

Translating T. Coraghessan Boyle's
The Night of the Satellite

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Utrecht University*

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29 June 2015

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1. Introduction

When I first read *The Night of the Satellite* by T. Coraghessan Boyle, I was not very impressed. I thought it went on and on and kept waiting for something big to happen, but nothing ever did. After I finished it I wondered how this story had ever ended up getting published in *The New Yorker*, and if Boyle had ever written something before. Unlike the characters in the story, I am not very interested in American literature, or even literature in general, so little did I know that Boyle is an accomplished writer, widely known for his style and outlandish plots. So after reading the entire story again, and paying attention to Boyle's use of language and the way the story is told, I noticed that while the story may not contain much of a plot, it contains many layers with regards to language. And when I started to properly analyze it, I realized that there was a lot more to this story than I had originally conceived. Considering the story has not been translated into Dutch yet, I thought this would be an interesting story to translate because of the focus on language. It was too long to translate entirely, so I have chosen the first passage to translate, the end of which is marked with a horizontal line in the appendix. This way, the reader will not fall right into the middle of the story, leading to possible confusion. A lot of translation problems I have encountered throughout the entire text can also be found in the first half of the story, so this contributed to my decision.

Boyle's use of style has also led to my decision regarding the "mock commission" that I have set for myself as I translated this story. I have decided to translate this story as if my translation were to be published in a collection of translated T. Coraghessan Boyle short stories, with the target audience consisting of Dutch T. C. Boyle fans. Because I am translating a highly stylized story for people who enjoy and are familiar with Boyle's work, I found it was important to pay attention to the stylistic aspects of this story. Translation problems from every Nord category – pragmatic, culture specific, language specific and text specific (Nord 147) – can be found in the text, and I will discuss all of them. However, due to Boyle's use of style, the vast majority of translation problems concerns text specific translation problems, so that is what I will be focusing on.

2. Story summary

Paul and Mallory wake up on a sweltering Saturday morning and go visit mutual friends. On the way there, they encounter an arguing couple. Mallory wants to help the girl, but Paul instinctively drives off. This causes them to fight. When they get to their friends, Mallory goes back to help the girl, and Paul has to deal with dogs following their nature. Later they go out and get drunk, and Paul bumps into the couple from the road again. Then, when Paul and Mallory are alone in a field, arguing, he gets hit by what he thinks is part of a satellite. Mallory thinks it is junk and throws it out without asking, causing their fight to escalate. Paul gets into the car and leaves, encountering the couple one more time and questioning his relationship with Mallory, because you never know what is going to come down next.

3. Pragmatic translation problems

To a translator, it is important to consider time and location of a story when translating. After all, it affects several of the decisions they make. If a translator feels that the target audience might not be familiar with certain elements in the text, they could choose to alter these elements in their translation to make sure their readers understand the story they are reading. For this reason I will be discussing the time and geographical setting of the story.

Considering there are references to laptops and cell phones in *The Night of the Satellite*, I think it is safe to say that it takes place in modern day. Thus I do not see the need to modernize or historicize it, meaning I have chosen to conserve the story (Holmes 186).

The story was originally published on the website of an American magazine and written by an American author. The narrator also states that the story takes place in the Midwest. This means that to the target audience, the story contains foreign elements that are generally not explained, because they are understood by the original audience. By leaving these elements as they are, meaning might be lost, and the story the translator is trying to tell might differ from that of the author. So the translator is faced with a choice: do they adopt a strategy of naturalization, or one of exoticism? Aside from my personal preference to keep the setting of a story unchanged, there is another deciding factor here: the role climate plays in the story, which will be discussed later. I felt that the story would benefit from adhering to the author's intentions because he is creating a vivid picture of the Midwest, and to a foreign audience, this might especially make them feel like

they are in another place as they read it. For this reason I have opted for a strategy of exoticism when it came to the story's setting, meaning I have tried to conserve elements of especially the sociocultural situation (Holmes 185). This means I had to find ways to deal with the culture specific elements that occur in the story, which will be reviewed later; By making the decision to exoticize the setting, Dutch readers will hopefully get that same impression of a hot Midwestern day through the eyes of an American student up to his neck in student loans as the original audience would.

4. Culture specific translation problems

As I mentioned before, the setting of the story can lead to culture specific translation problems. By choosing to exoticize the setting, I was faced with a variety of elements that Dutch readers would not be able to recognize or understand the meaning of. For this reason, I will be discussing units of measurement and culture specific elements.

The author employs quite a few units of measurement throughout the story. While American readers are sure to understand the distance described in feet and miles or the temperature in degrees Fahrenheit, these units help to create a picture that does not carry the same meaning for Dutch readers. I looked at both how easy it would be for the target audience to envision the measurement that is being described, and how odd it would be for a "foreign" unit of measurement to appear in an American setting, and ended up converting both the units of distance and temperature. The units of measurement used in the story are, as I said, used to paint a certain picture: the reader should picture the girl standing a certain distance away, and roughly how hot it is. I felt it was more practical to change the units of measurement to (kilo)meters and degrees Celsius, so Dutch readers would immediately get the same impression of the circumstances as the original audience; the temperature especially is important in this story, and thus the target audience should be able to get that same idea of heat as the original audience.

Another culture specific translation problem were the culture specific elements. These elements do not stand on their own in a translation; they are the result of a conflict that is created by every linguistically represented reference in the source text. When these references get transferred into the target text they pose a translation problem, because the element either does not exist in the target culture or carries a different value (Aixelá 197). If the target audience does not get their

meaning, the meaning of the story changes for them. Because I have exoticized the setting, I have chosen to also exoticize the culture specific elements; I feel it would not make sense to have the story take place in the United States, and then replace the American culture specific elements with Dutch ones. Thus, I have employed two strategies throughout the text to deal with the culture specific elements: strategies of maintaining and describing or defining. The first strategy entails preserving the original reference, which could actually increase the exotic character of a culture specific element (Aixelá 200). I have often combined this with intratextual elaboration: adding some information to this element, but in a way that the reader should not notice that this information was not originally in the source text (Aixelá 201). For example, the characters take two bottles of “Australian Zinfandel” with them, which is a kind of wine. I felt this would not be clear in the target text if I left it as it is, so I added *wijn*, “wine”, to “Zinfandel”. This way, the target text holds the same connotation to the target audience as the source text does to the original audience. The second strategy I used is that of describing or defining (Grit 192). For example, the source text mentions Lord & Taylor, which is an upscale specialty-retail department store chain in the United States (“Lord & Taylor”). I have chosen to omit the name and instead describe it as *een luxe warenhuisketen*, “a luxury department store chain”. I have alternated between the strategy of maintaining and elaborating and that of describing or defining, ultimately wanting to portray the same picture of the surroundings and the characters as the source text, making the target audience feel as if they are truly in the Midwest on a hot summer day without getting confused by all these foreign elements.

5. Language specific problems

When translating from one language to another, odds are you will encounter problems that arise due to the differences between the linguistic systems of the source language and target language. The language specific issues in the text that I will discuss here are words without an equivalent in the target language.

There were a few instances in the source text where the author used words that expressed concepts that are known in the target culture but which are simply not lexicalized, thus making them a challenge to translate. These words have not been allocated a word in the target language to express it (Baker 18-19). The English words “thrumming” and “blatting”, for example,

describe certain sounds, but direct equivalents do not exist in Dutch. To paint the same picture the author does I would have preferred to describe these elements rather than attempt to translate them literally, but in the case of “thrumming”, I was immediately faced with a problem: it is an onomatopoeia, meaning that the word itself resembles the sound that is being described. Aside from that, the author uses it twice in one sentence, “thrumming and thrumming”, and as will be discussed in the next part, repetition is an important element in the story. However, it is not a construction that is common in Dutch, so I had to make some changes to it. For this reason I ultimately went with *gonzend en brommend*, both of which sound similar to the original word in the target text and describe roughly the same sound, even if they are not an equivalent. Another instance where I struggled with equivalency was when Paul “hit” the child lock, an impulsive action that happened out of instinct and which played a part in escalating his fight with Mallory. Simply translating it as *indrukken*, “pressing”, does not seem to convey the same image the author intended, but as a translator you have to make choices: by elaborately describing every single concept that cannot be translated literally, the translation becomes difficult to read, and will start to feel “artificial”. Aside from the literal meaning of a word a translator has to take other factors into account, such as the author’s style and the tone of the story. This means that when faced with a word without an equivalent in the target language, compromises will often have to be made. It is up to the translator to decide which aspects to prioritize, and as the last part will make clear, style and tone play an important role in *The Night of the Satellite*. This is why I have prioritized the image these words are supposed to convey, while also paying attention to the author’s stylistic choices.

6. Text specific problems

The source text relies mainly on style and tone to tell the story, so it is of no surprise that most of the translation problems in this text can be found when attempting to properly recreate the author’s style and the tone of their story in a translation. The original author has their own unique style, which cannot always be literally translated. By translating a story, it will always somewhat change due to the many translation problems, some of which I have already described. I believe that a translator should try to preserve as much of the original style and tone of a story as possible, so that the target audience can read it in the same way it was intended for the original

audience. In the case of T. Coraghessan Boyle, it is especially important to try to adhere to his style – one of the defining characteristics of his fiction is his prose style. Critics have remarked on the energy, verve, and highly stylized quality of his prose (Gleason 9). Considering the target audience I therefore deemed it very important to preserve as much of his style as possible. I will be discussing the narrative voice, register, sentence length, repetition, and the relationship between word choice and the storyline.

