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Seven Lies

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Every lie must beget seven more lies if
it is to resemble the truth and adopt truth's aura.

– Martin Luther

September 14

A woman threw her glass of wine at me. It happened at Gloria Danilov's party at the Temple of Dendur. I didn't know the woman – hadn't spoken to her or even noticed her. Gloria had just introduced me to Harold Gedney, who detached himself from me almost as soon as Gloria left us. A moment later this woman steps up: 'Excuse me, are you Stefan Vogel?' 'Yes,' I say, and without hesitation she flings her wine in my face. Red wine: a great spatter of it all over my chin and neck and white shirt. She walks away swiftly but calmly, no one stopping her, and from the stunned way people look at me I can tell the assumption is that I must have said or done something disgraceful.

I got out of the place as quickly as I could, not looking for my attacker, just wanting to remove myself from the situation, and walked all the way to the Port Authority.

'Excuse me, are you Stefan Vogel?' 'Yes.' *Splash!*

The sheer reflexive speed of it. The strange naturalness this gave the gesture, as if it were simply an inevitability, a law of physics, that the acknowledging of my name should trigger a little violent deluge of red wine.

I sat at the back of the bus, a pariah; marinading in the

clammy wetness. I was shaken, but almost more than that I was furious with myself for having come down to the party in the first place, against my own better judgement. And then, beyond both the shakenness and the anger, this *déjà vu* feeling I get in any crisis: that the attack only happened now in the most illusory sense; that in reality it happened a thousand years ago, and was therefore nothing new.

The lights were on when I got home. I took my stained shirt off in the car – didn't want Inge to see it – and put my jacket on over my bare chest, buttoning my coat up over that. Bundled the shirt behind a cupboard in the garage. Inge was downstairs with Lena, reading by the woodstove. She gave me her glazed smile.

'How was it?'

'Fine,' I tell her, 'lots of caviar.'

She keeps her eyes on me, trying – I sense – to resist the pull of her book. But if she has noticed I am home early, she doesn't mention it, and if she finds it odd that I am standing in the over-heated living room with my coat buttoned up to my Adam's apple, she doesn't, as I had predicted, want to get into a conversation about it.

After a moment she stretches and yawns:

'I think I'll go to bed.'

'OK.'

Another helpless smile, then off she goes up the little wooden staircase, Lena shuffling loyally along behind her, tail up like a bedraggled ostrich plume.

I came here into the spare room. Saw this jotting pad on the shelf – a spiral-bound notebook. The sight stalled me. I had a sudden, overwhelming desire to break my own rule of committing nothing to paper.

Some divination, maybe, that I no longer have anything

to lose? Some notion of what cataclysmic event must have occurred elsewhere in the cosmos in order for a woman to have thrown her wine in my face at a party in New York?

September 15

Walked up to the quarry. Purple starry flowers blooming over the ditches all the way up Vanderbeck Hollow. Maples and oaks still in their summer foliage, moving through the day like galleons in full sail. Though if you look closely the sails are getting tattered now, pocked and torn in places; nibbled by insects, the holes browning at their edges. Fall on its way.

Are you Stefan Vogel? Yes. *Splash!*

This desire to exorcise the past. Not only the remote or middle past (though that too), but last week, yesterday, just now . . .

RUSTLE OF newspaper from the study above me, the snip-snip of scissor blades: Inge working on her clippings. I picture her up there, pasting the heavy tidings of another week into one of the tombstone-sized albums she has been steadily collating over the years. As always, the image comes at me with the force of reproach; all the more painful for being unintended, or not consciously intended.

Snip-snip, snip-snip . . .

My undiminished love for her. Something in it verging on the idolatrous, as though for some higher creature that has come unaccountably into my possession. (Exactly how I feel about life itself, I realise: that it has come unaccountably into my possession, somewhat to its own dismay.)

September 17

A phrase of my parents' comes to mind, one that was forever on their lips or Uncle Heinrich's back in Berlin: *Nachteil kriegen*: to receive disadvantage.

