

# Elona and Vitalijus

A story by William Page

If you take the train from Saint Petersburg to Vilnius, you will pass a little station surrounded by birch trees and thistle weeds about forty kilometers outside of Vilnius. The train will not stop at the station, which is shaped, rounded at the top, like a radio from the 1930s, but it will slow down, and if you happen to be sitting and looking out the window, you will see about twenty wooden houses all painted either dark green or canary yellow. The houses sit up on a hill a little above the tracks and almost all of them have a fenced-in yard with a garden of rugged vegetables like cabbage and cauliflower. In summer you will probably notice a few dirty-white chickens pecking here and there, and, if your eye is quick, you might even see a goat tethered to a tree or a dog lying in the sun. On the other side of the tracks, for those standing at the windows in the corridor of the train, there are more houses, a field for grazing horses, and a single brick street. This street is the center of the village and has three fruit and vegetable shops, a butcher shop where it is impossible to get anything but low-grade cuts of meat, a bakery where bread is baked fresh six days a week, and one rambling soviet-style department store broken up into fifteen different stalls where a small range of soaps, toys, clothes, and paper products are sold. At the far end of the street, there is an open market for farmers, and beyond that there is a forest of beech and pines trees. To the south of the forest there is a long flat pasture where two factories stand. One factory makes a variety of simple wooden toys for children and the other has fires for melting iron and molds for making scissors, small garden tools, and a number of medical instruments. Beyond the factories there are large fields used for growing potatoes.

It was in this village, not so long ago—when Lithuania was still part of the Soviet Union—that a baby girl was born to a couple, Loretta and Albinas. Both parents were employed at the scissors factory. The girl was born at home, after a long delivery, in June, when there are only a few hours of darkness at night. By July, when the weather was good, Loretta occasionally wheeled the baby passed the brightly painted houses and then down a dirt path to the factory to meet her husband at closing time. They named the child Elona, and though they had both wanted a son, they were pleased about the baby's fine features and golden hair. The women at the factory all stood over the old black pram and made a fuss over the child; they said that she was the most beautiful baby they had ever seen and that she would surely break the hearts of many young men. Of course the men said nothing. They stood behind the ladies and smoked.

When she wanted to show off her baby earlier in the day, Loretta sometimes met with her friends in a little park near the outdoor market where everybody in the village shopped. The park was nothing more than a worn track of exposed earth, three green benches in need of a coat of paint, and half a dozen dusty birch trees, but the skies were very blue that year, and so Loretta and her friends sometimes sat for hours slowly rocking their prams and gossiping. It was during

one of those afternoons that Loretta realized that Elona hardly ever cried. In a two hour period, another woman's baby—a red-faced, six-month-old bawler—had needed almost constant attention; whereas Elona, during the same period, had not made a sound. The two women thought she was asleep, but when they looked they saw that her eyes were open. She seemed perfectly content to do nothing but look up at the colored ribbons tied to the sun-shade above her head.

In the next months Loretta often commented to her friends—and to shop-keepers who would listen—that to care for Elona was easiest job in the world. But in September, when the cooler weather kept her inside more, she began to notice that she couldn't wake the child by calling her name and that loud noises had no effect on her at all. Elona was her first child, and so for a time she convinced herself that Elona's silence was normal for an infant of her age, but in November, when the first snows covered the fields and there was still no change, she took the baby to a specialist in Vilnius to have her hearing checked. The tests confirmed her mother's worst fears: Elona was completely deaf.

Loretta took the news of her daughter's deafness badly. She beat her breast, cried, and called on God. The doctor, a pedantic gray-haired Russian, explained to her and Albinas that they would have to learn sign language, but Loretta refused to admit that nothing could be done. All that winter she was convinced that an operation could cure Elona. What kind of operation, she couldn't say. She pestered the doctor about hospitals in Moscow and operations until he told her in no uncertain terms that Elona would be deaf for the rest of her life and that there was nothing he or anybody in Moscow could do about it. This silenced Loretta, but it didn't convince her; she simply decided that the doctor was lying.

For the next three years Loretta and Albinas took a train to Vilnius twice a week for classes in sign language. The classes were in the evening and took place in a yellow government building on the outskirts of the city. The parents sat at heavy wooden desks, which were bolted to the floor. Most of the parents were comforted by the class. They shared experiences and made friends. But Loretta refused to be consoled. In the back of her mind she never admitted that Elona was deaf, or, at least, that her handicap was incurable. She still imagined that some kind of miraculous cure was possible. She attended the classes out of a sense of duty, but she managed to learn almost nothing. She seemed to have no memory at all. What she learned two days before was completely forgotten. At home Albinas tried to help her, but she always gave up after ten minutes. "I'm just a stupid woman," she told him. "I'll never learn."

"Then who is going to teach the girl?"

"That's up to God."

Albinas didn't argue with his wife about God. He was a pragmatic man, who had little tolerance for his wife's excuses and religious sentiments. Whenever she brought God into their arguments, he sighed, lit a cigarette, and walked out of the room. He knew that she believed that Elona's deafness was a punishment from God for some innocent crimes she had committed as a young girl. At the beginning he had tried to talk her out of it, then, a little later, he attempted to inspire her to act, to take charge of the situation and do what was possible, but he always came up against the same stubborn, fatalistic logic: she could do nothing because her inability to act was also God's will.

In the three years since the birth of Elona, Loretta had grown stout and slow-moving. She had never been energetic, but now she lost her persistence—the strong side of her stubbornness—which had always served her well in the past. In the summer she still worked in her garden, growing cabbage and cucumber, but in the winter she did nothing but sit in the

kitchen, the warmest room in the house, and eat sweet biscuits and drink tea with the few women who visited her.

Albinas tried to teach Elona sign language, but he was not around enough and so Elona learned only a few basic signs. In the summer after her fourth birthday, Elona was wild and untamable. She ran around in the yard climbing on the fence and pulling up Loretta's vegetables and eating them raw. She also didn't like wearing clothes. She was always taking them off. And she was often dirty. Still, when the neighbors saw her playing naked in the garden, they always said, as if surprised, "What a beautiful child." Loretta knew what they meant; they were really thinking: how could such an ugly woman have such a beautiful child?

When she was five, Elona was sent to a school for deaf children in Vilnius. She was tall for her age, had quick eyes, and long wavy blond hair. Her movements were abrupt and quick, and in a crowded room her eyes tended to dart from person to person. At lunchtime, she attacked her food, ate rapidly, and then sat watching the other children. In winter her greatest joy was to sit at the windows and look at the woods that surrounded the school. She never seemed to tire of the snowy landscapes. When the trees became crystal with ice and the skies were gray with clouds, she would divide her free hours between three or four different windows in the old, rambling, overheated school building. In the summer, when there were fewer classes, she ran in the yard, spent whole days on her own, and only returned indoors for supper. She scrambled over fences and up trees faster and with more daring than any of the boys. More than once her teachers had to stand at the trunk of an oak or an elm and try to coax her down with signs.

She lived at the school for nearly four years, but during that time only a few students tried to befriend her. A frail, dark-haired girl with wide, astonished eyes followed her around for a few weeks in the autumn of her second year. But one afternoon, when the weather was warm enough for them to be outside, Elona coaxed her up into the first branches of a maple tree. Then she climbed up into the top branches herself and used her weight to make tree sway. The other girl was not that far from the ground, but she froze up and couldn't move. Elona tried to help her down, but the girl was too scared and Elona quickly gave up on her. She jumped down and ran away, leaving the girl clinging to a branch and crying until one of the teachers rescued her.

Before she arrived at the school, Elona had learned very little sign language, but her teachers were astonished at how fast she learned once she began. She had a natural expressiveness with her hands, was very clever with crafts, had the best penmanship in her class, and could read and write at a level above her age. But the man who tried to teach her to speak had no success with her at all. He was a big, overworked man with sympathetic eyes, and a perpetual beard coming on. It was this man who spoke to Albinas when the school officials decided they had done all they could for Elona. They met in his office. It was a ridiculously small office. The desk that took up half the space; the rest of the space was taken with a battered filing cabinet, and two folding chairs for visitors.

"She will never have what we call a normal deaf life," the man explained to Albinas, "as long as she refuses to speak. She's bright, but stubborn and unsocial. We've arranged for her to have two classes a week at home, and if she studies, she'll have a basic education. I don't know what else we can do for her."

When Albinas said nothing, he shrugged his shoulders and added, "I'm sorry. Very few of our students get a full education. We don't have the people or the money"

Later in the girl's dormitory, while Elona folded her clothes and stuffed them inside two battered plastic bags, the man told Albinas, "She's a pretty girl. My guess is that some young man will marry her despite her handicap."

On the train from the city to the village where they lived, Elona stood clutching the frame of the open window and watching the green pastures and the wooded hills glide by. Eventually her father made her sit down. In the compartment a man with a red, peaked hat and a gray beard sat opposite them. He spoke to Albinas and fed Elona from a paper bag of hard candies. By the time they arrived at their station, she was giddy from the excitement and the sweets. The bright sun and the confusion of the shops and the people that they passed on the road only stimulated her more. She wanted to run, but her father held her hand and led her to the old, yellow wooden house she only vaguely remembered. The house had two bedrooms, a common room with a coal stove, a kitchen with a stone floor, and a bathroom with a cracked ceramic bathtub. Summer or winter, it had a musty smell about it. The windows, because they were wood-framed, were hard to open—especially when the weather was wet—and the wooden floors in the bedrooms, despite some threadbare carpets, creaked. The walls were papered, as is common for that part of the world, but the paper had a tendency to bubble because of the moisture in the air and the constant change in temperature. The furniture in the common room consisted of a stodgy looking armchair that folded out into a narrow bed and a divan that folded down into double bed. Both were yellow and were standard Soviet issue. In the kitchen there was a rickety pine table with shiny paper pasted on the top of it, and four, equally rickety, chairs. All in all, it was a comfortable house: not too hot in the summer or too cold in the winter.

