

INVISIBLE

PAUL AUSTER



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INVISIBLE

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PAUL AUSTER


A Frances Coady Book
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
NEW YORK

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Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010
www.henryholt.com

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Distributed in Canada by H. B. Fenn and Company Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Auster, Paul, 1947–

Invisible / Paul Auster.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8050-9080-2

1. College students—Fiction. 2. Poets—Fiction. 3. Nineteen sixties—Fiction.

4. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3551.U77158 2009

813'.54—dc22

200900223

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions
and premiums. For details contact: Director, Special Markets.

First Edition 2009

Designed by Victoria Hartman

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

INVISIBLE

I



I shook his hand for the first time in the spring of 1967. I was a second-year student at Columbia then, a know-nothing boy with an appetite for books and a belief (or delusion) that one day I would become good enough to call myself a poet, and because I read poetry, I had already met his namesake in Dante's hell, a dead man shuffling through the final verses of the twenty-eighth canto of the *Inferno*. Bertran de Born, the twelfth-century Provençal poet, carrying his severed head by the hair as it sways back and forth like a lantern—surely one of the most grotesque images in that book-length catalogue of hallucinations and torments. Dante was a staunch defender of de Born's writing, but he condemned him to eternal damnation for having counseled Prince Henry to rebel against his father, King Henry II, and because de Born caused division between father and son and turned them into enemies, Dante's ingenious punishment was to divide de Born from himself. Hence the decapitated body wailing in the underworld, asking the Florentine traveler if any pain could be more terrible than his.

When he introduced himself as Rudolf Born, my thoughts immediately turned to the poet. Any relation to Bertran? I asked.

Ah, he replied, that wretched creature who lost his head. Perhaps, but it doesn't seem likely, I'm afraid. No *de*. You need to be nobility for that, and the sad truth is I'm anything but noble.

I have no memory of why I was there. Someone must have asked me to go along, but whose person was has long since evaporated from my mind. I can't even recall where the party was held—uptown or downtown, in an apartment or a loft—nor my reason for accepting the invitation in the first place, since I tended to shun large gatherings at the time, put off by the din of chattering crowds and embarrassed by the shyness that would overcome me in the presence of people I didn't know. But that night, inexplicably, I said yes, and off I went with my forgotten friend to wherever it was he took me.

What I remember is this: at one point in the evening, I wound up standing alone in a corner of the room. I was smoking a cigarette and looking out at the people, dozens upon dozens of young bodies crammed into the confines of that space, listening to the mingled roar of words and laughter, wondering what on earth I was doing there, and thinking that perhaps it was time to leave. An ashtray was sitting on a radiator to my left, and as I turned to snuff out my cigarette, I saw that the butt-filled receptacle was rising toward me, cradled in the palm of a man's hand. Without my noticing them, two people had just sat down on the radiator, a man and a woman, both of them older than I was, no doubt older than anyone else in the room—he around thirty-five, she in her late twenties or early thirties.

They made an incongruous pair, I felt, Born in a rumpled, somewhat soiled white linen suit with an equally rumpled white shirt under the jacket and the woman (whose name turned out to be Margot) dressed all in black. When I thanked him for the ashtray, he gave me a brief, courteous nod and said *My pleasure* with the slightest hint of a foreign accent. French or German, I couldn't tell which, since

his English was almost flawless. What else did I see in those first moments? Pale skin, unkempt reddish hair (cut shorter than the hair of most men at the time), a broad, handsome face with nothing particularly distinctive about it (a generic face, somehow, a face that would become invisible in a crowd), and steady brown eyes, the probing eyes of a man who seemed to be afraid of nothing. Neither thin nor heavy, neither tall nor short, but for all that an impression of physical strength, perhaps because of the thickness of his hands. As for Margot, she sat without stirring a muscle, staring into space as if her central mission in life was to look bored. But attractive, deeply attractive to my twenty-year-old self, with her black hair, black turtleneck sweater, black mini skirt, black leather boots, and heavy black makeup around her large green eyes. Not a beauty, perhaps, but a simulacrum of beauty as if the style and sophistication of her appearance embodied some feminine ideal of the age.

Born said that he and Margot had been on the verge of leaving, but then they spotted me standing alone in the corner, and because I looked so unhappy, they decided to come over and cheer me up—just to make sure I didn't slit my throat before the night was out. I had no idea how to interpret his remark. Was this man insulting me, I wondered, or was he actually trying to show some kindness to a lost young stranger? The words themselves had a certain playful, disarming quality, but the look in Born's eyes when he delivered them was cold and detached, and I couldn't help feeling that he was testing me, taunting me, for reasons I utterly failed to understand.

I shrugged, gave him a little smile, and said: Believe it or not, I'm having the time of my life.

That was when he stood up, shook my hand, and told me his name. After my question about Bertrand de Born, he introduced me to Margot, who smiled at me in silence and then returned to her job staring blankly into space.

Judging by your age, Born said, and judging by your knowledge of obscure poets, I would guess you're a student. A student of literature, no doubt. NYU or Columbia?

Columbia.

Columbia, he sighed. Such a dreary place.

Do you know it?

I've been teaching at the School of International Affairs since September. A visiting professor with a one-year appointment. Thankfully, it's April now, and I'll be going back to Paris in two months.

So you're French.

By circumstance, inclination, and passport. But Swiss by birth.

French Swiss or German Swiss? I'm hearing a little of both in your voice.

Born made a little clucking noise with his tongue and then looked me closely in the eye. You have a sensitive ear, he said. As a matter of fact, I *am* both—the hybrid product of a German-speaking mother and a French-speaking father. I grew up switching back and forth between the two languages.

