

KATHRYN SCHWILLE

Belonging to Karovsky

Of the five people at Karovsky's funeral, not one knew another. On the altar stood the Greek Orthodox priest, who could not remember ever seeing Karovsky in church and referred several times to family, though none were present. In the front row sat the weeping Liliana, a childhood friend who'd flown in from Romania, spoke no English and was promoted to fiancée in the obituary written by a sympathetic undertaker.

Behind Liliana was the American girlfriend who had not seen Karovsky in three months, when she moved out of his apartment after he chased her around the swimming pool with a butcher knife. She knew the shape and color of the pills he'd used to end things.

In the third row was the reporter, who could justify writing about a suicide only because Karovsky had rotted on his sofa long enough to become a public nuisance, and because the sofa was discarded thoughtlessly next to a dumpster, its black silhouette of body fluids upsetting the neighbors.

Beside the reporter was Karovsky's downstairs neighbor, Randall Digby, who found him the day after Easter when people complained of a bad smell. The apartment super had knocked on Digby's door because he was afraid to investi-

gate alone. Indeed, there was a horrible smell. After the police were gone, Digby, who suspected the super to be a drunk and a thief, volunteered for cleanup.

The newspaper had said Karovsky was a loner whose employment record was spotty. He was fired after six months at IBM, though his bosses said he was brilliant — a mathematician who loved number theory, and an inventor of sorts. When Digby looked around Karovsky's apartment on Easter Monday, he found a mysterious light board connected to a computer, two foot-high stacks of legal pads filled with equations, and a fourteen-inch robot with tweezer arms and a barrel-shaped body that reminded him of Dorothy's Tin Man.

It had taken two days for the police to discover that Karovsky had a brother in this country, a neurosurgeon in Bethesda, Maryland who agreed to pay for burial but said no one from the family would attend. "He was schizophrenic," Dr. Karovsky told the newspaper. "He threatened to kill our mother and wreaked havoc in our lives. Better that he died before someone got hurt." The prayer service, he said, would be a nod to the improbable, in case his brother's soul might wedge into heaven through a creaky back door. Such a back door, Digby

thought, might be needed for a callous brother, too.

Now, the fiancée held a handkerchief to her eyes and ran her hands along the coffin's edge, stopping once to fling herself across it in a European display of emotion that Digby found sadly overdone. Chanting in Greek, the priest swung toward the coffin a rope of clanging bells and incense that made the reporter sneeze. Digby could still recite the Latin of his Catholic youth and might have felt at home with a ritual in foreign tongue had he not found in the pew this week's spiritual lesson, which referred to ancient Catholics as corrupters of the faith. He hadn't known the Greek Orthodox still harbored that grudge.

Outside, a thunderstorm blew up. Rain pounded the stained-glass windows and chandeliers flickered beneath the painted dome of gray-bearded saints, Byzantine horses and icons haloed in gold. Digby felt himself in an alien country. The Virgin Mother wore red; he had never seen her in anything but blue.

The priest called for a final prayer and invited the mourners to approach the coffin for last goodbyes. Liliana muffled sobs and placed a yellow rose on the center of the coffin, patting the spot that probably covered Karovsky's shoulder. Turning to leave, she nearly collided with the girlfriend, who'd crept to the altar with two white carnations close to her chest, which she laid near the rose, not touching it.

The reporter kept a professional distance. Digby, too, concluded he did not know the deceased well enough for a last farewell. What plagued him was what he did know. Karovsky's family had wished for neither his body, nor any of his belongings. On his day off Digby had gone through the apartment with Clorox and a gas mask, for the stench of rotting flesh could have hurled a man from the room vomiting straight down to bile. The apartment, exactly like Digby's, was floor-to-ceiling beige, but beige was barely visible beneath the strewn newspapers, magazines and books. In the kitchen Digby had simply thrown out plates crusted with tomato sauce, white rice, french fries and something that looked like it might have been tabbouleh. He had felt guilty about that — could refugees have used the plates? — but he could not bear the thought of someone eating off them. In fact Digby disposed of many useful things, rather than decide whose desperate need they might fill.