Boyle himself has stressed the role of voice in entertaining the reader. According to him, “narrative voice is the beginning, and voice controls the mode of the story.” In other words, will it be narrated in the first, second or third person, and how will the tone color the story. This also gives rise to all the rest: character development, theme, language, structure, and symbology (Gleason 14). In *The Night of the Satellite*, style seems to have had an especially big influence on character development. The story is narrated in the first person, through the eyes of Paul, one of the main characters. By writing the story this way, Boyle has ensured that his readers do not get an objective account of the story that is being told: we only know what Paul knows, thinks and feels. It is Paul’s story, which means the focalization is internal. This serves to develop Paul’s character. Paul attends graduate school and does not have a lot of money, and he is just “marking time”. These are important elements in this story, considering Boyle has learned to create mainly unexceptional white middle- to lower-middle-class male protagonists, for whom contemporary American life holds seemingly nothing but angst and boredom (Gleason 13). It is a recurring character type in Boyle’s fiction, like Delaney Mossbacher in *The Tortilla Curtain* and the narrator in *Modern Love*, and therefore important to properly translate the character building aspects.

The narrative voice also adds to the tone of the story. Tone is more than just style, although they are often interrelated. Tone can be defined as the overall feeling conveyed by (part of) a story, including both conscious and unconscious resonance (Landers 68). By translating a text literally, the translator can distort the author’s intent, which is avoided by assigning a high priority to tone. Tone provides an important clue to register as well (Landers 67). Virtually every word falls into a register, which is a socially defined variety of language. It can be thought of as a continuum, ranging from informal to formal, ‘lowest’ to ‘highest’ (Landers 59). Register plays a particular role in this story: the story is told from Paul’s perspective, but he uses words from

both ends of the register spectrum. He uses “sun-dappled” to describe a street, for example. There is also “endemic” and “translucent”, to name a few more. On the other side, he uses words like “dud”, “shit aplenty” and “yea or nay”, which are of a low register. Considering register contributes to the tone of a story, the translator needs to be careful of the register they translate these words into. There are a lot of possible translations for “shit”, but if I were to translate it with *uitwerpselen* or *ontlasting*, I would be employing a much higher register than if I were to use *stront* or “shit”, which I went with. A possible reason for Paul’s switching between both ends of register is his background as a character: he is a graduate student with an American literature section in his bookcase at home. This indicates that he is well-educated and well-read, although at the same time he is a young adult living in the heart of the country, which might account for his occasional use of low register. Therefore, I think it is fair to say that the author purposefully moved along the spectrum of register, and to adhere to his style, a translator should do the same.

Another aspect of style is the ratio of long sentences to shorter ones, as well as ‘loose’ or ‘periodic’ sentences (Landers 90). This is especially apparent in this story, where very long sentences are often alternated with short ones. As was previously mentioned, the reader follows Paul’s thoughts when reading the story, and sometimes Paul goes on and on. For example:

It was too much trouble to bother with making dinner—and too hot, up in the nineties, and so humid the air hung on your shoulders like a flak jacket—and if Chris and Anneliese didn’t have anything else in mind, I was thinking of persuading them to join us at the vegetarian place in town for the falafel plate, with shredded carrots, hummus, tabbouleh, and the like, and then maybe hit a movie or head back over to Gabe’s until the night melted away.

This sentence is immediately followed with two extremely short sentences: “Fine. Perfect.” The difference in sentence length is striking, and can be compared to the actual storyline: to start with, the story frequently jumps back in time, making use of flashbacks, and one important element of the storyline is that nothing is happening in Paul’s life, until suddenly a few brief events, such as the satellite part that hits him or the fighting couple he keeps bumping into, break the monotony. The short sentences, on the other hand, add to the tone of the story: almost every

bit of conversation between the characters consists of short sentences, and the conversations are mostly filled with tension. For example, this is part of Paul and Mallory's conversation right before their conflict escalates. I have underlined what they are saying for emphasis:

"I don't know," she said, looking up at me for the first time. "I guess so. I don't care."

It was then that my gaze happened to fall on the bookcase, on the gap there, where the old paperback of "Nine Stories" had fallen flat. "Where's the thing?" I said.

"What thing?"

"The mesh. My mesh."

She shrugged. "I tossed it."

Tension is what propels this story. The characters are curt with each other, which is enhanced by the heat, which I will be discussing later. For this reason I found it very important to adhere to Boyle's style of long sentences, alternated with extremely short ones, preserving sentence length and use of commas and dashes to portray Paul's rambling thoughts. Short sentences proved easier to translate because they could often be translated literally.

Repetition is another important element in this story. The author not only repeats various words multiple times throughout the story; he also has certain events reoccur. In the case of words, it is important for the translator to translate them the same way to preserve that repetition. However, this can create problems when the author uses the same word in different contexts. I have underlined the word "streak" that is used on different occasions in the story:

"You need help?" I asked, and those *were* tears in her eyes, absolutely, tears that swelled against her lids and dried in translucent streaks radiating out from her cheekbones.

I wasn't making the connection—not yet—with the streak of light that had shot overhead as we'd slammed out of the car.

I went online the next day and found an article confirming that the streak in the sky had been produced by the reentry of a decommissioned twenty-year-old NASA climate satellite that scientists had been tracking as it fell out of orbit.

She let out a cry, and then the ice cream, double scoop, which had already begun to melt in green streaks across the back of her hand, slipped from the cone to plop wetly at her feet, just like anything else subject to the law of gravity.

In the first example I have translated “streaks” with *strepen*, and fortunately, upon reviewing the other instances where the word was used, I felt it fit in these contexts as well. If the author had not consistently used this word, though, I might have translated “streak of light” as *lichtflits* to emphasize the brightness of it in the sky. These repetitions add to the parallels in the story: all those “streaks” in the above examples are a result of things that are, as the last example literally states, “subject to the law of gravity”. First the girl’s tears, her ice cream, and, at the heart of the story, the satellite that comes down. Translating these repetitions with the same word ensures that these parallels are carried through into the translation. In other instances, the repeated words (like “silver Toyota” and “blacktop”) add to the reader’s perception of Paul. He uses the same, simple words to refer to past events, suggesting a rather simplistic view on things, and perhaps a reluctance to change. Considering the story revolves around a simple life that has become monotone, it is important to pay attention to these aspects while translating.

As I mentioned, it is not only words that are repeated. The entire story is full of events that reoccur. Take the movie that the characters go to see: it revolves around unhappy couples that have affairs with one another and other parties, ending in a close-up of each of the characters striding through Parisian rain. At the end of *The Night of the Satellite* we see Paul striding through the hot Midwest sun, after having danced with his friend’s girlfriend and thinking about the attractiveness of said girlfriend, the female bartenders, and the girl from the couple on the road. Paul also keeps bumping into the couple, and parallels can be drawn between Paul and other characters in the story and their interactions. Lastly, the actual story repeats itself: it starts out in a field after Mallory and Paul have started to fight, followed by the events that led up their fight, before the fight actually takes place in the story. The same thing happens after Paul has

been hit by part of the satellite: the story moves on to the next day, but within a few paragraphs the narrator takes us back to the field again. As such, keeping an eye on words or even sentences that are repeated throughout the text, I feel it is important to stick to the same repetitions in the translation.

Word choice is important for the tone of a story, but in *The Night of the Satellite*, there is a clear relationship between certain words that are being used and the underlying storyline. Heat plays a major role in the tone of the story, and Boyle uses a lot of words that have to do with heat to describe both the current temperatures and other elements; for example, Paul says the night “melted away” and expected the satellite to have been “incinerated”. Due to the heat, the characters are lethargic and quickly annoyed, unable to do much in the sweltering temperatures. In my opinion, it is the task of the translator to recreate that tone and paint the same picture for the target audience that the author did for their audience. For this reason I feel the translator should aim to translate any word that has to do with heat in a similar way, in order to bring out the influence that the heat has on the characters.

There is another factor that causes Mallory and Paul’s fight to escalate: instinct. One of the parallels that can be drawn in the story is between Paul and the dogs. The author uses various words that have to do with instinct to describe both Paul and the dogs. Paul has acted “instinctively”, locking the car door without knowing why, which angers Mallory, and “went right for” her, turning the fight physical and causing him to leave. The author is even more explicit when it comes to the dogs: they could not let their “instincts” turn over and got a “predator and prey” reaction from the sheep once they “went for” them, which made Paul’s dog turn “atavistic”. This does not seem to be a coincidence: many of Boyle’s novels and short stories look at the relationship between humanity and nature (Gleason 7). Some of these words can be translated literally, mainly those that directly reference instinct, but others proved more difficult, because they referred to more abstract concepts. “Atavistic”, for example, describes the reappearance of a characteristic in an organism after several generations of absence (“Atavistic”): in other words, the dog acted like its untamed predecessor. When translating these words, I wanted to keep those same allusions to instinct and wild animals, sometimes changing the direct meaning but always trying to convey that same sense of animalism. What is also interesting is the type of dogs the author writes about: Nome is a husky who has been named

after a small town in Alaska, whereas Boxer is an Alaskan malamute. It is even said of Nome that the current weather is hard on him because his fur was “made for another climate altogether”. Considering Paul’s reaction to Mallory and the heat, the same could also be said for him: perhaps he is just ill-suited for his surroundings, which led to the fight between him and Mallory. I wanted the target audience to understand the part the dogs play in this story, highlighting the conflict that they add to. For this reason I decided to make Boxer’s breed more explicit, to prevent a loss of information that is understood by the original audience (Chesterman 168). I changed Boxer’s breed from “malamute” to “Alaskan Malamute”, making use of intratextual elaboration again. I did not change anything about Nome, because huskies are fairly well known, and I do not think the original audience knows there is a town called Nome in Alaska either. So while the dogs themselves do not play a vital part in the story, their role between the lines is significant, and this should be taken into consideration when translating it.