Unsure of what to say next, I paused for a moment and then asked an innocuous question: And where are you teaching at our dismal university?

Disaster.

That's a rather broad subject, wouldn't you say?

More specifically, the disasters of French colonialism. I teach one course on the loss of Algeria and another on the loss of Indochina.

That lovely war we've inherited from you.

Never underestimate the importance of war. War is the purest, most vivid expression of the human soul.

You're beginning to sound like our headless poet.

Oh?

I take it you haven't read him.

Not a word. I only know about him from that passage in Dante.

De Born was a good poet, maybe even an excellent poet—but deeply disturbing. He wrote some charming love poems and a moving lament after the death of Prince Henry, but his real subject, the one thing he seemed to care about with any genuine passion, was war. He absolutely reveled in it.

I see, Born said, giving me an ironic smile. A man after my own heart.

I'm talking about the pleasure of seeing men break each other's skulls open, of watching castles crumble and burn, of seeing the dead with lances protruding from their sides. It's gory stuff, believe me, and de Born doesn't flinch. The mere thought of a battlefield fills him with happiness.

I take it you have no interest in becoming a soldier.

None. I'd rather go to jail than fight in Vietnam.

And assuming you avoid both prison and the army, what plans?

No plans. Just to push on with what I'm doing and hope it works out.

Which is?

Penmanship. The fine art of scribbling.

I thought as much. When Margot saw you across the room, she said to me: Look at that boy with the sad eyes and the brooding face—I'll bet you he's a poet. Is that what you are, a poet?

I write poems, yes. And also some book reviews for the *Spectator*.

The undergraduate rag.

Everyone has to start somewhere.

Interesting . . .

Not terribly. Half the people I know want to be writers.

Why do you say *want*? If you're already doing it, then it's not about the future. It already exists in the present.

Because it's still too early to know if I'm good enough.

Do you get paid for your articles?

Of course not. It's a college paper.

Once they start paying you for your work, then you'll know you're good enough.

Before I could answer, Born suddenly turned to Margot and announced: You were right, my angel. Your young man is a poet.

Margot lifted her eyes toward me, and with a neutral, appraising look, she spoke for the first time pronouncing her words with a foreign accent that proved to be much thicker than her companion's—an unmistakable French accent. I'm always right, she said. You should know that by now, Rudolf.

A poet, Born continued, still addressing Margot, a sometime reviewer of books, and a student at the dreary fortress on the heights, which means he's probably our neighbor. But he has no name. At least not one that I'm aware of.

It's Walker, I said, realizing that I had neglected to introduce myself when we shook hands. Adam Walker.

Adam Walker, Born repeated, turning from Margot and looking at me as he flashed another one of his enigmatic smiles. A good, solid American name. So strong, so bland, so dependable. Adam Walker. The lonely bounty hunter in a CinemaScope Western, prowling the desert with a shotgun and a six-shooter on his chestnut-brown gelding. Or else the kindhearted, straight-arrow surgeon in a daytime soap opera, tragically in love with two women at the same time.

It sounds solid, I replied, but nothing in America is solid. The name was given to my grandfather when he landed at Ellis Island in nineteen hundred. Apparently, the immigration authorities found

Walshinsky too difficult to handle, so they dubbed him Walker.

What a country, Born said. Illiterate officials robbing a man of his identity with a simple stroke of the pen.

Not his identity, I said. Just his name. He worked as a kosher butcher on the Lower East Side for thirty years.

There was more, much more after that, a good hour's worth of talk that bounced around aimlessly from one subject to the next. Vietnam and the growing opposition to the war. The differences between New York and Paris. The Kennedy assassination. The American embargo on trade with Cuba. Impersonal topics, yes, but Born had strong opinions about everything, often wild, unorthodox opinions, and because he couched his words in a half-mocking, slyly condescending tone, I couldn't tell if he was serious or not. At certain moments, he sounded like a hawkish right-winger; at other moments, he advanced ideas that made him sound like a bomb-throwing anarchist. Was he trying to provoke me, I asked myself, or was this normal procedure for him, the way he went about entertaining himself on a Saturday night? Meanwhile, the inscrutable Margot had risen from her perch on the radiator to bum a cigarette from me, and after that she remained standing, contributing little to the conversation, next to nothing in fact, but studying me carefully every time I spoke, her eyes fixed on me with the unblinking curiosity of a child. I confess that I enjoyed being looked at by her, even if it made me squirm a little. There was something vaguely erotic about it, I found, but I wasn't experienced enough back then to know if she was trying to send me a signal or simply looking for the sake of looking. The truth was that I had never run across people like this before, and because the two of them were so alien to me, so unfamiliar in their affect, the longer I talked to them, the more unreal they seemed to become—as if they were imaginary characters in a story that was taking place in my head.

I can't recall whether we were drinking, but if the party was anything like the others I had gone to since landing in New York, there must have been jugs of cheap red wine and an abundant stock of paper cups, which means that we were probably growing drunker and drunker as we continued to talk. I wish I could dredge up more of what we said, but 1967 was a long time ago, and no matter how hard I struggle to find the words and gestures and fugitive overtones of that initial encounter with Born, I mostly draw blanks. Nevertheless, a few vivid moments stand out in the blur. Born reaching into the inside pocket of his linen jacket, for example, and withdrawing the butt of a half-smoked cigar, which he proceeded to light with a match while informing me that it was a Montecristo, the best of all Cuban cigars—banned in America then, as they still are now—which he had managed to obtain through a *personal connection* with someone who worked at the French embassy in Washington. He then went on to say a few kind words about Castro—this from the same man who just minutes earlier had defended Johnson, McNamara, and Westmoreland for their heroic work in battling the menace of communism in Vietnam. I remember feeling amused at the sight of the disheveled political scientist pulling out that half-smoked cigar and said he reminded me of the owner of a South American coffee plantation who had gone mad after spending too many years in the jungle. Born laughed at the remark, quickly adding that I wasn't far from the truth, since he had spent the bulk of his childhood in Guatemala. When I asked him to tell me more, however, he waved me off with the words *another time*.