Yet Digby had defied the brother's instructions — delivered through the police — to pitch everything. He'd kept the equations, which he thought might be valuable, and a few pictures. He could not discard the exotic little robot, though he could not make it do anything but whirl. Perhaps it needed a new battery. Digby also took the recordings of Puccini, Offenbach and Brubeck — though tossing out the Wagner, whom he detested — for he had heard them all

through his ceiling when Karovsky turned the volume too high; they seemed already to be his. There were other things he kept, but he did not want to think of them now. He had found no evidence of Liliana or any other people in Karovsky's life, save one picture of him and the American girlfriend, taken by a lake in summer. Karovsky wore a tight t-shirt tucked willy-nilly into belted pants, exposing where he had missed a loop over his hip. Snatches of black hair around his bald spot lifted in the breeze. Digby suspected Karovsky had been fattened by the effects of psychotropic drugs, for his large body dwarfed the girl, whose name Digby believed was Ariel. He had not been home the night Karovsky chased her around the pool — the two of them in bathrobes, neighbors said. He might have intervened, sheltering her in his apartment, brewing a pot of oolong tea, waiting while she called a friend, or the police. Had she called the police? He imagined Karovsky banging on his door, demanding he give her up. She might have trembled in his arms; he could have loaned her a cardigan — the gray with suede elbows, his favorite.

How long it had been since a woman needed him. Four years since Germaine had banished him by moving to Pittsburgh because he wouldn't marry her. He was hurt when she told friends she'd replaced him with an Irish setter who was better company, until he recalled Germaine's moods and all her complaining. He

had not wanted to spend eternity with Germaine, though he loved her full hips and roast beef dinners and wondered sometimes if he should have tried harder. Once, in his twenties, he had tried hard. Elka was a potter; they lived idyllically beside a creek where the clay he carted to her wheel was drab as cement. His bookstore job supported them both, while Digby kept straight her sales book, filled out her tax forms and washed her clothes when inspiration and the trials of ash glaze kept her up all night. Digby never minded any of it. He thought their lives were transformed by each other, the way she molded the mess from buckets into something that could be admired. Elka had taught him to dance — foxtrot, waltz, even those awful disco moves. He discovered bliss in movement, a joy that comes from connection to another moving body. He loved going out with her. Men envied him. The waiter in Zarelli's would play to her blue eyes, then turn to him with new authority. "We'll have the Melanzane al Forno," Digby would announce, the Italian rolling off his tongue in a way it never had before.

Elka grew restless, though, and irritable at his efforts to help. "It's not working," she said one day, turning to scrub clay from her fingernails with the splayed-out toothbrush by the sink. He put his arms around her waist and pressed her back to his chest, hoping to quell panic that was squeezing there.

"What else can I do? Tell me."

"It's not you," she said, but he knew it was him. It was him because he was predictable and unoriginal and caught up in the details of day-to-day life that made her grow bored and impatient with him. He was, he felt, exactly the kind of partner her disordered life needed.

"Give us a chance." He turned her around, kissed her, and when they made love it was, to him, with an abandon like never before, as though self-consciousness and reserve had melted beneath the threat of loss.

"See?" she said afterwards. "See what it takes to inspire you? You have to think it's over. If it's not, you're afraid. I don't want to spend the rest of my life with someone who's afraid."

For three more weeks Digby hung on, showering her with presents, impromptu love and all the lack of routine he could imagine. When she asked him to leave, he thought he would never again love anyone as much. The rest of his life had confirmed this.

Gradually, women had faded from his reach until it seemed, sadly, there were no more opportunities to befriend them, nor could he remember how. Rarely did a woman enter the bookbinding shop where Digby bent over meticulous repairs of rare and precious volumes, his fingers brown from glue and pipe tobacco, stains which lately he'd leave rather than clean up, day after predictable day. If a woman did enter, she was often carrying a dilapidated

family Bible, with binding that had long ago lost its grip on the tattered, back-page records of birth and marriage. When he quoted the high cost of rescue she wouldn't blink, but would ask if she could pay in installments, a gift for her grandchildren. It's a poor investment, he would want to say, but who could measure sentiment?

When the prayer service ended the attendees walked silently to the vestibule of the church where Liliana, escorted by the priest in the absence of anyone else to shepherd her, waited to be consoled as if she were family. Rain and wind rattled tall wooden doors that surely, if opened, would drench the marble floor.

