



Interiors

Ionuț Gîtan

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[A STORY]

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*To Christoph Claus
in friendship; with love*

[I]

The Death of Adam

1

“PARDON ME?” BASTIEN SAID. His was voice incensed.

“Twenty countries so far,” the customs officer replied as he handed Bastien back his passport book through the opening in the glass vitrine. In his confusion, Bastien felt a flush of crossness towards the officer. His normal composure had not yet recovered from the flight.

“Twenty countries,” the officer said again. “It’s only—what—June now, and you’ve been to all these countries this year. You’ll tire. Once you’re my age, you’ll see.”

“OK—thanks,” Bastien said. “I’ll take that under advisement.” He walked past the counter to the arrivals terminal to claim his luggage from the carousel. Bastien entered the men’s bathroom and walked to the row of sinks before the mirror, placing his hands beneath the faucet to receive water into his cupped hands. Splashing it to his face, he stared into the glass at his reflection. The travel had weighed on Bastien, each destination a new line to his furled brow. His wanderlust—or rather, the need to slip away and vanish—had shifted at some point from survival to mere work. Travel became the metropolitan tedium of airport terminals, security queues, and boutique hotels, all alike in their heavy-handed, unsightly interiors. What baffled Bastien most was that this life was all by his design. At one point, at least, it had been what he desired. Bastien wished he could place the shift, the exact moment in time when this gap opened between what he had desired and what he had received. If he could identify that moment, then there was hope for him to study it, to understand what had gone wrong, and to set a new path. People make it sound so difficult, as if the decision to want something was not the most difficult part. *To crave is no different than to have*, Bastien told himself.

Bastien’s business trips left little time for leisure. Even a visit to a gallery or market was a treat for him. Meetings filled the days and client dinners occupied

the evenings. The dinners sprawled late into the night like watercolor blotting on paper, following its own desire line. On one trip—this was years earlier—Bastien left his office in New York for the airport to make an early flight, arriving the next Friday afternoon in Berlin. He went to meet an important client, a Japanese luxury goods and development company that was repositioning itself in the European market with the construction of a multi-level retail space—a mall—in the center of the city. After a series of promising meetings with a German commercial real estate firm that would take stake in the venture, Bastien’s client invited him for a celebratory dinner. He obliged, accustomed to winching his nights away.

After returning to his hotel to change clothing, Bastien took a taxicab to a pillbox of a Japanese restaurant just off the river Spree. Entering the place, Bastien smelled the familiar scent of *hinoki* cypress wood, a musky sweetness that reminded him of the old quarter Gion in Kyoto with its townhouses constructed of wooden lattice facades and baked tile roofs. The restaurant’s host greeted him, standing beside a flower arrangement of wisteria and plum blossoms that looked so delicate that one’s gaze could tumble the structure down. The host asked for his name and then escorted Bastien past the small, crowded *sushi* counter to a reserved backroom with *tatami* straw floors. The client idled at a short-legged table with a ceramic cup of fine, single malt sake. Bastien took his seat on the floor cushion and immediately ordered a buckwheat ale from the host before he exited through the paper screen door.

“Excuse me. I apologize for being late,” Bastien said, even though he had, in fact, arrived five minutes early. He spoke with a neutral, careful voice, at once soothing and, somehow, slightly hostile, carrying a faint threat of danger. His eyes took the color of polished basalt. Bastien’s body was lean and angular, and his hollowed-cheeks edged permanent laugh lines, softening his face. He wore his almond-colored hair short, styled like he had just risen from a long sleep. From his designer-clad gray trousers with a French fly and his linen white shirt to his black pepper-scented *eau de parfum*, Bastien’s exterior was studied and constructed, a produced version of himself. He could not unlearn this practice of self-mythologizing, not only working to control others’ perception of him, but his own perception of himself. He knew to do this through the objects he owned, the company he kept, and the words he left unsaid.

“No, no—thank you for coming. I can’t thank you enough for today,” the client, Mr. Muramatsu, said. Bastien picked up the small carafe, a turquoise and ash-colored stoneware in a reactive glaze that reflected the warm light from the room’s lanterns, and filled Mr. Muramatsu’s cup with sake.

“Please, please,” Bastien said and sat the carafe down to the table. Mr. Mura-

matsu released an audible sigh as the cup left his lips, signaling his pleasure aloud in the private room.

