

A Prayer for War

Walking up Lexington, dripping like a pot-roast, Richard Croxley III loosened his tie, blotted his forehead with a napkin from the deli, and thought, ‘Yes, pray for war, but plan for peace.’

Peace.

Peace had taken the *ad* out of *adventure* capitalism. Now the ventures were to Omaha, North Carolina, and Texas (where Texas Instruments, once a feather in Richard’s cap, had given up on missile guidance systems and had gone back to making calculators). Richard would be flying bulk-freight class to investigate all manner of boring, economical, and eco-friendly peace keepers (missiles, planes, ships, and tanks that – to add insult to injury – would never be built). In his prime, he’d been in Istanbul, sweet-talking investment capital from an insomniac Georgian general, a man who lay awake nightly with visions of T-90s and MiG-29s, of Putin astride an iron elephant, stampeding like Hannibal over the Caucasus Mountains. Well, the Russians had come, as Richard’s American colleagues had been predicting since Yalta; they’d come, but instead of the sickle and the hammer they’d come with the expense account and the black-market caviar (and the *girls*, of course). Now fat Russian oligarchs were floating in the Adriatic like funhouse reflections of Richard’s lonely, long-distance-runner frame. They drank and sunned, stuffing themselves with sardines and then selling shares in air-defense R&D to the Syrians. For *kopeks* on the Egyptian pound. Or whatever the fuck denomination was being used by the few Syrians who had money (Richard was an *ideas* man – a Ph.D. in economics – not a finance man, a distinction that was in many ways at the root of his current predicament).

‘Jesus Christ,’ Richard thought, holding a cool water bottle against his cheek, ‘Son of God, it is hot for May.’ It was if the entire population of New York had forgotten to turn off their

steam boilers; thick, humid heat roiled out of every crevice. It was a groin-rotting heat, with the kind of legendary Indochinese humidity that the older executives spoke about in chummy but cryptic terms: apocalyptic, *Apocalypse Now* heat. The world was coming undone: the ice on Mt. Everest melting, riots from Wall Street to Tahrir Square, the world's credit rating falling out of the sky like a cheap North Korean satellite. And yet, here was Richard, who had foolishly decided to walk the twenty-five blocks to the restaurant, soaking through a freshly laundered suit, on his way to talk about peace.

Peace had snuck up and fucked Richard. In American terms, peace was premature ejaculation on prom night; it was an audit from God (or rather, being Anglican, Richard imagined it was an audit carried out by a bespeckled, eunuch seraphim in a starched Brooks Brothers shirt, Metatron the Pusher of Pencils). Peace was that phantom step at the top of staircase, the one he'd been racing up, two stairs at a time. Peace was what he got for moving his broken family to America, hoping to be healed by the American dream. But everyone knew that only Americans – real Americans – got to live that dream. And everyone knew there were no real Americans, except the Native Americans.

Turning onto East Seventy Ninth, Richard, who was in a black mood, joked to himself that Parabellum, his firm, had come along several hundred years too late to capitalize on that particular conflict ('oh,' he thought, 'but if the Apache people had counted amongst their sacred possessions an Apache helicopter'). He had to get this kind of thing – dark humor, but also stupid puns, double-entendres, associational jitters, etc. – out of his system before drinks. Douglas MacLennan (whom no one, least of all Richard, was allowed to call 'Doug') was a two-highball-before-appetizers man. A Harvard man, his boss expected employees to drink his drink

of choice and match him drink for drink. MacLennan had summoned Richard to discuss what everyone planned on doing now that there were no more wars (his half-brother, the film producer – and family favorite – would simply reboot old wars; if only Richard could return so easily to the past, fictive or historical, Vietnam or a galaxy far, far away...).

Oh yes, there were still ‘wars.’ Here and there. Threats. Megalomaniac and hypochondriacs who couldn’t get a two-stage missile across the Sea of Japan. Inbred sociopaths starving to death daily ten or twenty thousand but never trending on news sites. Little anachronistic vendettas. Al Qaeda goons holding bullshit sessions on garbage barges off the coast of Malaysia. And there was the Levant. But Russia and China already had most of those contracts and Israel was a tough market to break into. You couldn’t just show up in Tel Aviv with a Savile Row suit and a rented Bentley – ‘you chaps need some help with your war?’ – like they did in the Sixties. Those boys had been around the block. And they could haggle. They’d haggle you right out of the bonus you’d already spent on braces, tutors, gaming systems, Maserati mechanics, your mistress(es), and standing reservations at DeNiro’s overpriced red-sauce joint.

