

Spiel

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To Toni, my first reader.

To the memory of Peter Davis.

*nunc per ludum
dorsum nudum
fero tui sceleris*

O FORTUNA!
(CARMINA BURANA)

—Want to play a game? says the blind woman.

—A game?

—A game. Do you want to play a game?

—What game?

—Is that all you do? Ask questions?

—Who are you?

—See what I mean? Nothing but questions! It doesn't matter who I am. All you have to do is tell me. Do you want to play a game or don't you? Yes or no? *No* is simple. I walk away. You never see me again.

—And *yes*?

—That's all part of the game.

She's perfect. The tiny crooked limp in her smile that's hiding a secret on her tongue; her sphinxish head – intense and wise and solid, with some great riddle tucked inside its lip. She is all perfection, a distillation of all the beauty I have ever known. Here are Annie Rivers' hands. Veronika Lenz's earlobes. And here Miss Straw, Year Seven Goddess, her very standing so kindly that it does not matter that she is taller than me because she stoops a little, so that I am no longer as small as I am. Her blindness is the antidote to my sickness. In her invitation I can sense the architect I am about to become. She fulfils the promise that has made me pack my small bag and come to this tired old city at the end of the world where the angel of history sets right the time, draws together the rubble of catastrophe. In her I have walked into my very own building, the arched doorways of my childhood crumbling about me. This is the space I carry in my head, the template against which I measure everything, the song I hear. I cannot just let her slip by. There is nothing else for it.

—Okay, I say. I'll play.

New Year's Eve

1

In the parable by Kafka, the master orders his horse be brought from the stables. The servant is confused, so the master takes to the horse by himself. A trumpet sounds and the master asks the servant what it means. But the servant has heard nothing. At the boundary of the estate the servant asks the master where he is going. I don't know, says the master, just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it's the only way I can reach my goal. Says the servant: So you know your goal? Yes, says the master, I've just told you. Out of here – that's my goal.

It's on one of the withering dog days after Christmas while I am away that my mother calls with the news. I arrive to her message late on the day of my return, midnight maybe, bearing a brace of rabbits, arrows snapped into their cheeks and kidneys, the spare bowstring twisted around their necks, ash on my face. The power is down because of the fires that have burned out half the state forest in the high country up near the Hydro. The high-tension wires that bring the smooth hum of civilisation to Melbourne have fizzled and crumbled. It'll be days until it all comes back. It's not the first time. There will be suburbs that

have to wait a whole week before the power is on. The people in them will complain for the duration and the newspapers and television will repeat their outrage for as long as the darkness and the heat last, for as long as it takes the meat and butter to go rancid and for as long as the powerless have no television. After that all will be forgotten. Civilisation will return.

Death has been on my mind since the ash settled and smeared on my face.

Death is on my mind when Veronika sets the news on me directly. She swings it blunt. Hans Kuhn is dead. Onkel Hans. My mother's brother.

By the morning I have packed my father's old brown suitcase. I take a cab to the airport. I tell no one that I am leaving. Certainly not Veronika. I mouth the words of leaving to Annie Rivers, the Annie I can only imagine. Annie of the waters. Annie of the ash. I consider writing to some university bureaucrat to cancel my enrolment in the architect's degree I have been floating through on and off for ten years, but I don't follow through. It seems right to just slip away. By the time Veronika will even wonder if I'm gone I am already transiting in Singapore. Next is Heathrow, a train to Gatwick and another hour on a Fokker to Hamburg.

I've not seen Onkel Hans more than twice in ten years, not since he moved up to the New South Wales coast somewhere, a place with a river and beaches, some fishing town that swells in the summer with backpackers and families. Nevertheless, he still inhabits a large kindly space in my childhood and I seem to occupy some sympathetic opposite for him. I start getting Christmas cards from him when Veronika moves in with me. He must think we are some kind of family and deserving of the respect that accords. I never send any back. I'm not the kind to

send Christmas cards. I know he is unsentimental enough not to be offended by this.

