

# *The Spanish Hour*

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1.

They've been married for years. They have two children. A two-and-a-half-year-old only now beginning to assemble syllables and a toddler struggling to go bipedal. They live in the only apartment they've ever shared, the first floor of a greystone house they now own. He still finds his wife attractive. Even alluring. He wishes Laura would feel the same about him. He wishes the sight of him stepping from the shower would arouse her. That she would reach for him or cup the bulge in his pants with the daring she used to reserve for semi-public places. Instead she thinks his desire, as she has been repeating lately, is inappropriate. He cringes whenever he hears the word. Still, all the compromises, irritants, and routines he associates with family life amount to a kind of satisfaction, some form of happiness.

He teaches translation. French to English, and English to French. He also knows Italian and German, has published a dozen papers, and taken part in research on machine translation systems. His name is known in his field.

A week ago, one of his students submitted as her assignment a chapter from Régis Jauffret's novel *Fragments de la vie des gens* along with her translation of it. As he read he held his breath. It seemed to be about him. He read with fascination, which gradually turned into revulsion. A sudden thought came, for which he chastised himself: his life was nothing more than an act of plagiarism. Then another emotion took over, some form of hope. He found himself reading avidly, forgetting it was a student's assignment. He read on, hoping to find something to hang onto — answers, maybe — by the end of the story.

His classes are filled with women who shine with youth and, in some cases, admiration. But his gaze never lingers. He wonders if he should find that bizarre; he wonders if he should worry. He's forty and filled with lust, but only for his wife. He's told no one about it, especially not his buddies after their Wednesday night squash game. They would find it — and him — piti-

able. Two of them have admitted to having affairs. Both say the same thing: it hasn't hurt their game.

The woman in Jauffret's story and his wife are kindred souls. They hold and express similar views regarding children. One must devote all of one's attention to them. Curb all inward-facing impulses, shed self-regard. The two women share the same opinions regarding sex. Sex is an energy sink. All it does is keep you up late, preventing sleep repair, consuming reserves you need the following day.

Beyond the logistics of child care and running a household, he and Laura exchange few words. She reacts to everything either with yawns or barbs. It's like a device with two settings. He's tried it all, pleading and shouting, reason and ranting. He's suggested she see someone, a professional. "I'm not depressed," is her reply. He's suggested they go on holiday. She considers the children too young to travel. He insisted — others are doing it, with even younger kids.

"No," she says.

It's left him depleted and unsure how to go on. But they go on.

One night his wife goes to bed even earlier than is her custom. She has just put the kids to bed. He wonders if it's a kind of invitation. When he goes into the bedroom he finds her asleep. Breathing through her mouth. Before he can stop himself, he shakes her awake.

"What do you want?"

He shows her what he wants. It awakens something in her. Her fists smash against his chest with stunning suddenness. Now his own fist crashes into the pillow, inches from her head. That single punch both frightens and releases him. He propels himself out of the room. Coat in one hand and keys in the other, he's out in the street.

He swallows the night air. Circles the block. His blood is slowly going silent again. He finds himself outside the neighbourhood Starbucks, then inside. He wonders if his agitation has left a mark on him. The place seems full of depressed-looking people reading self-help books. He decides against coffee.

He goes back. To the car — not the house — and heads downtown. He moves through murky, slithery streets. He rides with the window down; the air seems dense, charged. An unseasonable start to March. Traffic is suspiciously thin. His gaze tennises from one side of the street to the other. He spots one close to an intersection. He rounds the corner and sees her motioning to him. It's as if she's flagging a cab. She wears an expression of eagerness, and shiny lipgloss. She materializes in the passenger seat.

There's a moment of stillness. "Drive, honey."

He puts the car into gear. She reaches for his belt and unbuckles it with surreal ease. Gently, he's conscious of trying to do this gently, he applies pressure on her shoulder, pushing her back. Her smile collapses. Immediately he feels a desire to make amends. He pulls into a deserted car park. She leans toward him again. This time her hand goes to his face, a hovering caress. He shrinks from her touch. She spits out a single word and jumps out. The car door slams, reverberating with the absurdity of this enterprise. With a long out-breath, his head sinks to the steering wheel, and waits for the gap between this moment in his life and the next to be bridged.