Was that why I went down to Gloria's party, so as not to 'receive disadvantage'?

How in Berlin one was always in dread of not sufficiently abasing oneself towards some superior, and thereby 'receiving disadvantage'. Not that Gloria would have cared less or even noticed if I hadn't shown up. So perhaps more a sense of missing out on possible *ad*vantage? A reflex of my inveterate opportunism? Though what 'advantage' could have come my way at this late date, I cannot imagine.

Or perhaps I was looking for precisely what I found?

Are you Stefan Vogel? Yes. *Splash!*

Certainly I was apprehensive. Even debated whether to retreat as I came to the entrance of the party. I scanned the crowd milling among the Egyptian ruins. There were some familiar faces from our old New York days: the Chinese historian; that Czech couple we had dinner with fifteen years ago at their NYU apartment; the macho Cuban playwright who told Inge he'd written a part for her in his new play; one or two others – the remnant of Gloria's old retinue of dissident émigrés and exiles, sprinkled, as always, among her bankers and politicians. To the extent that any of them recognised me, they seemed friendly enough. Taking this to be an encouraging sign, I stepped into the fray, seizing a glass of champagne from one passing waiter and a black alp of caviar from another.

'Stefan!'

Gloria sees me from behind a pillar and sails over. Both

arms extended, her large old head tipped back in mock reproach, she takes my hands in hers, grasping them warmly.

'How kind of you to come! And where is your beautiful wife?'

'I'm afraid she couldn't make it.'

'Ah. What a shame. Give her my fondest regards. How lovely to see you! How long has it been? Must be five years at least!'

I nod vaguely, not wanting to discompose her with the fact that it has actually been more than ten since we fled New York and closer to fifteen since I picked up my last honorarium from the offices of the little Cold War quarterly she financed back in those days.

'Now you're living where, exactly?' Gloria asks.

'Aurelia. Up in the mountains.'

'I suppose you must love it.'

She looks at me with her kindly, guileless eyes. Her way of seeming only to acknowledge what is loftiest in one's nature, disregarding the rest, so that one feels gathered up for a moment, handed back to oneself in the form of a bouquet made exclusively of one's virtues and dreams and potentialities.

'Dear Stefan.' She gives my hand a little pat. 'Now, to whom shall I introduce you?'

The hostess must move on. But I don't think it's insincere, this warmth of hers. She must have kept literally dozens of us on the payroll of *The Open Mind*. Pure charity. A fervent anti-communist, but utterly democratic in her social instincts, as demonstrated by her choice of who – *whom* – to hand me off to:

'Hig!'

With a decisive movement she leads me towards a man

standing at the side of a cluster of elderly matrons. I recognise him immediately as Harold Gedney.

'Hig, I want you to meet Stefan Vogel. A wonderful dissident poet. He and his wife fled the former East Germany in – when was it, Stefan?'

''Eighty-six,' I tell her, bearing the various inaccuracies of her introduction in silence, as I must.

'Stefan very kindly read manuscripts for us at the magazine. Hig of course was on the advisory board. There, now.'

And with that, bestowing on each of us her elevating smile, she moves on.

Gedney turns from the ladies, sending a ripple of unease through their group. He looks at me with his pointed, ruddy face cocked appraisingly. I have been familiar with this face since my teens in the German Democratic Republic, where it formed one of a half dozen human images into which the abstraction 'America' would resolve itself in my mind. It was always gentle and frail and tired-looking, giving the impression of a sad god working overtime to help the human race, and now it is even gentler and frailer and more tired-looking than ever. The crest of sugar-white hair rising from his forehead looks almost ethereal in its silkenness; a veritable halo.

'A poet?' he asks – slight tremor of age in his voice.

I hasten to disavow the name:

'Well, no, not really. I'm –'

'I don't have much time for poetry.'

'Good God, I would hope not. A man in your position!'

