

Ristead na Muileann

Since Tito Died

Six months ago a smell of cold urine would have seemed quite different, it would've meant something quite different, but how quickly you become used to things. Cold urine left from last night and yesterday, lying at the bottom of the drains. And with it a milder smell of smoke, soap and disinfectant. In every hostel, in every city that we've been in, the bathrooms have the same smell and the pipes and the porcelain are cold, the water freezes you in the morning and in winter the drops of condensation gather along the line where the wall meets the ceiling. The Belgian who arrived late last night is bending down at the sink. He came in after the lights had been turned off, dropping his backpack, waking me up as he kicked off his hiking boots. But he apologized, whispered it out into the middle of the dark room and someone whispered something back.

Savon? he's saying now, wiping away the cold soapy water, shaking it out of his eyes and moving halfway round the basin. Do you want the sink?

What?

The sink?

No. I'll wait. It's cold. *J'en ai eu assez*. I want to say that the water's too cold, that I'm too cold and I don't know why I'm standing here, really, that I can't even begin this early in the morning. Theresa was the one who spoke French. I listen and, from time to time, I get by but not this early and not when I'm so cold. If she'd found herself in here, Theresa would've said something very clever and the two of them would've laughed and been friends for life, wandering down for breakfast together. Sitting in the square together this afternoon when we all run into each other, the way paths cross when you're travelling, sharing bags of fruit and still smiling at how funny it had been, asking where he's going next.

There's a second very strong smell coming in from the hallway, the smell of coffee that's coming up the narrow stairs from the kitchen and the entry way. I'm stiff from sleeping in a cold bed in a cold room. Nearly everyone's gone, the coats and packs have been taken out of the dormitory, but they're still setting out breakfast in the dining room, the bowls and the baskets. It isn't as bad as it can be sometimes. The coffee's not too bitter, and with sugar and milk, it's palatable. Potable, but not like home.

Sitting on the chair at the end of the table, the only place clear of the dried crumbs on the white paper tablecloth. Great sheets of foolscap. They don't set many places in the winter. There are three other tables in the room but the chairs have been turned over and stacked on them.

Almost alone, borrowing a spoon from the girl who's across the table from me.

Last night I was standing in the foyer when she arrived. She came in with a boy her own age, my age, both of them in rubber boots and long raincoats and now this morning she's sitting facing me, without understanding a word that I'd say to her. I can say anything to you now and you'd stare as bleakly. You won't know the difference. You're Yugoslavian, I watched you write your names across the page.

They must've walked all the way from the station because the rain had gotten underneath the coats and through their sweaters to the shirts underneath. They had hardly anything with them, a canvas bag and an umbrella, and they argued between themselves and then with the woman in the office. It seemed, as I stared at them from the far end of the room, that they didn't want to be separated. They didn't understand that the men sleep in a room with rows of iron bunks and a radiator that makes noises during the night as the water runs up and down through the pipes but I'm damned if it heats anything, and the women in another room down the hallway that must be just the same. Windows without curtains. That's the way it is but they weren't going to stand for it, they didn't want to sleep apart, the way the Austrians who came in just after dark were happy to do. Watching them dividing into two wings, shouldering their packs and bringing in the sleeping bags from their van outside, dividing as if it was the natural thing to do. Father and sons on one side, the woman taking her daughter up the stairs to the rooms.

Either the Yugoslavian girl didn't understand or she was pushing to see how far she'd get. She argued in Italian, she mustn't speak French and her boyfriend stood behind her staring around, loosening the raincoat and drying the rain that was still running from his moustache,

hardly caring, getting out of the way of other people coming in. Just tired and wanting to go to sleep. Somewhere, it didn't matter where. Anywhere. Reaching over and saying something quietly to her but she pulled her arm away from him.

Are you going to eat your bread, she's suddenly saying to me now, half-Italian, half-English, but her voice is warm.

Not all of it, I think I've found the one bit that's not too hard.

She's staring at me.

It's stale. No, go on. Take it if you want. There, and she's dropping it into her bag, saving it for him when he comes down for breakfast in case there isn't any more. At least she'll have her small cache.

He was drying himself when I was in the bathroom, washing his face and his neck as far down as his shoulders but no farther. Too cold to shower or to wash under his arms. He's tied his hair back in a leather thong, drying his moustache and he's leaning on the windowsill, looking down into the garden at the back of the building and out to the stone fence that separates the yard from the road on the other side, the little row of stores and the garage. Separate bread bakeries and separate pastry shops. It's still raining and the water from the eaves is running onto the stones, a smell of sulfur and damp. Greyness and green but it's still as cold as it was last night. You can smell the cold and there won't be any sun today, there wasn't yesterday or the day before. I've been travelling for a very long time now, towards the middle of the fifth month and sometimes you begin to wonder if you've ever done anything else.