## 2.

He's in his office. It's a Tuesday or a Thursday, it has that transitional feel. He concentrates for a fraction of a second — yes, Tuesday. And office hours are about to begin. Students are swarming outside his door, waiting to be admitted.

Several days have gone by since the event in the car park, and he can still see the girl's face. The too-glossy lipgloss. Those bright lips forming a single word. And he can hear, again, the car door slam. An accusing thud. A dull sound that now dredges up the memory of his fist smashing into the pillow, and the less-than-startled look in Laura's eyes.

He gets up to let the first student in. His movements are mechanical, he feels it with a kind of physical detachment — his body a vessel he's not quite filling.

The student's name is Susan. She sits across the desk from him. A solid wooden chair with a cushion, which she's now adjusting under her. Her manner is cramped, her gestures boxed in. She hardly dares look at him. She's not the only student who reacts like this in his presence, though some are more daring — the looks and the language they use. He doesn't understand it. How did this happen? When did he become attractive?

There's grey in his hair, but you have to look for it. Something is keeping him young, some kind of thirst. Some kind of hunger.

Every so often, even as he confers with his students that afternoon, he thinks of charming nonsense he'd like to say to his wife. Witty things designed to win back some shred of interest. He imagines picking up the phone, his finger blindly tapping out the familiar sequence, her toneless greeting at the other end. The sound of her voice will immediately squelch whatever promising impulse he hoped to conjure.

When the last student has gone, he closes the door and leans against it. He's aware of the angle at which his body is inclined, conscious of the pressure it exerts on the door. His eyes scan the desk. Sticking out from under a pile of

unread scholarly journals is the corner of an envelope. The stamped corner. The stamp bears a face he doesn't recognize. And a word, a single word: ESPAÑA. Carefully he pulls out the envelope. It's addressed to Professor Martin Talbo, the last letter of his name gone astray. Seeing the title before his name still gives him a little jolt. Inside is an invitation from the European Association for Machine Translation to a conference in Segovia. He accepted the invitation and paid the conference fee — almost a year ago.

He pulls the atlas from the shelf, blows dust from it. Segovia, it turns out, is a short distance northwest of Madrid. Madrid, he remembers from high school, is the highest peak among European capitals. Spain is a country he bypassed when he travelled through Europe in his early twenties. He's been to the south of France, seen much of Portugal, once spent ten days in Morocco — somehow he missed Spain, that huge chunk of geography in the middle of it all.

That evening, when he tells his wife he's going to Europe soon, she gives him an out-of-focus stare before returning to her magazine. He finds himself looking forward to Spain. If his life were a novel, his desire would be to jump to the next chapter.

### 3.

During the flight he falls asleep and wakes several times. It's not the tremors that puncture the plane's seeming stillness; it's not the unusual noises that sound like mechanical failure; it's his dreams that jolt him awake. There is no build-up to disaster — the plane crashing, his wife leaving with the kids or his long-suffering department made defunct — it happens immediately every time he closes his eyes. Which startles them open again. Just in time, this time, as the flight attendant offers him a hot, moist towelette. The relief is microscopic: the cloth is cold before you can count to one. Many passengers appear to have relinquished consciousness, the windows are mirrors of an unsettling black, and the movie screen is blinking. He looks away before the words *System Error* can leave a retinal impression.

Out of some depth rises a memory from his wife's Christmas party, four months ago, at the school where she teaches. Laura wore a lacy shirt over a black camisole, white skirt, black knee-high boots. The studied elegance surprised him. She held a glass of white wine in one hand. Gesticulating with the other. She was making a point about a school policy in a heated but controlled discussion with the principal, whose name was just now also rising from the depths: Fresiuk. She's mentioned him a number of times; he doesn't seem to have a first name.