“I’ve been looking forward to come to this place. I came a bit early for the *jun-mai*,” Mr. Muramatsu said, gesturing with his cup in hand.

“Thank you very much for inviting me,” Bastien said, insincerely. “I’m glad we can celebrate our hard work today.” He was eager for the server to come with his drink and the meal’s first course.

The restaurant’s food was in Bastien’s favorite style, traditional Buddhist cuisine that was customarily prepared and consumed by temple monks in Japan. Each vegan course was fashioned with an assiduous attention to detail, the chef creating an exhibition of miniature sculptures for the customers to devour. The plates came one after another: beginning with gingered eggplant and a red miso soup with notes of iron; moving to tomato fried rice and tofu with pea shoots and nasturtium flowers; then, a fried corn croquette topped with sesame and a lotus root pâté with knotweed and tangerine zest; and finally, ending with dessert, strawberry shaved ice and candies from a traditional confectionery shop in Kyoto. While exquisite, Bastien had been distracted away from the food by the server, a tall, thin man with mustard-colored hair. The server wore an indigo-dyed box apron around his waist and sported a pressed white shirt with the sleeves cuffed to his biceps, exposing a tattoo along his right arm: a classical Greek vase with an illustration of a physician in the act of bloodletting a statesman. He spoke in English with a playful German accent whose tone rose at the end as if each sentence concluded with an invitation. The server knelt to the table and explained the composition of each dish in a litany. Bastien held his gaze with him, listening intently as if receiving a sonnet.

During a lull in the conversation with Mr. Muramatsu, Bastien excused himself for the bathroom. Exiting, he came upon the server holding another carafe of sake.

“Are you enjoying your meal?” the server asked.

“Yes, of course. I loved the lotus root,” Bastien replied in earnest, remembering the subtle tang of the dish that caused the hairs on his neck to bristle with delight.

“You are visiting Berlin?” the server continued.

“I’m from New York City. I’m only here for two more days though,” Bastien said, slightly raising his back more upright. Although tall himself, he stood nearly two inches shorter than the server. “I’m staying near Boxhagener Platz. I hope I have time for the flea market tomorrow.” On a previous trip to Berlin, he found an antique glass bowl at the market. The vendor instructed him that the glass had been blown by artisans in Provence, but Bastien was more enchanted by the

marble pattern. The bowl sat on the kitchen table of his apartment in New York, always filled with sour cherries in the summer and persimmons in the fall.

“Are we your last table of the night?” Bastien asked, suddenly aware that the restaurant’s din had receded and there were no other customers left.

“Yes, we close after you and your *friend* finish,” the server replied, giving a smile as he gestured with the carafe of sake. “Do you come to Berlin often?”

“Not as much as I would like. I like the pace here. I haven’t spent much time in this neighborhood though. It looks interesting,” Bastien said, remembering the lively thoroughfare on the car ride over.

“There are some nice galleries along the river, but you more-or-less already have to know what you want in order to find it,” the server said.

“I noticed a lot of bars,” Bastien said, pausing as his dark eyes narrowed slightly.

“You could show me a place you like after work, if you don’t have plans.”

“What?” asked the server, looking back at him. “Tonight?”

“Yes, why not. If you like,” he said. “My name is Sebastien. But my friends call me Bastien.”

“Bastien,” the server said, brightly. “I’m Karl. Karl Kirchhof.” He paused, wondering whether to extend a handshake. “Sure—why not! I’m off work tomorrow anyway, so I can join you.”

“Perfect,” Bastien said. “Let me see if I can hurry up my *friend* then. I’ll wait for you outside once we leave. Is that OK?”

“Sure—no rush,” Karl said.

Bastien made his way to the screen door of the private room where Mr. Muramatsu waited. With his hand on the wooden flush handle, he looked back to Karl and said, “See you soon then.”

“*Tschüss*,” replied Karl, sweetly, before coming in after him with the sake in hand.

Bastien saw off the drunken Mr. Muramatsu after an exchange of compulsory bows, politely refusing the offer of a hired car back to his hotel. Outside the restaurant, Bastien bounced on the heels of his brogue shoes, the pebble grain leather lightly dusted with dirt from the sidewalk. He observed the banality of the concrete buildings about him, all constructed in haste and uniformity after the war with no thought spared for aesthetics. The cool of the mid-summer night air filled Bastien with life. It would be at least five hours until dawn, before the morning dew would lay down on the grass blades, waiting to be burned away by the sun. Looking onto the street, Bastien remembered the power of foreign places to excite and to energize him. He recognized that at one time the unknown was all that he

knew and that it had kept him alive. This placelessness had been supplanted by New York, like it had for some many other people before him that had moved to the city to remake it as their own. Bastien had never allowed himself to lust for the comfort of a home, but now that he had materialized the semblance of his own, a comfortable apartment where everything was his alone, he felt grateful to have finally arrived at this moment in his life.

