

## PATRIA

I buried N yesterday. Recently I saw my father's face. I'm the last of our group.

It seems necessary that someone speak for us, but to whom? I can't pretend that what I write is our farewell note to those in the Host Country who've been able to ignore us completely all these years.

Better to imagine that I'm addressing History. A doddering old crone in a nursing home, N once called History, clutching the arms of her wheelchair with claw-like hands, a dazed smile on her face, mouth drooling as she recalls--no doubt inaccurately-- something from long ago, so rapt in her musings that she can ignore the moans and screams of those around her.

History. Does she remember any of our demonstrations and protests, our disruptive actions, the letters, the statements and the manifestos? Can she spell the name painted on walls and bridges, recall the sacred dates?

"The folk art of our lost country," N called those slogans, lifting our spirits as always. And when, so many years ago, we exploded the bomb on the pier so that the visiting representative of the Occupying Power had to disembark elsewhere, X laughed and said it was nothing more than a cough in a hurricane. "But," he insisted, "we don't dare stop coughing."

We were all younger then.

N, X. Although there's no longer a need to hide anything, long habit makes me more

comfortable not using real names. To me those initials are our true identities.

Still, I insist on stating that we were real enough, we had corporeal forms, were figments of no one's imagination. I, for example, am a man of medium size, no longer young, sitting here in a shabbily furnished room in a middle-sized industrial city of the Host Country. Outside it's raining heavily, a spring rain whose very smell, I can't forget, is filled with hope.

On the wall beside my table is a map of another region of the world, warmer, drier than this place. Those who drew it chose, unsurprisingly, to ratify the greed of the Occupying Power that swallowed our country generations ago. My map is corrected, though: the bold red lines of my crayon trace the hidden shape, corrective surgery performed on the Occupying Power, whose thick, reptilian language has been eliminated from the places beside the dots marking our towns and cities, the alien words carefully blacked out and the historic names restored. I pause as I write and listen to the rain, looking at the outlines.

As a child I remember a map of my father's: it was large, printed on good heavy paper, strong as cloth. Our nation was colored a pale rose, with splotches of deep blue in my father's province of high northern lakes. In the northeast corner of our landlocked country was the wrinkled shape of the river that for so long separated us from the Occupying Power, though there are few today who would recognize our name for it. The short, sturdy words of our own language indicated that the map had been printed in what had been our national capital and I can still recall the wonderful musty tang of the old paper, like the smell of dried mushrooms. Even now I can feel the strong fibrous material between my fingers.

Our land had already been stolen from us before my father left his native village but here in the Host Country so far away clubs and groups were formed, there were gatherings in public rooms where the walls were covered with flags and the portraits of mustached rulers of earlier times. I remember my father and some of his friends playing a game from the homeland, slamming the pictured cards to the table with shouted words in the old language, I remember small glasses of amber liquid that were refilled from a bottle with a picture of a fierce warrior on the label. Late in the evening songs were sung, eyes were wet with tears.

Hearing this rain and looking at my spotted hands I realize just how long ago that was. I see my own map, improvised, inelegant, and I can become frightened. I can understand N, I can understand how one's faith can be tried, how terrible it can be to wake up on Wednesday, then Thursday, then Friday, knowing each time that all you hope and dream for has receded so much further from you while you've slept. Oh, I know. I listen to this cold, relentless spring rain and I keep telling myself that soon things will be blossoming.

But my father. To be candid, my father was a traitor. Not the kind who stands shivering with terror in the stone-paved square of the village, a beefy soldier of the Occupying Power jamming a rifle into his ribs, so that he fears for his life, for the safety of his wife and children, his hands trembling, his heart pounding as he imagines all too vividly what they'd be willing to do to a simple man like himself; and at last he blurts out the name and hiding place of a comrade, regretting it the moment he's done it, feeling only shame and horror like the acidic smell of the urine that runs warmly down his legs. Not that kind of betrayal, not that surrender before an overwhelming passion like fear; but rather the insidious gradual corruption of the ordinary, the daily, that changed my father, hair by hair, into a citizen of this Host Country of ours, with a nickname in their language, an interest in their sports, a taste for their food, their cigarettes.