Now it comes to him: his observations about the plane and dredged-up memories of no importance are delaying tactics. He doesn't want to arrive in Spain quite yet. He doesn't want to jump ahead. Doesn't want to think about Segovia or about the conference. For the first time in a long time, he's in the moment, it's where he wants to be. This small insight makes him happy, a feeling he's going to nurse at least until the plane's taxied to the gate.

#### 4.

In Spain the light is different. Anyone from a northern latitude will immediately see that. Even the airport, despite its standard-issue architecture, is different. The thought of hunting for a shuttle to the city makes him wheel his carry-on case to the nearest cab. Now he's enjoying the sensation of being whisked away. He wanted a day in Madrid, alone, before the start of the conference. The taxi drops him off at a small hotel not far from *Plaza Mayor*. The tightening in this chest reminds him of the city's lofty altitude. The air is richer and rarer. He senses something faintly petrochemical in it, also something citrus and a spice he can't identify. It all keeps his nostrils flaring like a nervous tic.

He should be but isn't tired. What he wants to do is explore. In Retiro Park, the sight of mounted police makes him think of home. The statue of the fallen angel is impressive and almost makes him wish he'd brought a camera. The gargoyles at the base of the statue almost make him glad he didn't. Various statues bear graffiti, much of it in near-English.

He tells himself he'd like to take an interest in the sights — the monuments and palaces, but it's the people he can't take his eyes off. By early evening he's convinced this is a city of strollers. They're everywhere. He guesses it's what people do here instead of television. There seems to be both leisure and purpose in it. Everywhere, the women are like magnets — younger or older or pregnant. He can't believe their power over him. Why, he wonders, did he skirt Spain in his twenties? Where would I be now? Who would I be? He recognizes something else. People here are physically aware of one another; he doesn't even have to look: he feels the current. They're beautiful; he has to make an effort not to stare. They're also beautifully dressed. Bruised purples, rose-tinted greys, arctic whites — it's a different spectrum. It's as if he's stumbled on an undiscovered species of elegance.

In the morning he takes a cab to Atocha. The train station houses a vast and impressive garden; he wishes he had more time. But he's been told that Spanish trains are punctual: "You'll think you're in Switzerland." He expected the station to be crowded; it isn't the case. Still, it pulsates, and he crosses it like a self-conscious spectator who's stumbled onto the stage. He easily finds

the train to Segovia. It isn't one of those streamlined projectiles that have made the smallest continent even smaller. He finds an empty compartment, which other passengers then find. Four of them, each reaching for reading material from pockets or bags as he or she sits. All eager readers, except for him. He faces the window and watches the urban clutter grow less dense like a skin condition clearing. It's two hours to Segovia, remote towns along the way, hills and sparse woods, dilapidated train stations. And everywhere, colours and gradations of colours that tease his eye, artichoke green, pomegranate red. This is not Switzerland.

Every so often he expects the other passengers to look up. No one does. They've selected their magazines and books judiciously. They don't seem Spanish to him. He wonders if he'll run into them again at the conference. He closes his eyes and sees the scene from his wife's Christmas party. The heated but cool conversation with the principal. Then the scene changes. The characters, though, are the same. Laura and Fresiuk, the principal. The setting is unknown to him but recognizably a hotel room. Laura is now kissing Fresiuk with a show of hunger. It stuns Martin. It staggers him. He's reeling — the train's derailing, he's certain of it. Then his eyes shut — fingertips massaging forehead — and order is restored. He created this scene; the thought makes him smile. The thought of his wife's adultery is both off-putting and intriguing, evidence of a passionate disposition not yet quenched.

In Segovia he searches for a cab as he leaves the train station and spots a fruit stand instead. The colours jump out at him. He buys figs and dates. And tangerines. As soon as he begins peeling, it fills his nostrils. The fruit is tangy, it is alive. It stings his lips, raises tiny bumps on his tongue like an allergic reaction. He recognizes his condition — he's in a state of expectancy. Whatever Spain has in store for him, he feels ready for it. He bites into the fruit again. Let it begin. Let it begin.