When I am nine I steal a copy of *The History of World Cities* from the mobile library. It's a fat glossy volume, but because it's winter I have the luxury of tucking it under my jumper. I sweat it all the way home then stash it under my mattress. At night I take the book out and read it with a torch under the covers, remembering the names of ancient streets and rivers, the gods worshipped at temples now crumbled.

The first ever city is ten thousand years old. It has no name. Its people did not write. The name *Çatalhöyük* only comes later. *Höyük* in Turkish means a mound of debris. The place is defined by its desolation. There is no private space. There are no streets. Each building adjoins the others in a warren. Holes are left in ceilings, between walls. It is a graduation from the cave, or a weird-dream approximation of it. The dead are buried under the floor, in the hearth. Their ghosts haunt the most intimate spaces of the house, domestic wraiths disturbing the journey of the living into the future.

The last city in the book comes after a catalogue of all those that were never built, ideal cities, dream cities. That last city is Nagasaki. On one page is a seventeenth-century map of the city with a legend in Japanese and some full-sailed Dutch ships in the harbour. The facing page is a full colour photograph; the city has been flattened into an orange desert, obliterated by the atomic blast. I cannot imagine the survival of anything, but here, in the foreground, on the trace of a road, is a man with a horse and cart, his black whip rising into the air, about to give a lazy, pitiful snap over the beast's ear, coming from nowhere, travelling to nowhere. In it I see the coming cinematic shadow of Henry Fonda as The President of America,

on the hotline to Moscow in *Fail Safe*. Even though the film is in black and white, the president's phone is as red to me as a snake's tongue. The last images are of people walking, children playing in New York's asphalt playgrounds, all of them about to die, the hot beast of a nuclear wind about to dissolve them into shadows.

It's Onkel Hans who finds me in my room reading the book. He sits next to me on the bed, holds his hand out for it, and I give it to him. He flicks through slowly, making pause on this city, then that. He doesn't say anything. I'm watching over his shoulder. The steady rhythmic flap of the pages. He stops at a map of Berlin and stares at it long and hard, running his finger first along the wide arterial boulevards, then into the narrower veins and capillaries of the side streets, until finally he taps the page with his architect's fingers in the middle of a small red line and gives a little smile. Then he snaps it shut in his hand, hands it back to me.

—You want to make cities? he says. Be an architect?

—Yes, I say not knowing, suddenly knowing.

Onkel Hans gives a pursed-lip smile.

—Your Opa would be feeling proud. He tries to be an architect. During the war. He tries. But. Pfft.

I don't answer his deflation. Don't know the nature of my grandfather's defeat.

—Architecture is in our bones, he says and pats my head, leaves it at that, heads back to the adult world of coffee, cake and cigarettes. It's enough for a boy.

I don't know if he means that our family is destined to it, or if our bodies are just that, works of architecture, but I sense that I am on track to make a step into some kind of family tradition that until now I have known nothing about.

When he has gone I go back to the map to try to find where in the city he was pointing to, but can't. He's left no trace. Was

it a place the family once lived? A building my grandfather made? There's a second map of the city over the page, with a fat, exaggerated and angular snake coursing through it. I trace my finger over it, the line of the Berlin Wall with its terrible truth: the world has already ended here. The scar of swastikas, the same hot Nagasaki wind that is champing to hurtle through its streets.

It's not the death of Hans Kuhn that drives me away from Melbourne. He is just my mother's brother. Just another one of those solid old Germans of my parents' immigrant generation – Snowy Hydro workers, canteen ladies, smokers – who has been claimed by heart attack, stroke, or some other equally and suddenly ruinous calamity, more or less before his time. An architect. Hans Kuhn is the trumpet. Like Nagasaki Man, I have survived the apocalypse. I am the man with ash on his face. The rivers have evaporated. My goal is to get out. Just out.