When they entered the house, her father didn't release her hand. He led her to the room where she used to sleep and then signed to her to stay put in the doorway. Inside the room a little boy was laying curled up on a bed. She was curious. He seemed so frail lying on top of the blankets. He slept with his thumb in his mouth. His little arms and legs were hairless. He was dressed in white, short-sleeved short and dirty shorts. She stood in the doorway and watched her father wake him with his big hand and then point toward her. He stared at her for a moment, wide-eyed with his mouth open, and then tried to hide behind her father. But Albinas pulled him off the bed and made him stand in front of her. He was half her height and was ready to cry, but, despite his fear, she couldn't resist touching him. She pressed the palm of her hand into his little chest. He thought her gesture was funny. He laughed as if he was ticklish, backed away from her, and, still smiling, wrapped his arms around one of his father's legs.

Her brother, Vitalijus, was two and half years old, six years her junior. He was small for his age, and, unlike Elona, easily sick. That winter, when he turned three, he caught a cold which turned into an infection in his throat and his right ear. Loretta, who didn't want to see his frailty, was blind to the first symptoms, and so he wasn't taken to the village doctor for antibiotics until he was feverish and miserable. Elona understood he was ill from the moment he began to pull on his ears and sniffle. She tried to keep him warm by carrying him around the house wrapped in a blanket like a puppy. The divan was supposed to be her bed, but during his illness, he began to sleep near the stove with her. At night Loretta put him in his room, but after her parents went to beds, Elona crept into her brother's room and carried him to her bed where it was warmer. In the morning he would be found with her long, healthy limbs wrapped around his cold, sick body. They slept together like two dogs, for warmth. After that winter it was hard to separate them.

During their second summer together, they exhausted Loretta. They were both quicker than her, and when she became angry, they ran from her as if it were a game. They rolled together in the grass and the mud, threw food at each other, overturned furniture, set fire to some

old newspapers in a rubbish can in the yard, ran away together outside at night when they were supposed to be in bed, and plundered the neighbor's apple trees. Loretta had lost touch with Elona in her years at school and was astounded by this tall, half-savage girl. She was particularly shocked by Elona's laughter, which she had not heard before. It usually began as a repressed titter, but rapidly progressed to a kind of delirious abandonment. And once she started, Vitalijus always followed. They hardly ever sat together without touching each other. Often Vitalijus settled in her lap. Even at dinner, when Loretta made them face each other across the table, he usually sat with his feet resting on his sister's knees.

More than anything Loretta was defeated by her inability to communicate with Elona. In her mind she believed that if she spoke slowly and loudly that Elona would understand her, but she spoke in such an exaggerated way that Elona's lip-reading skills were undermined.

In September, when the nights turned cool and wet and the wild mushrooms appeared in the groves around the village, Elona was given school work. Her tutor, a deaf man who had learned the rudiments of speaking, drove a battered car to their house on Tuesdays and Thursdays and loaded her up with exercises. He told Loretta that she should work every morning, as if she were in school. And so from nine until lunch Elona lay on her stomach on the divan with her legs bent at the knees, reading and writing in her notebooks, while Vitalijus, imitating her, would turn the pages of one of her books and inhale the smell of the paper and that glue and run his hands over the print. He was delighted when Albinas bought him a reader.

But then something happened that he couldn't have imagined. His mother separated him from his sister. Elona stayed on the divan, and he was made to sit at the kitchen table and learn pronunciation with his mother. He hated it, and their classes ended when he ripped half the pages out of the reader and hid them in one of Elona's notebooks. Loretta thought it was probably too early for him to read anyway. She let it go, but then, one damp, cloudy morning, she found Elona teaching him sign language. Loretta was still half-asleep—they were always up before her—and at first she didn't understand what they were doing. It looked like a children's game to her. Vitalijus, wrapped in a blanket, sat facing his sister on her bed, holding his little hands out while she demonstrated signs and corrected him by bending a finger or sweeping his hands around in circles.

She walked into the kitchen, made, and then drank a cup of tea before she understood what was happening. Then in a panic she rushed back to the room where they were sitting. In those days Elona wore her hair short. There was no other way. She lived like a boy and would have never kept it clean and untangled. Still, in profile, which is how Loretta saw her, she looked like a young woman. Her long neck, high forehead, and accepting eyes all gave an impression of experience. She was only ten, but she looked fourteen. It occurred to her that Elona was really happy. She didn't have the heart to interrupt them. She went back into the kitchen and sat at the table. She felt old and left out. She sighed out loud and sat looking at her empty tea cup. The thought of eating breakfast—usually one of her more enjoyable daily compensations—left her unmoved. She was strangely indifferent to everything. Nothing mattered.

That night she said to Albinas, "She's teaching him sign language." From her tone of voice, she might have said: she's teaching him to steal.

Albinas was tired and a little drunk. He undressed, put on a flannel nightshirt, and lay down on the bed. "She?" he said. "You mean Elona?"

"Yes, of course. She's teaching Vitalijus sign language. I caught them this morning."

"He's her brother."

"But it will affect the way he talks."

“You’re being ridiculous.”

She sat thinking and then said, despite herself: “They hate me.”

“No they don’t. They only want to communicate. It has nothing to do with you.” His impartiality pricked at her heart like a needle.

“It’s a punishment from God,” she said. “I abandoned her.”

Albinas sighed. “Go to bed. You’re tired. In the morning you’ll feel better.” He switched off the lamp and began to snore almost immediately. But Loretta couldn’t sleep. She had slept half the day and wasn’t tired.

In fact, Vitalijus was late in learning to speak. At four, when other children his age were forming sentences and delighting in the sound and the color of words, Vitalijus could only yell out disconnected words and point. But his sign language was already better than his father’s.

Like lovers, he and Elona eventually grew out of their giddiness and half-savage abandon. Their play became more relaxed and secretive, and their world grew to include the woods and the fields around the village. That autumn he was still slight and often rode on his sister’s shoulders, his hands resting on her head. They had developed private ways of communicating with each other. With one tap of his finger he could point out a fat, white-beaked raven that had cawed from a beech tree; with two taps he could tell her to move out of the way because a car was bouncing up the muddy road behind them. They spent hours laying under trees and looking up through yellow leaves into cloudy skies. For Vitalijus the sighting of a gold-breasted bird was always more exciting than its chirping. He could share the attractions of the visual world with Elona, and that was half his pleasure.

At home they entertained themselves and often ate alone. Loretta worked three days a week at the factory, and that took all her energy. She spent more time in bed and often claimed to be sick when she wasn’t. After a time the house began to accumulate dirt. Dishes sat in the sink until they were needed for the next meal, and the white, standard-issue refrigerator that had always sat a little uneven on the stone floor took on a perpetual sour smell. Dust collected on surfaces, and the carpets, never taken outdoors and beaten, had an odor of shoeless feet. Albinas, with his attitude of tolerant suffering, drank more than what was good for him, and took Elona’s bed on the divan near the fire. She always slept with Vitalijus in his room anyway.

The winter that year was particularly cold. Snow fell in the middle of November, and no one saw the ground again until April. In March the drifts in the fields were three feet high. Along the roads, where the trucks with plows had cleared a lane or two for cars, black and gray snow sat in long ugly piles. The temperatures in the afternoons usually rose to just above freezing, which meant that the snow melted a little and became ice at night. It was a hard month for everyone, but Loretta took the lingering cold as a personal affront. The motivations that kept her in motion had less and less effect on her. She didn’t care about anything; even her two greatest compensations, sleeping and eating, had lost their edge because of over-indulgence. She didn’t complain anymore; she didn’t even see the use of that. One week she missed two days of work and didn’t leave her bed the whole time. She dozed when she could, but mostly she sat and stared. On the third morning, she went down to eat and walked alone to the factory under gray skies. Albinas had gone earlier.

She lasted less than an hour. Her job was to turn the little screw that held the two halves of a scissors together. After twenty minutes she overturned her box of screws, and had to crawl around on the floor, picking them up while the unhinged scissors collected. She found most of the little screws, but then she was overwhelmed by the backlog. She slowed down to snail’s

pace, and then stopped altogether and just stared. The other women quit working as well, formed a half-circle around her and whispered among themselves. The whole line was at a standstill, which brought the foreman to the floor. He sent someone to fetch Albinas, but Loretta only frowned at her husband and looked away. Then one of the women noticed that she was wearing one dress over another. She was, in fact, wearing three dresses over her nightgown. She smelled, not of sweat, but of dirt. By this time the men, who thought there had been an accident, left their work to join the crowd. They couldn't understand why everyone was standing around a woman who hadn't been hurt.