Liliana asked a question of each of the mourners as they approached with silent condolences. "*Parlez-vous Francais?*" Ariel, whose thin lips were drained of color and set in a grim band, shook her head slowly. Digby's loyalties lay with her, not with the showy interloper. Up close, Liliana was older than she had appeared in the low light of the sanctuary. Her hair, caught in a tortoise shell comb, was the dull red that comes from bottles, and the lines around her mouth were harsher than one might desire. A black lace shawl against her long neck made her skin look sallow. She was a woman who normally wore bright colors, Digby thought.

Digby peered out a little window to the parking lot that was turning into a lake, wind sweeping waves across it. The severe bend in the trees reminded him that April was tornado

season in Ohio and he checked the sky for tell-tale blackness. When it was his turn to approach Liliana, he took her hand and patted it, saying no, he did not speak French. Then he stepped aside. Digby wanted one of these women to leave so he could address the other on the matter of the personal effects he'd taken from Karovsky's apartment. Of course it would be impossible to address this one on the subject, so perhaps it would by default be the other, whose narrow shoulders hunched a little now as she lit a taper and planted it in the curiously simple sandbox near the carved sanctuary door. Beneath Ariel's sweater he imagined the prominent clavicle and thin arms from the lake photo. Digby had hoped she would show up at the funeral so he could offer the pictures, after approaching her from behind, touching her elbow and quietly explaining by what heroic efforts he had come by them.

Liliana turned to the reporter. "*Parlez-vous Francais?*" She nearly whispered now, desperate.

The reporter spoke softly and held up his thumb and index finger an inch apart. "*Je parle un peu.*" Only a little. A barrage of foreign speech burst from Liliana like her grief. The reporter was listening, and not comprehending. "*Dites-moi lentement,*" he told her. He stretched the last word the way he wanted her to speak. Len-te-ment. She repeated, this time more slowly, and he nodded. He said, to no one in particular, "She needs to call a cab. She's staying

with a woman who could not get off work and had to drop her here. The woman lives on Castle Street."

"Could you take her?" Digby asked.

The reporter looked at his watch. "If the storm lets up soon." When he told this to Liliana, she took his hand in both of hers and thanked him in noisy, lightning French.

Ariel had been dry-eyed throughout, as far as Digby could tell, and he suspected she was sedated. He walked up to her — only three steps in the tiny vestibule — and introduced himself. They had met once or twice on the apartment stairs, he said. Did she remember? Yes, she remembered, and said her name was Ariel Ducane. He wanted to ask if she had known about Liliana. Instead he said, "He was a brilliant man, wasn't he?" The girl nodded, absently tucking her mouse-brown hair behind one ear. Her green eyes looked out from beneath long stringy bangs that Digby found so alluring he almost couldn't bear not to brush them aside. How old was she? Older than she looked. Twenty-seven? He could see that her pupils were dilated. When she told him she had walked to the church, he thought of the halfway house for the mentally ill about six blocks away. "You must let me give you a ride back," he said.

"No. No thanks," she said. "I like to walk. Even in rain."

"Not in this," he said.

She glanced out the window, her chin sharp

in profile. "It's letting up."

"Is no one going to the cemetery?" The priest spoke with caution. His comment surprised the little group, for it was the belief of everyone — even Liliana — that Karovsky's body was to be shipped abroad. "The funeral home said burial in Romania," the reporter announced, distancing himself from the misinformation.

"The brother changed his mind, I think," said the priest. "He will be buried in Elm Park."

"Now?" said Digby, looking out the window.

The priest nodded, and as he did two undertakers who had been lurking in a side room pushed through the vestibule door with Karovsky's coffin on a gurney. The group stood aside as the front door of the church was opened and Karovsky was launched into the wind and rain. The smell of ozone and damp pavement came indoors.

No one spoke until they heard the hearse doors slam behind the coffin. Liliana crossed herself. Digby watched for Ariel to digest the change of plans. "Let me take you," he said. She drew her cotton sweater closer and nodded. Digby's pulse quickened and he gave silent thanks to the fickle brother.

The reporter tried to explain the circumstances to Liliana. In the end his French failed him and he resorted to gruesome gestures for shovel and coffin. Liliana wept again.