I remember talking to him about the old map. He told me to forget all that. I was born in this country, he said, I had more of a chance for a future than he had. All this silliness, as he called it, was appropriate for the national holidays we still celebrated, drinking the amber liquor and singing the songs; but all that was like a game, which shouldn't be taken seriously.

He was a small man with the quickness and strength of a fox. He had red-rimmed eyes with heavy pouches, a drooping dirty-gray mustache and a nose that seemed always to be running. He touched me softly on the shoulder that time. "I'm serious," he said, speaking my name. A traitor.

I was young then, with a young man's need to believe in something. All around me I saw strangers. I walked for a long time before I realized I'd come to another neighborhood, only

slightly better than our own. Dogs were barking lazily, an airplane droned in the distance. I saw a man washing his brand new car, a dark blue sedan. I stopped to wonder, seeing how ardently he was working to make the metal shine. He paused for a moment to look at the wet car, smiling. Water ran down the curb, the sun shone, my stomach quivered. This was the real world. There must be more, I thought desperately. It was immediately after that that I joined our group, I met N.

Cackle, old crone, laugh your toothless laugh, your head and hands moving to a din that no one, hearing it, would mistake for music. Yes, so many years ago I joined our group.

I remember the plan we once debated for taking over a local television station in the early morning when few people would be around to protect it. We were going to place a card bearing the silhouette of our country before the camera. Who, I wondered even then, would have seen it at that hour? Lovers concerned only with their passion, insomniacs kept awake by worry over their health. Confronting that strange shape on the screen, the puzzling name, they'd think of obscure diseases and shudder. I confessed this to N and he laughed. "Yes," he said, "our cause is an affliction." I was uneasy. He smiled. "To be people like ourselves," he said, "requires a sense of the absurd." I felt better then and, remembering it, I feel better now.

Yes, those in this Host Country who surround me: smug, comfortable, suspicious and concerned, what would they have seen in that dark shape and the strange name? One could hardly expect them to have been able to imagine the pale rose beneath the opaque mass, how could they have recognized the twisting shape of our great river in the northeast, they'd have no sense of the deep cold northern lakes from which for centuries our fishermen pulled out the wriggling silver creatures with hard clear eyes. No, for them it would only have been a shape, as meaningless as a stain on a tablecloth.

A disease. Yes, I'd agree. But at least they might have acknowledged us.

In the early days of our activity when, frankly, there were more of us, when we had a visible cause and we could persuade ourselves that the citizens of the Host Country could be interested to some slight degree, we tried to win popular support. In those days it was the

fashion to be reasonable, to seek out alliances. The well-known rivalry between the Host Country and the Occupying Power could be used to our advantage, we told ourselves. We associated with other groups then. Their blue-jawed spokesmen would lean forward over the tables of workmen's cafes, their shirtsleeves carefully rolled to the elbow, and tell us that reasonably speaking our little nation, our peripheral language, were destined to disappear, had well nigh disappeared already; but that this shouldn't dismay us since we could all struggle together for a larger cause. We looked into our beers and were silent.

How reasonable! Our allies, our fellow conspirators. Yet as ignorant as the well-fed masses of the Host Country of the soft shapes of our southern mountains, the names of our poets, our children's games.

"Fools," X called them. "Their nation is an idea. Let them be buried there."

X was a small man, prematurely bald. He spat when he talked, he was always wiping his mouth. His eyes were large and his words came quickly, he sometimes stammered. "Yes," he'd shout above the noise of the tavern, "of course we're insane. Who else but the mad would spend their lives fighting for the liberation of a land they'd never seen, living in a country where nobody ever heard of the place for which we deny ourselves the pleasures that this wasteful nation strews around us?" He'd shake his head. "Remember," he'd say, using my name, "our allies are the mad."

He was killed in a political argument years ago, stabbed to death by the partisan of a group even more obscure than our own. Surrounded by strangers, I had to travel by bus to the distant city where he died and where a small memorial service was held for him. The bus broke down and for a time the passengers stood around, smoking, looking at their watches. From somebody's radio came the popular music of this alien country where I've lived my life. It was warm, we were far from anywhere. Brown treeless mountains stood on one horizon; the other, in the direction we were going, was flat and empty.