7. Conclusion

T. Coraghessan Boyle has created a vivid picture of life in the Midwest, and I felt the story would benefit from adhering to the author’s intentions. Therefore I have chosen to exoticize the setting. To avoid confusion about units of measurement, I converted them to units that Dutch readers would understand. I used a strategy of maintaining and elaborating and one of describing or defining to translate the culture specific elements to carry over their meaning. Sometimes I was faced with English words that did not seem to have an equivalent in Dutch and compromises had to be made. I prioritized the image these words are supposed to convey while also paying attention to the author’s stylistic choices. The author is known for his prose style, and relies heavily on style and tone to tell the story. By paying attention to the narrative voice, register, sentence length, repetition and the relationship between word choice and the storyline I have attempted to preserve the original style and tone. The target audience should get the same impression of the conflict that drives the story, seen through the eyes of the main character and which reaches a crescendo thanks to the heat and the characters’ instincts, helped along by choice of words. Therefore the translator should pay special attention to these aspects as well, painting that same picture of blistering heat and characters acting out of instinct.

8. De Nacht van de Satelliet

Waar we die nacht ruzie over hadden—en het was laat, heel laat, tien over drie volgens mijn horloge—ging over iets wat bijna twaalf uur eerder was gebeurd. Het was iets kleins, maar inmiddels was het buiten alle proporties gegroeid en infecteerde het alles wat we zeiden, alsof we nog niet genoeg problemen hadden. Mallory was meedogenloos. En ik stelde me defensief op en voelde me misschien meer dan een beetje paranoïde. We waren allebei dronken. En zo niet dronken, dan waren we op z'n minst wat loslippiger door wat we bij Chris Wright thuis na het incident genuttigd hadden, en daarna bij het avondeten, en daarna in de bar. Ik kon de stank ruiken die in de nacht boven de rivier hing. Ik keek op en zag hoe de hemel zich boven mijn hoofd uitstreckte en uiteindelijk kromp totdat hij me paste als een veiligheidshelm. Een vrachtwagen kwam met veel lawaai¹ voorbij over de snelweg², en toen was het stil, afgezien van de muggen die hun bloedlied zongen terwijl de rest van de insectenwereld krijste in protest of overeenstemming, ik wist niet welke, gonzend en brommend³, totdat de nacht voelde alsof hij open zou barsten en ons in stukjes in het gras achter zou laten.

‘Klootzak⁴,’ snauwde ze.

‘Je bent zelf een klootzak,’⁵ zei ik.

‘Ik haat je.’

¹ I had great difficulty translating “blatting”, because I could not find a literal translation for it. Upon looking up the definition I found out that it is a harsh or raucous noise. While I am familiar with the sound of a truck passing by on the highway, I was unable to come up with one word to describe it, so I opted for describing the noise rather than attempting to literally translate it.

² An interstate is a highway between states in the United States, but it is not relevant to the story and the reader might not know what it is. Thus I opted for *snelweg*, which is a translation of “highway”, which an interstate is, and which Dutch readers know.

³ I could not find a literal translation for “thrumming” in Dutch. I originally chose to describe the sound rather than directly translating it, but it would remove a repetition from a story that is filled with them. I then wanted to keep the repetition and translate it with an onomatopoeia that resembles “thrumming”, *brommend*, but while “thrumming and thrumming” can be said in English, *brommend en brommend* is not a common structure in Dutch. For this reason I chose another word that looks like *brommend* and means roughly the same thing so it would still be similar to a repetition, and ended up with *gonzend*.

⁴ It is possible to say either “Asshole” or “You asshole” in English when it is directed at the person you are talking to, but the same construction does not exist in Dutch. Thus I have translated it as though she just said “asshole”.

⁵ The male character is telling his girlfriend that he is not the asshole but she is, but this cannot literally be translated in Dutch. It would have been something like *Jij bent de klootzak*, which is not commonly said in Dutch. However, kids grow up telling each other *wat je zegt ben je zelf* when they are being insulted, or “you are what you say”, so I added *zelf*.

‘Ik haat jou ook,’ zei ik. ‘Ik haat jou in het kwadraat.’⁶

De dag, een zaterdag, was nog vreedzaam genoeg begonnen, we lagen met z’n tweeën opgekruld in bed en sliepen uit, de rolgordijnen dicht en de airconditioning aan het werk. Ware het niet voor de hond dan hadden we tot na het middaguur uitgeslapen, want we waren de afgelopen nacht laat opgebleven in een club die *Gabe’s* heet, waar we hadden gedanst met wat hulp van reguliere rum en twee kleine witte pilletjes die Mallory’s vriendin Mona haar gegeven had, tot we door onze kleren heen zweetten en onze kuitspieren—de mijne, in ieder geval—voelden alsof ze chirurgisch verwijderd, platgeslagen, en weer op hun plaats gehecht waren. Maar de hond, Nome—een husky, één blauw oog, één bruin—bleef zijn spits toelopende kop⁷ op mijn kant van het bed leggen en dringend aan één stuk door piepen, omdat zijn blaas op knappen stond en het hoog tijd was voor zijn ochtendwandeling.

Mijn ogen vlogen open, en, ondanks de behoeften van de hond en de eerste tekenen van hoofdpijn, kwam ik uit bed met het gevoel dat de wereld een gastvrije plek was. Nadat ik naar het toilet was geweest en wat water in mijn gezicht had geplensd vond ik mijn korte broek op de vloer waar ik hem achtergelaten had, ontrolde ik de hondenriem, en nam de hond mee naar buiten. De zon stond hoog aan de hemel. De hond snuffelde en stroomde leeg. Ik leidde hem naar de winkel op de hoek van de straat, kocht een krant en twee koffies om mee te nemen, volgde dezelfde weg terug door de stille zonbevlekte straat, liep de trap op naar ons appartement, en kroop weer terug in bed. Mallory zat overeind, op mij te wachten, nog steeds in haar nachtpon maar met haar bril op—een klein vierkantig ding met een zwart frame dat op een algemene leesbril leek, zo eentje die je zo in de apotheek kon kopen maar die eigenlijk afgemeten was door een optometrist en die ze droeg als een strijdlustig fashion statement. Ze rekte zich uit en glimlachte toen ik binnenkwam en mompelde iets dat ‘Goeiemorgen’ zou kunnen zijn geweest,

⁶ I really wanted to preserve Boyle’s use of repetition. I would have preferred to keep his use of “ditto” and translate it as *dito*, but that made translating the expression “square it” difficult because I could not come up with a translation that flowed well when combined with *dito*. Therefore I translated “ditto” as *Ik haat jou ook*, with *ook* meaning that he repeats what Mallory said. I then translated the second “ditto” as *Ik haat jou* without *ook* so Paul repeats himself, and ended up translating “and square it” literally into *in het kwadraat* to preserve the figure of speech, and because it flows well with *ik haat jou*.

⁷ The source text talks about “the wedge of his head”, but there is not an anatomical part of a dog’s head that is called the “wedge”. It refers to the shape, which is thick at one edge and tapers off. This is why I translated it as an adverb rather than a noun.

hoewel zoals ik al zei de morgen al bijna achter ons lag. Ik gaf haar een koffie en het Leven-katern uit de krant. De tijd vertraagde. Gedurende het volgende uur was het stil, afgezien van het geritsel van krantenpapier en het zachte ruisende geluid van hete vloeistof die door een kleine opening in een plastic deksel heen geslurpt werd. Misschien dommelden we wat. Het maakte niet uit. Het was zomer. En we hadden vakantie.

Het plan was om naar de boerderijwoning te rijden die onze vrienden Chris en Anneliese Wright van de boer zelf huurden en luierend de uren door te brengen met het drinken van wijn en misschien het spelen van wat croquet, of door een wandeling te maken langs de kreek die als een strakke lijn door de maïsvelden sneed, die anderszins als een onafgebroken massa omhoog rezen zo ver het oog reikte. Daarna zouden we improviseren. Het was teveel gedoe om ons met het koken van het avondeten bezig te houden—en veel te heet, ruim boven de dertig graden, en zo vochtig dat de lucht als een kogelwerend vest over je schouders hing—en als Chris en Annaliese niets anders in gedachten hadden, zat ik eraan te denken om ze ervan te overtuigen om ons te vergezellen naar een vegetarisch restaurant in de stad voor een falafelgerecht, met geraspte worteltjes, hummus, taboulé en nog het één en ander, en daarna konden we misschien een film pakken of teruggaan naar *Gabe's* tot de nacht wegsmolt. Prima. Perfect. Precies wat je van een midzomerdag in het Midden-Westen zou willen, nadat het zomersemester afgelopen was en je je boeken weggelegd had voor de drieweekse onderbreking voor het herfstsemester begon.