I'll give you the whole story, he said, but in quieter surroundings. The whole story of my incredible life so far. You'll see, Mr. Walker. One day, you'll wind up writing my biography. I guarantee it.

Born's cigar, then, and my role as his future Boswell, but also an image of Margot touching my face with her right hand and whispering: Be good to yourself. That must have come toward the end, when

we were about to leave or had already gone downstairs, but I have no memory of leaving and no memory of saying good-bye to them. All those things have been blotted out, erased by the work of forty years. They were two strangers I met at a noisy party one spring night in the New York of my youth, a New York that no longer exists, and that was that. I could be wrong, but I'm fairly certain that we didn't even bother to exchange phone numbers.

I assumed I would never see them again. Born had been teaching at Columbia for seven months, and since I hadn't crossed paths with him in all that time, it seemed unlikely that I would run into him now. But odds don't count when it comes to actual events, and just because a thing is unlikely to happen, that doesn't mean it won't. Two days after the party, I walked into the West End Bar following my final class of the afternoon, wondering if I might not find one of my friends there. The West End was a dingy, cavernous hole with more than a dozen booths and tables, a vast oval bar in the center of the front room, and an area near the entrance where you could buy bad cafeteria-style lunches and dinners—my hangout of choice, frequented by students, drunks, and neighborhood regulars. It happened to be a warm, sun-filled afternoon, and consequently few people were present at that hour. As I made my tour around the bar in search of a familiar face, I saw Born sitting alone in a booth at the back. He was reading a German newsmagazine (*Der Spiegel*, I think), smoking another one of his Cuban cigars, and ignoring the half-empty glass of beer that stood on the table to his left. Once again, he was wearing his white suit—or perhaps a different one, since the jacket looked clean and less rumpled than the one he'd been wearing Saturday night—but the white shirt was gone, replaced by something red—a deep, solid red, midway between brick and crimson.

Curiously, my first impulse was to turn around and walk out without saying hello to him. There was much to be explored in this hesitation, I believe, for it seems to suggest that I already understood that I would do well to keep my distance from Born, that allowing myself to get involved with him could possibly lead to trouble. How did I know this? I had spent little more than an hour in his company, but even in that short time I had sensed there was something off about him, something vaguely repulsive. That wasn't to deny his other qualities—his charm, his intelligence, his humor—but underneath it all he had emanated a darkness and a cynicism that had thrown me off balance, had left me feeling that he wasn't a man who could be trusted. Would I have formed a different impression of him if I hadn't despised his politics? Impossible to say. My father and I disagreed on nearly every political issue at the moment, but that didn't prevent me from thinking he was fundamentally a good person—or at least not a bad person. But Born wasn't good. He was witty and eccentric and unpredictable, but he contended that war is the purest expression of the human soul automatically excludes you from the realm of goodness. And if he had spoken those words in jest, as a way of challenging yet another anti-militaristic student to fight back and denounce his position, then he was simply perverse.

Mr. Walker, he said, looking up from his magazine and gesturing for me to join him at his table. Just the man I've been looking for.

I could have invented an excuse and told him I was late for another appointment, but I didn't. That was the other half of the complex equation that represented my dealings with Born. Wary as I might have been, I was also fascinated by this peculiar, unreadable person, and the fact that he seemed genuinely glad to have stumbled into me stoked the fires of my vanity—that invisible cauldron of self-regard and ambition that simmers and burns in each one of us. Whatever reservations I had about him, whatever doubts I harbored about his dubious character, I couldn't stop myself from wanting him to like me, to think that I was something more than a plodding, run-of-the-mill American.

undergraduate, to see the promise I hoped I had in me but which I doubted nine out of every ten minutes of my waking life.

Once I had slid into the booth, Born looked at me across the table, disgorged a large puff of smoke from his cigar, and smiled. You made a favorable impression on Margot the other night, he said.

I was impressed by her too, I answered.

You might have noticed that she doesn't say much.

Her English isn't terribly good. It's hard to express yourself in a language that gives you trouble.

Her French is perfectly fluent, but she doesn't say much in French either.

Well, words aren't everything.

A strange comment from a man who fancies himself a writer.

I'm talking about Margot—

Yes, Margot. Exactly. Which brings me to my point. A woman prone to long silences, but she talked a blue streak on our way home from the party Saturday night.

Interesting, I said, not certain where the conversation was going. And what loosened her tongue?

You, my boy. She's taken a real liking to you, but you should also know that she's extremely worried.

Worried? Why on earth should she be worried? She doesn't even know me.

Perhaps not, but she's gotten it into her head that your future is at risk.

Everyone's future is at risk. Especially American males in their late teens and early twenties, as you well know. But as long as I don't flunk out of school, the draft can't touch me until after I graduate. I wouldn't want to bet on it, but it's possible the war will be over by then.

Don't bet on it, Mr. Walker. This little skirmish is going to drag on for years.

I lit up a Chesterfield and nodded. For once I agree with you, I said.

Anyway, Margot wasn't talking about Vietnam. Yes, you might land in jail—or come home in a box two or three years from now—but she wasn't thinking about the war. She believes you're too good for this world, and because of that, the world will eventually crush you.

I don't follow her reasoning.