Standing there alone and apart from the others, outside some obscure cafe in an obscure part of what I'd learned to think of as my Host Country, beside a road I'd never traveled before, I

looked into that empty landscape, so far from the piece of this earth we'd spent our lives fighting for. As a truck's whine began to obliterate the dim music in the background I heard a cough from one of my fellow passengers on the other side of the bus, a curt, strangled bark. All at once I felt such an appalling sense of estrangement that I wanted to walk to the person nearest me, to touch him and tell him who I was, tell him about my father and his card games, the rose-colored shape on the map, our commitment, the patient poring over history books, the countless articles, memoranda, leaflets, the meetings in unheated rooms, the incidents, arguments, confrontations, the bomb on the pier. I wanted it known. Facing that blankness, I wanted it known.

I have to stop here. Even at this distance I can feel the force of an emotion that might well have unhinged me. How I wish there were something soothing in this relentless rain.

Facing that memory, I have to remind myself that there were other times, I have to turn my mind deliberately toward another incident that, though its practical results were ambiguous, I can't help thinking of now with fondness.

We were relatively active then, strong, it seemed to us at the time, though now it's comically clear how little weight we carried. None of us, of course, had seen our country but we were fiercely proud of our regional differences. When we managed to persuade an old woman to make one of the soups of our people, for instance, N would no sooner put the spoon to his lips than he'd begin shaking his head and proclaiming that though it was good, in the southern province from which his family had come different spices were used. When we spoke the language whose literary works we'd painstakingly studied we tried hard to preserve the regional dialects. Still the sad fact was that, separated from the land by so many miles and generations, we spoke our language not as natives but as exiles.

One night N and X and I drove in X's untrustworthy old car through the blowing snow to a nearby college where a minor official in the government of the Occupying Power was giving an address on economic matters. The three of us had carefully laid out our plan to stand up in the middle of the speech, to raise a banner and to confront the speaker about his government's continuing scandalous failure to grant self-determination to our people.

The talk was sparsely attended and we'd been able to be seated quite close to the stage. The deputy minister was a stocky bald man with a thick neck and heavy-lidded eyes. As he began his speech about agricultural exports, reading from his text in a bored, slightly contemptuous voice, I heard his accent and realized that, in spite of his name, which had no doubt been changed in order to advance his career, he came from the region of our lost country. My pulse quickened as I looked at someone whose ancestors might well have looked upon my own and for a moment it was as if I were seeing again that rose-colored map of my father's.

We three stood up at the predetermined moment, unfolded our banner, we began to shout all at once in the language of our country, accusing, indicting, pleading. At first the deputy minister looked up from his text like an awakened sleeper, adjusted his glasses and searched us out. Never for a moment did he look threatened, though, and when he saw how few we were his mouth curled into a sneer. We'd been shouting and X, who had, unknown to N and me, bought some candy minutes before, began hurling chocolate balls at the speaker. In seconds security men were leading us roughly out of the hall as we sang our national anthem at the top of our voices. The few spectators were wide-eyed with puzzlement and fear but at the podium the speaker leaned forward on his elbows and said into the microphone, not in the language of the Occupying Power but in the one in which we'd accused him: "If these hooligans intend to represent the cause they claim for their own they could at least begin by learning to speak the language correctly." I thought that I heard, under the irony, a genuine sadness.

"And whose fault is it," N asked later, as we drove back through what had now become a blizzard, "that we're separated from the land where our tongue is spoken? Whose fault is that?"

X, at the wheel, peered into the frost on the windshield and seemed to be listening for the echo of the one chocolate ball that had managed to strike the podium. "I'd love to see their faces," he suddenly said, "in the capital of the Occupying Power when this is reported back to them."

Meanwhile over the ticking of the windshield wipers I kept hearing the voice of the deputy minister, remembering how thrilling it had been to listen to the sound of our ancient

language, spoken with elegance, precision and force, coming over the microphone and entering the ears of those uncomprehending sheep from the Host Country who'd never heard it before.