We hadden geen banen, geen echte in ieder geval—banen waren een mythe, een gerucht—dus we hielden het vol in *grad school*, semester na semester, omdat we toch niets beters te doen hadden. We kregen financiële hulp, uiteraard, en bouwden een schuld op door onze studieleningen. Onze auto, een tweedehandsje van Mallory's moeder, had nieuwe banden en daarbovenop waarschijnlijk allerlei andere dingen nodig. We schreven papers, beoordeelden papers, kregen goeie cijfers⁸ in de cursussen die we volgden, en deelden goeie cijfers uit in de cursussen die we gaven. Soms voelde het alsof we zowaar vooruitgang boekten, maar de waarheid was dat we net als de meeste mensen maar wat af zaten te wachten.

⁸ The grading systems in the United States and the Netherlands differ from each other: an A or a B does not correspond with a specific numerical grade, which is why I felt uncomfortable translating it as one. An A is also the highest achievable result, though it does not correspond to a 9 or 10 in Dutch. Because A's and B's are the highest possible scores I therefore simply translated them as *goede cijfers*, "good grades", also avoiding naturalizing this element.

Hoe dan ook, we maakten wat boterhammen klaar, stopten de hond in de auto, en reden door de lommerrijke straten van het stadje⁹, tot de bomen ophielden en het platteland zich om ons heen openbaarde, twee afgeprijsde flessen exclusieve Australische Zinfandelwijn in een tas op de vloer voor de achterbank. De radio stond aan (bluegrass, een smaak die we verworven hadden sinds we naar het hart van het platteland verhuisd waren), en we hadden de ramen open om van de bries te genieten die we zelf genereerden terwijl de auto door de maïsvelden en over een reeks zacht glooiende hellingen heen zwoegde en ons liet voelen alsof we zweefden.¹⁰ Nome zat op de achterbank met zijn kop uit het raam, door de lucht heen een streep van kwijl achterlatend op de bumper. Alles was goed. Maar toen sloegen we af naar de asfaltweg die naar het huis van Chris en Annaliese leidde en zagen we daar de auto staan, een zilveren Toyota, de motor aan, geparkeerd in onze rijstrook en de verkeerde kant op gericht.

Toen we dichterbij kwamen zagen we een vrouw—meisje—ons over het midden van de weg tegemoetkomen, haar gezicht rood en haar ogen nat met wat de effecten van overspannen emotie of misschien wel hooikoorts zouden kunnen zijn, wat hier vaak voorkwam¹¹, en toen zagen we ook een man—jongen—die op het puntje van de motorkap van zijn auto zat en lelijke dingen naar haar distantiërende rug slingerde. Ik dacht net dat het eruit zag als een ruzie tussen geliefden¹² toen het meisje opkeek en Mallory ‘Stop!’ schreeuwde.

⁹ Paul and Mallory are said to live in a town, rather than a city. Calling it a *stad* implies that it is the latter, even if it is also a valid translation for “town”. Because of this, and because it is later mentioned that they are living in the heart of the country, I feel it would be strange to translate it with *stad*, seeing as it implies a huge population. This is why I chose to use the diminutive of *stad*, *stadje*.

¹⁰ I found this sentence difficult to translate because of the position of the verb “hump”. Not only was I not sure what it described – upon looking up definitions I thought it could either mean an exertive action or the way the car rolled up and down the hills – but I also had trouble with describing how the series of hills made Paul and Mallory feel as if they were floating. In Dutch, because it is a subordinate clause, the verb could not be at the start of it like it is in the source text. Rather, it should be placed at the end. At first I tried translating it like this: *terwijl de auto door de maïsvelden en over een reeks zacht glooiende hellingen heen zwoegde die ons liet voelen alsof we zweefden*, but by placing *die* right behind *zwoegde* it was unclear what *die* was referring to, and the whole sentence felt awkward to read. I resorted to changing *die* to *en*, referring to the way it felt to be sitting in that car as it rolled up and down the hills rather than the series of hills itself.

¹¹ The word “endemic” in the source text speaks to Paul’s use of high register words, but I felt that too many Dutch readers might not understand what it means if I translated it to *endemisch*. Because I feel I have used Dutch words of a high register in a lot of other places I felt I could leave it this one time, in favor of making this sentence understandable to the target audience.

¹² The source text mentions that Paul thinks of the term “lovers’ quarrel”, but I could not think of a similar term in Dutch, so I left out that he thinks of a specific term and instead described what the fight looks like to him.

‘Het is een ruzie tussen geliefden,’ zei ik, terwijl ik het gaspedaal een heel klein beetje omhoog liet komen.

‘Stop!’ herhaalde Mallory, dit keer wat nadrukkelijker. De kerel zat naar ons te kijken met iets wat op een boze grijns leek op zijn gezicht. Het meisje—ze was nu maar zo’n dertig meter van ons vandaan—deed haar hand omhoog alsof ze ons wilde laten stoppen, en ik liet het gas los, denkende dat ze misschien toch in de problemen zaten, dat er iets mis was met de auto, een oververhitte motor, de benzinemeter op nul. Het was heet. Sprinkhanen gooiden zichzelf als gele hagel tegen de voorruit. Het enige wat je kon ruiken was teer.

De auto kwam langzaam tot stilstand en het meisje boog zich naar mijn raampje, waar haar gezicht voor een moment afstak tegen de groene zee van maïs. ‘Heb je hulp nodig?’ vroeg ik, en dat waren écht tranen in haar ogen, absoluut, tranen die opkwamen tegen haar oogleden en in doorzichtige strepen vanaf haar jukbeenderen opdroogden.

‘Hij is zo’n eikel,’ zei ze, een hap adem nemend. ‘Hij, hij is’—nog een hap—‘ik haat hem.’

Mallory boog zich over me heen zodat het meisje haar gezicht kon zien. ‘Is hij je—’

‘Hij is een eikel,’ herhaalde het meisje. Ze was jonger dan wij, eind tienerjaren, begin twintig. Ze droeg haar blonde haar in vlechten en had een zwarte tanktop, afgeknipte spijkerbroek en roze Crocs aan. Ze keek naar de kerel, die nog steeds op het puntje van de motorkop van zijn auto zat, en veegde toen haar neus af met de rug van haar hand en begon weer te huilen.

‘Goed zo¹³,’ riep hij. ‘Huil maar. Ga je gang. En daarna kan je terugrennen naar je mama en papa, dat is wat mongooltjes als jij doen!’ Hij was ook blond, wat roodbruiner blond, en het begin van een roodachtige baard kroop in zijn bakkebaarden. Hij droeg een Banksy T-shirt, die ene met de rat met de zonnebril, en het zat zo strak dat het leek alsof het op zijn lichaam geschilderd was. Je kon zien dat hij tijd in de sportschool doorbracht. Een hoop tijd.

‘Stap in de auto,’ zei Mallory. ‘Je kan met ons mee. Het komt goed.’

¹³ At first I thought the guy shouted “That’s right” simply to demean her, but then I realized he might have been talking about her calling him a jerk. However, further on in the text she calls him a jerk again, and he clearly responds to that, so I assumed that in this sentence he is just edging her on and trying to make her feel bad about crying and translated it as *Goed zo* rather than something like *Dat klopt*, which would be a more literal translation.

Ik draaide me naar Mallory toe en blokkeerde haar uitzicht op het meisje. ‘Het gaat tussen hen,’ zei ik, en tegelijkertijd, ik weet niet waarom, drukte ik op het knopje van het kinderslot zodat de deur niet open kon. ‘Het zijn onze zaken niet.’

‘Onze zaken niet?’ kaatste ze terug. ‘Ze zou mishandeld kunnen zijn, of weet ik veel, ontvoérd, heb je daar ooit aan gedacht?’ Ze strekte zich zodat ze om me heen naar het meisje kon kijken dat nog steeds op het asfalt stond, alsof ze aan de grond genageld stond. ‘Heeft hij je geslagen, is dat wat er is gebeurd?’

Nog een snik, ingeslikt zo snel als hij er eruit kwam. ‘Nee. Hij is gewoon een eikel, dat is alles.’

‘Inderdaad,’ riep hij terwijl hij zich van de motorkap af liet glijden, ‘vertel ze alles maar, want jij bent Mevrouw Perfect, is het niet? Wil je wat zien? Jij daar, in de auto, ik heb het tegen jou.’ Hij hield één arm omhoog om de lange rode strepen erop te laten zien, bewijs van wat her tussen hen was voorgevallen. ‘Wil je haar? Je mag haar hebben.’

‘Stap in,’ zei Mallory.

Nome begon te piepen. Het huis was minder dan een kilometer verderop, en hij kon waarschijnlijk de hond van Chris en Anneliese ruiken, een Alaskan Malamute die Boxer heet, en misschien de schapen die de boer achter het hek hield dat de schuur omheinde. Het meisje schudde haar hoofd.