She thinks you need help. Margot might not possess the quickest brain in the Western world, but when she meets a boy who says he's a poet, and the first word that comes to her is *starvation*.

That's absurd. She has no idea what she's talking about.

Forgive me for contradicting you, but when I asked you at the party what your plans were, you said you didn't have any. Other than your nebulous ambition to write poetry, of course. How much do poets earn, Mr. Walker?

Most of the time nothing. If you get lucky, every now and then someone might throw you a few pennies.

Sounds like starvation to me.

I never said I planned to make my living as a writer. I'll have to find a job.

Such as?

It's difficult to say. I could work for a publishing house or a magazine. I could translate books. I could write articles and reviews. One of those things, or else several of them in combination. It's too early to know, and until I'm out in the world, there's no point in losing any sleep over it, is there?

Like it or not, you're in the world now, and the sooner you learn how to fend for yourself, the better off you'll be.

Why this sudden concern? We've only just met, and why should you care about what happens to me?

Because Margot asked me to help you, and since she rarely asks me for anything, I feel honor-bound to obey her wishes.

Tell her thank you, but there's no need for you to put yourself out. I can get by on my own.

Stubborn, aren't you? Born said, resting his nearly spent cigar on the rim of the ashtray and then leaning forward until his face was just a few inches from mine. If I offered you a job, are you telling me you'd turn it down?

It depends on what the job is.

That remains to be seen. I have several ideas, but I haven't made a decision yet. Maybe you can help me.

I'm not sure I understand.

My father died ten months ago, and it appears I've inherited a considerable amount of money. Not enough to buy a chateau or an airline company, but enough to make a small difference in the world. I could engage you to write my biography, of course, but I think it's a little too soon for that. I'm still only thirty-six, and I find it unseemly to talk about a man's life before he gets to fifty. What, then? I've considered starting a publishing house, but I'm not sure I have the stomach for all the long-range planning that would entail. A magazine, on the other hand, strikes me as much more fun. A monthly or perhaps a quarterly, but something fresh and daring, a publication that would stir people up and cause controversy with every issue. What do you think of that, Mr. Walker? Would working on a magazine be of any interest to you?

Of course it would. The only question is: why me? You're going back to France in a couple months, so I assume you're talking about a French magazine. My French isn't bad, but it isn't good enough for what you'd need. And besides, I go to college here in New York. I can't just pick up and move.

Who said anything about moving? Who said anything about a French magazine? If I had a good American staff to run things here, I could pop over every once in a while to check up on them, but essentially I'd stay out of it. I have no interest in directing a magazine myself. I have my own work, my own career, and I wouldn't have the time for it. My sole responsibility would be to put up the money—and then hope to turn a profit.

You're a political scientist, and I'm a literature student. If you're thinking of starting a political magazine, then count me out. We're on opposite sides of the fence, and if I tried to work for you, it would turn into a fiasco. But if you're talking about a literary magazine, then yes, I'd be very interested.

Just because I teach international relations and write about government and public policy doesn't mean I'm a philistine. I care about art as much as you do, Mr. Walker, and I wouldn't ask you to work on a magazine if it wasn't a literary magazine.

How do you know I can handle it?

I don't. But I have a hunch.

It doesn't make any sense. Here you are offering me a job and you haven't read a word I've written.

Not so. Just this morning I read four of your poems in the most recent number of the *Columbia Review* and six of your articles in the student paper. The piece on Melville was particularly good, your thought, and I was moved by your little poem about the graveyard. *How many more skies above me / Until this one vanishes as well?* Impressive.

I'm glad you think so. Even more impressive is that you acted so quickly.

That's the way I am. Life is too short for dawdling.

My third-grade teacher used to tell us the same thing—with exactly those words.

A wonderful place, this America of yours. You've had an excellent education, Mr. Walker.

~~Born laughed at the inanity of his remark, took a sip of beer, and then leaned back to ponder the idea he had set in motion.~~

What I want you to do, he finally said, is draw up a plan, a prospectus. Tell me about the work that would appear in the magazine, the length of each issue, the cover art, the design, the frequency of publication, what name you'd want to give it, and so on. Leave it at my office when you're finished. I'll look it over, and if I like your ideas, we'll be in business.

Young as I might have been, I had enough understanding of the world to realize that Born could have been playing me for a dupe. How often did you wander into a bar, bump into a man you had met only once, and walk out with the chance to start a magazine—especially when the you in question was a twenty-year-old nothing who had yet to prove himself on any front? It was too outlandish to be believed. In all likelihood, Born had raised my hopes only in order to crush them, and I was fully expecting him to toss my prospectus into the garbage and tell me he wasn't interested. Still, on the off chance that he meant what he'd said, that he was honestly intending to keep his word, I felt I should give it a try. What did I have to lose? A day of thinking and writing at the most, and if Born wound up rejecting my proposal, then so be it.