The Yugoslav's staring out the window, not wanting to move, but they'll close the building and turn us out by nine, you have to get going and decide to stay in Caen another night or go to the train station and buy a ticket somewhere. He's empty, staring out, and his thin shoulders are shaking with the cold while he's trying to keep warm, hugging his arms around his chest. A black wool sweater. One of the drains has backed up, cold water and wet socks and we're making damp footprints on the tiles when we walk. I want to make some joke about all of us being in it together but he wouldn't understand. He must still be there, leaning his weight on the windowsill, his forehead pressed against the glass. The humour of it doesn't translate sometimes and it's just as well that I didn't try. We would've been left looking at each other, not even a hesitant smile to break in between us.

When they'd finally agreed to stay, too wet a night to go out anywhere else, they carried their sacks up to the *dortoir* and then came down again to sit in the little room on the main floor where there are

four or five chairs around a wooden table. A severe, quiet argument. He was pointing at a map that they'd spread out in front of them, tracing a black line with his finger, the trip they'd already made through France and where to go next, but she wouldn't look at it. I wondered what they were saying, how closely each of the invectives scraped at them. But they kissed each other at the end of it and she laughed with the odd, warm voice saying something to him and going up the stairs to the women's room, the big boots slopping on the stairs. He seemed very tired, looking around the room, and then he saw me staring at him and he smiled and saluted to say, you know how it is, and I nodded back, yes, I understand.

The old woman who runs the kitchen has appeared from nowhere, standing behind me. *Café, monsieur? Il n'y pas de lait*, it seems someone forgot to order it. It wasn't me, you can be sure of that, and if *madame* asks me I'll tell her! But still, there's lots of coffee. I've made too much again. You're nearly all down now, aren't you? There can't be many more upstairs?

Oui, oui . . . J'en veux merci. They don't often ask you and I might not get lunch and I'm asking, *encore du pain*, because I've given mine away and I didn't realize that I was this hungry, hungrier as I start waking up. I've been sitting here for half an hour now, staring around me, and watching the hallway become lighter. In winter the days are so short, and now I'm finally waking up into it, finally warming up. I remember Theresa used to keep biscuits in her pack for us to eat. *Oui, merci*. She's a friendly old woman. I suppose most of them would be if you could talk to them and make sense of it. The soft language that I've heard whispered in the churches by old peasant women, scratching voices. Can I call them peasant women any more? I wonder what it is they talk about, this one here, what would she say if I could hear her when she's leaning over the *tisane* that she makes herself in the morning? Her husband, I suppose, who's been buried since he was forty and her children who don't visit here, that's all.

The girl across from me has turned to look after the woman, following her with her eyes, and then back to me, suspicious. Who am I to have more coffee? Am I so important that the woman makes a special trip? She's wondering is it her boyfriend's that I'm drinking, Oleg or Yuri or whoever he is. Upstairs. Has he missed it? She's staring at me and then down at the coffee bowl that's in front of me, am I going to drink all of it?

It's steaming up toward me. There's never any heat in these places. January's the wrong time but in summer it must be warm and some-

times you must have to stretch out in the afternoons to sleep it away. Sitting having breakfast she has her raincoat on but it's unbuttoned, open over a sweater. Like the boy upstairs. Can they travel here? It won't be the same when Tito dies, the Russians will come in so fast that their heads will spin. All those Yugoslavians saying what will we do now, what will we do now. Or has he already gone. Hasn't he? I suppose they must be able to wander around now the same way that we can, unless they've climbed into the back of a minivan and driven across the border to Venice, run the checkpoints. Or defected from a school tour climbing in the mountains in Austria, slipping down into the village while everyone else is having dinner. But they're here and travelling the same way I am, they must be able to get abroad and around. The passports that I saw her pulling out of the sack. The proof of it is sitting across the table from me and upstairs, staring out the window.