‘Ga maar, bitch,’ riep de kerel. Hij leunde achterover tegen de motorkap en kruiste zijn armen voor zijn borst alsof hij hier al een tijdje mee bezig was en bereid was om tot het einde der tijden door te gaan.

‘Je hoeft dat niet te pikken,’ zei Mallory, en haar stem was scherp en hard, de stem die ze bij mij gebruikte als ze het op haar heupen had, wanneer ik teveel praatte of er niet aan toegekomen was om de afwas te doen als het mijn beurt was. ‘Kom op, stap in.’

‘Nee,’ zei het meisje, en ze deed nu een stap van de auto vandaan, zodat we haar volledig konden zien. Haar armen glommen van het zweet. Er zaten druppels vocht op haar bovenlip. Ze was knap, erg knap.

Ik liet het rempedaal los en de auto kroop langzaam naar voren, zelfs terwijl Mallory zei, ‘Stop, Paul, wat doe je?’ en ik zei, ‘Ze wil niet,’ en toen, wat flauwtjes, ‘Het is een ruzie tussen geliefden, zie je dat niet?’ Toen reden we verder omhoog door het kanaal dat de weg door de groenste velden ter wereld sneed, voorbij de nijldige kerel met de bekraste onderarmen en een onverbiddelijke hardvochtige blik vol leedvermaak in zijn ogen, naar beneden en weer de volgende golvende heuvel op, en Mallory was furieus en sloeg op de gesloten deur alsof het een drumtoestel was en draaide haar nek om naar achteren te kijken, terwijl de hele scène in de achteruitkijkspiegel verdween.

Tegen de tijd dat we bij Chris en Anneliese thuis waren stond Mallory in volledige crisismodus. Zodra we op de oprit geparkeerd stonden drukte het knopje van het kinderslot weer in, maar ze gaf me slechts een vernietigende blik, smeedde de deur achter zich dicht toen ze uit de auto sprong, en stampte de traptreden op die naar de veranda leidden terwijl ze riep, ‘Anneliese, Chris, waar zijn jullie?’ Ik was toen uit de auto gestapt; Nome sprong over de voorstoel en schoot langs me heen terwijl Boxer om de hoek van het huis heen gescheurd kwam, een gele labradorpuppy die ik nog nooit had gezien in zijn kielzog. De honden blaften extatisch, toen zwaaide de hordeur open en daar waren Chris en Anneliese, spritzers in hun handen geklemd. Chris liep op blote voeten en had geen shirt aan, Anneliese ging bijna exact hetzelfde gekleed als het meisje op de weg, behalve dat haar topje blauw was, zodat het bij haar ogen paste, en ze droeg ballerina’s met open teen om met haar voeten te pronken. Voordat ze naar *grad school* was gegaan had ze als kousenmodel bij een luxe warenhuisketen in Chicago gewerkt, en ze liet geen mogelijkheid aan haar voorbij gaan om ervoor te zorgen dat iedereen het wist. Wat de rest van haar betrof was ze aantrekkelijk genoeg, dacht ik zo, met gestroomlijnde ledematen, kroezig kopergekleurd haar, en de witste tanden die ik ooit gezien of me voorgesteld had. Mijn eigen tanden neigden meer naar het gele, maar geen van mijn ouders was dan ook tandarts en die van haar allebei wel.

Mallory zei geen ‘Hallo’ of ‘Hoe gaat het?’ of ‘Bedankt voor de uitnodiging.’ Ze draaide zich gewoon gefrustreerd in een ruk om en wees naar de weg. ‘Ik heb een fiets nodig,’ zei ze. ‘Kan ik iemands fiets lenen?’

Anneliese toonde haar tanden in een onzekere glimlach. ‘Waar heb je het over? Je bent er net.’

De uitleg was kort en levendig en ongenadig wat betrof mijn gebrek aan bezorgdheid of gevoel. Alle drie keken ze me even aan, toen zei Anneliese, ‘Wat als hij gevaarlijk is?’

‘Hij is niet gevaarlijk,’ zei ik uit reflex.

‘Ik ga met je mee,’ zei Anneliese, en een minuut later duwde ze twee dezelfde mountainbikes naar buiten, die van haar en Chris.

Chris zwaaide met zijn glas. ‘Denk je dat Paul en ik misschien in jullie plaats zouden moeten gaan? Ik bedoel maar, voor het geval dat?’

Mallory zat al op de fiets. ‘Laat maar,’ zei ze, met een hoeveelheid bitterheid die veel verder ging dan ik verdiende, als ik het al verdiende. Ik had alles gedaan wat iemand gedaan zou hebben. Geloof mij maar, je komt gewoon niet tussen een koppel wanneer ze middenin een ruzie zitten. Vooral onbekenden. En vooral niet op een smoorhete middag op een verlaten landweg. Wil je je ermee bemoeien? Bel de politie. Dat was wat ik dacht, in ieder geval, maar het hele gebeuren had dan ook zo snel plaatsgevonden dat ik echt niet de tijd had gehad om de gevolgen te overdenken. Ik had uit instinct gehandeld, dat was alles. Het probleem was dat zij hetzelfde had gedaan.

Mallory keek me aan. ‘Je zou hem uiteindelijk waarschijnlijk zelfs een schouderklopje geven.’ Ze pauzeerde even; keek Chris indringend aan. ‘Jullie allebei.’

Toen werd het verwarrend, want voor ik kon antwoorden—voor ik na kon denken—traptten de vrouwen de oprit af terwijl de zon hen verlichtte, alsof we allemaal in het tweede bedrijf van een toneelstuk zaten, en de honden, aangespoord door de labradorpup, kozen dat moment om onder de onderste plank van het gebleekte houten hek door te schieten en achter de schapen aan te gaan. De schapen stonden precies daar, middenin de tuin, gewoon wat te malen en een zweterige schapenstank te verspreiden, en de twee oudere honden—die van mij en Chris—wisten dat ze verboden terrein waren, strikt en absoluut, en dat er zware consequenties voor ze zouden volgen als ze ooit de fout in zouden gaan en hun instincten over zouden laten nemen. Maar dat was precies wat er gebeurde. De pup, die, zo bleek later, een verjaardagscadeautje van Chris voor Anneliese was geweest, snapte de regels nog niet—dit waren schapen en hij was een hond—en

dus hij ging achter ze aan en de schapen reageerden en die reactie, roofdier en prooi, deed de oudere honden op hol slaan.

Op dat moment vergaten we de vrouwen, het stel op de weg, vergaten we spritzers en croquet en het idee van chillen op een kokendhete middag, want de honden vielen de schapen aan en de schapen konden nergens heen en het was aan ons—*grad school*-studenten, geen boeren, geen herders—om naar binnen te gaan en ze uit elkaar te halen. ‘Oh, shit,’ zei Chris, en toen sprongen we allebei over het hek en zaten we er middenin.

Ik ging achter Nome aan, riep woedend zijn naam, maar hij leek wel een wilde hond; scheurde wol en huid van het ene blatende dier na het andere. Ik had hem twee keer; gooide mezelf bovenop hem als een linebacker, maar hij wurmde zich los en ik lag in de modder, in het stof, een cycloon van stof, terwijl de schapen op mijn blote armen en uitgestoken handen traptten met hun steenachtige zwarte hoeven. Er was een hoop stront. Er was bloed. En tegen de tijd dat we de honden in een worstelhoudgreep hadden en ze daar weg hadden gekregen hadden zo’n zes schapen zichtbare jappen op hun koppen en poten, een situatie die de boer—de huisbaas van Chris—zeker weten zou verontrusten als hij erachter zou komen, en we moesten allebei nodig ontsmet worden. Ik bloedde. Chris bloedde. De schapen bloedden. En de honden, de honden die we berispten en knepen en sloegen, werden door ons door de voortuin heen gesleurd naar een plek waar we ze vast konden ketenen zodat ze liggend de rest van de middag door konden brengen met hijgen en het overdenken van hun zonden. Dat was het moment, dat was wat ons bezighield, en als de vrouwen ergens op hun fiets zaten, omringd door een deken van insecten of zich in de ruzie van iemand anders mengden, wisten we dat niet.

Een auto reed toen voorbij, een zilveren Toyota, maar ik kon er maar een glimp van opvangen en kon niet zeggen of er twee mensen in zaten of slechts één.

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Appendix: “The Night of the Satellite”

What we were arguing about that night—and it was late, very late, 3:10 A.M. by my watch—was something that had happened nearly twelve hours earlier. A small thing, really, but by this time it had grown out of all proportion and poisoned everything we said, as if we didn’t have enough problems already. Mallory was relentless. And I was feeling defensive and maybe more than a little paranoid. We were both drunk. Or, if not drunk, at least loosened up by what we’d consumed at Chris Wright’s place in the wake of the incident and then at dinner after and the bar after that. I could smell the nighttime stink of the river. I looked up and watched the sky expand overhead and then shrink down to fit me like a safety helmet. A truck went blating by on the interstate, and then it was silent, but for the mosquitoes singing their blood song, while the rest of the insect world screeched either in protest or accord, I couldn’t tell which, thrumming and thrumming, until the night felt as if it were going to burst open and leave us shattered in the grass.

“You asshole,” she snarled.

“You’re the asshole,” I said.

“I hate you.”

“Ditto,” I said. “Ditto and square it.”