Loretta refused to move from the line or to explain herself. The foreman had tried to help her off the chair, but she pulled her arm away from him, which made him angry. He wanted her removed and demanded that two of the women escort her to his office. But the two women did nothing.

One of them said, "Who knows what she might do. She's crazy."

This sparked an argument with the whole group participating. They argued about her for five minutes as if she wasn't there. Eventually it was decided that if anybody was to move her, it should be Albinas. Albinas only shrugged his shoulders and took one of her arms and pulled her down from the chair. When she was standing on her own, she suddenly spoke: "Nobody loves me," she said. "Not even God."

They took her to the foreman's office and notified the village doctor, a young red-haired Russian from Moscow. He came and examined her. He shined a tiny flashlight in her eyes, took her pulse and blood pressure, and then asked her a few simple questions, none of which she answered. She was awake, but her eyes were completely blank. The young doctor shook his head back and forth and said to Albinas: "Catatonic."

That night she was taken by train to an asylum.

A week later, in the first days of April, it began to rain. The thaw had finally come. The land, made warmer by clouds that hugged the earth, didn't freeze. Water rushed everywhere. During the day, under gray skies and the constant threat of a downpour, Elona helped her aunt, Albinas' sister, turn their house upside down. Everything was cleaned. Carpets were dragged outside, beaten with brooms, and then carried in when the first drops fell. Windows were opened that hadn't been opened all winter, floors were scrubbed, and sheets soiled with blood and dirt were burnt. Every item in every cupboard and cabinet was scrutinized. Traps for mice were set and roaches were poisoned with a can of insecticide that smelled vaguely of lilac and turpentine. Even the bodies of the children were inspected. Both were given a haircut and then dumped, one at a time, into the tub and washed with a brush and a cloth as if they were dogs. Half their clothes were thrown out, and new ones were bought.

Elona was no longer allowed to sleep with her brother. The fold-out chair became her new bed. Her aunt slept on the divan next to her. She was a small woman with dark, copper-colored hair, unsmiling lips, and a face that was often red. She didn't like to touch other people, and so she carried a thin stick, about half the diameter of a broom handle, to get Elona's attention. After she showed Elona how to scrub the bathtub, she stood behind her with her stick and touched her shoulder with it every time she missed a spot or didn't use enough powder. In the weeks she lived at the house Elona became skittish. She sat in corners so her aunt wouldn't be able to sneak up behind her, and she never stood in a room with her back to a door. About every third day her aunt became impatient enough to slap Elona's backside with her stick. Elona eventually learned to judge her anger by how red her face became.

After five weeks this woman, who had taken over the house, quarreled with her brother. The next morning she packed her clothes and a bottle of juice and took a bus back to the village where she lived with her husband. Once her aunt disappeared, Elona took back the divan. She didn't sleep in Vitalijus' bed anymore, but he often crept down to sleep with her. He was used to her warmth and could climb under the blankets without waking her. That August they were told that their mother had died at the hospital. It meant little to either of them. They took the news stoically and then went on with their summer as if nothing had happened.

That fall Vitalijus started school. He grew up to be a sensitive boy. He had a round, pale face, weak chin, and watery blue eyes. His hair was brown and fine and his nose was straight and proud like his sister's. Because he was small and not very strong, the other boys bullied him at school. Elona was his only real friend. They were together so much that he was called 'Elona's boy' by the adults and 'sister's boy' by the children his age.

His teachers thought him too dreamy for mathematics, too weak for gymnastics, and too smart for industrial work. His language skills also developed oddly. He leaned Lithuanian, Russian, and English with about the same fluency, as if they were all foreign languages.

He excelled in only one subject: drawing. At seven he was already good with a pencil. He could stand in front of a tree brimming with yellow leaves and then go back to his desk and draw it from memory. His art teacher said that she had never encountered a boy his age that was so talented. Naturally he was encouraged, since he wasn't favored in any other way. By the time he was nine, it was already decided: he would-be artist.

It never occurred to Vitalijus that his talent was something he couldn't share with Elona, and it never occurred to her that she would be less talented than he was. For the next years they were often seen together in the wood that was to the north of their house. While he drew a bent oak or a bird he had seen, she studied a book on perspective and art theory. She had asked her tutor to bring her any art books he could find. She was more systematic than Vitalijus. She wanted to learn the theory from books before she began to draw, so she studied. He just drew. In those early years when he became cross because he couldn't draw a field of buckwheat or a landscape of trees to his satisfaction, she would boldly draw the subject in a few lines to show where he had gone wrong. His style of drawing was careful and precise, but he had the nearsighted habit of working out details before he had a conception of the whole. Elona tried to teach him to see the finished picture—whether it be a tract of forest or a single onion on a flat table—in his mind first. But his talent was captivated by details. He tended to begin with the component of the composition that struck him most. For a time Elona sketched an outline for him, so would he had a frame to work from. Eventually, he saw the sense of this method and began to do it himself. All and all he learned more from her than he did from his teachers at school.

In the year that Vitalijus was twelve and Elona was eighteen, their father died suddenly at the factory. His job was to pour molten iron into the molds that formed the pieces of the instruments that the factory-made. On the afternoon of his death, he had just laid out the molds for pouring, when he fell to floor and hit his head. One of his co-workers helped him up and led him to a bench. He was dazed, but he didn't seem to be injured, so the man left him to check the temperature of the fire. When he looked around a few minutes later, Albinas was slumped over on the bench, his head resting on his knees and his right hand clutching the material of his shirt.



After the doctor called and pronounced him dead, the men from the factory carried the body to his house. It was May and already warm, but the afternoon was overcast. The air was windless and heavy. A rain was coming. Great, gray clouds assembled like sheep over the village and the green hills above the railroad tracks

When the men invaded the house, Elona stood backed up against the wall with fear and watched them carry the corpse to her father's bedroom. After they set him on the bed, one man took off the shoes, while another tried to arrange the face. The sudden shock of death was still evident in his features which were distorted and rigid. They didn't understand that Elona could read lips and so a slight, curly-haired man, with an almost comical overacting, stood before her, grabbed his chest, and then threw his arms out and fell on the floor. Of course she knew he was dead. His face was very pale and his lips were blue and frozen in a hideous frown. Death hung on him like wet clothes.

The men were still trying to communicate with her when the women came, filling the house at once with the confused sweet scent of many flowers. The women told the men to leave her alone, and so they did. Most of the men left, though two stayed; they sat on the divan and smoked, while three of the women locked themselves in her father's bedroom with the corpse. Elona didn't leave her spot against the wall until one of the women in the bedroom emerged and took her hand. She led her to a chair by the side of her father's bed. They had washed the body and dressed it in a black suit Albinas had worn three or four times a year. Vases of flowers and white candles were set on the dresser, the window sill, and on the floor. On the wall they had tacked an old black and white photograph of Albinas with three friends. Elona didn't know the other men, but she picked out her father, even though he was a young man in the picture. The young men were crouched behind an enormous pile of mushrooms, and they were all smiling. Behind them there was a ghostly hint of mist and bare trees. Elona connected the photograph with the trips to the country her father took with his friends every autumn to collect mushrooms. She remembered that he usually returned a little drunk with two or three shopping bags filled with edible mushrooms, which had to be boiled and put in jars for the winter.

She wanted to collect Vitalijus from school, but they wouldn't let her. The women had taken over the house. Some were in the kitchen cooking, and others were sitting in the common room talking in low voices with the men. They seemed to think that she would want to stay in the room with the body, but she didn't. The idea of dressing up a corpse and sitting with it seemed unnatural and grotesque to her. Still, they herded her back into the bedroom, and this time, two women she had seen before but didn't really know sat in the bedroom with her. Little by little, she became fascinated with the face of her father. She had never looked at him so closely before. His features were straight and regular, and more or less relaxed, at least compared to the terror she had seen on his face when they had carried him into the house. Still, there was something stretched and mask-like about his face, as if the panic of his last moment lay beneath the thin veneer of his skin. It was this double image—of a superficial peace and an underlying fear—that fascinated her. She suddenly wanted to draw him. Portraiture had never attracted her before. Faces, in her opinion, were undependable. One mood, one expression was always quickly followed by another and then another, but here was a face that didn't change; it would only slowly decay and lose form like a pile of yellow leaves.

Vitalijus arrived with one of the men who had carried the corpse. He was brought immediately to the bedroom where the body was laid out. He cried, though he seemed to understand that everyone expected him to be a man and did his best to hide his grief. A priest

arrived not long after Vitalijus. He performed a short ritual in a dry, muttering voice, and then left.

After half an hour the two women stood to leave. One took Elona's hand and led her out of the room. The two men, who had been talking and smoking downstairs, had entered the room and sat across from Vitalijus. Her brother was alternating between bouts of crying and shock.

Elona understood that the corpse was not to be left alone and that the mourners were going to sit in the bedroom in shifts. They took her to the kitchen where she helped with the cooking. It was evening, and everybody needed to be fed. Pots of cabbage and smoked pork were already simmering on the stove. Elona was glad to have something to do with her hands.

Her next shift at the bed didn't come until after midnight. She had fallen asleep on the divan, but they woke her and pointed to the bedroom. The rain had come by then. It wasn't a storm. She saw no lightning, but she smelled the fresh wet air and saw the water beading on the glass in the windows. She was joined by a woman she didn't know, who immediately fell asleep in her chair.