The two of them are a funny pair in their rubber boots and raincoats. Even without the boots. Are they students, too? Can we all see the paradox of having everything in common and being tied together here, all of us, and not being able to talk about it. We *would* have something in common if we could reach across the table. Still, even with the bridges that we share, they're odd and singular and attractive, I thought that last night when they came in and the girl argued for half an hour with the woman at the desk. The woman shaking her head and losing her temper, finally saying do you want to stay or not? There are rules and they are to be obeyed, *règlements*, do you understand? No? Look, there they are printed on the door, so read them. There. It's ten o'clock in the evening, I've been sitting here since five o'clock, I'm tired and I'm about to close the door. This is it. This is me standing up! Now, do you want to stay or not, it's entirely up to you, my friend. Entirely up to you. The long debate in Italian and French and the girl understood the tone, the words strung together. I pretended that I was looking at the posters in the foyer, camping holidays and bicycle trips and ferries to England. Eavesdropping because there's nothing else to do and catching most of it, except for a few words I didn't understand. Perhaps if I could've watched their lips and faced them, watched what went on between them.

She has porcelain skin and her cheekbones are so high that they catch the mild grey light from the window. She's beautiful, really, even this early in the morning when it's so cold that I saw my breath when I was coming down the stairs, combing my hair and wrapping my

sweater around my coat and stuffing them into the carry-all that I take with me during the day.

I don't remember what there is in Caen. A cathedral, I'm sure. No difficulty guessing that. The old woman has the enamel pitcher of coffee again. They're very good about it here, in some hostels they'll show you the door if you ask for more, the lecture about this is no restaurant, no hotel, you pay thirty francs a night, that doesn't even pay the cost of the butter. What is it you Americans want?

Canadien.

Whatever. You come in here and expect service and this and that and you snap your fingers. Just too much.

No. They're not like that here.

She's bending down to hear better, *comment?*

Au Mont-St.-Michel, madame? Est-ce qu'il y a un autobus que je puis prendre au mont? L'île?

Ah. Oh, that, of course, everyone goes there from here, I should've known. She's sketching out a map on the table and drawing her finger down from the corner where we are, the hostel, here, do you understand, across this way. Now if you're standing on the street facing the square, there's a café and the church and a bistro where the bus stops, here, if you want to get on. They'll bring you back here again, tonight, right here outside the hostel. You buy your ticket from the driver. It's not too bad, my nephew went out there last month when he was here. He lives in Rennes, that's where the family is. I don't see much of them. We don't talk much any more, one thing and another. I'll just say this, and I won't say anything more, there was a little trouble with some money. Well it was my sister-in-law, really. But the boy is my brother's son and he must be your age. No, maybe a little older. He's just done his *Service*, he's the one who went.

Yes?

Yes. So you want to go the *Mont*, eh? You know, I haven't been there for years. I remember my father used to take us there in the summers when we were growing up. Not for years.

No?

No, not for years. It's pretty, though, if you like that sort of thing and if you have a good day for it. I suppose it depends what time of day you go out, the what-do-you-call-it, the tide, but you can still smell the salt grass. Really, you should take a picture with all those sheep in front of it, out on the marsh. Promise me you'll take a photograph of it, you will do that, won't you? And if you have a chance, try a little roast, or a lamb chop. They eat the salt grass, you know, and it gives the meat

such a flavour. Well, that's the way it used to be. It must still be the same now.

Yes.

I would think.

You said that there's a bistro in town?

L'étoile normande.

Yes?

You can't miss it.

And how much is it?

How much? I don't know. Seventy francs, maybe a hundred.

It's expensive.

No, not really when you think about it. My nephew told me they stop and give you lunch in some hotel along the way, maybe at Pontorson. It was very good, he said, just like in the city. Here, have some more coffee, it'll warm you up. It's a cold day out there and there's a wind that will go right through you if you don't have something to stop it. But at least there won't be anyone on the *Mont*, there never is in winter. In summer you have to ask people to move so you've got room to breathe! Now just you and the cats. And at the end of it all they bring you right back here on the coach, right where you started from and just in time for dinner. That's good, isn't it? Right back here! She's turning and carrying the empty bread baskets back to the pantry, walking very slowly across the room.

Maybe my French isn't as bad as I thought, I'm surprised. Gaps here and there but I can get by without Theresa.