Without an apron, Karl looked even more lean. His navy linen trousers rose to the navel, enclosed by an exposed button on the left hip. He wore the same work shirt cuffed at the sleeves, but with a few buttons left undone at the top.

“Thanks for waiting. I’m finally free,” Karl said.

“I’m sorry for the bother after work. It’s late,” Bastien replied, in his habit of apologizing.

“Oh no, it’s fine. I’m a night person anyway,” Karl said.

“So, where should we go?” Bastien asked. “Do you have a place in mind?” Karl led the two into the gray-scale of the night. Ambling down the street side-by-side, Karl pulled a small pouch from his back pocket. The patent leather was worn down to a chestnut-colored patina. He opened the flap to retrieve a pair of hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes.

“Do you smoke?” Karl asked, offering Bastien the fag.

“No, not usually,” Bastien replied. “Let’s just share one.”

“OK,” Karl said, returning the pouch to his back pocket. “You Americans don’t really smoke.”

“I guess not—no,” Bastien said, thinking of his friend Simone back in New York.

Bastien and Simone met at an industry party on the Lower East Side. This was many years ago after he had recently moved to the city. It was a one of those ridiculous events that Bastien loathed—a launch party for some handbag at a downtown bar that was frequented by editors and publicists. Simone spotted him alone at the bar ordering a drink, and she had quickly cornea him into a conversation about a Fellini film. After chatting and quickly appraising that Bastien could have no romantic interest in her, Simone ushered him to her crew of friends at the party, all expats decamped from Paris. Bastien appreciated the speed and force by which Simone navigated the world, and how the strength of her orbit enveloped everything about her. With Simone, Bastien felt himself remitting a modicum of control. In her presence, he dropped his shoulders and felt at ease. Simone was this to Bastien, a friend.

Simone was performatively French, especially when out drinking together. The

two would be dinning at one of their usual spots on Canal just past Allen Street, when Simone would scramble in her purse for a pack of cigarettes and a matchbook. *I need a smoke*, Simone would declare, standing to leave before Bastien had a chance to even react. At first, the habit of leaving the table mid-meal had stupefied Bastien. He had grown so accustomed to the American style of dining out where the waitstaff hovered about, busy replenishing glasses and asking question after question, working to expedite the meal to forty-five minutes, or maybe an hour if an aperitif was ordered. The act of leaving a table, with your belongings unaccompanied and your half-eaten plates left to cool, seemed a sacrilege to Bastien. And yet, with Simone, he had the power to do it anyway. They would break from the meal for a fifteen-minute recess outside where the conversation would become more unwound, more intimate. Although the nicotine itself did nothing to relax Bastien, he did appreciate the space that smokers created for themselves. Fractioned off from the rest of the world, they huddled together in conversation. Any passersby coming down the sidewalk, too, could stop to ask for a butt and join the coterie, a plume of pewter-colored smoke welcoming them into the fold.

“**You don’t seem** that American to me though,” Karl said, lighting the end of his rolled cigarette with a match as they walked.

“Oh—really,” Bastien said, putting out his open hand to receive the cigarette.

“How long have you been in New York?” Karl asked, passing it off to him. “Are you from there?”

“No—not long, I think about fifteen years,” Bastien said, inhaling the smoke.

“Since I was twenty.”

“And before that?” asked Karl.

“I moved around a lot,” Bastien said, suddenly terse. His tone held a finality that signaled an end to the questioning on this topic.

“Ah—I see,” Karl said. “New York is great. I’ve visited friends there a few times. It’s really expensive though, no?”

“Yes, I guess. Compared to Berlin, at least,” Bastien said. Conversations about New York started and ended with real estate. In the city, people would ask for the neighborhood you lived in before they would ask for your name. New York turned everyone into real estate agents: the rent is high—but not that high—surely others pay more; the pros-and-cons of one train line (the L—always under construction) versus another (the G—barely functioning); which neighborhoods had already gentrified (all of them) and which borough was still on the precipice (State Island?); who rented versus who had wealthy enough parents to purchase property for them. Real estate was as much the culture of the city as pizza or Broadway.