It occurred to her that she should wake the woman, but she didn't. She then she had another idea. She stood and went across the hall to Vitalijus' bedroom. He was asleep in the bed. From his dresser she took a sketch pad and a few pencils and returned to where her father lay. She studied the corpse from a number of different positions. One with his face was in the shadows, and another with the candlelight flickering on his closed eyes and waxy cheeks and forehead. She drew rapidly, without understanding what she was doing or why she had to draw him. She had no idea whether the drawings were good or not. She made four studies from different angles. In each she saw something new. In one she realized that her father had probably been a handsome man; in another, she saw that she resembled him, especially his high forehead and blond hair; in the third, she tried to capture the outward calm and inner fear she had seen earlier; and in the last she wanted only the emptiness, the feeling of vacancy of the lifeless corpse. Afterward she hid the sketch pad in a closet in the hallway and crept back to her chair. The woman next to her snored peacefully.

In the morning her aunt arrived and took over the house and all the arrangements. The wake with its continual stream of visitors continued through the next twenty-four hours. Then, early on the third day, an unvarnished coffin was carried into the house. The men put the body into the box and set it on two chairs in the bedroom. Outside in the yard people were beginning to arrive. Then an old black station wagon was backed up to the gate. It had no seats except in the front. The day was sunny and clear. The air, refreshed from the rain, was cool.

When everyone was gathered outside, the men carried the coffin out of the house and loaded it into the station wagon. It pulled away and drove very slowly down a muddy road. All the mourners followed behind. Twice the wheels of the hearse got stuck in the mud, and the men had to push it out.

The priest had little to say at the cemetery. When they lowered the coffin in the hole with ropes, Vitalijus cried. Elona held him and he wept with his face buried in the dark cloth of her dress.

After the burial everybody returned to the house and ate a meal that had been prepared the night before. There was no music, no wine, and little talk. As soon as the men finished eating, they went out and smoked in the yard. A few of the women helped Elona's aunt clean up, but by the middle of the afternoon, the house was restored to order and quiet. Just before dark Elona and her aunt took the sheets the dead man had lain on and burnt them in the back yard. Then they went through his clothes and threw out everything that was too dirty or too worn to be

given away. She didn't know it at the time, but her aunt was preparing his bedroom so that she could occupy it.

Their aunt stayed on for two weeks after her brother was buried. Vitalijus, always more emotional than his sister, cried on and off for a week. Elona went about her life as if nothing had changed. She read, went for her usual walks, ate with her usual appetite, and tried to entertain Vitalijus by imitating the manner of their aunt. With skill she captured her aunt's awkward march-like walk, her way of shaking her finger at them when she spoke, and her habit of throwing the windows in the house open and taking in a deep breath. Once at dinner the woman turned abruptly and caught Elona mimicking her. There was a tense moment, but then Elona saw, by her aunt's confused expression, that she hadn't recognized herself in her pantomime. That morning her aunt had tried to speak to her niece about her attitude, but Elona conveniently pretended that she didn't understand.

Vitalijus, though twelve, looked only nine or ten, but Elona, at eighteen, looked twenty-one or twenty-two. Her figure had filled out. She was tall, as she had always been, but her hips had widened and her waist had remained slim. Her hands and feet seemed large for her frame but were well-formed. Her lips were bold and full and her forehead was high. Her eyes were blue-green and wary, and her ears were a little small, as if they had atrophied for lack of sounds. She was not graceful by any human standards; she still had the habit of abruptness and then being still, but she was terribly agile and efficient in all her movements. Her gait was always a little fast, as if she were fleeing someone, and her table manners were all but barbaric—she ate with satisfaction and had no idea how she smacked her lips and grunted with pleasure. She dressed very simply, in the winter in a comfortable frock and a sweater and boots, and in the summer in a light cotton dress with sandals, but her strong limbs and powerful face always lent her clothes a classical but uncultivated stateliness. The only vanity she allowed herself was her hair, which she wore long. It was beautiful hair, very gold, not pale blond like most Lithuanians.

After their aunt left, she and Vitalijus depended on each other completely. At the market she sometimes lifted him up to the counter so that he could see everything behind it. He was their common voice: "We want a fat chicken" he would say, or "We want ten eggs." But it was Elona who sniffed the meat to make sure it was fresh and turned the eggs over with her hand to see that none of them were cracked. They were always together, and when they spoke with their hands, not even people who understood sign language could follow their abbreviated symbols. They lived on the tiny stipend Elona had from the government, which required her to go to the city twice a week to teach sign language to children, who, like herself, were completely deaf. She had taken over her mother's garden, and now turned into something quite wonderful. It turned out that she had a real talent for growing vegetables.

In the next years they became a familiar sight walking together both on the roads and on the footpaths outside the town. In the summer, when the fields were blooming with mustard or buckwheat and the forests held the moist darkness of the short nights, they would spend hours drawing or painting a scene. He signed their work; he painted it, but she mixed the paints for him and sometimes added a line or a cluster of flowers that didn't exist in the actual scene. In the winter, when the flatlands were buried under thick snow and the sun set in labyrinth of pink and purple clouds, they would hurry up a hill or to the edge of a forest so that he could sketch the scene. She carried his pencils and paints and often chose the colors for him or refused him the paints altogether if she thought the scene was better communicated in pencil. He came to trust

her artistic sense implicitly and grew used to the comfort of having her silent presence next to him while he worked. Though she sometimes went as far as to choose the best scenes for his compositions, she only occasionally sketched and painted herself. She thought of her work as experimental, as attempts to understand different aspects of art, like composition or perspective.

If Vitalijus lent her his ears and voice, she lent him her eyes. At the school he attended there was no art department to speak of. Elona taught him the mechanics of drawing, good draftsmanship, and the details of his craft, all of which she learned from books. But it was more than that; Elona taught him to see the world as an artist. She communicated her perception of silent visual nature to him, which he unwittingly adopted as his vision, his artistic trademark.

He studied art the university for only a year, but that was enough to land him a job painting backdrops for the naturalistic plays performed at the Russian theater in Vilnius. The job gave him enough money for paints and canvases, but not much more; it gave him and Elona the freedom to return to the fields and hills around the city with larger canvases and better materials. When he was twenty-three, his nature paintings were shown in Kaunas and then Leningrad, but his work was not political, and the Soviets wanted him to demonstrate some devotion to the party. He didn't know exactly how he was going to do that—he was not a Russian and had little fellow feeling for the communist party—and so he retreated back to his job at the theater. Two more years passed. Sometimes he and Elona discussed whether he should paint a dramatic war scene of the Red Army defeating the Nazis, or a portrait of a Communist hero, or a celebration of the common laborer, but while he was still trying to decide what to do, the party began to disintegrate in Moscow and the Lithuanians began to talk openly of independence.

Vitalijus had never really been interested in politics before, but the events in Vilnius tapped his feelings of national pride. He and his friends joined in the demonstrations in the city, at the site of a nuclear power plant, and then in a human chain that stretched 650 kilometers to protest the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which had paved the way for the Soviet domination of the Baltic States.

He didn't think of appeasing the Soviets anymore. He, along with his artistic friends, defied the Russians: they held secret meetings, refused to speak Russian in public, and wrote anonymous pamphlets, which they scattered throughout the city. Vitalijus also busied himself with a dramatic portrait of a student who had killed himself twenty years earlier to protest the system. It was painted with zeal, and though it lacked real inspiration, it was carried by a young girl on a pole like a banner during a demonstration one cloudy Sunday afternoon in Vilnius.

The day after the demonstration the Soviets sent troops into Vilnius, and when the Russian soldiers took a television tower and killed fourteen unarmed civilians, reporters and crews with television cameras from Western Europe and America flocked to the city, looking for stories and photographs. They rented apartments near the television tower, which was held by the Soviets, set up their cameras, and waited for the violence. But the standoff proved to be excruciatingly long, and so eventually they got bored and began to look for entertainment. They held parties, drank Vodka, mourned the expatriate life, and mingled with the university students and the members of the independence movement.

It was at one of these parties that Vitalijus met a young American reporter named Carol. She was a strong-minded red-haired woman with slim hips and skin that easily freckled. When they met, she was drunk and flirted with his friends and told jokes in English. She had no idea that Vitalijus understood her because he was silent and his friends tried to make themselves understood in Lithuanian. The young men teased her, shrugged their shoulders, and laughed. But

after a while they became bored and went to a window on the other side of the apartment. They were on the nineteenth floor and could see the Russian tanks in the courtyard below. Two video cameras were set up on tripods behind curtains. The men talked and passed around a set of binoculars.

Only Vitalijus hadn't moved; he still stood smiling at Carol. She looked bored. She brought up a bottle of wine from the floor and filled her glass. Then she said to him: "So handsome, do you want to go to bed?"

"If you want to," he said in halting English.

Her face turned red. "You understood me all along."

"I studied English at school."

"Now what I am I going to do? I've propositioned a minor. What are you? Seventeen?"

Vitalijus didn't understand her usage of the word 'minor.' His sense of the word was limited to music, a minor or major key. He looked at her with confusion.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you want to see my identity card?"

"Yes."

The card was in Russian, which she didn't understand, but he translated it for her, and pointed to year of his birth, which she could read.

"So you really are twenty-six."

"Yes."

"I'm twenty-seven," she said. "I hope I didn't offend you."

"I'm often thought to be younger than I am."

"You don't really look seventeen," she said. "That was a joke."