"His kind will be the first to be hanged," X declared.

"Only," N laughed, "after we've allowed them to teach us to speak the language correctly." How I miss his cheerfulness.

When I think of the three of us, dedicated, united, oblivious to the treacherous snows outside the car as we speculated passionately about our lost country, I can believe that that battered car of X's was our true homeland.

Really, all this happened so long ago. Occasionally I realize: my life has passed. Where has it gone? Who in this country knows of our cause anymore, when so many others crowd the news? Who remembers that minor nuisance in the sleepy college town? Better, one might agree with our former "allies," that we should simply forget, simply allow this peripheral people to fade away. Where are the Babylonians?

Let me tell you, old crone: there was once a people, not richer and more powerful than the Babylonians, certainly, or those of the Host Country. And no better, either, I'll admit. The land had its share of scoundrels, frauds and monsters. Our early barbarian kings, some of them little more than gangsters, the warriors who fought bravely and those who fled, our saints, our peasant women, our glamorous actresses, our political thinkers--ours was the common fate: to struggle, to suffer, to try to lift ourselves, to confess our sins or to forget them, to celebrate our glories, real and invented, and--hardest of all to accept--to disappear.

Soon we'll all be gone: the barbarian kings, the poets, N, X, myself. Unremembered. Having written this, I find that I can contemplate it with tranquility. I'm grateful for the peace.

Still I don't intend to mislead by giving the impression of heroic fidelity. Like my father I too could have surrendered. Once, for instance, there was a woman in my life whom I'll call Sister and, without going into details let me say that the relationship was much like others of its kind.

Neither of us was in our first youth, there were things we'd already given up forever and



though we were sensible we were no stronger than other people. Marrying her wasn't out of the question. But I can point, as if to a place on a map, to the moment when everything became clear in that regard. Things had arrived at a certain point between us and we took a vacation together at a lake in the mountains. We rented a cabin, we swam, at night we listened to the pine branches moving against the roof, we were lulled. How far away now was that pier, that college lecture hall. In truth what pathetic failures they seemed beside that quiet lake, and how blessedly distant. In the little country store as I carried a bag of groceries in my arms, smelling the freshly ground coffee, the tang of cheese, watching the light play across a mound of bright lemons, I felt what seems at this distance a swooning, I realized how easily I could be swayed, how the gentlest breath of breeze could reconcile me to things as they were, how a puff of wind too soft to wrinkle the lake's surface could turn me forever to forgetfulness, to the Wednesdays, the Thursdays and the Fridays; and Sister must have seen it in my eyes because she touched my bare arm and said nothing.

Let me be honest: I wanted that breeze to come, I longed for the full force of a gale.

Yet only a few hours later that same evening, as I rowed the boat and Sister lay back against the seat, her hand trailing in the clear water--she had such lovely skin--listening to the creak of the oarlocks, the splash and pull of the oars, the hiss of the water dropping from the blades to the surface of the lake, I found myself absently studying the contour of the water and land, the dark mass of trees, thin sliver of sand beach, reflected clouds, and I realized that I was thinking about the lakes of my father's province in what was now the territory of the Occupying Power: did they look like this? And if, by some fantastic coincidence one of them should exactly resemble this one in every detail; yet how totally different for me the experience of rowing on this lake and not one there, in that other place.

And then, realizing with horror that if I were capable of forgetting, of betraying that land, that rose-pink shape, it was possible everyone might forget, that the land, its people, its language and its history could vanish forever, I felt an actual breeze and I shuddered. Sister was startled, she asked if anything was wrong. Though I said nothing I'm confident there was some

recognition and she didn't persist.

We walked back to our cabin in silence. I remember the horror I felt when we encountered the man who owned the cabins. He was washing his car and as we passed he turned briefly from the water-slick metal to wave at us with one hand while the clear liquid poured thickly from the bright green hose he held with the other, making a flat arc that fell with a splash to the earth below. As we walked under the pines I kept hearing the splash of that water.

