

.1

I was never here. (Please, wait. Looks like you're in a hurry to leave. Here, I'll rephrase.) I've never been here. (Yes, perhaps I'm lying. Or perhaps I'm lying in a language other than my own.) Everything here is handed (to you) like a letter (and then to me), on the back of which are drawn quick arrows, signs of etching. I could say, "Really, what a commotion," and put everything back in place. I could say, "Now we will behave." It's a rainy day, and we're playing in the big house, in the white holiday home, on the porch, once again going up and down the stairs.

(We should really use the past tense: Were. We were playing. We ran.) Do you remember, you whispered in my ears not to drop the gloves, and that you like brown bears and swans and pickled cherries, and that the sled can reach the speed of a train locomotive? That excessively good manners offend you, that the paintings in the house scare you, that the crowded lines in the book make your eyes flit about, and when people are angry at you, you want to become a stone, dive into the pool water, swim under the aquatic plants and run the teeth of your fork over the delicate skin on the inside of your arm. Remember how you used to walk along the boulevard and see the colors changing in the sky. (Do you remember that? Every word loses meaning when repeated like this. Sometimes I wish that all this were lost, after all.) Remember that you said that we would live together in the little house, and never return to the big house? There everything is the right size. There we would practice growing without actually doing so. Every day, practicing within velvet, within fur, in more useful fabrics than these. We would write our name at a hidden spot on the walls. We would roll foreign words on the tongue, roll ourselves one more time.

(No. It's just me talking with things that don't have a mouth.) Hello, Mr. Wardrobe. How are you, Mrs. Lamp? The last secret is my desire to be here. (But it's not a pure desire – I hasten to add – it's not clear-cut. After all, this, too, is a lie.)

(No.) My desire could peel the wallpaper off the wall and reveal everything. I could break the glass with a single puff and let the elements in, all the branches are knocking at the window, I turn my face. Who's there? Only me. I'm invited to the table. Tasting the blood mixed with the earth. Touching the marble absent-mindedly, the finger lingering idly on the thin porcelain, observing, it's a matter of proper breathing. (Breathe.) This is the family. The family members know languages, collect books, go to the opera, put on a play every summer, in which they all take part. They are engaged in education, study, collecting, charities. These are people with a family tree, and a family. The people who will pull up roots from here (will leave, escape, flee and smuggle out – and now turn everything into past tense), who will become a picture on the wall, a story. But you have enough stories.

(And you,) after some thought, you have become a lightning rod of memories. Reflecting the lake water and the shine of the shoes in the purity of the eye. From this moment on, you'll be able to paint from memory a place you have not been to. Pronounce the name of the river. Hang a transparent shade on the tree. You have learned to cast a floor you never walked on, mirrors that have not worn away by your reflection. You added an oily fingerprint to the book, learned to find North by the stars, pasted yourself into the pictures. (Here you are, remember?) Now, put one foot in front of the other on the ancient stones, be a

page hidden in the library, a leaf hidden among the forest trees. Pretend, and don't pretend. Now close your eyes. Now forget.

2.

The children would sit around and copy. They would copy lines, corridors, sturdy maple trees, finely polished porcelain, ornate pieces, ball gowns, a mountain hiking jacket, a dressed stone wall, wide trails, first-class train tickets, cold air, meadows (not lawns), a ball (not a party), an open-air theater production on a summer's evening, a book for teaching handicrafts to children like them. Ten fingers is all it takes, maybe. It didn't work. They didn't cut along the lines. Every time, they would rush with the scissors, and cut off the head. The roof. The edges gaped open. And the language was ill-suited, as well. The words fell away or piled on top of each other, crooked, broken, squashed. A pile of children. What was lost there in the transition, when they crossed the bridge, when they placed unpracticed fingers where their feet once ran? If you ask them – everything. But they tried. It was a summer assignment, every summer, and they were the kids. That's how they entrusted them to do the work. Patiently. Gently. With amusement. It was a very serious matter.

When they persisted – put up a fight, as they say – when they got up and shook themselves, showering their surroundings with sand and dust, and broken glass, and sand again – that's when they were left alone. Whoever remained, repeated the names of the trees. Not everything had a name. Not everything can be remembered and conveyed accurately. They tried to reach between the cracks and grab something intangible, something that was still moving. Not a tail, but a frock coat. Someone said: Once is enough. We'll say the right word – password,

spell, luck charm – and get across. But in their heart of hearts, however much they searched for secret passages, wardrobes with missing back panels, nooks and crannies, they didn't really believe any of that really existed.

3.

Since I couldn't remember the name of the town, I said "The place where you lost your heart." We had gone up the mountain, and down again. None of us fell into a ditch, but the radiator broke. Well, that's how it is sometimes, on vacation. Are we still going? We may need to ask the conductor. All this travel is a bit excessive. All this has to have context, otherwise we'll be running around from here to there like silhouettes in a headlight. Because surrounding us there is (for example) snow.

We tell her about the snow like we tell her about the big house. About the summer houses. The White House. The Red House. Anna's brown bag. She sees colors, and then shapes. She thinks that one can separate the color from the shape. These are two columns of tin soldiers in an ancient, pointless war that will carry on for a small eternity. Imitation of another war. Over there are trenches.

First colors, then shapes. Then grasp the whole world, as one might grasp a ray of light in one's hand. There, in one of the corners, it is hidden under plain camouflage: a book, a dollhouse, a rocking chair, a painted lampshade. Any of them might suit, even if the antique rocking chair still serves the children as they play. Even if it is smeared with industrial whitewash.

It might have been easier if nothing had been left. Had history not remembered them so well. Always a character caught in the mirror, prancing about. A lock of hair. An ornamental knife. Another pearl necklace. One could have chosen other things. The past is bursting with objects. They are more

stubborn than one might imagine. Noni treated them carelessly. There is no sanctity in things – if there's a handle, one presses on it. If there's a memory, one touches it with one's hands. Remember the lips that rubbed against the cup, the hand in the forgotten glove, the hours that tickled each other to distraction even though they were supposed to behave better than that.

There is time marked in glass boxes and an alarm warning of an intruder. She is now an invasive species. Her hands behind her back, not touching anything. She's carrying a satchel on her back, like a schoolgirl, even though she hasn't been a schoolgirl for a long time. Sometimes she thinks about Anna's handbag, which was elegant but practical. It suited her, the stitching was strong. Probably bought at some good department store, or maybe custom made for her. If the handbag were in her possession, she could stop holding it.

In the handbag, Anna carried miniature models of the world. When Anna and her daughter used to go for a train ride, she would pull out of her handbag little miniatures of whatever they saw: Here is the windmill. Here's a bridge. Here's a horse. Suddenly, the world is one big dollhouse and everything is in order. The small harbors the secret of the large.

In fact, everything was very big. The house is huge. The estate. The amphitheater where productions are staged. So what is small? The playhouse where the children play at being grownups. A table and chairs. A woven rug. An oven. Running water. Electrical power. Each child in turn is led to the house. That's where they prepare. In the small house, Noni baked real cookies for her guests, the family members who came to be impressed by her independence. When the cookies were burned, the maids secretly swapped them with cookies that had turned out well.

In fact, everything is very small. It seems that the whole world can be folded, cut up. Become a model. You can stick it on a sheet of paper, scribble on it, let the wind blow upon that which is lifeless. And, despite it all, the house is still standing. She peers through glass placed over another glass. Yes, when you look closely, you find that something is trapped between them, fluttering. Everything is alive, except what is not. She knows that. Here, as per the instructions, she is a stranger to the place where she lost her heart. (She's getting very close, maybe it's not her heart.)

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