Richard stopped himself outside Quatorze (an overpriced *foie-gras* joint), MacLennan’s default restaurant (he lived upstairs and would order delivery, despite the fact that Quatorze was *emphatically* not the kind of place that delivered). MacLennan ordered in French and would humiliate junior executives (like Richard) by ordering for them if they hadn’t mastered the slippery Parisian cadence. Richard did tongue exercises and thought about what to say. But what could be said? In North Africa and Afghanistan, soldiers were fighting house to house, in and out of mountain crags. The Taliban didn’t own anything big enough to hit with a next-generation

Tomahawk missile ('who even fucking *remembers* those things,' Richard bitched to himself, 'after twenty years it's the cigar – not the guided missile – that's the icon, admittedly a bit phallic, of the Clinton years'). These days, Predator drones flew around, developing sentience out of sheer fucking boredom and hoping to get hired by the NYPD. These were primitive times, a return to the pre-Nintendo era, in the words of his son (Richard IV, twelve, enthusiast of funereal garments, violent video games and something called 'metal-core,' which Richard III had recently learned – to his relief – was *not* a type of armor-piercing ammunition but merely very loud, very fast rock'n'roll).

Yes, it was the Crimean War out there; the Light Brigade was getting mowed down by homemade bombs. They were getting stabbed ('*Stabbed? Stabbed!*'). In the space age. It was like dying from rubella. Richard tried to imagine the shock, the humiliation of watching a rusted bayonet slide through your \$50,000 dollar body armor like warm Tiffany's cutlery through truffle-butter. It was beyond him.

'Wherefore,' Richard wondered, pouring some water on the last of his napkins and blotting his neck, 'where-fucking-fore art my glorious, bloodless, post-modern war?'

But the post-modern wars had been won, leaving only the pre-modern warriors, the megalith builders, the stone-age Abrahamic loons and the genital mutilators. Peace meant sweeping these ancients, the remains of the previous millennium, into the ashcan of history. And that meant, more or less, dustpans and brooms: the New World's armory needed no innovation, no re-invention, no investment, no investors, and no Richard.

'A world with no Richard,' he thought. A schism, brought on by corporate panic, cleaved him in two: Richard the Solipsist, who watched from within, the captain of his own sinking ship,

seized by eschatological panic at the thought of an impossible, illogical world in which he did not exist; and Richard the Detached, who watched from without, allowing without protest the suggestion that a world without him – a world at peace – might be a better world.

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MacLennan was receiving his (at least) second drink as Richard met him by the usual table and – for a moment – the grander panics were usurped by a simple fear of tardiness. MacLennan waived Richard down, appraising him quickly and allowing him to sit, sweat cooling in the frigid dining room, for a full minute before dispelling Richard's cloud of worry.

-I just finished with Hammerstein.

Richard nodded, faintly relieved. MacLennan caught him eyeing his drink, a rocks glass with a neat finger of something amber hued (almost greenish: a peaty Scotch or, Richard wondered silently, did MacLennan drink venom to inoculate himself against would-be assassins?).

-Their liquor supplier neglected to fill their order of bitters. I've recommended a new purveyor to them but, for the time being, it's Islay neat for me.

Richard sighed. He was being let of the hook – he wouldn't have to guess MacLennan's pick of poison – and was thus served a backhanded insult: MacLennan lacked faith in Richard's ability to mimic (a crucial senior executive skill, apparently). Or did he? Richard's eyes wandered to the upper shelf behind the bar, recognizing two different Islay single malts: the standard ten-year-old Ardbeg and a pricey limited edition he recognized from the liquor store as

‘the Peat Monster.’ Surely MacLannen would never be caught drinking something with a name out of *Sesame Street* (surely MacLennan wouldn’t even know the children’s show – or children in general – existed; rumor had it he disowned his own son at five months for being insufficiently articulate, a rumor that Richard suspected was only moderately hyperbolic). Was it a trap? A waiter, spying Richard’s *gauche* state of drinklessness, maneuvered towards him from the bar. ‘Fuck,’ thought Richard, and then, mentally escalated to the oath *du jour* of his daughter (Josephine, thirteen, middle child and profoundly *Americanized*), silently chanted, ‘motherfucking motherfucker.’

The waiter stood invisibly behind Richard’s shoulder; Richard gambled.

-I’ll have an Islay, neat.

-We have several Sir. Would you like to see our full list of spirits?

-No need. I think I’ll try the Peat Monster.