Listen, old crone, how I wish I could take you by your bony shoulders and shake you. I'd shout into your face to tell you how it frightens me to think I will have lived and died in exile.

I can anticipate certain questions. Why, for example, haven't I ever taken the opportunity to visit the land of my people, to see the village my father left all those years ago? As a matter of fact, when he died there was a little money, a small sum but quite enough. Still, I didn't go there.

I've tried to be honest with myself about all this. Let me admit then that I've imagined that trip a great many times. And could anyone doubt how moving it's been for me to contemplate my actually being there, dipping my fingers into the cold waters of one of those mountain lakes, feeling beneath my feet the steady flow of that great river, walking through the narrow streets of our ancient capital, stepping out of the sun into the deep quiet shade of one of the old places of worship? Do I even have to say that I've dreamed those scenes countless times, only to awaken with my eyes stinging as I see around me the dismal brown walls of this shabby room, knowing that beyond them are only the alien sights of this land that, though I've lived here all my life, I can only think of as my place of exile?

And still I've refrained from going there. In some sense, I've told myself, it's part of the price I've been willing to pay, part of the sacrifice. Maybe my dedication is better maintained by my memory of that rose-colored shape, maybe to remain pure it's better not to complicate things with a reality that's likely to be more troublesome than the cherished vision.

Let me be blunt: I've never tried to go to our homeland because I've been afraid. Yes, I'm no less immune to fear than the rest of them. And yet the fear I'm talking about isn't that the authorities there would lay their hands on me, because I know very well they dismiss our actions,

in spite of what X thought about the consternation we were provoking in the capital of the Occupying Power. No, what I've always feared is that, were I to go there I'd very likely find a population as sheepish and content with the way things are as the likes of my father. Since the Occupying Power cleverly permits them the celebration of the major ethnic festivals where costumes are worn and songs are sung, bold drunken threats are shouted, an observer might be misled about the rebellious spirit of the people. But when the holidays are over the kings and martyrs of our people will be put away like seasonal toys while the population resumes its pursuit of the rewards the Occupying Power dispenses in return for mere betrayal of centuries of history.

However else my life might end, such a sentimental visit wouldn't provide an appropriate close to the story. Better to visit the pier where the damage from our bomb has long since been erased, better to think of that pier as our homeland.

How they of the Host Country would laugh if they were to read this, they who live in a nation so powerful they can easily delude themselves into believing it's been here since the beginning of time.

Let them laugh, then.

There was only one time when I saw this country transformed, saw it catch its breath in horror like the savage who glances fearfully at the black skies just after the lightning bolt has shattered a nearby tree, leaving him for the moment deaf to everything but the frightening clap of thunder that seemed to have erupted from beneath his feet.

It was when the popular hero who'd seemed invulnerable was brought down.

I saw it in their faces: the smugness and the arrogance were suddenly gone like windows blown out in a violent storm. Now there were naked eyes looking toward others. On buses, on streetcorners they gathered in clumps, saying little, seeking the comforting presence of others. I walked among them as the streets grew dark, the very sound of the traffic seeming muffled, the drivers disinclined to use their horns. I saw people huddled in groups before television sets, I saw them reading newspapers under streetlights, reluctant to go home, disbelieving perhaps for

the first time in the reality, the primacy, of their private lives.

Maybe for a time they were like me.

I'm not an animal. In a way I was touched by the sight of this nation bemused and fearful, yet maybe what I felt after all was more of an intellectual satisfaction than a turning of the heart. Walking among those whom I'd thought nothing could move, whom I'd seen so often in the past insulated from our quaint importuning by their endless supply of machines that provided comfort, pleasure and distraction, I had a sudden revelation of their vulnerability and for the moment I was heartened, my faith was restored and my sense of purpose fortified.

Though that time has receded, like every other time, into the past, the mere memory strengthens me and enables me to speak directly now of N, the last, the best of my friends.

"Forgive me," he'd written in his suicide note. At the end, regrettably, he'd lost his wonderful, comforting sense of humor.