## 5.

Segovia is even higher up in the Castilian plain than Madrid. His breath is short in the paper-thin air. Here, too, people are elegant. It must be a Spanish trait, encoded in their genetic assembly. They'd rather go hungry than be shabbily dressed.

Today, the sun is beating down hard. Is it Spain or the unseasonable weather typical of the late petroleum era? He looks up, a raised hand shielding him from the glare. Segovia's famous castle — the site of the conference — crowns the city. Alcázar is Arabic for royal residence; he doesn't need a dictionary or guidebook to tell him that.

By the entrance to the main hall a wide display panel has been installed. In the middle of it, an aerial view of the Alcázar, surrounded by a moat of script, Latin Cyrillic Arabic. The text is in fifteen languages. Why so few? Dismissing the question, he reads and finds out that the Alcázar is mentioned in documents as early the twelfth century. It was the fortified palace of the kings of Castile. He reads straight through, without the English to other languages, the quality of the translation a matter of sudden indifference to him.

He enters the hall and takes a seat at random. A speaker is already addressing the assembly. Martin thinks of Laura. His associate in child-rearing. He hasn't given her a call yet. It isn't as if she's expecting one or is worried she hasn't heard from him. Someone at the podium is saying that the next speaker needs no introduction, but is about to get one anyway. There's a sudden burst of applause and, surprisingly, even some cheering.

Randolph Krieger scans the audience and smiles as he makes his way to the podium. With an energetic handshake, he rewards the speaker who introduced him. He surveys the crowd at length before thanking them for their attendance. Krieger is the closest thing to a star in this field, an American who has conquered Europe. His work fills entire shelves at university libraries. His most celebrated book, *Bound in Translation*, was turned into a documentary that was nominated for an Oscar. The way he moves and speaks is revealing. He knows how to be in the world. How to live in it. He proceeds with ease from one thing to the next. He has learned, and learned well, from certain masters. Murphy, Schmidt, Gracián. He's read their books, set his course by them. He is common in nothing; he does not live in a hurry; he knows how to say no. One of these mentors, Gracián, has always exerted a fascination, which Krieger is slowly dissolving by adapting his *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, first published in the seventeenth century, to the here-and-now. It will be ready in a year. Despite his sum of wisdom, he wants to be everything to everybody — but resists the pull.

The audience is still. Their attention is complete, except for Martin's, who has trouble following Krieger. It's like a bad connection, he's getting one word out of every two, or three. It seems to be about poetry. Martin squints at the podium, tuning the voice in. Yes, astoundingly, Krieger is talking about poetry, of all things, at a translation conference. He reports that he's machine-translated a number of his favourite poems from various languages. The imperfect technology has enhanced the poems, like a more robust genetic mutation. It's English broken in unexpected places. He has collected them in a volume and published them under the title, *The Fractured Poets Speak*. He read a selection at the Palm Beach Poetry Festival. He was a surprise guest.

The poems were well received — also a surprise. Here he pauses. A murmur ripples through the assembly; it swells and rises: they want to hear the poems. An assistant appears from the wings, in this impeccable *mise en scène*, carrying a slim volume. Krieger leafs through it and announces he won't be clearing his throat before beginning his reading. The assembly, with the exception of Martin, laughs. Everything works for Krieger.

## 6.

Martin scans the serving dishes. The morning session has ended, and a lunch buffet is being served in the room adjacent to the conference hall. The food looks spectacularly unSpanish; grilling, broiling, and frying have sucked out the colour. He looks up and finds Krieger staring at him. Arms at his sides, elbows slightly bent, as if ready to draw. The ice-blue gaze of a Holocaust denier. Incredibly, Krieger joins him, extending his hand and introducing himself. As if that were needed. He immediately informs Martin that he enjoyed — enjoyed! — his paper on grapheme-phoneme correspondences in speech synthesis architecture. Martin barely remembers writing the thing. Krieger says all this with unsettling solemnity — it makes you wonder why he bothers. Martin wonders if meeting Krieger will turn out to be the reason for going to Spain. He finds he can keep the conversation going only if he shifts and stands at an angle to Krieger. There's a massive door, ajar, on the left and sunsplashed windows on the right.