A pause. MacLennan narrowed his eyes.

-Another Peat Monster for the table, very good.

The waiter rustled softly and was gone. MacLennan sipped his drink.

-It’s rather very heavily peated, you know.

-It is. But why else drink it? Otherwise we might as well have the Japanese Scotch.

MacLennan let out a slow dry laugh.

-Japanese Scotch. That’s vaguely clever Croxley.

Richard shrugged.

-After a drink I might be more precisely clever.

-Don't get excitable. Hammerstein, he's bordering on vaudeville. He wrote for the *Lampoon*, did you know that? There's journalism, and there's tabloid pornography, and then there are college humor magazines. It's called 'sophomoric' for a reason. Makes me miss the quota days.

MacLennan laughed to himself and Richard relaxed; his boss's distaste for humanity was an amorphous evil that had to choose a form to do harm; as long as that form was anti-Semitism (or, at least, anti-Hammersteinism) Richard Croxley or Cambridge was safe, and he promised to make karmic amends for this Faustian pact by telling his Jewish friends (including his girlfriend) about MacLennan's barbarism. This had long been Richard's standard operating procedure with MacLennan, but he had developed the strategy through his youthful dealings with his own grandfather – Richard the First – who had, like his historical namesake, voiced murderous contempt for the Jewish people (Richard scrupulously avoided all things psychoanalytic, denying any Oedipal root in his preference for Jewish mistresses and preferring instead to think of his libido as Shakespearean).

The waiter returned wordlessly with Richard's drink and MacLennan smiled thinly.

-Very well then, Richard, you know why we're here, yes? Not just to drink heavily peated Scotches with gimmicky names and lampoon the *Lampoon*. So tell me, what do you want?

-Sir?

-What is it you want, Richard?

The magnitude of the question – what was the square of infinity? – caused Richard's brain to swell against his skull. What did he want? He wanted an end to dated *Monty Python*

jokes at his expense (how many times could he be sent by his colleagues to ‘find a shrubbery,’ honestly, before he could reasonably be expected to garrote one of them with an Ethernet cable?). He wanted seniority. He wanted a cartel. He wanted enough money to say, ‘fuck you,’ to projects and people that belittled him. He wanted fuck-you money and a yacht, the ‘H.M.S. Fuck-You Money.’ He wanted a mistress in the Ukraine and another in the Dominican Republic so that – at cocktail parties in Tribeca – he could say nonchalant things about having mistresses, the contrasting temperaments of women from such varying climes. Instead, at the moment, he had perpetual dampness behind the ear and evergreen horns. He was the shunt through which directives and delegations traveled. He had only enough money to curse beggars and buskers and even then only under his breath. He had a beautiful and maddeningly youthful ex-wife whose latest boyfriend made Richard’s annual salary every time he stepped on the AstroTurf to play American football (but, of course, she refused to marry, lest Richard be freed of alimony payments). He had three ‘ex-children’ (a term coined, or at least popularized, by his oldest, Maxine, sixteen). He had a girlfriend living in (west) Hoboken who used physical verbs like ‘push’ in abstracted marketing terms. She went to better cocktail parties than he did and would frequently forget to reciprocate oral sex (she had once, after five or so mojitos, said ‘I thought British men of your generation didn’t like getting blown,’ leaving him speechlessly puzzled over which part of her statement to object to first).

Could MacLennan bridge the gulf between Richard’s ‘wants’ and ‘haves,’ even with his godlike finances? (Could MacLennan, for example, make his ex-wife look her own damn age?) And where to even begin? Richard collected himself and started simply:

-I’d like to make more money.

Caviar arrived, as if by pure force of MacLennan's will. Richard watched as his boss lifted fifty-dollars' worth into his mouth on a blintz and for a queasy second wondered if MacLennan was in bed with the Russians (in Richard's mind, the metaphor literalized in the image of a porcelain-skinned Estonian kneeling astride MacLennan's leathery loins).

-All good Marxists do, in the end.

MacLennan's snide tone alleviated some fear of a post-Soviet merger, but it still stung Richard, who had – in the ideological fray of late 80s academia – written an ultra-leftist doctoral thesis on conflict economics.

-Oh, Sir. I've shed those foolish leanings many years ago.