Elm Park was not far. The priest would ride

in the hearse, the reporter would take Liliana and Digby would have Ariel at his side. The ride would be short — six or seven minutes. After the burial he would tell her about the pictures, which were in a folder on the back seat.

The storm showed no sign of retreat. Digby brought the car to the church door and Ariel climbed in, rain on the roof as loud as ocean waves. Even on high the windshield wipers were nearly ineffective and Digby struggled to see. Wind gusted so fiercely around his old Chevette he thought they might be lifted from the road. At the cemetery they would be drenched, even under a tent — if the tent were still standing. On Warwick Boulevard, where water rushed over storm drains clogged with leaves and fast food litter, three black garbage bags, stuffed and tied, sailed single file along the curb like giant turtles swimming. Digby drove slowly down the center where the ground was highest.

They stopped at an intersection where a streetlight was haywire, waiting for directions from a police officer with water streaming from his slicker. Digby could not think of what to say to Ariel, who sat with her black macramé purse on her knees, hands clasped on top. Her polished nails were green, a trend he had noted among the young which he had heretofore found repulsive. On Ariel the green was almost becoming; he wondered if she had a tattoo. He

raised his voice to be heard above the rain.

"How long had you known him?"

"Three years." Her bangs split in the center of her forehead to form a V, exposing a widow's peak and a small jagged scar. Her skin was very light, and she had a beauty mark beneath one eye. When she looked at him, his mouth went dry.

"How did you meet?"

Ariel turned her gaze to the police officer, who was motioning for them to move. "A support group," she said. She did not elaborate. Digby hoped if she had a problem it was not a psychosis. A personality disorder at the neurotic level was the most he could handle. He did not understand her tolerance of Karovsky's misfit behaviors. He wanted her to know that he'd noticed her before, that he'd worried about her in that apartment with Karovsky, and had wondered what became of her when she left.

"I heard the two of you fighting sometimes. In the apartment. He had a temper, didn't he?"

"He had a mental illness. That was all."

Digby could not see her eyes because of her long hair, but he sensed a tear. He wished she would tuck back the hair, like before.

The day Karovsky had moved in, Digby watched from his kitchen window as Karovsky and another man unloaded each piece of furniture and tramped up the stairs. A queen-size mattress and frame, no headboard. A Mediterranean-look dresser, the kind you see in motel

rooms. Digby knew, by the shape of his own bedroom, that there was only one place the bed would fit; the dresser too, at the width it was. He knew that after the new resident put in the furniture he would sit on the bed and say to himself, this room is not as big as it looked.

Digby had tried talking to Karovsky. Sometimes Karovsky wouldn't answer and sometimes he seemed almost normal — chatting on the stairs about the weather, or the brilliant stars on a particularly clear night. Karovsky knew stars. "Cassiopeia!" he'd shouted from his balcony one warm spring night, when Digby sat on his own balcony, debating the next shapely clips for his topiary. It was after ten; the Wagner from Karovsky's stereo, if it continued, would again prevent Digby from sleeping with his windows open. He leaned over the railing, aiming his voice upstairs. "Hey! Could you turn it down?"

"Ariel, come look at the sky!" Karovsky bellowed. Digby heard a female voice but could not make out what she was saying. He wondered what the woman looked like, what she was wearing, whether she would stay the night.

Digby leaned around his railing again. "Please turn down the music!" He thought he should go upstairs and bang on the door. This outdoor argument was low class.

"What's your problem?" Karovsky shouted.

"My problem is I want to sleep tonight!"

Digby yelled. Karovsky began singing with the opera — some godawful thing from *Seigfried* —

and Digby wished he'd go back to yowling at the stars. "Hey!" Digby hollered. "The whole neighborhood can hear you!"

"So?" Karovsky tromped from one end of the balcony to the other. "Ariel! The stars!" Karovsky had no apartment above him; he had a clear view of the sky. "You down there. Take a look!"

That was it. Digby picked up a plastic deck chair and slammed it over his head against Karovsky's balcony. "I can't see anything! You're in my goddamn way!" He bounded through his apartment and up the stairs to bang on Karovsky's door. No one heard him. Clenching his fists he turned them sideways, hammering with both at once. Maybe he was about to get punched, but he didn't care. "Open up!" he cried. Finally Karovsky came to the door, a glass of red wine in his hand. He didn't look like he was going to punch anyone.