There's someone standing next to Krieger now, whom he introduces to Martin. Like Krieger, Karin is blonde and blue-eyed, but a different species of blond-and-blue. Her features — short upper lip, isosceles nose, wide-gapped eyes — are a comedy of errors. Krieger addresses his next utterance to her, only her — it's Martin's cue.

"Enjoy your lunch," he says, and turns away. At the buffet tables, people are still piling things on plates.

Earlier, during the morning session, the conference organizers announced they would respect the tradition of the host country on this, the first day: everyone is encouraged to enjoy a siesta. Proceedings to resume at 5 p.m. This suits Karin. She's no more than an observer, really; she doesn't have a talk to deliver. There's plenty going on, speakers and seminars, discussion panels and round tables. But it's Spain she wants. Places beyond the walls of this fortress. No other invited speaker shines like Krieger; his absence would deprive the conference of its leading light. Everyone in attendance is in stationary orbit around him. Even his lengthy digressions on poetry — and those baffling poems — win him genuine applause. Someone should start a fan club. She's been to many conferences with Krieger — has lost count. She

keeps a diary, it's in a desk drawer in Copenhagen, amid old letters from him and ticket stubs, receipts, and other mementoes of places they've been. It's a clothbound notebook, burgundy, expensive-looking. In it she recorded the moment she stopped admiring him. Now she finds she's made a decision. She'll rent a car and discover Segovia.

## 7.

What she ends up getting is a Smart car, the forfour model rather than the fortwo, which is barely wider than some fat men she's known. It's past five; the sun has lost none of its strength. On the narrowest streets, hers is the only car. She goes on an exploratory foray of the avenues around the Alcázar, paying careful attention. She enjoys the twists, the oval mirrors standing guard over blind corners. Her intuition is soon rewarded, and she comes to a complete stop before he notices her.

"Are you giving a talk today?"

"Not today," he says. "Not tomorrow."

There's silence. It's as if they've run out of things to say. His fingers drum on the roof of the car. In the distance the turrets of the castle cut a figure against the deep blue sky. Finally, Martin gets in. He's barely shut the door, the car's already moving.

Again, narrow streets; some so narrow he's tempted to touch walls with his outstretched arm. Or pluck a flower hanging from the windows at street level. Lively colours even in the most shadowy corners.

"Why did you come to Spain?"

He can feel his facial muscles reacting to the question; his hand comes up to quell the twitch.

"My guess is you don't really need to be at this conference," she says. "Am I right?" She nods, as if marking a beat, and adds, "I don't either."

"I come to Spain whenever I can," she says. "Sometimes I think I should live here." She's navigating the streets with a look of intense concentration, as if afraid she'll lose her way. "I've read everything ever written about this country."

He digests this exaggeration. "You've probably also guessed this is my first time in Spain."

For a while nothing is said; neither feels the need to fill in gaps. Around them, buildings and roadways of stone, stretching back centuries, solid and grainy.

"My grandmother was Spanish," Karin says.

At a stoplight his hand reaches for her. As if on cue, her foot hits the accel-

erator, and only seconds later, the brakes. She slides it into neutral. Pulls the hand brake. “Would you like to drive.” It doesn’t sound like a question.

He takes the wheel, almost grateful on behalf of his hands.

They’re moving again, and Karin points the way to the road leaving town. There’s a guidebook on the dash. She opens it to read about the place that’s receding behind them. “At the meeting point of the rivers Eresma and Clamores, the waters have sculpted deep channels around a base of limestone rock. People have been living here for twenty-five hundred years.” Her voice has the faint music of Scandinavian English, the fake British accent that isn’t put on. A charming trait with the potential to grate.