“Everyone seems so occupied,” Karl continued. “By making money, by work.”

“Berlin is different?” asked Bastien, sincerely curious that someone could be compelled by a force outside of money or work.

“I think so, yes,” Karl said.

“How then?” Bastien asked, taking another drag of the cigarette.

“I think the values are different here in Berlin, in Germany. The people are different—maybe not better—but just different. We think differently—about the government, about work, about many things.”

“Really? How so?”

“Have you been here on a Sunday? Everything shuts down. The stores are closed. People are at home, are at the park, with their families, with their friends. I can’t imagine New York stopping for anyone.”

“Yes, but fundamentally,” Bastien interjected. “I don’t see much difference, between anywhere really.”

“I mean, sure, our sense of place has collapsed,” Karl retorted. “We’re forced to live in some global village where there’s the same stores on every corner of every city, no matter where go. The people though—”

“I travel so much for work—but the only thing that stays with me is this feeling of sameness,” Bastien said, impassioned by the exchange. “There’s an essential monotony. But then, I think, maybe I’m to blame for this, for not adding anything new myself, for seeking out the same things, the same people, the same bar, the same—”

“Oh—wait, we’re here,” interrupted Karl, stopping suddenly on the sidewalk before an odd, white tiled building that reminded Bastien of a Jean-Pierre Raynaud sculpture. Bastien found that he smoked the entire cigarette himself, never returning it to Karl. The discussion ensnared them both, the pace of their walk quickening as they talked. Bastien had always been combative, eager to fight. He liked engaging in a discourse: the dance of two opposing viewpoints that would collide and eventually terminate. One would triumph over another, or more compelling and rarer still, an argument could resolve into an entirely new thought that would have previously been unimaginable without the exchange between the two people. Bastien preferred this over what typically made talk between friends: the banalities of work; the misgivings of lovers; the shortcomings of parents; the sharing of childhood traumas. He disliked that so many friendships were measured by the divulging of secrets and the theft of stories. It was as if the only way to move past pleasantries—to build trust with another person—was to reveal a hidden part of yourself.

Inside, Karl ordered beer from the bartender while Bastien sat a table. The

narrow space reminded Bastien of a ship's interior with its half-barrel vault ceiling and curved wooden benches that snaked along the wall from the front entrance to the back. Karl carried the two glasses of Kölsch back to the table and sat beside Bastien on his side of the table. As he sat down, Karl was careful for his knees to briefly touch Bastien's before moving them away.

"*Salut*," Bastien said, picking up his glass from the table.

"*Kanpai*," Karl said in return, chiming his glass to Bastien's.

"It's nice in here," Bastien said, looking straight at the bar with its motley rows of liquors, wines, and other potions idling on shelves along the wall.

"I come here a lot. It's never really crowded," Karl said, glancing to the other couple seated in the back.

"I really like the sconces," Bastien said, gesturing with his glass to the light fixtures. Filtered fluorescent tubes hung to the wood paneled walls. The saber-like tubes were wrapped by colored gels that divided them into thirds with tops and bottoms of silvery, blueish white and the middles encircled by candy-color bands of varying widths and degrees of translucency. "The colors reminded me of Josef Albers."

"Or Robert Irwin," Karl said.

"Exactly, kind of like *Homage to the Square*," Bastien said.

"That's why I like coming here," Karl began. "I'm not sure if they are supposed to be reproductions, or knockoffs or whatever, but I like their reductive geometry: the repetition and the industrial fabrication of them. How they could be these mass-produced art works that reject the market, the call to make rarefied objects. It's difficult to come to terms with the fact that art is unable to contribute to culture anymore, at least not in any meaningful way that is different from mainstream music, movies, television, or even politics, and art is usually not even as entertaining. I would much prefer to come here—a bar—instead of going to whatever gallery, where all the works lean into gratuitous sexual provocation, or intellectual grandiosity, or gaudy spectacle, or cults of personality. It does me better to come here to be challenged, to generate new ideas, to talk, and to think about how artworks are authored, experienced, and valued. All because of sconces! *Sconces!*"

Karl stopped to take a breath, aware suddenly that he had been rambling, while Bastien was silent, watching him.

"I'm sorry," Karl said. "I didn't mean to go on about this."