"It's too loud," Digby said. "It's just way too loud."

Behind Karovsky's hulking figure someone turned down the music. "You do not know how to enjoy a beautiful night," Karovsky said. His accent emphasized the *t* sounds, making his dismissal theatrical. "Mr. Digby, is it? I am sorry if we disturbed you." He held out his large fleshy hand and Digby shook it, though he didn't want to. "We are neighbors, we must be friends." Digby looked past Karovsky for a glimpse of the woman. Her back was to them;

all he could see were long hair and a slender figure. Karovsky stepped aside. "Won't you come in for a glass of wine?" The woman looked over her shoulder and he saw that Karovsky's invitation had surprised her.

"Another time," Digby said. The woman's face relaxed.

"Very well," Karovsky said. Digby backed away rather than turn around so he could for just another second, through the crack of the closing door, admire the woman's thighs emerging from her cutoffs.

Back in his apartment, Digby settled into his blue swivel rocker, lit his pipe and picked up the new issue of *Consumer Reports*. Upstairs, he could still hear opera but no more footsteps. They were probably in Karovsky's bed, right over Digby's bed. He would stay up and read for a while. He turned to an article that rated toothpastes and noted that his grocery-store brand, with which he was quite happy, was not even listed.

The next time Digby saw Karovsky his expansive nature seemed to have disappeared. He brushed past Digby with a grunt and hurried up the stairs. Mercurial, Digby thought. He vowed to keep his distance.

Ariel twisted a bit of hair between her fingers, watching the downpour. "It wasn't what you think. He was kind and generous." Her frankness ruffled him. Had Karovsky given her

the scar? "Last August he took me to Chicago on the train. We went to Navy Pier. A jazz band was setting up for a party at the old pavilion. He gave the sax player ten dollars to play a waltz and we danced in the middle of that big room, just the two of us. He was a terrible dancer." Ariel moved her clasped hands from her lap to her chest and pressed her head against the seat as though fighting it. "Someone chased us out before the song was over and when we ran down to the water we could hear that man playing as if we were still there."

Digby imagined Ariel dancing, engulfed by a man with two left feet. He was sure he could still manage a waltz, though there had been none since Elka. He wondered what to say now. They were nearly at the cemetery. Ariel startled him when she spoke.

"I remember on the Ferris wheel, when we stopped at the top. We watched the fog rolling in off the lake. It was so beautiful up there, away from everything, that he began to cry."

This moment was uncomfortable and Digby wanted it to be over. "Things didn't work out between you?" he said.

"There were problems," she said. This seemed to close the subject. Ariel examined her nails. Digby was grateful they had just passed through the cemetery gates.

Ariel did not wait for him to open her door, which he would have been pleased to do. Because he did not have an umbrella, he took a

map from the glove box and rushed to her side, unfolding it over her head while they walked up a slight incline to the maroon funeral tent. Karovsky had been wheeled to the grave and set beside it. Under the tent the priest clutched an umbrella against the wind and blowing rain, trying to shelter Liliana, himself and his prayer book. Digby folded his wet map and tucked it into his jacket pocket. He would have liked to take off his jacket and put it around Ariel's shoulders, but decided the gesture would appear so familiar he could only do it at the end, before their walk back to his car.

The priest's prayers were in English this time, and he rather quickly made the customary citations of dust and eternal life. A little apart from the others, Digby stood just to Ariel's left, so close that his coat sleeve brushed her sweater and very nearly the hair that fanned across her shoulders. Two raindrops clung to her bangs and wet marks scattered across the hips of her gray cotton skirt. Digby could feel water from his hair drip beside his ears, which he hoped were no hairier than usual. He knew that young women did not find certain footprints of middle age attractive, though apparently Ariel had overlooked Karovsky's physical shortcomings. Digby had twice seen Ariel and Karovsky in the pool, when Karovsky was thinner than in the pictures from the lake. While he floated on his back, she swam sidestrokes around him, her narrow hips rolling with the flutter of legs.