Bracing myself against disappointment, I set to work that very night. Beyond listing half a dozen potential names for the magazine, however, I didn't make much headway. Not because I was confused and not because I wasn't full of ideas, but for the simple reason that I had neglected to ask Born how much money he was willing to put into the project. Everything hinged on the size of his investment, and until I knew what his intentions were, how could I discuss any of the myriad points he had raised that afternoon: the quality of the paper, the length and frequency of the issues, the binding, the possible inclusion of art, and how much (if anything) he was prepared to pay the contributors. Literary magazines came in numerous shapes and guises, after all, from the mimeographed, staple-bound underground publications edited by young poets in the East Village to the stolid academic quarterlies to more commercial enterprises like the *Evergreen Review* to the sumptuous *objets* backed by well-heeled angels who lost thousands with every issue. I would have to talk to Born again, I realized, and so instead of drawing up a prospectus, I wrote him a letter explaining my problem. It was such a pathetic document—*We have to talk about money*—that I decided to include something else in the envelope, just to convince him that I wasn't the out-and-out dullard I appeared to be. After our brief exchange about Bertran de Born on Saturday night, I thought it might amuse him to read one of the more savage works by the twelfth-century poet. I happened to own a paperback anthology of the troubadours—in English only—and my initial idea was simply to type up one of the poems from the book. When I began reading through the translation, however, it struck me as clumsy and inept, rendering that failed to do justice to the strange and ugly power of the poem, and even though I didn't know a word of Provençal, I figured I could turn out something better working from a French translation. The next morning, I found what I was looking for in Butler Library: an edition of the complete de Born, with the original Provençal on the left and literal prose versions in French on the right. It took me several hours to complete the job (if I'm not mistaken, I missed a class because of it) and this is what I came up with:

I love the jubilation of springtime
When leaves and flowers burgeon forth,

And I exult in the mirth of bird songs
Resounding through the woods;
And I relish seeing the meadows
Adorned with tents and pavilions;
And great is my happiness
When the fields are packed
With armored knights and horses.

And I thrill at the sight of scouts
Forcing men and women to flee with their belongings;
And gladness fills me when they are chased
By a dense throng of armed men;
And my heart soars
When I behold mighty castles under siege
As their ramparts crumble and collapse
With troops massed at the edge of the moat
And strong, solid barriers
Hemming in the target on all sides.

And I am likewise overjoyed
When a baron leads the assault,
Mounted on his horse, armed and unafraid,
Thus giving strength to his men
Through his courage and valor.
And once the battle has begun
Each of them should be prepared
To follow him readily,
For no man can be a man
Until he has delivered and received
Blow upon blow.

In the thick of combat we will see
Maces, swords, shields, and many-colored helmets
Split and shattered,
And hordes of vassals striking in all directions
As the horses of the dead and wounded
Wander aimlessly around the field.
And once the fighting starts
Let every well-born man think only of breaking
Heads and arms, for better to be dead
Than alive and defeated.

I tell you that eating, drinking, and sleeping
Give me less pleasure than hearing the shout
Of "Charge!" from both sides, and hearing

Cries of “Help! Help!,” and seeing
The great and the ungreat fall together
On the grass and in the ditches, and seeing
Corpses with the tips of broken, streamered lances
Jutting from their sides.

Barons, better to pawn
Your castles, towns, and cities
Than to give up making war.

Late that afternoon, I slipped the envelope with the letter and the poem under the door of Born’s office at the School of International Affairs. I was expecting an immediate response, but several days went by before he contacted me, and his failure to call left me wondering if the magazine project was indeed just a spur-of-the-moment whim that had already played itself out—or, worse, if he had been offended by the poem, thinking that I was equating him with Bertran de Born and thereby indirectly accusing him of being a warmonger. As it turned out, I needn’t have worried. When the telephone rang on Friday, he apologized for his silence, explaining that he had gone to Cambridge to deliver a lecture on Wednesday and hadn’t set foot in his office until twenty minutes ago.

You’re perfectly right, he continued, and I’m perfectly stupid for ignoring the question of money when we spoke the other day. How can you give me a prospectus if you don’t know what the budget is? You must think I’m a moron.

Hardly, I said. I’m the one who feels stupid—for not asking you. But I couldn’t tell how serious you were, and I didn’t want to press.

I’m serious, Mr. Walker. I admit that I have a penchant for telling jokes, but only about small, inconsequential things. I would never lead you along on a matter like this.

I’m happy to know that.

So, in answer to your question about money . . . I’m hoping we’ll do well, of course, but as with every venture of this sort, there’s a large element of risk, and so realistically I have to be prepared to lose every penny of my investment. What it comes down to is the following: How much can I afford to lose? How much of my inheritance can I squander away without causing problems for myself in the future? I’ve given it a good deal of thought since we talked on Monday, and the answer is twenty-five thousand dollars. That’s my limit. The magazine will come out four times a year, and I’ll put up five thousand per issue, plus another five thousand for your annual salary. If we break even at the end of the first year, I’ll fund another year. If we come out in the black, I’ll put the profits into the magazine, and that would keep us going for all or part of a third year. If we lose money, however, then the second year becomes problematical. Say we’re ten thousand dollars in the red. I’ll put up fifteen thousand, and that’s it. Do you understand the principle? I have twenty-five thousand dollars to burn, but I won’t spend a dollar more than that. What do you think? Is it a fair proposition or not?

Extremely fair, and extremely generous. At five thousand dollars an issue, we could put out a first-rate magazine, something to be proud of.

I could dump all the money in your lap tomorrow, of course, but that wouldn’t really help you, would it? Margot is worried about your future, and if you can make this magazine work, then your future is settled. You’ll have a decent job with a decent salary, and during your off-hours you can write all the poems you want, vast epic poems about the mysteries of the human heart, short lyrical

poems about daisies and buttercups, fiery tracts against cruelty and injustice. Unless you land in jail get your head blown off, of course, but we won't dwell on those grim possibilities now.

I don't know how to thank you . . .

Don't thank me. Thank Margot, your guardian angel.

I hope I see her again soon.

I'm certain you will. As long as your prospectus satisfies me, you'll be seeing as much of her as you like.

I'll do my best. But if you're looking for a magazine that will cause controversy and stir people up I doubt a literary journal is the answer. I hope you understand that.

I do, Mr. Walker. We're talking about quality . . . about fine, rarefied things. Art for the happy few.

Or, as Stendhal must have pronounced it: *ze appy foo*.

