social demonstration of a partly unknowable internal state, a messy combination of Twain's shapeless string of absurdities, and something like that state of secular grace I was talking about earlier. Maybe all books are sacraments. Do we achieve a state of elevation, as we read and write? That's probably a stretch.

There are things I probably won't and can't understand about him, and why he did what he did. You'll continue to read now, knowing what I knew, what is true and what is less true, and I hope that his account still holds the power he intended. I'm of the opinion that its power might be increased, and am of the view that had he stayed straight from the beginning… well, you know my opinion about that. I believe in fact, and I believe in the plain truth told wholly—that the truth retold can be a net thrown around life at a certain time and place, encompassing all within, and that people can go out there, live as actors, work within their staging ground, do so with a soft heart; I want others to go out in the world with an idea, with intentions and means, and come back with a story about how their actions affected the world and how they themselves were shaped by the results. I have a belief that such endeavors can improve the world, however recklessly, especially when these people go forward and interact, give, solve, change the situations they encounter—and also, even those with no intentions of recording their actions. There's nothing to be gained from passive observance, the simple documenting of conditions, because, at its core, it sets a bad example. Every time something is observed and not fixed, or when one has a chance to give in some way and does not, there is a lie being told, the same lie we all know by heart but which needn't be reiterated. Friends, I urge you to find us hopeful. I urge you to find that we tried something, knowing nothing of the results. I remind you that we did freeze on a Latvian beach, which is pictured somewhere in these pages, we froze our fingers

and knees and ears, in order to tape almost a thousand dollars in a rubber tire. And there is a chance that this money will not find the right new owner, and there is a chance that it's still there, full of mold or now the home for some disease-carrying insect, and there is a chance that everything we did was incorrect, but stasis is itself criminal for those with the means to move, and the means to weave communion between people.

## MONDAY

Sonje went back to Auckland yesterday, to the house she shares with her husband, who she hasn't seen in two and a half months. I leave today and have things to do in Phuket when I get there. I will be good.

The pig is gone, the one that washed ashore behind this house. Today the morning was dry and clear again, and I stepped onto the deck, and where the pig was, there was just a low mound. I'm not sure if someone buried it there, or if the sand just built up around it.

The pig symbolizes nothing.