"And the part about going to bed?"

"I guess I drank too much wine. I don't usually ask men to go to bed with me." But then added in a lower voice, "But sometimes I'd like to."

"Then why don't you?"

She leaned back against the wall and looked at him over the rim of her wine glass. "I guess I'd feel pretty humiliated if I was rejected."

"I wouldn't reject you."

His proposition, as indirect as it was, made her frown and squint her eyes at him. He was sure he would be rejected, which he thought was a shame because he was attracted to her energy. He liked her sharp, square features and her little brown eyes. Her shoulders were wide, and this, together with her slim hips, gave him the impression of a strong, compact woman.

"It is all a bit sudden," she said finally, "but I don't see why not."

Carol spoke no Lithuanian or Russian, and so she started paying Vitalijus a salary to be her interpreter. The political hostilities, after the first violence, settled into a long, drawn-out standoff. Carol stayed on after many of the other reporters gave up and went home. She chronicled the entire conflict between the Soviets and the independents, though most weeks she wired nothing but a short paragraph to the news service that paid her. It was a hard time, and, more than anything else, she wrote about that. The Russian navy had set up a blockade in the Baltic Sea and kept fuel and food from entering the country. Apartments were cold, food was scarce, and there was no hot water piped into the city. Carol braved it all with a kind of joy that

sometimes baffled Vitalijus. She seemed inspired by difficulties. "I feel so lucky," she said, "to be here during such an exciting time."

Vitalijus didn't understand what was exciting about being hungry or cold. They spent most of their days standing in lines for food, listening to the radio for news, talking to anybody Carol thought might have an interesting 'slant,' or making love under the blankets in her unheated apartment. He had no time for painting at all. If they had a free moment, she insisted that he teach her Lithuanian, even though it was obvious that she had no talent for languages.

When it became unbearably cold in her apartment and obvious that there were not going to be quick solutions in Vilnius, they rented an old car and went to his house in the village, where there was a stove. They used some of Carol's dollars to buy wood and a fifty-pound sack of coal in the town. The man—a swarthy Lithuanian national with a gray mustache—wouldn't take rubles. Dollars and Deutschmarks were the only negotiable currency on the black market in Vilnius, but Vitalijus was surprised to find the same rates in the village.

At the house they made a fire in the stove and set pots of water on it because Carol wanted a bath. When Elona came in, Carol was sitting in the bathtub in the bathroom, which was next to the kitchen for practical, plumbing reasons, and Vitalijus was pouring the warm water over her. Vitalijus didn't hear her come in; she was just there, standing at the bathroom door. Carol saw her first. The water in the tub didn't cover her and so she was splashing around and soaping her legs when she noticed Elona. "This must be your sister," she said without embarrassment.

Vitalijus turned his head in confusion. Elona reacted by stepping backward.

"God, she's pretty," Carol said. "You didn't tell me she was pretty. She can't understand me, can she? I mean she doesn't read lips in English or anything like that?"

Vitalijus just stood between the two women, holding an empty pot. He felt stranded between two parts of himself. The person he was around Carol didn't know about Elona, and the person he was with Elona had little to do with Carol. For a moment he wasn't Carol's lover or Elona's brother; he was only a man standing between a naked woman and a dressed woman with no idea what he was supposed to say.

Elona had been collecting broken branches in the woods around the village for a fire. Something she did most days since the blockade. She had an armful of sticks and half-rotted logs. After taking in the impression of her brother and this strange woman, she backed up a few steps, dropped the branches near the stove, and then went to her room and shut the door.

"Is there more water?" Carol asked. "I want to be rinsed."

She stood and shivered, and he went to fetch the last pot of water on the stove, and poured it over her.

When she had a towel and was drying herself, Carol said, "I hope we didn't shock her too much."

Their dinner with Elona that night was a failure. Carol talked about nothing. Vitalijus translated what she said into sign language, but Elona didn't try to communicate at all. In the next week nothing Vitalijus said or did convinced Elona to try to befriend Carol. When Elona saw Carol, she left the room or the house. The first of April had come and gone, and so it was warmer, but there were still no buds were on the trees. It had long been Elona's habit to take walks in the woods and fields around the village. Vitalijus had accompanied her before, but Carol's idea of a walk was into the village to buy food; she didn't understand the attraction of Elona's nature walks. "It's so bland here," she said. "It's not like we're in California. I mean it's not really beautiful here."

One rainy afternoon, after they had eaten lunch together, Elona took her coat and went out rather than stay in the house with Carol. It wasn't a hard rain, only a steady, gray drizzle. Vitalijus would have suggested that she stay, but he knew it was useless—his suggestions only provoked her stubbornness. After they watched her walk down the muddy road and then disappear into a misty thicket of bare trees, he and Carol took the opportunity to make love by the fire in the front room, as it was cold in Vitalijus' bedroom. "Your sister is a really weird case," Carol said afterwards, when they were lying naked under the blankets on the divan. "I've never met anyone before who was so conceited about a handicap."

Vitalijus didn't understand: "Conceited?"

"You must see what I'm saying. I mean it so obvious. She's so aloof. She has nothing but disdain for all of us. She makes no efforts at all to communicate. Why hasn't she learned to speak?"

"She's deaf."

"I know she's deaf. But she reads lips. Deaf people can speak. They can be made to live regular lives, but they have to try."

"I don't see why she should be made to do anything."

"It would be good for her. Don't you see that she's unhappy?"

He didn't see it. He had never thought about it. For him Elona just was. She lived from day to day and enjoyed what pleasures presented themselves, the rest she accepted. He had a hard time imagining how his sister could be happier.

"She needs a lover," Carol proclaimed. "And she'll never learn to be happy as long as you protect her from the outside world."

Vitalijus had never felt that he was an obstacle to his sister's happiness. In fact, he had always thought the reverse: that he was one of her few sources of joy. The idea of her having a lover was strangely offensive to him. Who, among his friends, could appreciate her? He couldn't think of anyone. The men who were sympathetic, pitied her, and she hated that; and the men who made eyes at her in the town, only wanted to sleep with her. Besides he couldn't imagine her with a husband. It would spoil their life together. But then, hadn't he already alienated her by bringing Carol into the house? "She was happy before you arrived," he observed.

"Of course she was happy," Carol said, as if it were all very obvious, "she was living through you. The women in this part of the world are so backward. They can only think of their men. Heaven forbid that one would have her own life."

Vitalijus saw that she was generalizing and that she didn't understand the depth of the love he felt for his sister and she for him. "It's not so simple," he said.

But Carol, who loved large sweeping statements, was caught up in her own thoughts. She stood up and started looking around on the floor for her clothes. "You're an artist," she said, "and she'll only keep you back. She's nice, but she's a provincial, and she'll never understand the depth of your perception."

He didn't exactly agree with what she said, but he was pleased. It pleased him to be called an artist by a woman from New York. He felt sophisticated and was gratified by the way his life was moving ahead. He told himself that, for the most part, Carol was right: in the end Elona would hold him back. She had no place in his new life.

The Moscow putsch collapsed in August after a six-month impasse. And, for the first time since 1939, the Lithuanians took possession of their country. Vilnius, the city of forests and the new capital of the small republic, was again seen on the televisions of the world. And Carol was the

woman who reported the story to the United States. With Vitalijus as her interpreter and an American camera crew ordered in when the rumors began in Moscow that the Soviets would withdraw, she covered the removal of the Russian troops, the tumbling of the Lenin statue in the Lukiskiu Square, and the jubilant celebration of the students in the streets.

For a week they worked sixteen hours a day, driving from one event to another in a rented van. They collected an enormous amount of footage, which had to be edited before it was transmitted to the US. When he wasn't on the street with the crew, Vitalijus was translating speeches from politicians or interviews from tapes. Everything had to be done immediately. What happened yesterday was old news.

On Carol's last night in Vilnius, they locked themselves in the bedroom at the apartment next to the television tower and made love. The floor was covered with empty bottles, food containers, rolls of film, and typed transcripts, and outside in the living room two of the men in the camera crew slept on mattresses. Early the next morning Carol left with the crew for Riga, to cover the independence of Latvia. Vitalijus wanted to go with her, but there wasn't room in the van and she had already found a new interpreter. She gave him the key to the apartment and asked him to clean up the mess.

Without Carol he felt strangely disconnected from the events of his country. The confused beginnings of the new republic—the changing of the street signs, the return of the Lithuanian language, the speeches of the new politicians, and the hunting down of the criminals from the Soviet regime—all left him unmoved. He picked up the trash at the apartment and then wandered about the streets for a few days. When he understood that there was nothing for him to do, he took a train back to his village, where Elona was waiting for him. She knew nothing. He had to explain the events of the last weeks. Her life was held together by her habits. She cared nothing for the Soviets or the independents; she was content as long as she was able to buy the same foods and necessities she had bought the week before. The Soviets had required her to teach deaf children as well as work a few days a week at the toy factory, both of which had been disrupted by the independence movement. For her, independence brought uncertainty: the factories were closed and the markets had nothing to sell. To reassure her, Vitalijus explained that there would be some confusion in the next months, but that life would slowly get better; then he showed her the American money the broadcasting company had paid him and the two bags of groceries he bought from Vilnius.