Now, beside the priest, Liliana had taken the reporter's arm to steady herself as Karovsky was lowered into the ground. The reporter stole a look at his watch and grimaced slightly. Digby hoped the reporter would still be able to return Liliana to whatever house on Castle Street she had come from, and began to think up excuses why he could not chauffeur her. He rehearsed what he might say to Ariel about the pictures, how he would offer to her three other trinkets he had found that day — a gold watch that no longer worked but looked to be very old, a Montblanc fountain pen engraved with the initials AK, and a leather bookmark. He would not tell her about the folded-up letter he'd found in Karovsky's bedroom, addressed to her and dated a month ago. It had been wrong of him to read it, but after a day of clearing out Karovsky's rubble he had begun to feel like a confidante from whom no secrets could be withheld. He had been through Karovsky's underwear, dumped his bathroom toiletries and cleaned out the medicine cabinet of aspirin, mouth wash, Percodan and spermicidal jelly. From the bureau he had swept away dimes and quarters, a wadded handkerchief and a dirty comb, all piled in a corner as though a pocket had just been emptied. The refuse of Karovsky's life he'd hidden discreetly in two dozen green trash bags. He'd picked up the letter with the same discretion; if it was not important, no one need know. There was no envelope; he would

never know where to find this person. He sat on the bed to read it, right on Karovsky's tangled blue striped sheets with their disturbing yellow stains. In the letter, Karovsky told Ariel in print that slanted first one way and then the other, that he was sorry for all that had happened, that he had always loved her and that if she would have him, he wanted her back. "I think of your head on my shoulder, your eyelashes brushing my neck . . ." Digby couldn't finish. The letter was full of sad yearning. As he folded the letter into his pocket a brown roach skittered out from under the bed. Digby slammed it with the nearest book, a history of the telescope.

The reporter was trying to catch Digby's eye. Digby pretended to look at his watch, which was not on his wrist but on his desk where he'd left it that morning. Somehow he must find a way to say, out of Ariel's earshot, that he was too pressed for time to deliver that overwrought foreigner to Castle Street. He wanted to take Ariel out for a cup of coffee. He looked at the reporter and tapped the sleeve of his coat where it would have covered his watch. The reporter cut his eyes toward Liliana and Digby shook his head ever so slightly, no.

The priest ended his prayers and Karovsky was lowered into the grave by four men holding straps. From a new direction came a gust of wind that nearly pulled the priest's umbrella from his hands. A few strands of Ariel's hair

blew toward Digby's chin before she grabbed her hair and pulled it beneath the collar of her sweater. Was Karovsky's letter the sort that would make Ariel feel better? He would decide later, and already had invented a story to cover the time lag, something about a misplaced stack of papers in which the letter would have been found. He ran his dry tongue over dry lips and wondered if the vinaigrette on his luncheon salad had harbored any garlic.

The little group began to stir from the places where they had been frozen since the start of prayers. The reporter appeared at Digby's side and whispered, "Got to abandon ship I'm afraid. County commissioners meeting. Other side of town." With that he delivered a pleading look. "I explained as best I could," he said over his shoulder. Liliana was being consoled by the priest, Ariel was staring at the rain and the cemetery workers were waiting to cover the grave, which they no doubt preferred to do without onlookers. Digby felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. He would have to hide the pictures beneath the car seat. How could he justify driving Liliana all the way to Castle Street before dropping off Ariel on the way? He nearly despaired.

Liliana left the priest and appeared in front of Digby. He decided to appeal to Ariel's empathetic qualities, which he was sure she had. Touching her arm he said, "Will you come with me to drop her off?" He hoped that she might

understand he did not want to face alone the burden of Liliana. It was uncivilized of anyone to expect him to put this so-called fiancée into the same car as a legitimate ex-girlfriend, but he hoped that Ariel believed, as he did, that Liliana's romance with Karovsky was a concoction.

Ariel fiddled with the earring in her right ear that dangled beneath her chin; the one in her left ear was shorter. "I'm not in a hurry," she said. Digby could not tell if this meant she was annoyed.

After the three of them made their way down the slippery incline to the car, Digby held open the front door and wondered who would enter, though he would have bet on Liliana and she did not disappoint. Ariel opened the back door and slid the folder of photographs across the seat. None fell out, but Digby was afraid to call attention to the folder by moving it. If he made no sudden stops, it would hold its cargo.