Stendhal and Maurice Chevalier. Which reminds me . . . Speaking of chevaliers, thank you for the poem.

The poem. I forgot all about it—

The poem you translated for me.

What did you think of it?

I found it revolting and brilliant. My faux ancestor was a true samurai madman, wasn't he? But at least he had the courage of his convictions. At least he knew what he stood for. How little the world has changed since eleven eighty-six, no matter how much we prefer to think otherwise. If the magazine gets off the ground, I think we should publish de Born's poem in the first issue.

I was both heartened and bewildered. In spite of my doleful predictions, Born had talked about the project as if it was already on the brink of happening, and at this point the prospectus seemed to be little more than an empty formality. No matter what plan I drew up, I felt he was prepared to give his stamp of approval. And yet, pleased as I was by the thought of taking charge of a well-funded magazine, which on top of everything else would pay me a rather excessive salary, for the life of me I still couldn't fathom what Born was up to. Was Margot really the cause of this unexpected burst of altruism, this blind faith in a boy with no experience in editing or publishing or business who just one week earlier had been absolutely unknown to him? And even if that was the case, why would the question of my future be of any concern to her? We had barely talked to each other at the party, and although she had looked me over carefully and given me a pat on the cheek, she had come across as a cipher, an utter blank. I couldn't imagine what she had said to Born that would have made him willing to risk twenty-five thousand dollars on my account. As far as I could tell, the prospect of publishing a magazine left him cold, and because he was indifferent, he was content to turn the whole matter over to me. When I thought back to our conversation at the West End on Monday, I realized that I had probably given him the idea in the first place. I had mentioned that I might look for work with a publisher or a magazine after I graduated from college, and a minute later he was telling me about his inheritance and how he was considering starting up a publishing house or a magazine with his newfound money. What if I had said I wanted to manufacture toasters? Would he have answered that he was thinking about investing in a toaster factory?

It took me longer to finish the prospectus than I'd imagined it would—four or five days, I think, but that was only because I did such a thorough job. I wanted to impress Born with my diligence, and therefore I not only worked out a plan for the contents of each issue (poetry, fiction, essays, interviews, translations, as well as a section at the back for reviews of books, films, music, and art)

but provided an exhaustive financial report as well: printing costs, paper costs, binding costs, matter of distribution, print runs, contributors' fees, newsstand price, subscription rates, and the pros and cons of whether to include ads. All that demanded time and research, telephone calls to printers and binders, conversations with the editors of other magazines, and a new way of thinking on my part since I had never bothered myself with questions of commerce before. As for the name of the magazine, I wrote down several possibilities, wanting to leave the choice to Born, but my own preference was the *Stylus*—in honor of Poe, who had tried to launch a magazine with that name not long before his death.

This time, Born responded within twenty-four hours. I took that as an encouraging sign when I picked up the phone and heard his voice, but true to form he didn't come right out and say what I thought of my plan. That would have been too easy, I suppose, too pedestrian, too straightforward for a man like him, and so he toyed with me for a couple of minutes in order to prolong the suspense, asking me a number of irrelevant and disjointed questions that convinced me he was stalling for time because he didn't want to hurt my feelings when he rejected my proposal.

I trust you're in good health, Mr. Walker, he said.

I think so, I replied. Unless I've contracted a disease I'm not aware of.

But no symptoms yet.

No, I'm feeling fine.

What about your stomach? No discomfort there?

Not at the moment.

Your appetite is normal, then.

Yes, perfectly normal.

I seem to recall that your grandfather was a kosher butcher. Do you still follow those ancient laws or have you given them up?

I never followed them in the first place.

No dietary restrictions, then.

No. I eat whatever I want to.

Fish or fowl? Beef or pork? Lamb or veal?

What about them?

Which one do you prefer?

I like them all.

In other words, you aren't difficult to please.

Not when it comes to food. With other things yes, but not with food.

Then you're open to anything Margot and I choose to prepare.

I'm not sure I understand.

Tomorrow night at seven o'clock. Are you busy?

No.

Good. Then you'll come to our apartment for dinner. A celebration is in order, don't you think?

I'm not sure. What are we celebrating?

The *Stylus*, my friend. The beginning of what I hope will turn out to be a long and fruitful partnership.

You want to go ahead with it?

Do I have to repeat myself?

You're saying you liked the prospectus?

Don't be so dense, boy. Why would I want to celebrate if I hadn't liked it?

I remember dithering over what present to give them—flowers or a bottle of wine—and opting in the end for flowers. I couldn't afford a good enough bottle to make a serious impression, and as I thought the matter through, I realized how presumptuous it would have been to offer wine to a couple of French people anyway. If I made the wrong choice—which was more than likely to happen—then I would only be exposing my ignorance, and I didn't want to start off the evening by embarrassing myself. Flowers on the other hand would be a more direct way of expressing my gratitude to Margot, since flowers were always given to the woman of the house, and if Margot was a woman who liked flowers (which was by no means certain), then she would understand that I was thanking her for having pushed Born to act on my behalf. My telephone conversation with him the previous afternoon had left me in a state of semishock, and even as I walked to their place on the night of the dinner, I was still feeling overwhelmed by the altogether improbable good luck that had fallen down on me. I remember putting on a jacket and tie for the occasion. It was the first time I had dressed up in months, and there I was, Mr. Important himself, walking across the Columbia campus with an enormous bouquet of flowers in my right hand, on my way to eat and talk business with *my publisher*.