He had, at least, shed his outward Marxist leanings; Richard the Detached was neutral and amoral, neither left nor right. Inwardly, Richard the Solipsist lurched from pole to pole, schismed (further) along those ancient Freudian lines ('who even speaks – publically at least – of old Victorian Freud,' Richard protested, a bit too much, 'the rusted phonograph in the wireless, digital age?'). Privately, it was all there, the tripartite mind. There was Richard's Super-Ego, his archangel of Guilt, a philandering, Scotch-guzzling demigod who chided him endlessly – 'I've just seen the numbers, why aren't you making *more*?' – and preferred his illegitimate son-of-a-whore brother (though Richard's thesis had explicitly denounced Freudian thinking, he had to admit it: his Super-Ego bore some fairly uncanny resemblance to both his father and grandfather). There was also the dark, anarchist imp, shouting Marxist slogans up from the pit, ready to dance on the grave of the New World Order (the imp, Richard suspected, was the source of a recurring fantasy: shoving a two-pronged cocktail fork through MacLennan's eye-socket and

pithing his frontal lobe). And of course, Richard himself, the Ego, a man-child cornered in the cockpit, a powerless figurehead.

-Croxley? Have we lost you? Have you forgotten why you're here?

Richard willed a shaky union of his factions.

-I expect, Mr. MacLannen, that it's about the state of the art, so to speak.

-Yes, well, it's hardly Star Wars these days. Good Christ I do miss that. Ron was a visionary, I tell you. I've hated how they've caricatured him, like a senile Patriarch in sweatpants looking for his jellybeans. That man saw the future. A very profitable future. Not this junior senator we've got now. A very, very junior senator. Of dubious provenance.

Richard felt a tingle of uneasiness; the shift from waspy anti-Semitism to conspiratorial racism – while it didn't precisely threaten him – represented instability. Like a drunk or a rabid animal, it might lash out in any conceivable direction. His only option was to steer things towards business, which – unfortunately – meant answering for the world's martial lull (if he could put it so prosaically).

-So, the business has got to adapt.

-Yes. Now that we are enjoying this most unfortunate *pax Americana*.

-Well, sir, I'm sure there are still opportunities.

-Don't sit here, Richard, at this very nice restaurant, drinking very nice Scotch, and try to sell me that starry-eyed MBA optimism. I am fairly sure Parabellum has NYU interns for that.

Richard sipped his drink. He had gambled once and it had paid off. As the patron saint of his girlfriend's beloved Hoboken might have crooned: Would luck be a lady? Richard rather hoped it would be *unlike* a lady – or at least the ladies he had known. Unlike his wife (who, true

to the crude saying, had *not* gone back after ‘going black’) or his girlfriend (at whose apartment innumerable male models, guitarists, and neo-Hemmingwayish authors incessantly ‘crashed,’ the term suggesting to Richard that they had accidentally careened off the path to their own residences and into his girlfriend’s vagina). Richard, his mind compulsively reeling from business failure to sexual failure, instinctively lashed out at his girlfriend’s industry.

-No sir, I’m sure Hammerstein already sold you that social media ‘push’ shit.

MacLennan sipped his drink and nodded approvingly, perhaps sensing the economy with which Richard had thrown both his co-worker and girlfriend under the bus. Richard had scored a point, but still he cringed – MacLennan, when smiling, looked particularly Mephistophelian – and there was a caustic hollowness in Richard’s head, nothing but willowy literary clichés: a blinding darkness, a deafening silence, a painful numbness. But then this undergraduate poetry was pushed aside by something concrete, something rough and real. It was an idea, a demonic idea – from above or below, Id or Super-Ego, Richard couldn’t be sure – that frightened and excited him. He did not even try to contain it.

-And, well, sir, I’d like to start a war.

-Oh, I think our Mesopotamian adventures have exhausted that market, Richard.

-No sir, not a foreign war.

MacLennan laughed.

-Not a war on...on drugs, Richard. A war on crime? On poverty?

Richard finished his drink, nodded to the waiter, and – summoning a reserve of either real courage or a very passable imitation – looked MacLennan in the face. His boss’s lips curled

faintly, preparing instinctively to mouth disappointment with Richard's idea as a skilled fencer is already rotating at the hips when an attacker lunges.

-No, Mr. MacLennan, not a war on poverty. A war on the poor.

MacLennan was quiet for a moment. There was no retort, no withering dismissal, not even an oblique insult. His boss finished his drink and, as the waiter arrived, slowly began to nod.

-Let's order some dinner. How's your French, Richard?