The next morning she wanted him to go out and paint as they had done before. She set his paints and brushes and his easel near the door and was sitting, waiting for him in the morning, at their wobbly table in the kitchen. But he didn't want to paint. He told her to go out on her own. She didn't understand and looked at him with fear. "I don't want you to live through me anymore," he said aloud with irritation. "You need to find your own life."

She left the house and didn't return until evening. Vitalijus did nothing all day. He missed the excitement of having Carol around. Elona, in his mind, represented his old way of living, which he had no wish to return to.

Two days later Elona set his paints and easel near the door again. This time he went out with her. They started out after lunch and walked from the village along a road they had taken many times. The sun shone hot on the dirty lane, and the shade in the forest quivered with humidity. At a pond they stopped, but some young people were bathing, so Elona wanted to go on. They made their way through a beech grove toward some tall pines on a hill. Elona carried everything, as had been her habit from when he was a child and she was bigger and stronger than him. In the shade of the pines they stopped and she set up the easel. He sat on the hill, chewing



on a piece of long, yellow grass. After the easel was in place, she began to mix the colors he would need. He watched her without interest. He had no motivation to paint and was curious to see what would happen.

When everything was ready, Elona helped him up and they stood together before the white canvas. She held out a brush for him, but instead of taking the brush, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her in front of him. Then, from behind her, he forced her hand so that she made a vertical line down the middle of the canvas. She swung around to face him, but he didn't let go of her hand. "If you want to paint, paint," he yelled.

She tried to pull her hand away from his grip to answer him, but he held it tight.

"No, speak to me," he said. "Look at my lips. Try to say what I'm saying: I want my own life. Say it: I want my own life."

She didn't understand. She looked at his face and saw only that he was angry.

"Say it," he demanded, pointing to his lips with his free hand. "I want my own life."

She jerked her hand away from his and stepped back. The only person in the world that she trusted had suddenly become unpredictable. They stood staring at each other for what seemed to her to be a long time, but then, finally, he signed to her: "You're living through me. You have to find a life of your own."

She could add nothing to what he said. She was frightened. Everything was suddenly uncertain; it was as if the earth had moved under her feet. She couldn't see the forest in front of her. Her fear had opened like an enormous void between her and Vitalijus, and as much as she wanted to overcome it, she couldn't. It engulfed her. It possessed her arms and legs, froze her blood, and became the air she breathed.

"You have to find a life of your own," he repeated with his hands.

Her hands hung by her side, as useless as her ears. He stood with the sun behind him waiting for her to answer, but she couldn't have responded if she would have known what to tell him. Her mind swam. It occurred to her that she would faint if she didn't change the tension of her body, but she could do nothing.

Then he turned abruptly, walked down the hill, jumped over a little dried-up gully, and started down the road. Part of her was relieved, but her heart heaved up emptiness from the pit of her stomach. She sat down on the pine needles and breathed the warm, sharp scent. Her only thought was to sleep, to break the connection between her consciousness and her body. Her mind was in shock: it refused to admit what her senses had communicated to her. Still holding the brush, she laid down on the pine needles. The ground was warm from the sun. With hardly a thought she closed her eyes and slept.

When she woke up, it was evening and almost dark. Her eyes took a moment to adjust and her back was stiff from lying on the ground. Without thinking she stood and stretched. A bird flew down from the trees and landed on the top of the easel and opened its little beak. The canvas, with its one vertical stripe of brown, reminded her of what had happened. She wanted to be afraid, but she couldn't. For better or worse she was abandoned. She sighed and took a deep breath; the air was heavy with the scent of pines. The path that ran downhill toward the beech trees glowed as if it were wet with dew.

Without thinking about what had happened, she collected the paints and folded up the easel. As she walked through the woods and then along the road back to the house, the light from the sun, which had already set, grew faint behind her. The windows in the house were dark, empty like her. Vitalijus was not at home. She went to her room, the room that had once been her parent's bedroom, and lay on the bed. The humid summer night imposed itself through the open

windows. The garden outside was washed with heat. Then the moon rose over the trees at the edge of the yard and reflected in the full-length mirror on her mother's old wardrobe. She was so enchanted by the silent yellow orb in the glass that she sat to have a better look at it. As she did this, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She was shocked to see her reflection: she was a beautiful woman. With some curiosity she stood and stepped closer to the mirror. She had been told that she was good-looking, but she had never understood it before. Her fear had kept her from seeing her beauty. It forced her to concentrate on the animal side of her internal world, and that side, though not exactly ugly, was coarse and selfish. It had not occurred to her that her body could be more than a vehicle for her perception, but now she saw it to be something in itself—just as an attractive vase is more than a container to hold flowers.

Her interest was excited. She wanted to examine her body as if it were a gift given to her by a lover. She slipped off her sandals, and then let her old frock dress fall around her feet. In the same way she let her slip fall and stepped out of it. She stared at her naked body with surprise. Then she began to softly caress her flat belly and her breasts, so that she was quite aroused. But when she stopped to examine her flushed face and swollen breasts, she saw an image flash across the mirror and turned toward the door. Vitalijus was standing in the door frame, looking at her. She was strangely affected by his presence. She didn't want to hide herself. No, she wanted to share her discovery with him. And in his own way, he understood. His intimacy with Carol was still fresh in his mind. His body took him toward his sister, and it made no distinctions; it was fascinated. Elona was beautiful in a way that made Carol seem pathetic. He stood behind her, placed his hand on her shoulder, and stared at her reflection in the mirror, and she didn't recoil from his touch but sighed and relaxed. Without realizing what he was doing, his body began to respond to hers. He kissed her neck, as he had done many times with Carol, and then reached around her and held her breasts in his hands. She stood quite still and let him touch her. But then his body became impatient for the pleasure it already imagined, and he turned her around, pulled her toward him, and kissed her on the lips. But when he saw her eyes, the eyes he had looked into from when he was a child and sat in her lap, he was shocked and ashamed. He released her, stepped backward, and ran from the room.

He had only wanted to tell Elona that he was leaving. He had gone to the post office to telephone the hotel where Carol was staying in Riga, and she had told him that she was returning to Vilnius and asked him to meet her and to bring a few things she had left with him. At the end of the week she was flying to Frankfurt and then on to New York. Earlier she had promised to help him to get a visa to America if he wanted, and so he asked her to try. She told him that she would pull what strings she could to get him out of Lithuania.

He had to go back to the city because he needed to arrange to have his paintings packed for shipping, so that they could be sent to New York if he found a gallery in America that would show his work.

It was in this double state of expectation and guilt that he had stumbled in on his sister. He knew he couldn't face her again, so he wrote her a note explaining his plans and promising to write, left her what dollars he could spare, packed a suitcase of clothes, and then hurried to the train station.

It was nearly impossible to get a visa to America in Vilnius in those days, but Carol and her friends bought a false passport and made a press pass for him. This would get him out of Lithuania, but he couldn't use the passport in New York. It wasn't good enough. He would have to try his luck with the immigration people.

It all turned out to be much easier than they imagined. Carol called the agency they worked for, and they had a sponsorship letter waiting for her in Frankfurt. And the day before they arrived in New York, the United States had officially recognized Lithuania as a country, and there was a real interest and sympathy for the new Baltic States, which were viewed as victims of the Soviet Regime. Carol had given him instructions about what to say and what not to say on the plane, but it turned out to be unnecessary. The immigration officer who took his case was a bald man with a green suit and no tie. He looked bored. He read the letter, looked at his papers and asked him if he was engaged to Carol. He said no. Then he asked if he wanted six months or a year. Vitalijus didn't understand that the interview was over and looked at Carol. The man gave him a year.

The next day he was sitting in the office of a gallery owner on West 57th Street. The office had no windows. A ventilator hummed in the ceiling, and out in the gallery, two men were crating up a show of abstract paintings. Vitalijus had stopped to look at one. It was a simple design of blue stripes with gold-colored clouds floating through it. The gallery was one long room with a polished parquet floor. The entrance had a heavy glass door and two tinted windows on either side of it.

The gallery owner turned over the pages of his portfolio, without looking at them closely. He was a tall, thin man with slicked-back, blond hair and sleepy blue eyes.

"I'm going to be candid," he said. "I think we can make some money here. But we have to act quickly. The atmosphere is perfect for something like this, fresh out of the Soviet Union. But I've promised the gallery for six months, and I'd probably have to make some concessions to the artists who'd be pushed back."

Carol said to him. "This is the first gallery we've tried. Maybe you can recommend one that isn't so backed up."

He looked intently at a picture in front of him, and then leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers on his desk. "All the good galleries have a backlog," he said, absently.

Carol said nothing. She crossed her legs and sat back in her chair. The office walls were a pastel green and covered with posters from previous shows.

"Give me half an hour," he finally said. "Go have a cup of coffee somewhere, and come back. I'll have an answer for you then."

When they returned forty-five minutes later, the man had a contract for Vitalijus to sign.

His pictures were shipped and then hung as soon as they arrived, all within a month of his landing in New York. And the show was a success. He made more money than he had imagined possible, was interviewed by two newspapers, and appeared on a television news show to discuss the democratic possibilities of the Baltic nations. But politics, like the length of hemlines and the width of neckties, has its fashions, and after a few months nobody in New York cared about Lithuania or about his paintings. He became just another immigrant artist living in New York in the best way he could. He went to parties in half-furnished attic apartments, met artists who spoke seriously about punk rock to elegantly dressed women, drank a great deal of California wine, and talked at length to a certain Russian poet with a pointed black beard and dirty fingernails about the isolation of the city. But he didn't paint. New York didn't inspire him.