I am in Hamburg. The rest of my mother's people are in this city. They regrouped here after the war, but I don't know them. Onkel and Tante someone or other. They are nameless to me – photographs in an album, people so distant that I have to ask my mother each time: who is this one? and what about that one, is that one still alive? And five minutes later I have forgotten. They are the people left behind, bricked into walls, forgotten. This is the way I draw my life out of the family photo album, cautious to avoid the direct lines that might snare all my pasts into my present. On one side of the line are my mother and my father and Onkel Hans, on the other is a simple blank, not dark, not light. Nothing.

When I arrive by bus at the Hamburger Hafen I shadow a phone booth for a quarter-hour, flick through the pages, looking for my mother's surname. I find a few likely candidates, but balk at telephoning them, save myself, and them, the embarrassment

of my knocking on their doors and admitting that I don't know who they are. Instead, I linger about the Reeperbahn for an hour or so. On the street, there's a tub-thighed prostitute, a young woman with deep attractive eyes who I pass a few times. She thinks I'm in the game. I hold my hand on my wallet inside my coat. It's bulging with notes. I consider giving some over to her but can't get past the next step. There'll be eyes on me. People who will know what I'm doing, they'll know what a dirty bastard I'm being. Then she'll be in control of me. Take me to some flimsy room where a hundred other guys have had her and left their smudge on her bed and body. There'll be mould in the corners and when she speaks she'll growl. I imagine the roaching filth that infests her body. She looks me in the eye and I look away. This is not my destination. The trumpet still sounds.

By the time the stub of the day is ready to fall away into the chill dark of a winter's night I've made it to the *Hauptbahnhof*. I search through the schedule of trains. Here it is. Berlin. *Ab 1634. An 1859*. I buy a ticket and reach the train just as it is pulling away from the station. I find an empty compartment and fall into the seat, watching the countryside fall away in shades of green, brown and grey. When the sun finally dips away behind the train I am overcome by a sleep that is quick and solid.

I dream a woman. Not the blind woman on Friedrichstrasse, she hasn't arrived yet. The dream woman is someone like the blind woman. The dream woman is blind only because she cannot see beyond my dream. Here she is, lying in the grass, waiting for me. She stretches out. The summer sun polishes the few freckles on her face so they glow golden brown, like the sweetest of all raisins. Here she is, lifting her t-shirt over her head, happy and complete. Without complication. Perfected.

From here inside my dream, the dream woman might be my destination. I want to stay with her for a little while to be sure. I lie beside her and run my hand around the slight contour of her breast, losing my finger in the soft slow intimacy of her skin. Its heat. Its terrible heat.

But she is not my destination. The train jolts, squeals and jumps and I wake as clearly as I have fallen. The dream folds. But still the dream woman persists in inhabiting me, and this other woman, the one on Friedrichstrasse, is only minutes away from taking my hand. Outside, orange balls of light float as spectres of other cities.

Soon the train scrapes by the corner of a building then rolls into the station at Berlin-Friedrichstrasse. No destination yet. Just movement. Out of here.

I pull my bag from the luggage rack and wait for the other passengers to pass before I get out. A trio of bumpy-faced Russians argue in short barks out of their black Italian suits, squashing and sliding against the glass. Next, a bored-looking punk girl. Her head is pencil-sharp, a sack slung over one shoulder. She looks up at me. I sense the creep of a snarl and turn away. The Russians are probably more dangerous, but the punk more volatile, and I am in no mood for quarrelling. I don't have time for it. The blind woman approaches. Her time approaches.

There's a book on the seat. Perhaps it was on the luggage rack with my bag for the whole journey, left behind somewhere on the spider web of the German train network. I pick it up. It's a well-thumbed *Inferno*, a cheap paperback with a picture of Hell and its ribald demons sprawled across the cover, souls tortured into an insufferable ecstasy. Inside there is a handwritten dedication in German.

Thank you for your correspondence. R.

R. It might be Richard. Might be Roland. Rumpelstiltskin. Redrum. R. Someone in another place, a long time ago. R. A lover. A code. A name without a body. I close the book and am about to replace it when the conductor sticks his head inside the compartment.

—This train ends here sir, he says, his German curdling into a Bavarian accent so lumpy that for a moment I think it's my father speaking. Please collect your belongings and get off.