Once he began driving, Digby decided it would be rude to talk only with Ariel so he said nothing. He occupied himself with puddled streets and drivers who sprayed the windshield as they sped past. After a few minutes Liliana began to talk, as if in conversation with the dashboard. Her words tumbled out, as though a river had overflowed its banks and if words were not let out now, like flood control, there would be a drowning. She spoke French, not Romanian, and Digby wondered if she still thought

someone nearby would understand. He stole a glance in the rear view mirror to spy on Ariel; she sat grim-faced, staring out the window. "*C'est terrible*," Liliana said. He understood that. What was terrible, he thought, was that he was trapped in this car with this woman and the whole thing was more awkward than anyone knew.

The wind had died down and the rain was letting up. By the clock on Digby's dashboard, the trip to Castle Street took fourteen minutes, though it seemed to him more like thirty. As Digby turned onto Castle Street, in a neighborhood of old homes on the edge of a city park where unsavory practices took place in the public restroom, he said slowly, "What number?" and pointed to the addresses above the doors. Liliana produced a key with a number scrawled on adhesive tape and held it out to him.

"Ah, four fifty-six," Digby said, and pulled up in front of a brick two-story with a forlorn awning. Liliana waited in the car while he got out and opened the door for her — a woman accustomed to being attended, he thought. He ushered her to the porch where he wondered how they would say goodbye. As it turned out he did not have to say much. Liliana kissed him on each cheek — left, right, then left again, in a manner he thought the Continentals reserved for intimate friends. Her words were brief for once. *Merci beaucoup*, he understood. And *au*

revoir. She put the key into the lock and was gone.

When Digby returned to the car he opened Ariel's back door and said, "Won't you move up front?" She did, and when the edge of her skirt trailed along the seat and out the door he tucked it beside her calf. She seemed barely to notice.

They pulled silently into traffic, Liliana's perfume hanging in the car like a stubborn cat in a doorway. "How old do you think she is?" he asked.

"Forty-seven," Ariel said. "She was saying that he had asked her to marry him not two months ago and here she sat, practically a widow at forty-seven."

Digby turned to her, astonished. "You understood all that?"

"I spent a year in Marseille, during college."

Digby digested this for a moment, and what it meant for the last two hours. Perhaps, from the back seat, Ariel had been able to discount what she was hearing, spoken in hysterical French by a woman of questionable motives. Certainly Digby questioned everything about her.

"What else did she say?"

"She thinks she could have saved him. She doesn't understand. You can't save any of them, once they decide."

The hair did not hide Ariel's eyes as they filled with tears and Digby tightened his grip on the steering wheel to keep his hand from reach-

ing for hers. He was sure Liliana had said much more. Perhaps she had babbled about how much they loved each other, how much she would miss him. Ariel had sat perfectly still, absorbing all. What a mess. And then there was the letter. To tell Ariel that he knew how much Karovsky cared for her would be to reveal he had read a letter not addressed to him and he was not ready to do that, not even to ease her misery. Yet he wanted to comfort her.

They drove in exhausted silence, through streets where the water was receding, curbs no longer rushing streams. Digby took the long route, hoping at first she wouldn't notice, then hoping she would. "I don't believe he asked her to marry him," he said. "Did he ever mention her?"

"Once. He told me that there was a woman in Romania who had come to visit. They talked about marriage, and he decided he didn't want to marry her. After a month here, she went home."

"That was the end of it?"

"So he said."

They were approaching the neighborhood of the church, and would soon pass the café where Digby imagined they might share a few moments. "May I buy you a cup of coffee?" he asked.

Ariel shook her head quickly. "Just take me back to the church. I'll walk from there."

"But I can take you home. I have time."

"I want to walk." Her voice had an edge, and Digby decided to stop pushing. He had caused enough heartache for one day. There was one more matter to discuss.

"I have a photograph. Of the two of you. And others of him." Reaching into the back seat he pulled up the folder. "Here." He wanted to explain now about the mess he had cleaned up — the stain on the carpet where Karovsky's hand had dropped off the sofa, the ants swarming over a half-eaten piece of toast, the shattered wine glass which looked as though it had been flung against a door. He wanted to ask her what she knew about the stacks of equations, the gold watch, how to work the robot. He could not bring himself to say anything. Instead of a confidante now, he felt like an intruder.