In the same months Carol's life improved. Her pieces on the Baltic revolution had jump-started her career as a television journalist. By November she was working for a local station in New York. Her beat in the city kept her busy. At first she telephoned Vitalijus when she had done a particularly good interview, and he would click on the twenty-nine-inch color television

that came with his rented apartment and watch her tangle with a local politician accused of embezzlement or harass a lawyer assigned to a police brutality case.

The station was affiliated with a national program in Washington DC, and the director there promised to find her a place on their international team as soon as a position opened up. Her apartment was only a few blocks from where Vitalijus lived, but by the New Year she stopped calling and coming around, and whenever he showed up in her lobby, the guard told him that she was out. But then they met, by accident or fate, one rainy afternoon in a health food store. The shop was in the basement of a brownstone and used half its space for vitamins and supplements. Carol, when Vitalijus noticed her, was filling her basket with energy bars. He had a cold and felt particularly miserable. He had only left his bed to buy an herb tea his neighbor, a sleek, dark-haired gay dancer who had taken a motherly interest in his life, had recommended. He stood behind her and touched her shoulder.

She spun around, said "Oh hello," and then took a good look at him and added: "My God, you look awful."

"I have a cold."

"Well, besides that, how are you doing?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you painting?"

"I did a few sketches last month."

"You have to work. I don't understand why you don't do anything."

He shrugged his shoulders again. "I'm not inspired here."

"Then go somewhere else. You have money. Go to California."

"I don't know anybody in California."

She sighed and looked at the bars in her basket. "Listen: I'm going up to Maine next week to see my family. Why don't you come with me?"

"I guess I should do something."

"Oh, you'll like Maine," she said, making it clear that she didn't like it, "it's cold and gray and quiet, just like Lithuania."

They drove up the coast together in her BMW. She was an impatient driver and terrified him with her habit of passing a line of cars into oncoming traffic. Twice she had to force her way back into the line or be hit. They left early in the morning, and by evening they were at her father's home, a stone farmhouse between two flat fields, which were uncultivated. The grass was covered with a thin layer of snow. The road that led down to the farmhouse was sloped on either side so that house sat in a little valley. There was also a barn of gray timber. The house was two stories and had a slate roof that needed some patching. When they got out of the car and stretched, Vitalijus looked up at the house and said, "It's a nice place."

"You would like it."

"Is this where you grew up?"

"We had better not go into that now," she said.

They were there to visit her father, who was working in the barn. He was a tall, taciturn man with a full head of white hair, who made his living by restoring antique furniture. He didn't seem interested in Vitalijus. He shook his hand, pulled two chairs over to where he was working, so that the young people could sit, while he continued varnishing a dresser. He asked his daughter practical questions about her life in New York: who she worked for, how much money they paid her, how long did it take her to get to work, was traffic in the city really as bad as everybody said it was. They talked for an hour, and then they didn't seem to have anything more

to say. So Carol said good-bye. Vitalijus didn't understand why she didn't want to stay the night, and she didn't want to talk about it. They got in her car and drove to her sister's apartment in a coastal town thirty miles to the east. Vitalijus had met Carol's sister, Beth, when she has come to New York during his show at the gallery, but he had no real picture of her in his mind. He had met so many people in those first weeks, and Beth had not been a person who had stood out.

The road to the sea was an old two-lane highway, thoroughly patched; the original concrete was broken and disconnected like a jigsaw puzzle. For the first few miles there were other farmhouses and more fields; then they came to a suburb and finally to the town by the sea. Vitalijus was relieved to be out of New York. He felt relaxed for the first time in months. Carol had been right; the great overcast skies, bare coastal woods, and flat fields reminded him of his home. He thought he could paint here and said so.

He and Carol stayed in Beth's guest room, but after only two days Carol went back to New York, and it was decided that Vitalijus would stay on and look for a place to paint. A week later he managed to find and rent a house near the sea, not far from Beth's apartment. The last snow was beginning to melt. During the day, when the sun was hot, puddles formed in the fields, but at night they froze over again. He called Carol in New York when he was ready to move his things up to the new house, but she said she was too busy to come and get him and help him move. In the end Beth drove him to New York and helped him pack, move, and then set up his new place. But then, as soon as he was finally settled, the spring rains came, and he couldn't go outside to paint. He stayed indoors, drank coffee, and stared out the big glass windows that looked down toward the beach. The great, gray clouds pounded the landscape with hard, inexhaustible rain; rivers of water poured down from the roofs of the houses and formed streams in muddy gullies that flowed back toward the ocean.

At night he drank wine and talked to Beth. In New York, when he first met her, he had hardly noticed her. He was, at the moment, in the glow of his short period of fashion. But now that things were different, he found that he liked Beth. She was more sympathetic and more relaxed than Carol. Next to Carol she had seemed timid and overshadowed, but once she was alone with Vitalijus, he saw that she had a quiet confidence that Carol, for all energy, lacked. She had Carol's features, but she had dark, thick hair, wide hips, and a slow, deliberate way of moving. Carol had told him that Beth "wasn't ambitious," and for Carol that was a fault, but Vitalijus found it refreshing. She was genuinely interested in him and his work, and she had a good knowledge of art history because she was a teacher.

When he finally had a day that was dry enough to work outside, he packed his paints and chose a modest-sized canvas. He selected a scene where the grass and the sand met, and chose to do it backward, that is, looking at it from the beach so that the sea became a mood rather than a part of the picture. He started with vigor, but he was soon discouraged because he couldn't make his colors come out right. He had let Elona mix his colors for so long that he had lost his eye for it and kept making his yellows too bright and his grays too dark. This frustrated his painting, as he was used to working fast and now had to work slowly with long pauses while he experimented with the oils. By lunch he had ruined the picture and had to admit that the day was a failure. He went back to the house and drank a couple of glasses of wine and sat thinking, and then he took a nap until evening.

When he explained to Beth what had happened, she was very practical and suggested that he make a pencil sketch first. He was not eager to break his work up into stages. He was not a student anymore, and besides, he thought it would affect his inspiration, but he realized that she was right, and so the next morning he sketched the same scene with some success and made

notes for the painting. Then he returned to the house and set up his canvas in front of the window and began to experiment with the colors. He worked on it for three days, and, as he expected, the scene lost its energy when he painted slowly. He knew the picture wasn't good, but he was especially crushed when Beth was unenthusiastic about it. She wasn't exactly critical, but she had seen his Lithuanian pictures at the gallery and knew he could do better.

A few days later he had a note from Carol, explaining that she was going to marry the director of the news program in Washington, where she had just been hired. The tone of the letter was formal. She wished him luck, invited him to the reception in New York, and said that she looked forward to seeing him on her next visit home.

That evening, without a word, he handed the letter to Beth; after she read it, she admitted that she had known about Carol's engagement for three days and was afraid to tell him. For a time they stood without speaking on his balcony, which hung over an embankment that led down to the sea. There was a wind from the east, and the tide was coming in. The waves were splashing below, and on the beach people walked up and down in last light. After the sun set behind a row of cedars that marked a property line between his house and his neighbors, he opened the sliding door and they went in. In the kitchen he opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses for them and she heated a casserole she had brought from her apartment. It occurred to him that he and Beth were already like an old couple in that they were comfortable together without having to talk.

"I guess I should be upset," he said, sitting at the kitchen table.

"I don't see why. You must have known that this was coming."

He said, "I guess I knew something," but he hadn't. His own problems had made him blind to what was going on with Carol.

"She wasn't right for you."

"Yes, I saw that. I could never really talk to her."

"That's important."

"Not like I talk to you," he said and then he added as a kind afterthought, "And we could never sit without talking either."

"That's important too."

"Yes. You can't talk all the time."

They ate dinner in silence as if to prove how comfortable they were together. But afterwards, when he said, "That was good," he was surprised how tense and high his voice had become. She was also uncomfortable. She smiled awkwardly, folded her arms over her chest, and then lowered her eyes so that she looked at the Formica table between them, "There's more," she said. "If you want..."

"No. I think not."

It didn't take much to excite his passion after he realized her discomfort. She was wearing a knitted dress that clung to her hips and tended to bunch up and show off her legs, which were solid and shapely. When they stood together at the sink he noticed how thick her hair was and had a sudden impulse to touch it. He stopped himself, but then later when they were sitting on the sofa near the fireplace, his infatuation moved to her hands, which he took and kissed. At first she seemed strangely passive after Carol; she let him kiss her neck and then unbutton the front of her dress without moving at all. She was warm and patient, but he felt her excitement in her breathing which had increased. But then later, when they made love, he was surprised by the depth of her passion. She was more sensual than Carol. She liked him to take his time. With Carol he had always felt that their lovemaking was a little bit too much like a race.

Vitalijus still had some money left from his New York show, and so he and Beth planned to tour Europe in the summer. They had to wait until June when Beth would be finished with school. There was also Carol's wedding in the last week of April. Up until the wedding, he painted nearly every day. He experimented with different methods, and, though he never achieved the subtlety of color found in his Lithuanian work, he became fairly competent at mixing his colors quickly so as not to be too disturbed by the mechanics. But his pictures still lacked his original power. They were definitely second-rate compared to his earlier paintings.