The day had begun peaceably enough, a Saturday, the two of us curled up and sleeping late, the shades drawn and the air-conditioner doing its job. If it hadn’t been for the dog, we might have slept right on into the afternoon, because we’d been up late the night before, at a club called Gabe’s, where we’d danced, with the assistance of well rum and two little white pills Mallory’s friend Mona had given her, until we sweated through our clothes, and the muscles of our calves—my calves, anyway—felt as if they’d been surgically removed, hammered flat, and sewn back in place. But the dog, Nome—a husky, one blue eye, one brown—kept laying the wedge of his head on my side of the bed and emitting a series of insistent whines, because his bladder was bursting and it was high time for his morning run.

My eyes flashed open, and, despite the dog's needs and the first stirrings of a headache, I got up with a feeling that the world was a hospitable place. After using the toilet and splashing some water on my face, I found my shorts on the floor where I'd left them, unfurled the dog's leash, and took him out the door. The sun was high. The dog sniffed and evacuated. I led him down to the corner store, picked up a copy of the newspaper and two coffees to go, retraced my steps along the quiet sun-dappled street, mounted the stairs to the apartment, and settled back into bed. Mallory was sitting up waiting for me, still in her nightgown but with her glasses on—boxy little black-framed things that looked like a pair of the generic reading glasses you find in the drugstore but were in fact ground to the optometrist's specifications and which she wore as a kind of combative fashion statement. She stretched and smiled when I came through the door and murmured something that might have been “Good morning,” though, as I say, the morning was all but gone. I handed her a coffee and the Life section of the newspaper. Time slowed. For the next hour there were no sounds but for a rustle of newsprint and the gentle sougning suck of hot liquid through a small plastic aperture. We may have dozed. It didn't matter. It was summer. And we were on break.

The plan was to drive out to the farmhouse our friends Chris and Anneliese Wright were renting from the farmer himself and laze away the hours sipping wine and maybe playing croquet or taking a hike along the creek that cut a crimped line through the cornfields, which rose in an otherwise unbroken mass as far as you could see. After that, we'd play it by ear. It was too much trouble to bother with making dinner—and too hot, up in the nineties, and so humid the air hung on your shoulders like a flak jacket—and if Chris and Anneliese didn't have anything else in mind, I was thinking of persuading them to join us at the vegetarian place in town for the falafel plate, with shredded carrots, hummus, tabbouleh, and the like, and then maybe hit a movie or head back over to Gabe's until the night melted away. Fine. Perfect. Exactly what you wanted from a midsummer's day in the Midwest, after the summer session had ended and you'd put away your books for the three-week respite before the fall semester started up.

We didn't have jobs, not in any real sense—jobs were a myth, a rumor—so we held on in grad school, semester after semester, for lack of anything better to do. We got financial aid, of course, and accrued debt on our student loans. Our car, a hand-me-down from Mallory's mother, needed

tires and probably everything else into the bargain. We wrote papers, graded papers, got A's and B's in the courses we took, and doled out A's and B's in the courses we taught. Sometimes we felt as if we were actually getting somewhere, but the truth was, like most people, we were just marking time.

At any rate, we made some sandwiches, put the dog in the car, and drove through the leafy streets of town, until the trees gave way and the countryside opened up around us, two bottles of marked-down shoppers' special Australian Zinfandel in a bag on the floor in back. The radio was playing (bluegrass, a taste we'd acquired since moving out here to the heart of the country), and we had the windows rolled down to enjoy the breeze we were generating as the car humped through the cornfields and over a series of gently rolling hills that made us feel as if we were floating. Nome was in the back seat, hanging his head out the window and striping the fender with airborne slaver. All was well. But then we turned onto the unmarked blacktop road that led out to Chris and Anneliese's and saw the car there, a silver Toyota, engine running, stopped in our lane and facing the wrong direction.

As we got closer we saw a woman—girl—coming toward us down the center of the road, her face flushed and her eyes wet with what might have been the effects of overwrought emotion or maybe hay fever, which was endemic here, and we saw a man—boy—then, too, perched on the hood of the car, shouting abuse at her retreating back. The term "lovers' quarrel" came into my head at the very moment the girl lifted her face and Mallory yelled, "Stop!"

"It's a lovers' quarrel," I said, ever so slightly depressing the accelerator.

"Stop!" Mallory repeated, more insistently this time. The guy was watching us, something like an angry smirk on his face. The girl—she was no more than a hundred feet away now—raised her hand as if to flag us down, and I eased up on the gas, thinking that maybe they were in trouble after all, something wrong with the car, the engine overheating, the fuel gauge on empty. It was hot. Grasshoppers flung themselves at the windshield like yellow hail. All you could smell was tar.

The car slowed to a halt and the girl bent to my window, letting her face hover there a moment against the green tide of corn. "You need help?" I asked, and those *were* tears in her eyes,

absolutely, tears that swelled against her lids and dried in translucent streaks radiating out from her cheekbones.

“He’s such a jerk,” she said, sucking in her breath. “He’s, he’s”—another breath—“I hate him.”

Mallory leaned over me so the girl could see her face. “Is he your—”

“He’s a jerk,” the girl repeated. She was younger than us, late teens, early twenties. She wore her blond hair in braids and she was dressed in a black tank top, cut-off jeans, and pink Crocs. She threw a look at the guy, who was still perched on the hood of the car, then wiped her nose with the back of her hand and began to cry again.

“That’s right,” he shouted. “Cry. Go ahead. And then you can run back to your mommy and daddy like the little retard you are!” He was blond, too, more of a rusty blond, and he had the makings of a reddish beard creeping up into his sideburns. He was wearing a Banksy T-shirt, the one with the rat in sunglasses on it, and it clung to him as if it had been painted on. You could see that he spent time at the gym. A lot of time.

“Get in the car,” Mallory said. “You can come with us—it’ll be all right.”

I turned to Mallory, blocking her view of the girl. “It’s between them,” I said, and at the same time, I don’t know why, I hit the child lock so the door wouldn’t open. “It’s none of our business.”

“None of our business?” she shot back at me. “She could be abused or, I don’t know, *abducted*, you ever think of that?” She strained to look around me to where the girl was still standing on the blacktop, as if she’d been fixed in place. “Did he hit you, is that it?”

Another sob, sucked back as quickly as it was released. “No. He’s just a jerk, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” he crowed, sliding down off the hood, “you tell them all about it, because you’re Little Miss Perfect, aren’t you? You want to see something? You, I’m talking to you, you in the car.” He raised one arm to show the long red striations there, evidence of what had passed between them. “You want her? You can have her.”

“Get in,” Mallory said.

Nome began to whine. The house was no more than half a mile up the road, and he could probably smell Chris and Anneliese’s dog, a malamute named Boxer, and maybe the sheep the farmer kept behind the fence that enclosed the barn. The girl shook her head.

“Go ahead, bitch,” the guy called. He leaned back against the hood of the car and folded his arms across his chest as if he’d been at this awhile and was prepared to go on indefinitely.

“You don’t have to put up with that,” Mallory said, and her voice was honed and hard, the voice she used on me when she was in a mood, when I was talking too much or hadn’t got around to washing the dishes when it was my turn. “Come on, get in.”

“No,” the girl said, stepping back from the car now, so that we got a full view of her. Her arms shone with sweat. There were beads of moisture dotting her upper lip. She was pretty, very pretty.

I eased off the brake pedal and the car inched forward even as Mallory said, “Stop, Paul, what are you doing?” and I said, “She doesn’t want to,” and then, lamely, “It’s a lovers’ quarrel, can’t you see that?” Then we were moving up the channel the road cut through the greenest fields in the world, past the pissed-off guy with the scratched forearms and a hard harsh gloating look in his eyes, down into a dip and up the next undulating hill, Mallory furious, thumping at the locked door as if it were a set of drums and craning her neck to look back, as the whole scene receded in the rearview mirror.

By the time we got to Chris and Anneliese’s, Mallory was in full crisis mode. The minute we pulled into the driveway I flicked off the child lock, but she just gave me a withering look, slammed out of the car, and stalked up the steps of the front porch, shouting, “Anneliese, Chris, where are you?” I was out of the car by then, Nome shooting over the front seat to rocket past me even as Boxer came tearing around the corner of the house, a yellow Lab pup I’d never seen before at his heels. The dogs barked rhapsodically, then the screen door swung open and there were Chris and Anneliese, spritzers clutched in their hands. Chris was barefoot and shirtless, Anneliese dressed almost identically to the girl on the road, except that her top was blue, to

match her eyes, and she was wearing open-toed flats to show off her feet. Before grad school she'd been a hosiery model for Lord & Taylor in Chicago and she never missed an opportunity to let you know it. As for the rest of her, she was attractive enough, I suppose, with streamlined limbs, kinky copper-colored hair, and the whitest teeth I'd ever seen or imagined. My own teeth tended toward the yellowish, but then neither of my parents was a dentist and both of hers were.

Mallory didn't say "Hello" or "How are you?" or "Thanks for inviting us." She just wheeled around in exasperation and pointed down the road. "I need a bicycle," she said. "Can I borrow somebody's bicycle?"

Anneliese showed her teeth in an uncertain smile. "What are you talking about? You just got here."

The explanation was brief and vivid and unsparing with regard to my lack of concern or feeling. All three of them looked at me a moment, then Anneliese said, "What if he's dangerous?"