He had sublet an apartment from a professor on a year long sabbatical, a large but decidedly stuffy, overfurnished place in a building on Morningside Drive, just off 116th Street. I believe it was on the third floor, and from the French windows that lined the eastern wall of the living room there was a view of the full, downward expanse of Morningside Park and the lights of Spanish Harlem beyond. Margot answered the door when I knocked, and although I can still see her face and the smile that darted across her lips when I presented her with the flowers, I have no memory of what she was wearing. It could have been black again, but I tend to think not, since I have a vague recollection of surprise, which would suggest there was something different about her from the first time we had met. As we were standing on the threshold together, before she even invited me into the apartment, Margot announced in a low voice that Rudolf was in a foul temper. There was a crisis of some sort back home and he was going to have to leave for Paris tomorrow and wouldn't return until next week at the earliest. He was in the bedroom now, she added, on the telephone with Air France arranging his flight, so he probably wouldn't be out for another few minutes.

As I entered the apartment, I was immediately hit by the smell of food cooking in the kitchen—sublimely delicious smell, I found, as tempting and aromatic as any vapor I had ever breathed. The kitchen happened to be where we headed first—to hunt down a vase for the flowers—and when I glanced at the stove, I saw the large covered pot that was the source of that extraordinary fragrance.

I have no idea what's in there, I said, gesturing to the pot, but if my nose knows anything, three people are going to be very happy tonight.

Rudolf tells me you like lamb, Margot said, so I decided to make a *navarin*—a lamb stew with potatoes and *navets*.

Turnips.

I can never remember that word. It's an ugly word, I think, and it hurts my mouth to say it.

All right, then. We'll banish it from the English language.

Margot seemed to enjoy my little remark—enough to give me another brief smile, at any rate—and then she began to busy herself with the flowers: putting them in the sink, removing the white paper wrapper, taking down a vase from the cupboard, trimming the stems with a pair of scissors, putting the flowers in the vase, and then filling the vase with water. Neither one of us said a word as she worked about these minimal tasks, but I watched her closely, marveling at how slowly and methodically she worked, as if putting flowers in a vase of water were a highly delicate procedure that called for one

utmost care and concentration.

Eventually, we wound up in the living room with drinks in our hands, sitting side by side on the sofa as we smoked cigarettes and looked out at the sky through the French windows. Dusk ebbed into darkness, and Born was still nowhere to be seen, but the ever-placid Margot betrayed no concern over his absence. When we'd met at the party ten or twelve days earlier, I had been rather unnerved by his long silences and oddly disconnected manner, but now that I knew what to expect, and now that I knew she liked me and thought I was *too good for this world*, I felt a bit more at ease in her company. What did we talk about in the minutes before her man finally joined us? New York (which she found to be too dirty and depressing); her ambition to become a painter (she was attending a class at the School of the Arts but thought she had no talent and was too lazy to improve); how long she had known Rudolf (a part of her life); and what she thought of the magazine (she was crossing her fingers). When I tried to thank her for her help, however, she merely shook her head and told me not to exaggerate: she'd had nothing to do with it.

Before I could ask her what that meant, Born entered the room. Again the rumpled white pants, again the unruly shock of hair, but no jacket this time, and yet another colored shirt—pale green, if I remember correctly—and the stump of an extinguished cigar clamped between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, although he seemed not to be aware that he was holding it. My new benefactor was angry, seething with irritation over whatever crisis was forcing him to travel to Paris tomorrow and without even bothering to say hello to me, utterly ignoring his duties as host of our little celebration, he flew into a tirade that wasn't addressed to Margot or myself so much as to the furniture in the room, the walls around him, the world at large.

Stupid bunglers, he said. Sniveling incompetents. Slow-witted functionaries with mashed potatoes for brains. The whole universe is on fire, and all they do is wring their hands and watch it burn.

Unruffled, perhaps even vaguely amused, Margot said: That's why they need you, my love. Because you're the king.

Rudolf the First, Born replied, the bright boy with the big dick. All I have to do is pull it out of my pants, piss on the fire, and the problem is solved.

Exactly, Margot said, cracking the largest smile I'd yet seen from her.

I'm getting sick of it, Born muttered, as he headed for the liquor cabinet, put down his cigar, and poured himself a full tumbler of straight gin. How many years have I given them? he asked, taking a sip of his drink. You do it because you believe in certain principles, but no one else seems to give a damn. We're losing the battle, my friends. The ship is going down.

This was a different Born from the one I had come to know so far—the brittle, mocking jester who exulted in his own witticisms, the displaced dandy who blithely went about founding magazines and asking twenty-year-old students to his house for dinner. Something was raging inside him, and now that this other person had been revealed to me, I felt myself recoil from him, understanding that he was the kind of man who could erupt at any moment, that he was someone who actually *enjoyed* his own anger. He swigged down a second belt of gin and then turned his eyes in my direction, acknowledging my presence for the first time. I don't know what he saw in my face—astonishment? confusion? distress?—but whatever it was, he was sufficiently alarmed by it to switch off the thermostat and immediately lower the temperature. Don't worry, Mr. Walker, he said, doing his best to produce a smile. I'm just letting off a little steam.

He gradually willed himself out of his funk, and by the time we sat down to eat twenty minutes later, the storm seemed to have passed. Or so I thought when he complimented Margot on her superb cooking and praised the wine she had bought for the meal, but it proved to be no more than

temporary lull, and as the evening progressed, further squalls and gales came swooping down on us spoil the festivities. I don't know if the gin and Burgundy affected Born's mood, but there was no question that he packed away a good deal of alcohol—at least twice the amount that Margot and I downed together—or if he was simply out of sorts because of the bad news he had received earlier in the day. Perhaps it was both in combination, or perhaps it was something else, but there was scarcely a moment during that dinner when I didn't feel that the house was about to catch on fire.