I do nothing, the book burning so hot in my hand I might be stealing it. He's a long way from home. Impatient.

—Is there something wrong? he says, somehow maintaining his politeness despite his bark. Don't you understand German? You have to get off the train. Now.

—Yes, I say. Yes I understand. I just left something behind, that's all.

I hold up the book for the conductor to see. He nods. He doesn't care what excuse I have. He wants his train empty. So I claim the book as my own. I drop it into my bag, and carry its guilt off the train with me. Out of here.

I emerge from the station into a tunnel, the dark rumble of trains overhead, cavernous, near-empty stores on either side of the road. It all seems to swell under the weight of something unsaid, ready to bury me alive. I hurry. It is as cold as I have ever known cold to be. The walls are beaded with points of frozen moisture that have wept from the deep fissures in the brick and painted-over pipes, each of them sparkling in the streetlights, frozen into small whispering eyes.

I cross the street, follow the sidewalk out from under the station and am at a bridge. I lean over the rail. The surface of

the river below has frozen into a smooth crust. I have only ever heard of frozen rivers as a rumour. Never had the evidence of one before my eyes. Around the time I secret *The History of World Cities* under my mattress there is a story on the news about a girl my age in Charlottetown, Canada, who has fallen through a crack in the ice and is trapped under water for an hour. She survives because her body temperature falls so far that it obviates its own need for oxygen. I still think this is spectacular, but perhaps it is commonplace in lands where rivers freeze with the seasons. Stockholm, says *The History*, is locked in ice for months at a time. I must have heard stories like this a thousand times since, but I remember the Canadian story because the girl's name is Charlotte and this is the city she lives in. This coincidence, which no one seems to remark on at the time, remains with me. The story becomes one with my idea of cities, places where children are frozen into long silent rivers, caught in motionless eddies between life and death, in the echo, the parental cry of their own names.

On the far side of the bridge, at the edge of a small square, stands a church-like building. At the peak of its stunted spire a circle of white neon light rotates on a pivot. I know this building from somewhere, but cannot place it. As if, just because I am here, I can't recognise anything. It is alien. An uncertain feeling alights on me. The light wind dies away, the faint whiff of candle smoke drifts by. At the same moment, the rotating circle of light on the building across the river stops rotating and falls dark. Now the street empties of traffic. The cars have vanished, the sidewalk is deserted. Even the background hum of the city seems to fade to silence, as if the quiet quilt of ice under the bridge has unfolded and blanketed the entire city. This is the city of my dreams. I am Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man*,

the last man. The entire city, civilisation itself, has perished, but it seems as if little worse has happened than that everyone has really just gone away, or hidden in cupboards, and left things where they were. Cigarettes in ashtrays, telephones dangling off the hook, dog food in the bowl. There is no time. No space. There are no arrivals, only departures. Soon, nature and its ruin will return.

I close my eyes, ready to disappear into this end-time rapture, when I hear something. Snap. I look over the rail again. The plate of ice on the river has broken and water is pooling over it now, breaking the ice into still smaller pieces. Soon the bulk of it drifts away in a languid slush. I look across to the building over the river. The light is turning on its pivot again. Now I can read the words. Name the building. It's the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht's home, Mackie Messer, the shark.

I turn back toward the station, through the tunnel. The bustle and rumble of people and cars return. They haven't disappeared at all, it's only that I have seen through them. Forgotten to pay them any attention. I dodge and weave their knotty mass until I come to an intersection. To the east, a wide boulevard, Unter den Linden, stretches out in a mess of headlights, the dumb animals of the city emerging from the vanishing point under the enormous pillar and bulb of the television tower. The pavement is swelling with people, a carnival throng, anticipating the blast of the New Year. To the west the cars squeeze around corners into the last open roads, barred from the approach to the Brandenburg Gate. On the pedestrian lights the Don't-Walk man, in his broad-brimmed hat, burns red into the night. I wait for him to change.

Now, here is the blind woman. She is coming. Here I am.