"He's not dangerous," I said reflexively.

"I'm going with you," Anneliese said, and in the next minute she was pushing a matching pair of ten-speed bicycles out the door, hers and Chris's.

Chris waved his glass. "You think maybe Paul and I should go instead? I mean, just in case?"

Mallory was already straddling the bike. "Forget it," she said, with a level of bitterness that went far beyond what was called for, if it was called for at all. I'd done what anyone would have done. Believe me, you just do not get between a couple when they're in the middle of a fight. Especially strangers. And especially not on a sweltering afternoon on a deserted country road. You want to get involved? Call the cops. That was my feeling, anyway, but then the whole thing had happened so quickly I really hadn't had time to work out the ramifications. I'd acted instinctively, that was all. The problem was so had she.

Mallory shot me a look. "You'd probably just wind up patting him on the back." She gave it a beat, lasered in on Chris. "Both of you."

That was when things got confused, because before I could respond—before I could think—the women were cranking down the drive with the sun lighting them up, as if we were all in the second act of a stage play, and the dogs, spurred on by the Lab pup, chose that moment to bolt under the lowest slat of the bleached wooden fence and go after the sheep. The sheep were right there, right in the yard, milling around and letting off a sweaty ovine stink, and the two older dogs—mine and Chris’s—knew they were off limits, strictly and absolutely, and that heavy consequences would come down on them if they should ever slip and let their instincts take over. But that was exactly what happened. The pup, which, as it turned out, was a birthday present from Chris to Anneliese, didn’t yet comprehend the rules—these were sheep and he was a dog—and so he went for them and the sheep reacted and that reaction, predator and prey, drove the older dogs into a frenzy.

In that instant we forgot the women, forgot the couple on the road, forgot spritzers and croquet and the notion of chilling on a scalding afternoon, because the dogs were harrying the sheep and the sheep had nowhere to go and it was up to us—grad students, not farmers, not shepherds—to get in there and separate them. “Oh, shit,” Chris said, and then we both hurdled the fence and were right in the thick of it.

I went after Nome, shouting his name in a fury, but he’d gone atavistic, tearing wool and hide from one bleating animal after another. I had him twice, flinging myself at him like a linebacker, but he wriggled away and I was down in the dirt, in the dust, a cyclone of dust, the sheep poking at my bare arms and outthrust hands with their stony black hooves. There was shit aplenty. There was blood. And by the time we’d wrestled the dogs down and got them out of there, half a dozen of the sheep had visible gashes on their faces and legs, a situation that was sure to disconcert the farmer—Chris’s landlord—if he were to find out about it, and we ourselves were in serious need of decontamination. I was bleeding. Chris was bleeding. The sheep were bleeding. And the dogs, the dogs we scolded and pinched and whacked, were in the process of being dragged across the front yard to a place where we could chain them up so they could lie panting through the afternoon and contemplate their sins. That was the moment, that was what we were caught up in, and if the women were on their bicycles someplace wearing a scrim of insects or stepping into somebody else’s quarrel, we didn’t know it.

A car went by then, a silver Toyota, but I only caught a glimpse of it and couldn't have said if there were two people in it or just one.

We never did get around to playing croquet—Mallory was too worked up, and, besides, just moving had us dripping with sweat—but we sat on the porch and drank Zinfandel-and-soda with shaved ice, while the dogs whined and dug in the dirt and finally settled down in a twitching fly-happy oblivion. Mallory was mum on the subject of the couple in the Toyota except to say that by the time she and Anneliese got there the girl was already in the car, which pulled a U-turn and shot past them up the road, and I thought—foolishly, as it turned out—that that was the end of it. When six o'clock rolled around, we wound up going to a pizza place, because I was outvoted, three to one, and after that we sat through a movie Anneliese had heard good things about but which turned out to be a dud. It was a French film about three non-specifically unhappy couples who had serial affairs with one another and a troop of third and fourth parties, against a rainy Parisian backdrop that looked as if it had been shot through a translucent beach ball. At the end there was a closeup of each of the principals striding separately and glumly through the rain. The three actresses, heavily made up, suffered from smeared mascara. The music swelled.

Then it was Gabe's and the pounding air-conditioned exhilaration of an actual real-life band and limitless cocktails. Chris and Anneliese were great dancers, the kind everybody, participants and wallflowers alike, watches with envy, and they didn't waste any time, not even bothering to find a table before they were out there in the middle of the floor, their arms flashing white and Anneliese's coppery flag of hair draining all the color out of the room. We danced well, too, Mallory and I, attuned to each other's moves by way of long acquaintance, and while we weren't maybe as showy as Chris and Anneliese, we could hold our own. I tried to take Mallory's hand, but she withheld it and settled into one of the tables with a shrug of irritation. I stood there a moment in mute appeal, but she wouldn't look me in the eye, and it was then that I began to realize it was going to be a long night. What did I want? I wanted to dance, wanted joy and release—summer break!—but I went to the bar instead and ordered a spritzer for Mallory and a rum-and-Coke for myself.

The bar was crowded, more crowded than usual, it seemed, even though most of the undergrads had gone home or off to Europe or Costa Rica or wherever they went when somebody else was

paying for it. There were two bartenders, both female and both showing off their assets, and it must have taken me five minutes just to get to the bar and another five to catch the attention of the nearest one. I shouted my order over the furious assault of the band. The drinks came. I paid, took one in each hand and began to work my way back through the crowd. It was then that someone jostled me from behind—hard—and half the spritzer went down the front of my shirt and half the rum-and-Coke down the back of a girl in front of me. The girl swung around on me with an angry look and I swung around on whoever had jostled—pushed—me and found myself staring into the face of the guy from the blacktop road, the guy with the distraught girlfriend and the silver Toyota. It took a beat before I recognized him, a beat measured by the whining nasal complaint of the girl with the Coke-stained blouse—“Jesus, aren’t you even going to apologize?”—and then, without a word, he flashed both palms as if he were performing a magic trick and gave me a deliberate shove that tumbled me back into the girl and took the drinks to the floor in a silent shatter of glass and skittering ice cubes. The girl invoked Jesus again, louder this time, while the guy turned and slipped off into the crowd.

A circle opened around me. The bartender gave me a disgusted look. “Sorry,” I said to the girl, “but you saw that, didn’t you? He shoved me.” And then, though it no longer mattered and he was already passing by the bouncer and swinging open the door to the deepening night beyond, I added, my own voice pinched in complaint, “I don’t even know him.”

When I got back to the table, sans drinks, Mallory gave me a long squint through her glasses and said—or, rather, screamed over the noise of the band—“What took you so long?” And then, “Where’re the drinks?”

That was the defining moment. My shirt was wet. I’d been humiliated, adrenaline was rocketing through my veins and my heart was doing paradiddles, and what I was thinking was, Who’s to blame here? Who stuck her nose in where it wasn’t wanted? So we got into it. Right there. And I didn’t care who was watching. And when the band took a break and Chris and Anneliese joined us and we finally got a round of drinks, the conversation was strained, to say the least. As soon as the band started up again, I asked Anneliese to dance and then, out of sympathy or etiquette or simple boredom, Chris asked Mallory, and for a long while we were all out on the dance floor, Chris eventually going back to Anneliese, but Mallory dancing with a succession of random guys

just to stick it to me, which she succeeded in doing, with flying colors and interest compounded by the minute.

And that was how we found ourselves out in that dark field on the night of the satellite, letting things spill out of us, angry things, hurtful things, things that made me want to leave her to the mosquitoes and go off and rent a room on the other side of town and never talk to her again. She'd just told me she hated me for maybe the hundredth time—we were drunk, both of us, as I've said, the encounter on the road the tipping point and no going back—and I was going to retort, going to say something incisive like “Yeah, me, too,” when I felt something hit my shoulder. It was a blow, a palpable hit, and my first thought was that the Toyota guy had followed us in order to exact some sort of twisted revenge for an incident that never happened, that was less than nothing—the girl *hadn't* got in our car, had she?—but then I felt whatever it was skew off me and drop into the wet high grass with an audible thump. “What was that?” Mallory said.

I wasn't making the connection—not yet—with the streak of light that had shot overhead as we'd slammed out of the car.

“I don't know.”

“Here,” she said, pulling out her phone to shine the light on the ground.

The object was right there, at our feet, cradled in a gray-green bowl of broken stalks. It was metallic, definitely metallic, some sort of steel or titanium mesh six inches long and maybe three wide, like a sock, the size of a sock. And it wasn't hot, as you'd expect, not at all. In fact—and this was when it came to me—the heating had taken place twenty-three miles up and by the time it had got here, to earth, to me, it was as lukewarm as a carton of milk left out on the counter.

It was a sign, but of what I wasn't sure. I went online the next day and found an article confirming that the streak in the sky had been produced by the reentry of a decommissioned twenty-year-old NASA climate satellite that scientists had been tracking as it fell out of orbit. The satellite had been the size of a school bus and weighed six and a half tons and that fact alone had caused considerable anxiety as it became increasingly clear that its trajectory would take it

over populated areas in Canada and the United States. A picture of it, in grainy black-and-white, showed the least aerodynamic structure you could imagine, all sharp edges and functional planes, the whole overshadowed by a solar panel the size of the screen at a drive-in movie. The article went on to claim that all debris of any consequence had most likely been incinerated in the upper atmosphere and that the chances of any fragment of it hitting a given person anywhere within its range had been calculated at one in thirty-two hundred. All right. But it had hit *me*, so either they needed to recalculate or Mallory and I should get in the car and go straight to Vegas. I brought my laptop into the kitchen, where she was sitting at the table in the alcove, working a serrated knife through the sections of her grapefruit.