"Are you kidding?" Bastien said. "I think that was the most revelatory critique of the art world that I've heard in a long time: thank you." Bastien and Karl both broke into laughter, suddenly feeling a lightness of mind from the alcohol. Karl stood from the table with the two empty glasses and returned quickly with them

replenished.

“What makes Berlin thrilling aren’t its exhibitions,” Karl said, continuing his argument, “which nobody seems to find interesting, but the artists and strangers and assorted characters. Most gallery openings aren’t little more than good places to find some friends. It’s the beginning of the journey into the night. Conversations are what’s exciting right now.”

“I would say that New York is similar in that way,” Bastien added. “It’s not a single industry town. There are people from across disciplines. At one dinner table, you will have a doctor, an actor, a fashion designer, a writer, a stay-at-home parent, a politician, an out-of-towner—all gathered together. The people make the conversations interesting.”

“Any artists at your dinner table?” Karl said, wily.

“So, you are an artist then?” Bastien asked.

“I’m more of a sculptor these days,” Karl replied.

“What do you make?” Bastien said, his eyes widening to consider Karl more intimately. Bastien admired artists. He was fascinated by their ability to create desires in others, desires that gave shape to reality. Djinn-like, artists could dream up other ways of living and conjure into physical space representations for human craving and for meaning. Bastien felt as though artists not only navigated the world with their own a set of rules of their own making, but they upended the world through material, through concept, and through perception.

“I work in glass,” Karl said.

“What sort of glass?” Bastien asked.

Each morning Karl rose from bed before daybreak and walked into his kitchen to put the kettle to boil on the stove. He stood at the counter-top and mantra-like, brewed the coffee, the aroma breathing life into him for the day. With the caffeine making way through his veins, Karl dressed in his gym clothes and rushed out the door to start his run for Tempelhofer Feld. Karl had always been a runner. His memories of childhood were the long stretches he spent running from his house, past the church, to the village’s limit and back. For Karl, running was a tool; it was a method for him to diminish his boundless energy, a restlessness that could overtake him if left unmanaged. The habit continued into his teenage years and when he moved to Berlin for art school. Karl enjoyed running in the morning through the empty city, before the daily dance of commerce began. He loved the sight of Berlin so early in the morning, the way the sun rose over the buildings and spilled onto the city, the beetle-like purples flowering into cheryblossom pinks. During each run, he made sure his pace would quicken to the point where he would

be drenched in sweat. Sweating was like a form of blood-letting, momentarily draining him empty. The run cleared away the fog of his mind, leaving a great elsewhere in its place that could be explored.

After the morning run, Karl showered and then biked to his studio space. He rented a large room in an old bottle warehouse on the east side, a ten-minute bike ride from his apartment. His studio was on the top floor of the building, one of the largest with a beamed ceiling. The entire building was occupied by other artist spaces and workshops, which gave the place a sort of fledgling community. Among the artists, Karl was closest with a Polish woman named Paula whose studio was opposite of his. Paula made a habit of meandering into his studio without invitation. She never came to discuss art, but instead, she complained about a labor rollback by the new coalition government, the rise of fascism in her motherland, or most frequently, her German boyfriend, Peter, with whom she had been sharing an apartment with since Karl had met her three years before.

“I cannot understand German people!” Paula moaned, a familiar complaint that Karl learned to not take offense to. “They do not open up! Everything about Peter is so robotic. There is no emotion in him!”

“And you’ve tried telling him to be more open with his feelings?” Karl asked.

“Yes! And still nothing. It’s that same stone-like expression on his face,” Paula continued. “I tell him this is why his parents must have named him Peter. In Polish, it comes from the word stone. He’s as sensitive as a stone!”

When Paula wasn’t complaining to him about Peter, Karl worked trance-like in his studio, breaking only to brew himself another cup of coffee in the shared kitchenette down the hall. His days were spent at the studio and his nights at the Japanese restaurant where he worked, a uniformity of schedule that brought control over his time. Karl enjoyed the rhythm of his life. The studio was like a second apartment, filled with just enough of his personal ephemera—house plants in their earthen pots, some books, a change of clothing, a crate of wine bottles—without bringing clutter to distract from the work. The space was large, a rectangle box lined with large windows along the west-facing wall. Against the narrower, northern wall, Karl constructed a workstation, where he stored his materials and tools. A variety of wrenches, screwdrivers, and pliers hung from the plywood sheath walls. Beneath the wood counter, black plastic milk crates lined the three rows of open shelves, housing enamels, paints, power tools, and other materials. Karl was fastidious in the cleanliness and arrangement of the tools at his workstation, giving it an artificial, showroom-like quality. He worked on his sculptures in the center of the room, lining the gray-painted floor with yellow electrical tape to contain the artwork within a singular space.