A few kilometres northwest of Segovia, they drive through a village called Zamarramala. Again, the guidebook falls open. The Fiesta of Santa Agueda, held on February 5, is a day when local women don medieval costume and parade through the streets, jeering at the men. The guidebook informs them that the fiesta dates back to 1227 when a group of women distracted the Moorish invaders — aided by wine and bawdy songs — while the men attacked and captured the fortress in Segovia. She places the guidebook on the dashboard as if closing a menu. In the folds of his shirt and trousers she finds his prick and takes it out. It is upright and pale, still ascending and pushing out against the warm sheath of her hand. She removes her hand, and forms a triangle with her index, middle finger, and thumb with which she crowns him. Pinpoint pressure at the tips. It gives him a jolt, and diminishing aftershocks. She’s watching the traffic ahead as studiously as he is. Again, they’re on a road leaving town, the gaps between buildings growing. Now she forms a ring with her thumb and forefinger and gently pulls on the head until he’s on the brink. And releases. Martin pulls over to the side of the road. Karin starts again. She repeats this a number of times — he finds himself counting but doesn’t reach the figure some part of his mind somehow managed to set. From her purse she deftly produces tissue paper. She can’t — he marvels at this — have timed it better. They wait by the side of the road, his hollow legs unable to deal just yet with the pedals even in this teeny car without a clutch.

8.

In his room, Martin waits until the third ring before picking up the phone. Laura or Karin? His book lies open, face down, on the bed.

“I still have the car.”

His room suddenly seems too small.

“Today I’d like to discover Pedraza.”

“What’s in Pedraza?”

“Let’s find out,” she says.

Pedraza is half an hour from Segovia. Karin is driving. The road leaving town is winding; it seems to fit the mood. Then the highway, open vistas, everything is clearer. It’s almost high noon in Spain, the blinding hour.

In Pedraza they have to leave the car in a parking lot and negotiate the town on foot. A walled city with narrow streets, deep as sunless valleys, stone walls rising on either side. In the Castillo de Pedraza they stare at paintings by Ignacio Zuloaga. A famous Spanish painter, but one they’ve never heard of. Stunning pictures. A young woman’s bare calf, slim ankles, and red pumps. A bullfighter in his suit of lights, such pride that his face seems contorted with it. Paintings of hands, as telling as faces. They respond to it all. Even the still life they find erotically charged. They easily locate a deserted corridor. He unbuttons her shirt. His mouth snakes its way down, his tongue leaving a trail. His hands rise on either side of her, tenting her skirt. She’s wet. He breathes it in, he laps it up, that intoxicant.

## 9.

That same afternoon, they’re back in Segovia, attending the conference. Independently, both’ve selected the same seminar; it’s on proactive translatology. A small room but a packed house. The speakers drone, inventive jargon providing the only relief. Karin and Martin exchange a look and leave the room. They set off once again in that tiny car. Martin has brought along a newspaper. There’s a story about the conference on the front page. And a picture of Krieger, basking at the podium like a gold medallist. Certainly, the man knows how to post himself in the centre of things.

Their destination is Coca, about an hour’s drive. It’s like many places in Spain, where past and present are synonyms. They’ve seen many castles, but the one in Coca is spectacular. Karin produces a camera from her overnight bag, a gesture that surprises Martin for some reason.

“Digital photography is my future,” she says.

He doesn’t pursue this.

She dips into the guidebook again, and they find out the castle in Coca is the best example of Moorish style in the country. Inside the fortifications, there are few visitors; they’re almost alone. He kisses her, pins her against a wall. When they emerge from the castle, the sun dazzles them.

They walk through narrow streets their guidebook describes as unimaginably old. He’s hopscotching from cobbled sidewalk to cobbled roadway and back, his body’s rightful occupant. He feels he can take up dancing, like a new vocation, that he was born-again to it.

That night they take a room in an inn. Finally, the air is cool. His prick is harder than he can remember it being in a long time. He handles it like an instrument. Places it. Makes repeated adjustments. His hard-on is a flashback, he's in his twenties, his late teens. Her hands, too, are drawn to it. Then that plunge — sweet and thrilling still. Slow rushing descent, somehow new, even now.