“What did I tell you?” I said.

She took a moment to scan the article, then glanced up at me. “It says it was incinerated in the upper atmosphere.”

“ ‘Most likely,’ it says. And it’s wrong, obviously. You were there. You saw it.” I pointed through the doorway to the living room, where the piece of mesh—stiff, twisted, blackened from the heat of reentry—occupied a place on the bookcase, where formerly a vase had stood, between Salinger and Salter in the American Lit section. “Tell me that’s not real.”

The night before, out in the field, she’d warned me not to touch it—“It’s dirty, it’s nothing, just some piece of junk”—but I knew better. I knew right away. I took it up gingerly between thumb and forefinger, expecting heat, expecting the razor bite of steel on unprotected flesh, and thinking of “The War of the Worlds” in its most recent cinematic iteration, but after we’d had a moment to examine it under the pale gaze of the cell phone and see how utterly innocuous it was, I handed it to her as reverently as if it were a religious relic. She held it in one hand, running her thumb over the braid of the mesh, then passed it back to me. “It feels warm,” she said. “You don’t really think it came from that meteor or whatever it was?” She turned her face to the sky.

“Satellite,” I told her. “Last I heard they said it was going to come down in Canada someplace.”

“But they were wrong, is that what you’re saying?”

I couldn't see her features, but I could hear the dismissiveness in her voice. We'd been fighting all day, fighting to the point of exhaustion, and it infuriated me to think she wouldn't even give me this. "They've been wrong before," I said, and then I cradled the thing under one arm and started back across the field without bothering to see if she was coming or not.

Now she said, "Don't be crazy. It's just some piece of a car or a tractor or something—or a lawnmower. It fell off a lawnmower, I'll bet anything."

"A lawnmower in the sky? It hit me. Right here, on the shoulder." I jerked at the neck of my T-shirt and pulled it down over my left shoulder in evidence.

"I don't see anything."

"There's a red mark there, I'm telling you—I saw it in the mirror this morning."

She just stared at me.

A week slid by. The heat never broke, not even after a series of thunderstorms rumbled in under a sky the color of bruised flesh—all the rain managed to do was drive up the humidity. We were supposed to be enjoying ourselves, we were supposed to be on vacation, but we didn't do much of anything. We sat around and sweated and tried to avoid contact as much as possible. Dinner was salad or takeout and we ate at the kitchen table, where the fan was, books propped in our hands. It was hard on the dog, what with the complication of his fur, which was made for another climate altogether, and I took him for increasingly longer walks, just to get out of the house. Twice I led him to the park where the satellite had sloughed its skin, and if I combed the grass there looking for evidence—metal, more metal, a screw, a bolt—I never said a word about it to anybody, least of all Mallory. What did I find? A whole world of human refuse—bottle caps, cigarette lighters, a frayed length of shoelace, plastic in its infinite varieties—and the bugs that lived in and amongst it all, oblivious. I came back from the second of these excursions and found Mallory on the couch, where I'd left her, her bare feet and legs shining with sweat, magazine in one hand, Diet Coke in the other. She didn't even glance up at me, but I could see right away there was something different about her, about the way she was holding herself, as if she knew something I didn't.

“I took the dog to the park,” I said, looping his leash over the hook in the entryway. “Hotter down there than here, I think.”

She didn’t say anything.

“You want to go down to Gabe’s for a drink? How does a G. & T. sound?”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking up at me for the first time. “I guess so. I don’t care.”

It was then that my gaze happened to fall on the bookcase, on the gap there, where the old paperback of “Nine Stories” had fallen flat. “Where’s the thing?” I said.

“What thing?”

“The mesh. My *mesh*.”

She shrugged. “I tossed it.”

“Tossed it? Where? What do you mean?”

In the next moment I was in the kitchen, flipping open the lid of the trash can, only to find it empty. “You mean outside?” I shouted. “In the dumpster?”

When I came thundering back into the room, she still hadn’t moved. “Jesus, what were you thinking? That was mine. I wanted that. I wanted to keep it.”

Her lips barely moved. “It was dirty.”

I must have spent half an hour out there, poking through the side-by-side dumpsters that served our building and the one across the alley from it. I was embarrassed, I’ll tell you, people strolling by and looking at me like I was one of the homeless, a can man, a bottle redeemer, and I was angry, too, and getting angrier. She had no right, that was what I kept telling myself—she’d done it just to spite me, I knew it, and the worst thing, the saddest thing, was that now I’d never know if that piece of mesh was the real deal or not. I could have sent it to NASA, to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, to somebody who could say yea or nay. But not now. Not anymore.

When I came back up the stairs, sweating and with the reek of rotting vegetables and gnawed bones and all the rest hanging around me like a miasma, I went right for her. I took hold of her arm, slapped the magazine away, and jerked her to her feet. She looked scared, and that just set me off all the more. I might have pushed her. She might have pushed back. Next thing I was out the door, out on the street, fuming, the sun still glaring overhead, everything before me looking as ordinary as dishwater. There was a bar down the street—air-conditioning, music, noise, people, a change of mood that was as easy to achieve as switching channels on the TV—and I was actually on my way there, my shoulders tense as wire, when I stopped myself. I patted down my pockets: wallet, keys, cell phone, a dribble of dimes and quarters. I didn't have a comb or a toothbrush or a change of underwear, I didn't have books or my iPod or the dog, but none of that seemed to matter, not anymore. A couple in shorts and running shoes flashed by me, breathing noisily. A motor scooter backfired across the street.

We kept the car in the lot out back of the apartment. I went the long way around the building, keeping close to the wall, in case Mallory was at the front window, looking to see where I'd gone off to. The tank showed less than a quarter full, and my wallet held three fives and three singles—along with the change, that gave me a grand total of nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents. No matter. I'd stop at the A.T.M. on the way out of town, and if things got desperate I did have a credit card, which we reserved for emergencies only, because we really struggled just to make the minimum payment every month. Was this an emergency? Mallory wouldn't think so. The geniuses from NASA might not think so, either—or the farmer whose sheep bore crusted-over scabs on their legs and throats and sad white faces. But as I wheeled the car out of the lot I couldn't help thinking it was the biggest emergency of my life.

I didn't know where I was going. I had no idea beyond the vague notion of putting some miles behind me, heading north, maybe, until the corn gave way to forest, to pines as fragrant as the air that went cold at night and seeped in through the open window so that you had to pull a blanket over you when you went to sleep. The car—the rusted-out Volvo wagon Mallory's mother used to drive to work back in Connecticut—shuddered and let out a grinding mechanical whine as I pulled up in front of the bank. I got out, mounted the three steps to the concrete walkway where the A.T.M. was, and waited the requisite six feet six inches away from the middle-aged woman

in inflated khaki shorts who was just then feeding in her card. The heat was staggering. My shirt was wet as a dishrag, my hair hanging limp. I wasn't thinking, just doing.

It was then that I glanced up and noticed the silver Toyota parked in the lot of the ice-cream parlor next door. A woman and two kids emerged from the building, licking cones, and went off down the street, and then the door swung open again and there was the blond girl, her own cone—the pale green of pistachio—held high and her face twisted in a grimace as she said something over her shoulder to the guy behind her. He was wearing the same T-shirt he'd worn that day on the road and he didn't have an ice cream of his own, but as he came through the door he twisted his face, too, and snatched at the girl's arm. She let out a cry, and then the ice cream, double scoop, which had already begun to melt in green streaks across the back of her hand, slipped from the cone to plop wetly at her feet, just like anything else subject to the law of gravity.

“You creep!” she shouted. “Look what you did.” And he said something back. And then she said something. And then I was no longer watching them, because, as far as I was concerned, they could go careering around the world on any orbit they wanted, just so long as it never intersected mine again. Space debris that collides in two wide bands of low Earth orbit, at six hundred and twenty and at nine hundred and thirty miles up, can fragment and fragment again—things as big as satellites and rocket boosters and as small as the glove the astronaut Ed White lost on the first U.S. space walk. Eventually, it's all going to come down, and whether it'll burn up or crush a house or tap somebody on the shoulder in a dark field on a dark night is anybody's guess.

The woman at the A.T.M. seemed to be having trouble with her card—no bills had yet appeared, and she kept punching at the keys and reinserting the card as if sheer repetition would wear the machine down. I had time. I was very calm. I pulled out my cell and called Mallory. She answered on the first ring. “Yeah?” she snapped, angry still. “What do you want?”

I didn't say anything, not a word. I just pressed my thumb to the off switch and broke the connection. But what I'd wanted to say was that I'd taken the car and that I'd be back, I was pretty sure I'd be back, and that she should feed the dog and pay the rent, which was due the first of the month, and if she went out at night—if she went out at all—she should remember to look

up, look up high, way up there, where the stars burn and the space junk roams, because you never can tell what's going to come down next.