For the past year, Karl worked with large sheets of light-green tinted glass. When first beginning the series in the material, Karl rigged a rope and pulley system from the wooden fir beams of the studio's ceiling to hang the glass in such a way that it would levitate a half a meter above the floor. With four video cameras positioned on each end of the room, Karl captured himself shattering the glass by hand. He gripped the cherry wood handle of the sledgehammer, brought it above his right shoulder, and struck the alloyed steel hammer head to the glass—the blow immediately causing the glass sheet to shatter into pieces and fall to the floor in a symphony of chimes. Karl repeated this act, hoisting a new slab of the green glass above the debris and striking anew—until he had created a mound of shining, flat blades.

During the first trial of his new series in glass, Paula had stormed into Karl's studio, believing an accident had occurred.

“*Scheisse!* Are you fucking crazy?” Paula screamed, her eyes ricocheting from the hanging slab of broken glass, to Karl, and to the shards on idling on the floor.

“What?” Karl replied innocuously, removing the cotton dusk mask from his face.

“You're going to hurt yourself!” Paula screamed again.

“It's fine,” Karl said, setting the hammer to floor. “I haven't cut myself,” he paused, “just yet.”

Despite Paula's objections, Karl continued the work. Paula warned other artists on the floor of the noise, which only piqued their curiosity. Soon others from the building came to watch Karl break the glass. They first came alone, but soon brought guests—friends, lovers, curators, writers, and others of the art world ilk. The work took on a performative nature that Karl did not intend when he first incepted the project. The visitors grew in number, until spectators lined the walls of his studio and crowded outside. Some spectators carried sketch pads and audio recorders, while others held bottles of beer. Within a month, Karl came to hate the spectacle. Although he cherished the artwork, he felt that the work was too private to him, in a way that he did not completely understand. Karl felt a fidelity to the raw material. After each session, he watched back the recorded videos of the demolition, frightened by the way his eyes leered and how simply he wiped away with his forearm the pearly sweat from his brow. Watching the videos, Karl recognized a menace in himself—a capacity to transform something so pristine into the abject. He worried that others could see this in him too.

Once the glass piled a meter high in his studio, Karl decided to terminate the project—not because it was complete but because he could no longer suffer through it. Wearing gloves coated in nitrile to protect his hands, Karl dismem-

bered the pile of broken blades piece by piece. He picked up each sea-foam green piece and placed it on the gridded vellum paper rolled out from its spool across the studio floor like a carpet. Wearing white polypropylene slippers to cover his feet, he trotted back-and-forth across the paper. Karl took a green colored pencil and carefully stenciled the jagged silhouettes of each piece of glass onto the paper. He labeled each piece chronologically with letters and numbers so that the thousands of blades were cataloged. Once named, Karl wrapped the glass pieces in bogus craft paper, sealing it shut with masking tape. (This process alone took a month.) He filled four wooden crates with foam packaging material. Inside, he placed the wrapped blades, the rolled vellum paper, a hard drive of the video files, and a manual of assembly instructions. On each crate, Karl stenciled *THE DEATH OF ADAM* in bold, black painted letters. He called for the moving company to bring the crates to his storage unit, and began the difficult work of putting the unfinished project out of his mind.

“Are you okay?” Bastien asked, breaking Karl from the memory’s spell.

“What?” Karl replied, lamely.

“Is it better to not talk about your art?” Bastien said.

“Oh-no!” Karl said, swiftly. “I’d rather—just—show you instead!”

“Right now?”

“Yes. I can take you to my studio. It’s not far away. We can keep drinking there. I have wine.”