In the morning they pick Peñafiel as their next destination. The first thing they see as they approach the town is the castle. It's on a hill, perched on a long narrow rib of granite 300 feet above the town. At the foot of the hill, a little river flows. They find themselves by the *Plaza del Coso*. She asks a passerby about it. No trace of Scandinavian in her Spanish intonations. People in the area consider the *Plaza del Coso* to be the oldest bullfighting ring of Spain. Unexpectedly, it isn't a ring; it is square. The guidebook alerts them to the presence of a Museum of Wine in the castle. When they get there, they find a tour already under way. The guide addresses the group in German, a language Karin and Martin both know. They attach themselves to the tail of the tour group. Then trail and veer off and lock onto each other. They can't be doing this. The rest of the group are only steps away round a corner; the guide's voice is clear, though fading. Their exhilaration makes them fumble. She has to guide him in. She gasps, once, twice, she can't believe she's gasping. He rams, all restraint gone. Spent, they somehow find the group in the maze of corridors, though it's the exit they were looking for.

They emerge into yet another of Spain's dazzling afternoons. In the distance, the graceful sweep of landscape — close enough to engulf you. The shimmer of sunlight telescopes everything in. They, too, are shimmering, with sweat. Briefly they hold hands. Suddenly, he feels Spain is not large enough to contain them. He imagines filling Europe with their presence. The thought breaks apart; he brushes away what's left of it, intimations of Prague, the Alps, Venice. He finds himself unwilling to leave Spain, rejects all thoughts of departure, its imminence. He wanted days poured like honey. But these Spanish days are skidding by — each brief as an hour.

The road they're on leads to Villaverde de Íscar. They've driven through the larger towns of Cuéllar and Íscar, followed a road that curves back to Segovia. But they've made a decision: at Villaverde de Íscar, they'll turn back and head west, away from Segovia. All the way to Zamora, which Martin has never heard about and which Karin has described as “fabled.” The bookish word makes him smile. She's saying something now, and a word keeps coming back. She's talking about change. Changing. As in one's life.

“Can you do that?” he wonders, and almost voices it.

She gives him a look — brief but sustained.

“Sometimes,” she begins, “you feel you’re at the end of one part of your life. After a while, you recognize that feeling.”

He takes his eyes off the road to face her. Her smile is unexpected, and glittering. In three weeks she turns forty-three. She feels she’s never looked better; mirrors confirm this. The lines at the edges of her eyes and her mouth have lost their power to disturb. The extra pounds are welcome, she carries them well, her too-boyish slenderness a thing of the past, finally.

“Have you travelled all over Spain?” he says, definitely feeling he’s changing the subject.

“The place that really fascinates me is Extremadura. It’s remote, it’s practically empty. No one lives there, in those mountains and those isolated villages. It’s a harsh, harsh place. I went once, a long time ago. I’d like to go back.”

“We’ll have to stop for gas.”

She gives this an indulgent smile, then: “It’s where most of the *conquistadores* came from.”

“I know,” he says.

She smiles at that, too. “You don’t go to many conferences.”

“Let’s talk about you instead.”

Teaching has been her passion, but fading now. She’s painting again; started Flamenco and Tango lessons on the eve of her fortieth birthday. Unexpected talents as a dancer. Also unexpected was the spillover effect: she’s in demand like never before — workshops, seminars, calls for papers. A university in Madrid has offered her a position; she’s almost certain she’ll say no.

Until late evening they do not touch. They sit in their room, having seen nothing of Zamora yet, reading about Spain like classmates preparing for an exam. She feels the coolness in the air, her skin reads it like unwelcome news. She reaches for a sweater. Occasionally, she interrupts her reading to inspect the air. It’s a pensive look with various gradations, the shifting focus discernible in her gaze. If he could read her mind; if he could see through her eyes. The best he can do is ask what she’s thinking.

“You’re going to laugh,” she says.

“Am I?”

“I feel good.” She looks at him directly, challenging him to refute it. “This very minute, I feel good.”

They dip back into their books. After re-reading the same paragraph and failing to grasp it, he goes for a pee. Returning, he leans against the doorway. She’s standing in front of the dresser, looking at herself in the mirror, hardly moving. Only her eyes are moving, surveying her reflection. He watches her.