Ariel took the folder and silently looked through the pictures. If she was surprised by anything, it did not register on her face.

"I was the only one, you see," he said. "I was the only one nearby who had ever talked to him. If only I had known where to find you."

"I saw the newspaper. I could have called someone." She was still looking at the pictures when he pulled into the church parking lot. The rain had stopped.

"You should take them," he said. Ariel slipped the lake photo into her purse.

"Take all of them." Digby could not imagine what he would do with seven pictures of a

dead stranger. But Ariel shook her head. "What should I do with them?" he asked her.

"What did you do with any of his things?"

Digby's dry mouth went drier still and his insides began to draw in. Her tone was not accusing, only practical. She was looking at him, lips slightly parted as though another question were forming. It occurred to him he had never seen her smile. Did she have the small even teeth he so admired in women, or perhaps two front ones that came together at an odd angle?

He wished with all his might now he had never read the letter. Perhaps there had been another letter. Perhaps Karovsky had written her later and she had declined to see him, or had torn up the letter without opening it.

"The brother said to throw everything out."

"But you kept the pictures."

"And the equations. Do you know about the equations?"

Ariel smiled. She smiled! Her teeth were small and pearl-colored, even and straight. "Fermat's last theorem. He was trying to solve it. But someone beat him to it." Digby's palpitating heart seemed to crash against his ribs; his breath wanted to come fast, but he deliberately slowed it. She had smiled. He could not possibly tell her about the letter.

Ariel put her hand on the door handle. "I must go."

Quickly as he could gracefully manage,

Digby was out of the car and crossing to the passenger's side. "Thank you for the ride," she said. He could not think what to do. In a moment she would be gone, back to that halfway house or wherever it was that she didn't want him to follow.

"How can I get in touch with you? I mean if something comes up. There is a stack of papers I haven't been through."

Ariel regarded him now with a bit of surprise. He assumed she questioned his intentions, or at least his truthfulness.

"I'm in the phone book." She was not a good liar; her eyes cast down and her body twisted slightly. She had loved a man who was insane; from Digby she was about to walk away. Perhaps he could follow her now, at a prudent distance. But he dismissed this idea as unseemly, too adolescent for a man his age.

As she turned to go, Digby gently reached for her arm, his breathlessness uncontrollable now. He thought of the stained carpet, the silverfish that had crawled from the cupboards, the shiny fountain pen gleaming from the finished crossword puzzle of an old *New York Times*. What had made her fall for him? Eccentricity? Intelligence? His need?

Ariel extended her hand as if to shake. He stepped close to her until he could feel her hair beneath his chin, the exquisite arms beneath his hands. Had he drawn closer her eyelashes might have fluttered against his neck, just above his

collar. He took a quick, deep breath above the part of her baby-fine hair and thought of how easy it was for life to harden into something it was not supposed to. In a few seconds Ariel would pull away. Inside Digby was screaming, and this time he could not hold back. What was there to lose? *O Cassiopeia*. Words tumbled from his mouth before he could stop them.

"What was it that you saw in him, anyway?"

Ariel looked at him as though she hadn't quite heard, or believed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you and all those other women he had up there before you. He was balding, sometimes fat, usually ill-kempt and in the end, crazy. What made you want to sit at the top of a Ferris wheel with *him*?"

In an instant he knew the answer to this, and the sadness it brought him was familiar and old. He had never shouted at the stars and never would. No view from a Ferris wheel would ever make him weep, though he was close to weeping now. An insane, unemployed, knife-wielding

schizophrenic had been more the hero of his own life than Digby would ever be.

Ariel pulled away and Digby let her go. He did not need to see her face now to know there were tears. "I'm sorry," he said, her back already to him. "Please don't go." But what else could she do? She walked quickly with her head down, as though it were still raining, carrying with her Digby's hopes and keyhole peeks at fading possibility. Digby stared after her, considered calling out again and decided to keep still. He thought of his assemblage of Karovsky's possessions. Hundreds of pages of numbers and squiggly symbols he could total but never explain. Seven pictures, an expensive pen and an old watch — things which should have been Ariel's that she would never see. And a letter he'd had no business reading, which ensured he would know forever that he had just held close, briefly, and lost, the only immeasurable thing belonging to Karovsky.