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Dinner itself never seemed to arrive (although Richard would later find a *confit* of duck leg in his jacket pocket). Instead, there was a staggering cavalcade of alcohol: after a brief interlude of champagne (a pallet cleanser after the 'Peat Monster,' which tasted like tea made from lawn-mower clippings) there were two bottles of Bordeaux (the cost of one could have outfitted his son with the latest high-end gaming system) and then an aperitif of Sherry ('I hear Spanish desert wines are all the rage in London these days,' MacLennan clucked, half-mockingly). Finally – in something out of the cyclic madness of Beckett – there was a return to the swampy madness of Scotch.

As Richard grew progressively drunker, his sales pitch grew wilder, more extravagant, and the world fell away: the disinterest of his father and – perhaps crueler – the phantom disappointment of his deceased grandfather; the lingering, nettling loose ends of his divorce settlement; the increasing detachment (if not outright hostility) between himself and Max and Jo;

the unsettling opacity of his son; the stealthy but inexorable decay of his working memory; the more conspicuous entropy at work on his physique; the diminishing returns of keeping a neo-bohemian girlfriend. After broaching the punt on the second bottle of wine the outside world itself disappeared, ending abruptly just beyond the hostess's podium, and somewhere during the Sherry Richard became aware that he was slurring some of his words and forgetting others ('what,' he found himself asking out loud, 'is a more politick phrase for scum of the earth?'). By the time the 'Peat Monster' returned in all its smoky monstrosity, Richard was gesticulating as if a live current were running through him, speaking in corporate tongues, possessed. He was looking at MacLennan through one eye at a time and – although he could not be sure – thought that perhaps MacLennan might be doing the same (although he might have been squinting). But through all of this, the shedding of faculties, memories, and all but the autonomic functions of his primordial fish-brain, Richard clung to the guiding thread of his idea, his singular vision: the mother of all wars.

And then he lost it.

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Richard found himself sitting at the table, his Scotch glass held up, one finger extended for emphasis, his mouth open and his mind completely blank. MacLennan was staring at him, eyes narrowed, head tilted forward, expectant.

-And?

-Sir?

-Well, Croxley?

Richard excused himself and stood up, shakily, and headed towards the back of the dining room. Having cataracted himself with all manner of booze, he was forced to feel his way to the men's room. He missed the crucial turn and found himself in the small room where the wait staff huddled, anxiously checking tickets, organizing trays of food, and cursing quietly in their native languages (Spanish, mostly, although Richard thought he heard 'khuy,' an indispensable Russian profanity that sent him momentarily into another bout of paranoid Russophobia). He looked down – sharply, to avoid the gaze of a potential Russian corporate spy – and saw, on what was either three or six silver trays, an assortment of espressos and café Americanos. Lifting one to his mouth, he was aware of a faint tingling sensation across his lips and tongue, but otherwise felt nothing. After two more, he became more distinctly aware that he had burned himself, but was also enraptured by the warm humming sensation in his stomach. Then the warmth turned some gastric corner and headed mouth-wards, against the normal flow of traffic and with volcanic force.

Richard, possibly apologizing to the wait staff (and, also, possibly vomiting slightly on a mousy food runner), hurled himself towards the nearest door. Without time for celebration, Richard noted the presence of several businessmen and threw up in a urinal, happy to have stumbled into the right bathroom ('amongst men,' a voice murmured in Richard's head, a quote perhaps, or a wishful thought, 'everything is permissible amongst men'). Apologizing again, Richard made his way into a stall and knelt before the toilet in supplication. His palms flat on the immaculate tile floor, Richard's eyes clamped shut and he felt as if a writhing demon was being

pulled – exorcised, along with pea soup he had apparently eaten at some point in the meal – from his lower-intestine.

And, in the darkness behind his eyes, he recaptured for one moment his vision: a gleaming hyper-luxury building, rising majestically (and, *yes*, phallus-like) above the streets of Manhattan. Two miles tall – four times higher than what those small-timers in Dubai had, double even the height of Frank Lloyd Wright’s impossible Sky City – and ringed by moats and checkpoints. He saw twenty-four hour personal guard companies staffed by male models; he saw a line of Bentley armored personnel carriers with Sennheiser audio systems and leather seats by Prada. He saw Armani portable anti-nerve-gas systems, pearl-handled crowd-control shotguns by Beretta in a Madison Avenue shop window. He saw impossibly stylish Oscar de la Renta body armor for women (modeled by someone resembling Penelope Cruz, dark-eyed and feline, rolling around in her private fortress and purring, *‘l’armadura del amor’*).

He saw home security that would make the gates of Heaven seem positively porous.