Unseen, he supposes. He's both in the moment and aware of it. She smooths her blouse with both hands, pausing at the breasts. They linger there, moving slightly, making tiny adjustments. Then a more pronounced rounded motion, ever-narrowing circles. There's something purposeful in this. In the mirror her eyes finally meet his.

They undress like teammates. Each item of clothing is deposited almost with care. She turns her back to him, but it's an invitation. She rubs against him. Takes a step toward the bed; he follows. Then she's on the bed, on all fours. It comes to her that it's been a long time since she's wanted to please someone. Again he follows, as far as he can go. They begin. He sets the pace. They fuck artlessly — the moving parts, the pure mechanics of it. It's all purpose and precision. Right to the end.

## 10.

Zamora is a place of astounding beauty. So was the approach to Zamora. Garden and desert both, water and dust. The faces, also, are startling; he wonders if he can get used to this. The fleeting looks that pierce and ensnare. The dress. The demeanour. He feels impelled to jot this down and scours the glove compartment, then his bag, for something to write with, something to write on. He realizes this is not the first such postcard thought he's had. There's an army of adjectives gathering in his cerebral cortex. And now comes the next realization, as unbidden as bad news: it's his wife he's writing to. Karin is driving; at the moment, nothing he does can distract her. In his carry-on, his cellphone lies dormant, not a ring, not a vibration.

They walk through the town spellbound. That such a place can exist. That they can be in a place like this. They walk in silence, buoyed by the light of early afternoon. All around them vestiges, things that coax their gaze. Walls, stone and mortar, flat surfaces, uneven surfaces, rusting metal hinges, honey-brown wooden beams half a millennium old. It's an onslaught of details, their attention clotting with it. Then, a look of calm appraisal appears on her face; she's deciding not to trust what she sees. He recognizes this; suddenly, it makes him ache for her more.

Another night in Zamora, they're nodding in and out of dreams. Haphazardly they begin again. Incomplete couplings like railcars in a shunting yard. All night long they swim, repeatedly crossing the border that divides sleep and waking.

In the morning, the sun filters in through the shutters. They wake with a kind of constrained agitation in their limbs. As they touch it gets the better of them. Kisses bites blows. It's a vertiginous rise, or fall, and exhilarating. Incredibly, they're pummelling each other now. Her long nails scour his back,

raising welts. Bruising moments. And then it's over. Their rasping breath fills the room. When they rise from the bed, they totter, as if answering the bell and returning to their respective corners. They avoid each other's eyes.

Breakfast is coffee, nothing more. They leave as soon as they've drained their cups. She's been wondering about Krieger wondering about her. On the way to the car, she calls him, cell to cell, and tells him she's on her way back. She'll be in Segovia before noon. "Yes," Krieger says in Danish. And hangs up.

The way from Zamora to Segovia is mostly highway. Martin lets the needle bob at 160 just to keep pace with the traffic. By contrast, the conversation is aimless or merely self-perpetuating; neither can stand the silence. Thinking ahead, he offers to let her drive into Segovia; she accepts. They don't need to wonder how it can end. Both have return tickets in their luggage.

Near the Alcázar he asks to be dropped off.

"I'll see you at the conference."

To both of them, it sounds like a lie.

He's back in his room. For the first time, its shabbiness is apparent. It's flagrant. He stands at the window, looking out. The day's clarity is unblemished, but the sun's authority has slipped away. Something of the agitation he felt in Zamora still courses through him. He tries pacing, reading, drinking duty-free. He sits; he lies; he sits again. His mood dips and rises — more dip than rise. Side by side on the table next to the bed are his tickets out of here, train and plane. Lying once more on the narrow bed, he calls Laura. He listens to each ring, fretting. There's the mustiness in their basement, the funding committee at the university, the end of the lease on their car. He dismisses these things even as they reclaim him. He gets their voice mail and mentally composes a message as he hears his own recorded voice. In the background, other sounds, feathery and indistinct, the enveloping wing of home, fluttering.