I would have understood despair over the failure of our cause but it was shocking to learn that what N succumbed to was something more mundane: trying to assure himself of a minimal degree of comfort in the old age he saw advancing on him he grew fearful, he let his small savings be used in certain schemes involving less than honest people. And he told no one, it was his little shameful secret. When these dealings came apart N, who himself had done nothing wrong, nevertheless considered himself dishonored, and he shot himself with the revolver he'd bought years ago in order to be prepared for any action our group might sponsor. "Forgive me," he asked.

There weren't a half dozen people at his funeral, none besides myself had been associated with N in political activities. It was a bright day and the noise of jet planes from the airport near the cemetery kept swallowing the words of the simple service. I spoke a sentence or two of tribute, in the old language, of course, I called him a patriot. I returned to my room alone, thinking of N's being buried so far from the land we both loved, wondering where the body would soon be laid. I inherited his few possessions, I forgive him his lapse. A lifetime spent in such dedication can't be rendered invalid by an isolated weakness.

Yes, I still consider him a patriot, though in all honesty I felt an acute sense of betrayal at first, or should I say more precisely, abandonment. When I think of him--tall, thin with a slight stoop, an ironic smile playing about his lips--what strikes me as curious is that as he grew older he resembled more and more the professor that I jokingly told him he would have become had he lived in the old country. I see N sitting with his students in a cafe in our capital city, sipping the amber liquor while his eager students wait for him to resume the telling of some anecdote from our people's past.

How certain faces haunt us. I saw my father's the other day. I was in the bathroom, I'd just suffered one of my dizzy spells, I almost fainted. I held the cool porcelain of the sink under my trembling hands, hearing my breath, unsure for a few moments where I was, and I saw him looking at me from the mirror. I put it that way because though I recognized within seconds that it was of course my reflection I was seeing, still in the interval before my reason established control that was exactly how I experienced it. People have, of course, remarked on the resemblance for years but there was something truly frightening about seeing oneself that way, from the outside. The doctor has told me recently how fragile my health has become and it's some consolation to know that such visitations are, after all, only the result of physical weakness.

When I saw that face, though, when I realized that to the outsider I'd become my father, with the same gray hair, drooping mustache, even the running nose, it came to me more sharply than ever before that the final judgments on my life were soon to be rendered.

Let me be frank, let me acknowledge my terror.

Because our nation was small and we were constantly being overrun the legends and folk tales of our people don't celebrate invincibility but rather persistence and determination. We have a story about a small hill in the south of our land where a particular kind of sweet fern grows. One of our legendary rulers is buried there and according to the story when a worthy youth of obscure origin will make from the reeds of the several regions of our land a pipe on which he'll play a certain ancient song, the melody will be heard deep within the hill by the sleeping ruler and his knights, who have waited for centuries to be called to restore their land.

References to this ruler and his warriors abound in the patriotic songs and literature of our people.

Now, myself facing the shadows, I could try to find some consolation in that story though N, the scholar in our group, used to point out how many conquered peoples had similar tales. When I first heard this I responded by saying "History weeps at these stories." N shook his head. Even as a young man he had an air of worldliness. "History is not sentimental, my friend," he told me. "History smiles at these stories, History is amused."

So, writing for History, I anticipate its response. N was right, of course. I expect nothing from History. Rather, as my dear friend wrote in his farewell to me: "We had our lives. They are ours and no one else's. This was our land, our beloved country."

Let me surrender those cold mountain lakes, that great twisting river, the narrow streets of our capital that I've never seen, give them up once and for all, completely. Now, wearing my father's face, I recognize my country in the rose-colored shape, in small rooms that smelled of cabbage, solitary walks through the chilly streets of this middle-sized city, my friend X, with the rapt expression of an avenging angel, hurling a chocolate ball at a speaker, N shaking his head thoughtfully as we toast each other with the amber liquor on one of our people's holidays, Sister listening with me to the pine branches moving softly against the roof of our cabin. This, all, mine, a world, more than I can contain. My country, my people. Soon to be buried with me.

I wait for no worthy youth's melody to call me back, to restore, to complete what was lived completely. When this fierce rain ends I expect only silence.

I welcome that silence.