He saw government housing projects belching flame from every window. He saw riots in Detroit – and Liverpool, Frankfurt, and St. Petersburg – and flotillas of ultra-luxury yachts on Lake Michigan, the Black Sea, and off the Amalfi coast. He saw himself, standing on the lawn of the Croxley estate, framed by those flawless hedgerows, a flaming bottle of petrol in his hand (Defending? Assaulting? Self-immolating?). And he saw his son, a hood pulled over his eyes, his mouth covered in a bandana, an ancient Kalashnikov held over his head.

He saw the final frontier of conflict economics, the last turn in the gyre of history, the final clash of thesis and antithesis, dream and nightmare. And beyond that.

The end.

A world without Richard.

A world without anybody.

And then, as the demon's barbed hold on his esophagus was broken, he belched hot, acrid air and fell back against the stall door. His body empty and rung out, he pulled himself up to his feet, adjusted his tie, and stepped out of the stall. Sitting by the sinks, an older black gentleman nodded, rose from his stool, and handed Richard a warm, wet towel.

-Would *monsieur* care for a disposable tooth brush?

Richard looked at him and then shook his head.

-Maybe just... some mouthwash.

-Very good, sir. Peppermint or Eucalyptus?

-Oh, peppermint, thank you.

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Back at the table, MacLennan was signing *l'addition* to his house account. Richard sat down slowly and, staring at his lap, unfolded his napkin (which had been refolded into an origami swan, or a pirate hat, or something, Richard couldn't quite tell). Finally, he looked up at his boss, trying to figure out why the man was smiling.

-Well, Richard, I have to say. I'm not sure any of what you said tonight is actionable. Of course, I do encourage my senior executives to think outside the box, but that was the furthest from the box I've experienced in some time. By several orders of magnitude.

Richard blinked slowly.

-Senior executive?

-Well, if you're uncomfortable with the term – look, I know it can be difficult, yesterday you were Hammerstien's coworker, now you are to be, in essence, his direct superior – but we can work the title into things incrementally. We'll ease into it.

-Thank you? I mean, yes, thank you, Mr. MacLennan.

-Douglas, please.

-Doug?

-Douglas, Croxley, don't get carried away.

-Of course. Sir.

-Douglas, Richard, come on now.

-Douglas.

-I have to say, I was dreading this. Absolutely dreading it. But you, Richard, you are quite entertaining. Bold. A little unhinged, perhaps, but then this modern economy is certainly run by unhinged forces. Mad captains of industry, if there are even captains anymore. But, come, I'll get you a cab. Though, really, you should get yourself a proper car service. Get some sleep, and – in the morning – we'll run the numbers on this little idea of yours.

MacLannen (Douglas?) stood, patting Richard on the shoulder as he passed him on the way towards the exit. Richard stumbled shakily after him, unclear of anything. 'What the fucking fuck?' he thought, borrowing mentally the words of his son (who had, at ten, begun deploying 'fuck' – in the American fashion – as every conceivable part of speech). And there, standing in the fading light, heat still radiating up from the concrete, Richard remembered his son – that is, his son before the move to New York, before the sartorial and emotional monochrome, before

the obscenity and the indifference (however pseudo-scientific, a little Oedipal hostility would have at that point touched Richard's heart). He felt guilty, for not thinking at the same time of Max and Jo (he thought, to chastise himself, of cruel, drunken Faulkner lashing out at his girls, 'no one remembers Shakespeare's daughters'). But by the time they'd left London his daughters had already been lost (to their mother's post-divorce faction, to boys, to fashion, and to America, or rather to fucking Manhattan, which was American but more so). But with his son – oh, how he'd hoped – there was still a chance. A chance that they'd not lose each other. He remembered his son, curled, sleep-eyed, tucked under his flannel sheets in bed; he remembered reading Dickens to him, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*. His father had read the same books to him, a chapter every night, sipping tea between paragraphs. The comfort of ritual, of tradition: his grandfather had read to his father (ever the anti-Semite, his grandfather had considered Dickens superior to Shakespeare and his 'curious sympathies'). But all this – the details, the touch and smell, the tactile reality of an England now vanished and forgotten – this had bled out from his wounded mind; all he could think about, as he crumpled into the back of a yellow cab, was this: a father reading to a son. A single image, a curio clutched in the hand of a man thrown overboard and shipwrecked on this strange island. The cab flew down the FDR, the gleaming towers of midtown on his right, the flickering lights of Queens and Brooklyn, across the East River to his left. His stomach surged and ached, his head throbbed. His son. A flutter of panic struck him. What was his son's name? He found he couldn't remember.