I wonder where she is this morning? If we hadn't argued she'd be here, across the table, saving bread for me. She used to be ready before I was in the mornings. I have trouble getting up and getting out of bed in the morning because it's so cold, and trouble getting in at night and trouble sleeping. It's the dampness. I stay motionless, keeping to the warm spots, refusing to go out on to the cold sheets. I can't remember being warm since we started, except when we stayed in hotels, the one in Paris where we could sleep together, arms over stomach. We'd lie together and she'd put the hollow of her back against me, pull my arm across her, moving and trying to get inside me to keep warm. They didn't change the sheets the four nights that we were there. But, still, when we could afford to stay in hotels, that was the best part, even with the bathrooms that are halfway up the landing, built into the curve of the stairs. And the Algerians in the next room, five or six of them, playing music until two or three o'clock in the morning, someone else pounding on the wall for them to be quiet. The trip is hardly what I

thought it would be. I thought we'd sleep together every night here. And I remember the last thing that I shouted at her as she ran away. I know she heard me, the sound of the traffic wasn't loud enough to drown me, the things I suddenly had to say. I shouted Rouen, as her bus pulled away, Rouen, the twenty-third of January. And she didn't turn around. That I'll be there. I'll go, it's the day after tomorrow. And I'll wait and maybe she'll come, but I don't know. Honestly, I can't tell any more. Wait and see, but something lying at the back of my mind keeps saying that she won't be there.

The two of us travelling for four months, town after town, it's a long time to be together and then watching her disappear on a bus, the only person I know in the country, on the continent, and now it's going on five months since we came. She didn't know where it was going, the first bus that came, just to get away to prove her point.

I can't remember what we argued about. I can remember the end of it, the money, that was it, but if I tried to tell the whole story that wouldn't be the real, ragged reason. To be honest, I suppose we ran out of things to say to each other. It was spending too long making decisions day after day, just the two of us. If there'd been someone else to talk to it would've been all right. Or if we could've stopped somewhere for a week, not moved and had something familiar around us. But after a while it didn't come any more and there wasn't anything to say. It made me wonder if there ever had been, and then here, the first morning that we arrived in Caen. The price of the sausage, that's what started it, the symptoms but not the illness. The cheese at the first shop was all right. And the oranges at the stand at the market. The bread. But it was half a kilo of sausage and we argued and she slapped me and she's never done that before. Tired and hungry and she slapped me in the middle of the street, an open palm. Slap. And we stood back and couldn't say anything. Theresa, it's not the way that I thought it would be. Standing in a street in Caen, wordless fury and the anger that had appeared out of nowhere, out of thin Norman air. Nothing to say and we couldn't come close and then she shouted and we began all the things that we hadn't said before. It's early and we're cold and she's shouting that I made us miss the train leaving Chartres and I'm saying she opened the camera and ruined all the pictures I had, crying it. The hotel in Paris that I made us take and how we paid too much for a damp, dusty room. The bank in Avranches where she tore the traveller's cheque. Slap, across the face. That I didn't want her along at all, that I'd rather have been alone, without her from the moment we left home. God, it was a lie. People watching us, curious little Normans

stopping to look at us even though they couldn't understand. That she could go back to Canada for all I cared, why had we ever planned it? I don't know why I said it and why didn't she stop me? It was as much her fault as mine. We'd argued before and it had always ended but this time it didn't. There were the words and then nothing, no making up. No apologies. She began crying so angrily that she couldn't stop and then she said she was going to leave, that this was it, travel on her own, goddamn me. I didn't think she would. And there isn't a chance to talk it over now.

That was three weeks ago. I stayed here for the first week, thinking she'd come back. Every night, coming back to the hostel and sitting by the door, watching it open. Hardly anyone coming in. The sound of tires on wet pavement.

They got tired of seeing me and my tired little face. Back again, *monsieur*, you must love this place. Really! There are other towns in France you know, haven't they told you? Oh well, in the summer we let you stay two nights and no more and then you have to go off again but I suppose it won't do any harm now. Let's be honest, there's no one waiting for your bed. There's no line up. So, you like Caen, do you? What's this, a week you've been here?

I don't know where Theresa is now. I made a wide circle just to be in another town, went away and stayed away and now I've come back again. With all the places we've been, I'm going to remember her sitting on a bus with her pack on her knees, looking ahead, pretending that I wasn't outside staring in at her, slapping on the glass so that she'd look at me. And when she finally turned and mouthed something at me, I couldn't understand it, the bus starting and pulling out. Now I'm waiting for each day to be finished so that I can get on with the next one and then through it and back to sleep again and make it to the next morning. I don't know why I shouted the twenty-third. It was a date we must've been talking about before. It was the first thing that I could think of in the panic, running along beside the bus, watching it pull out and roll across the gray square toward the narrow street out of town. The little white flag of a sign, pointing out the road to the highway and the *autoroute*.