Carol's wedding and reception took three hours. The service was in a small church and was only for family and close friends. Vitalijus had only been invited the reception, not the wedding, but Beth insisted that he come as her escort. The groom had been married before and had grown children. He had turned fifty that winter and his hair, once black, was now mixed with streaks of gray. While he was standing at the altar with the priest waiting for Carol to be ushered up the aisle, he stood for a moment looking at his watch. It was obviously a gesture he made without thinking, a gesture he acted out twenty times a day to show that he was serious about his time. Still Vitalijus thought he could have controlled himself for an hour on the day of his wedding. It made him look as if he were timing Carol's promenade.

The reception was at a restaurant. The crowd was not large—about fifty people broken up into tables of eight and ten. Lunch was served with champagne. After desert and coffee, the servers stood around waiting for the party to break up. They wanted to set up for their evening customers.

The bride and groom were the first to leave. When they were gone, the groom's daughter, only a few years younger than Carol, remarked: "Can you believe it? Daddy has a business meeting at three. He only fixed his appointment book for the morning."

Beth said knowingly, "I don't think Carol will mind."

Then everybody stood to go. Beth and Vitalijus went down to the Metropolitan Museum, but Vitalijus was tired from drinking champagne, and they only stayed long enough to look at the Van Goghs. The next day they came back and did a complete tour. Vitalijus was in a cheerful and talkative mood when they started out, but he became more introspective and quiet as they walked from room to room looking at the pictures.

When they returned to Maine, he couldn't paint. For two weeks he did nothing, then he worked on some illustrations for a children's book. The man and woman who wrote the book were friends of Beth's. Their first book had been a success, but the man who had done the illustrations had taken the money he had made and moved to a clay house in the Arizona desert, where he planned to do a series of paintings. He refused all other work for the moment, and so the couple was searching for a new illustrator. Vitalijus turned them down at first, but then Beth read the manuscript to him one night and he became strangely intrigued by the story. He made a few sketches to show Beth's friends. The couple liked the sketches, and so Vitalijus was commissioned to illustrate the book.

He used watercolors for this work and enjoyed the difference in medium and the fantasy of the story. He told himself that he would recover his real work when he returned home. It was not an unusual story: the expatriate artist who couldn't find his equilibrium in a foreign land. He and Beth talked about it often. She presented him with different theories about the power of early childhood impressions and then gave him a book about how early memories imprint on the adult psyche. Everything she told him corroborated his feelings, and so he was soon convinced that his problem was one of location, not of inspiration.

In June they flew to Amsterdam and spent a few days going to museums. With the money he made on the illustrations, they were able to indulge themselves and stay at a hotel near the Rijksmuseum that had a view over a canal. Their room, though small, had an antique table and armchairs, a deep red carpet, and a modern bath. The first night Beth sat up in bed and read aloud from the books on European art she had brought from America. The next morning she bought a guide book of the city and two biographies, one of Rembrandt and of Van Gogh. She became his private tour guide and instructed him about the different schools of Dutch painting, the history of Amsterdam as an art center, and the private fortunes of the great artists.

Vitalijus was most interested in the Van Gogh Museum. They spent most of their time in this modern, well-lit building. On their second day, they arrived at opening time so that they look at the pictures without feeling the crush of the tourists. They hurried up to the second floor, and he stood before the series of flowering branches with their bright pink and white blossoms. At lunchtime he came back and did a few sketches. He was excited. In Van Gogh he saw what he had lost: his perception. He understood that this was the difference between his artistic work and his illustrations. The power he had possessed in his early work had been given over to technical problems. But he now felt confident that he would regain his capacity to convey the life of what he saw, rather than the lines and the shapes and the colors.

Later, toward the middle of the afternoon, when the museum became overcrowded again, they went out to a coffee shop and he examined the sketches. He was disappointed. "I know what I have to do," he said, "but somehow I can't put it all together."

Beth reassured him: "You put it all together before. It will come back."

He insisted that they go back to the Van Gogh museum. There he stood before the same paintings he had studied earlier and compared them to his sketches. Beth could feel his frustration. Then he made two drawings that were nothing like anything he had done before. The blossoms he drew were so suffused with his anger and so tensely rendered that they didn't resemble flowers anymore. They looked like hard, artificial bursts of flames. At closing time he wanted to get drunk. Beth found a restaurant and made him eat a steak with his wine. She told him that he was lucky, that he could always do illustrations between his periods of painting. She reminded him how happy the publisher had been with his work on the children's book. He apologized for ruining her holiday, but he said little else.

Lithuania was the next country they were to visit. The morning they flew into Vilnius it rained, but by the time the plane landed, most of the clouds had passed over the city and hung above the flatlands to the east. They rented a car and drove to the center of town. Some of the old Soviet-style shops—with their ridiculously limited supply of goods displayed behind counters—had been closed. New, glossy stores with glass windows had replaced them. Reconstruction was going on everywhere. Shops were gutted, painted, and turned into restaurants for Mafia bosses and joint ventures with the Danish and the Norwegians. Apartments were renovated and made ready for English and American tenants. Piles of old lumber and broken fixtures lay on the sidewalks waiting for the trash men.

Vitalijus was glad to see how the city was pushing to become more European, but at the same time, Vilnius seemed terribly small to him. For the first time he saw the streets and parks with the eyes that he imagined Carol had seen them. After New York and Amsterdam, Vilnius was a small, provincial city. Beth thought the medieval town was pretty, but she was disenchanted by the ugly Soviet apartment buildings that were everywhere. They had seen all they wanted to see after only an hour and a half. Besides, Vitalijus was anxious to see Elona



again. He had sent her money every couple of months, and she had written to him. But her letters were oddly vague. He was concerned that she might be angry at him. He wondered how she spent her time. Apparently she had made no effort to find work since independence. She had the money he sent her and a small disability check from the new government. She had said it was enough.

It was evening when they reached the road near the railroad tracks that led into the village where Vitalijus had been born. Compared to the Maine woods and the vastness he had felt living near the sea, the countryside outside the village seemed small and tame. The birch groves he and Elona had played in as children were thin and without mystery, and the leaves on the trees were dusty and dull of color. Even the sunlight seemed meager and poverty-stricken: it fell over the fields and trees as if it were tired and eager to give way to the night. He drove on in silence, shocked that this landscape was supposed to help him recover his inspiration.

They arrived at his house about an hour before dark. On the porch he was confronted with the familiar smell of turpentine and paint. The door was open and they went in. The house had been transformed. Furniture had either been removed or pushed to the walls where it was out of the way, and everywhere—on the floors, tacked against the walls, and lying against the legs of tables and the backs of chairs—there were canvases.

In a kind of waking sleep, Vitalijus looked in Elona's bedroom and then in his old room. Elona was not in the house. When he returned to the front room, Beth was holding an electric lamp up to one of the canvases. Without saying a word they went from picture to picture. He recognized many of the scenes. The sloped field just outside the village was painted twice: once as a muddy wound with broken stalks and low-lying gray clouds above it and then again with knee-deep grasses and a figure in the corner with her back to the artist. There was the confusion of the apple orchard in blossom where they used to steal fruit in the autumn; the swimming pond with nudes, and the back of their house painted from the garden. But where was the bare tree that was filled with fat ravens? He didn't recognize it. Then there was a portrait of a little girl looking out the window of a green house. He didn't know the house or the girl. They examined every painting they could find. With a concentration unusual to him, Vitalijus saw everything. The early paintings were unimportant. They were experiments in technique. There were maybe two dozen of these. Maybe she had done more. Most of them were on heavy paper as if she didn't want to waste a canvas on an experiment. But then suddenly everything came together. After that, every picture was a minor masterpiece. There were over thirty pictures. Her draftsmanship was not as detailed as his, but it didn't matter—in a way it added to the whole effect. The wildness of her brushstrokes made the viewer feel the power and life of the scenes with greater vividness. He was astounded. Carol had duped him into believing that Elona had lived through him, but she had been wrong: he had lived through her.

"It's a miracle," Beth said when they came to the last picture. "Your perception is here in every painting."

"It's more," he said. "I wasn't this good. This is my next stage."

"But how is it possible? The paint is fresh."

He couldn't answer her. His mind was elsewhere. His future appeared before him like a vision. He would become an illustrator. He would marry Beth and they would settle in Maine and live out their lives in quiet mediocrity. Elona had been the artist in him, and without her, he would never be more than a minor talent. He realized this very clearly, and almost accepted it. There was some pain and emptiness in his understanding, as if the false picture he had carried around with him for all these years had been forcibly removed and not yet replaced by something

new, but he knew he would survive. He struggled to comfort himself: he latched on to Beth's quiet love and the money he had made in America, and that, unexpectedly, helped him recover from the shock.

He had quite forgotten the room in which he stood; Beth had to shake him from his reverie. Someone was standing in the doorway. He turned from the canvas where they had stopped. In the light of the doorframe, his sister stood. He recognized his old painting smock—it was a little small for her, but no one would have thought it had once belonged to someone else. Underneath the smock, she wore a green summer dress. Her long hair was braided and her face was dotted with blue paint, as if she had, in the rush of her work, accidentally touched her brush to her cheek. When their eyes met, he became aware of a feeling in his chest around his heart. The sensation was familiar to him, though it took a moment for him to realize that it was the genius that had once inspired him.