It began when Born raised his glass to toast the birth of our magazine. It was a gracious little speech, I thought, but when I jumped in and started mentioning some of the writers I was planning to solicit work from for the first issue, Born cut me off in mid-sentence and told me never to discuss business while eating, that it was bad for the digestion and I should learn to start acting like an adult. It was a rude and unpleasant thing to say, but I hid my injured pride by pretending to agree with him and then took another bite of Margot's stew. A moment later, Born put down his fork and said to me, "You like it, Mr. Walker, don't you?"

Like what? I asked.

The *navarin*. You seem to be eating it with relish.

It's probably the best meal I've had all year.

In other words, you're attracted to Margot's food.

Very much. I find it delicious.

And what about Margot herself? Are you attracted to her as well?

She's sitting right across the table from me. It seems wrong to talk about her as if she weren't here.

I'm sure she doesn't mind. Do you, Margot?

No, Margot said. Not in the least.

You see, Mr. Walker? Not in the least.

All right, then, I answered. In my opinion, Margot is a highly attractive woman.

You're avoiding the question, Born said. I didn't ask if you found her attractive, I want to know if *you* are attracted to *her*.

She's your wife, Professor Born. You can't expect me to answer that. Not here, not now.

Ah, but Margot isn't my wife. She's my special friend, as it were, but we aren't married, and we have no plans to marry in the future.

You live together. As far as I'm concerned, that's as good as being married.

Come, come. Don't be such a prude. Forget that I have any connection to Margot, all right? We're talking in the abstract here, a hypothetical case.

Fine. Hypothetically speaking, I would hypothetically be attracted to Margot, yes.

Good, Born said, rubbing his hands together and smiling. Now we're getting somewhere. But how attracted to what degree? Enough to want to kiss her? Enough to want to hold her naked body in your arms? Enough to want to sleep with her?

I can't answer those questions.

You're not telling me you're a virgin, are you?

No. I just don't want to answer your questions, that's all.

Am I to understand that if Margot threw herself at you and asked you to fuck her, you wouldn't be interested? Is that what you're saying? Poor Margot. You have no idea how much you've hurt her feelings.

What are you talking about?

Why don't you ask her?

Suddenly, Margot reached across the table and took hold of my hand. Don't be upset, she said.

Rudolf is only trying to have some fun. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do.

Born's notion of fun had nothing to do with mine, alas, and at that stage of my life I was ill-equipped to play the sort of game he was trying to drag me into. No, I wasn't a virgin. I had slept with a number of girls by then, had fallen in and out of love several times, had suffered through a bad broken heart just two years earlier and, like most young men around the world, thought about sex almost constantly. The truth was that I would have been delighted to sleep with Margot, but I refused to allow Born to goad me into admitting it. This wasn't a hypothetical case. He actually seemed to be propositioning me on her behalf, and whatever sexual code they lived by, whatever romps and twisted dalliances they indulged in with other people, I found the whole business ugly, off-kilter, sick. Perhaps I should have spoken up and told him what I thought, but I was afraid—not of Born exactly, but of causing a rift that might lead him to change his mind about our project. I desperately wanted the magazine to work, and as long as he was willing to back it, I was prepared to put up with any amount of inconvenience and discomfort. So I did what I could to hold my ground and not lose my temper, to absorb *blow upon blow* without falling from my horse, to resist him and appease him at the same time.

I'm disappointed, Born said. Until now, I took you for an adventurer, a renegade, a man who enjoyed thumbing his nose at convention, but at bottom you're just another stuffed shirt, another bourgeois simpleton. How sad. You strut around with your Provençal poets and your lofty ideals, with your draft-dodger cowardice and that ridiculous necktie of yours, and you think you're something exceptional, but what I see is a pampered middle-class boy living off Daddy's money, a poseur.

Rudolf, Margot said. That's enough. Leave him alone.

I realize I'm being a bit harsh, Born said to her. But young Adam and I are partners now, and I need to know what he's made of. Can he stand up to an honest insult, or does he crumble to pieces when he's under attack?

You've had a lot to drink, I said, and from all I can gather you've had a rough day. Maybe it's time for me to be going. We can pick up the conversation when you're back from France.

Nonsense, Born replied, pounding the table with his fist. We're still working on the stew. There's the salad, and after the salad the cheese, and after the cheese dessert. Margot has already been hurt enough for one night, and the least we can do is sit here and finish her remarkable dinner. In the meantime, maybe you can tell us something about Westfield, New Jersey.

Westfield? I said, surprised to discover that Born knew where I had grown up. How did you find out about Westfield?

It wasn't difficult, he said. As it happens, I've learned quite a bit about you in the past few days. Your father, for example, Joseph Walker, age fifty-four, better known as Bud, owns and operates the Shop-Rite supermarket on the main street in town. Your mother, Marjorie, a.k.a. Marge, is forty-six and has given birth to three children: your sister, Gwyn, in November nineteen forty-five; you in March nineteen forty-seven; and your brother, Andrew, in July nineteen fifty. A tragic story. Little Andy drowned when he was seven, and it pains me to think how unbearable that loss must have been for all of you. I had a sister who died of cancer at roughly the same age, and I know what terrible things a death like that does to a family. Your father has coped with his sorrow by working fourteen hours a day, six days a week, while your mother has turned inward, battling the scourge of depression with heavy doses of prescription pharmaceuticals and twice-weekly sessions with a psychotherapist. The miracle, to my mind, is how well you and your sister have done for yourselves in the face of such calamity. Gwyn is a beautiful and talented girl in her last year at Vassar, planning to begin graduate work in English literature right here at Columbia this fall. And you, my young intellectual friend, budding wordsmith and translator of obscure medieval poets, turn out to have been an outstanding

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