More coffee, *monsieur*? Jam? But you have to hurry with it because we're closing now, sir. *Dépêchez-vous. Neuf heures*. Another day starting, and what have you decided?

Nothing more to say about her nephew in Rennes? It seems, then, that we can't talk. I can ask where to buy the tickets or where the post

office is, yes, but the barrier stops us from saying anything more than that. Limited words and a few gestures.

La confiture, monsieur. Ma fille l'a faite. D'abricots. Last summer's apricots, you must try it. Try some, but hurry, it's getting on! It's going to be nine o'clock before you know it!

You're very kind.

We don't have so many students any more. A few years ago you'd be lining up to get in here in the morning and lining up to check out and lining up to get more sheets. So busy! Now, they're not that many at all. You'd hear them all in the hallway and half-way up the stairs. Really, it was a tower of Babel! We'd be so busy and I'd complain to *madame* all afternoon about the crowd of them, you couldn't understand a word that they'd say. Now there's no one at all. Just you few and now I have time to put my feet up and, you know, the funny thing is that after all the complaining I did, I miss them. Students don't travel any more, eh? Is that it?

Trop cher, madame.

Trop cher. Here. She's put a little honey in with it, can you taste it? Just a drop. And that colour! You can't buy jam in the stores like that. Not that colour.

It's too sweet but I'm not sure if I'll be having lunch. I've found myself wandering through the streets sometimes at two o'clock, and the shops have been closed, the blinds drawn down on the doors.

The girl across from me is spooning it out in tablespoons, taking out the bread that she's saving for her boyfriend and heaping it on. Watching me watching her, not embarrassed. They were too late last night for dinner and I didn't see them bring in anything to eat. She must be starving, making a meal out of it. There's a bit falling on her sweater and she's scraping it off with her finger. Staring at me again. Then staring past me and over my shoulder, waiting for him to come down. And he's still upstairs, his huge dark eyes, staring out the window. When I was there he'd been stroking the hollow that's underneath the point of his cheekbone, deciding that no, it's too cold to shave.

Monsieur, vous allez rester ici. Ce soir? They want to know, are you staying again tonight? If you are, they'll keep your little book, your card, if not you'll have to run and get it from *madame* before they close up the office.

Oui. La nuit. Don't have. Nothing tonight and Mont-St. Michel seems too impossible today. I left the map in my backpack, at the bottom under my sleeping bag and my towel, and it wouldn't be worth

the trouble of getting it out. I want to go home but I can't make the first step. If I hang on, if I hang on. Still, that leaves me here and I don't think I can face another chapel or another reliquarium, jewelled heads, saint's fingernails and musty ivory boxes. Bits and pieces, didn't any of them die whole? Sit in another pew and stare at another window that you can never see, high up on the wall. Tree of Jesse. Mary. Annunciation. The cold, puckered faces of all the other tourists, padding around on the pavement and wearing it down to smooth gray stones. I never imagined there'd be so much boredom and fatigue. I've learned *ennui* here.

She hasn't combed her hair yet. Maybe she'll do that in the station while they're waiting for the train. They'll comb it out together, his is nearly as long as hers. You wouldn't expect that on a Yugoslav, hair that long. She'll turn around, sitting in the wooden pews beside the window and stare out at the stone urns and the *Café de la Gare* and the *Hôtel de la Poste*, and he'll brush her hair until the knots have disappeared and the waves are lying carefully across her shoulders and down her back. It's funny, I thought they'd all have black jackets and baggy pants with shiny knees but maybe they've been away from home for a long time. It hasn't been the same since Tito died.

I can go for a day without talking to anyone, a whole day, except to order coffee and to buy stamps. Postcards. Her hair's long and dark like Theresa's, matted together at the ends because of the rain last night. I want to tell her to be careful but I don't know how. He's upstairs now, if you understood the look on his face you'd realize that he's tired and you're tired and that you'll have supper tonight in another hostel, hardly talking, with a pot of apricot jam between you and there won't be anything to say.

And my old woman is back, her coat on her arm because she can go home now that breakfast's over. Rain, *monsieur*, it's going to be another cold day. So you've made your mind up, eh, you're going to leave your things here? So cold for this time of year, isn't it?

Oui, madame, I'll be back for the coffee.

Rain. Still, it could be worse, couldn't it, *monsieur*?

If I could warn her, I'd lean across to the girl and say, careful, every day every evening. Just the two of you. Be careful. He's upstairs now in the bathroom, washing his neck and his face and leaning against the window staring out. If you could, if you understood the look on his face, you'd understand.