Gedney gives me a circumspect look, as if unsure of my tone. I recall suddenly that he has been drawing fire recently, this distinguished elder statesman; a little late showering of opprobrium at the twilight of his career. I have heard his name mentioned in connection with the hostility towards

America currently surging across the globe. Even some talk among his enemies of bringing him to account for certain of his past actions and policies. I try to think of something I can say to show him I'm not being ironic; that I am on his side. But his hand is suddenly thrust out towards mine. I shake it confusedly, hear him say, 'Good meeting you, young man,' and stand there blinking as he walks firmly away.

Beside me the ladies dart reproachful glances in my direction. They must have been hoping to reclaim their high-ranking consort after he was done with me. Meanwhile, a young woman is approaching . . .

'Excuse me, are you Stefan Vogel?'

A fair-haired woman in a grey dress. Pearls at her ears and throat. Her face broad and smooth; rather pale. As she moves towards me I have the sense of a soothing presence coming into my field of attention. I do notice that she isn't smiling as she asks her question, but her very seriousness adds to her calming air. I look into her eyes, anticipating some balmlike, restorative conversation with her.

'Yes,' I reply.

And out of the points of light gleaming about her, the goblet of red wine, which I have not previously noticed, detaches itself, coming perplexingly towards me, in a perplexingly violent manner, its ruby hemisphere exploding from the glass into elongated fingers like those of some ghastly accusatory hand hurtling through the air at my body until with a great crimson splatter I am suddenly standing there soaking and reeking, blazoned in the livery of shame.

The shock, but then also that familiar, muffling *déjà vu* sensation; kicking in as soon as the shock wears off: the sense that despite the appearance of new damage, any harm done to me was in fact done aeons ago. *It has already*

happened. Therefore nothing has changed. And therefore it is not important.

'I WAS BOUGHT . . .' Always imagined I would begin a memoir with those words if I should ever write one. A *me*-moir.

'I was bought' – instead of the usual 'I was born . . .'

I was bought

I was purchased

September 19

Tech and telecom stocks tumbling again. Good year on that front at least: accounting scandals, fear of terrorism, current administration's economic policy, all battering nicely at the markets. Even Intel's sinking. I shorted it at forty and again at thirty; now it's under twenty. Feels like betting on gravity, or on death.

This wondrous provision for gambling on failure! How it caught my imagination when it was first explained to me back in New York. I felt I'd stumbled on something like a professional calling. The first practical and profitable way I'd found of exploiting my own personality; my capacity for doubt, my tendency to expect the worst. I seem to have an instinct for companies in trouble; corporations with rotten wood under their gleaming skins. Too bad I lack the recklessness that ought to go with it. A little less caution and we'd be rich instead of just getting by. Own a nice house instead of renting this little cottage. Not have to rely on Inge's job at the health food store for our insurance. Would that have made a difference? I doubt it. Not that Inge doesn't appreciate the finer things in life (I

always wished I'd been able to buy good clothes for her), but the lack of them is not what ails her.

Even so, I should like to set her up with a truly large sum, and for that, as for everything else at this point, my own annihilation seems increasingly the most elegant solution.

Convert myself into gold: one way of remaining with her for ever!

September 25

I walked Lena up to the quarry. She's still limping, but chased a squirrel and almost caught it too.

How Inge nursed her back to life after the truck hit her, instead of putting her to sleep as the vet recommended. Carrying her out into the sun every day on that wooden rack, till her pelvis healed enough for her to walk. Massaging her every morning, boiling hamburger meat for her. Then, since it seemed to help her sleep, bringing her up onto our bed at night.

My objection to that. Ostensibly on grounds of hygiene – her wheezing, her drooling and hair-shedding. But really it was just a kind of peevish jealousy that made me deliver my ultimatum: the dog or me.

I could swallow my pride and go back upstairs to our comfortable bed. There's nothing to stop me, and I believe Inge would welcome it. I could undress and climb in with her, find some way of opening a conversation. She would no doubt do her conscientious best to be responsive, as she would too if the talk should lead me to attempt more intimate things, though I know also the expression I would find in her white-lashed eyes (crow's-footed now at their corners but more beautiful to