Bastien entered the studio ahead of Karl. The gratuity of the space’s sweeping interior made him envious of life in Berlin. Large reflective glass pieces littered the floor and idled on the studio’s walls. As Bastien walked about them, Karl followed to explain his process to Bastien. He broke the reflective sheet glass into puzzle piece size shapes. On some of the cutout mirrors, Karl treated the glass with a cocktail of ammonium fluoride and hydrochloric acid that he blended at his workstation, causing the reflection to be clouded. He mended the broken glass pieces together with a gold leaf lacquer. These fault lines of gold bound the pieces back together to their original form, like matching tectonic plates that had drifted apart a millennia ago. Karl disrupted the integrity of the pristine glass, deliberately giving it blemishes and fissures. In the white box of a gallery space, Karl erected the artworks like tombstones so that viewers would have to walk among them as if in graveyard. To his surprise, the artworks were hugely popular, a fun-house of mirrors where visitors could indulge in their own maimed reflections. His gallery had been pleased by the pre-sales, when the collectors and art consultants came to visit to the studio during a preview before installation. The artwork quickly

made news among insiders in the art-world. It prompted a special visit by a large museum in New York, which began a nearly year-long negotiation between the museum and his gallery on the matter of acquiring a selection of the sculptures for the museum's permanent collection.

After the exhibition's opening, Karl had been annoyed by one critic's review—although it was positive, flattering even—in an art trade publication. The critic posited that his work succeeded where so many other artists had failed. The critic interpreted the mirror's clouding effect as a representation of a muddled society, unable or unwilling to see ourselves as we truly are. The critic said that the gold leaf that filled the cracks in the mirror was representative of life's vanities whose role was only to divert and distract. The critic indicated how the cracked mirrors were a signal of disjunction in our understanding of how the world is put together, what our own consciousness means to ourselves. The critic continued to explain how the mirrors doubly embodied the illusion of knowing, because they are assumed to reproduce reality, when in fact the mirrors are full of imprecisions and misapprehensions.

The critic was not wrong, but what infuriated Karl so much was how easily his works could be wielded to fit whatever narrative. Karl did not intend to cabinet away his intention into the kind of intellectual grandiosity that he admonished, but still, he felt it a shortcoming that his works were so easily apprehended, so easily prescribed meaning and value. Karl thought that maybe this was more of result of his personality in general rather than his capacity as an artist. After all, Karl was bad at lying, bad not saying exactly what was on his mind, bad at hiding his thoughts from the world. In many ways, it was an opposite nature that drew him to Bastien, whose life was made of nesting doll of half-truths and disguises, each more remote and precious than the one before it. Karl did not understand this when he first met Bastien; it took years later after they occupied so much of each other's time in New York. Where Karl would loudly sigh when perturbed and was quick to give monologue about what distressed him, Bastien trained himself to do no more than wince at discomfort, sepulchering whatever pained him so wholly that it was as if nothing could hurt him. Karl admired the disciple and the determination by which Bastien constructed his life. He was serious but never disenchanted. At times, Bastien was even playful—especially when alone with Karl—knowing as much that life was half a performance for others. Yet, as Bastien unveiled more of himself and his doleful life, Karl would come to interpret him as a kind of Byronic hero, a man that perceived himself as the villain.

"I bet *people* like these," Bastien said after a long silence, as he walked about the mirrors in the studio. His voice paused on the word *people* as if to exclude himself.

“You don’t like them,” Karl said.

“I’m sorry,” Bastien said, realizing his error. “I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just that I can imagine people interfacing with the sculptures. I can see them—”

“Dumbly staring at themselves? Taking photographs?” Karl said, curtly.

“No, it’s not that,” Bastien said, standing beside Karl as they talked to one another through the looking glass. “Or it’s not just that, which I also presume happens.”

“What is it then?” Karl asked.

“Mirrors tend to imply that we should be permanent fixtures of the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable,” Bastien said.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Karl said.

“What I mean to say is,” Bastien continued, “People spend a lifetime reflecting on themselves. They want to see themselves even when they are looking at themselves. And to what end? Reflection is never more itself than when it is—nothing.”

Karl listened without hearing. In that moment, he felt grounded in an uncanny familiarity, as if he had been recollected into the eternal, as if he had reached a light at the end of a darkened hallway. He felt grateful that he had been allowed to wander blindly for so long so he could know what it meant to return home.

Karl’s childhood home was like a hostel, always emptying. The first departure was the brother, Max Kirchhof, gone before the two had even met. Karl knew little of Max, hardly an anecdote, only that during the winter of his second year he had been seized by a pneumonia of which he did not recover. Karl only heard Max’s name in prayer, in whispers so quiet he could never be certain if real or imagined. The second departure was the mother, Joanna, who was as pale and thin as a candlestick. Little of life existed for her beyond the bed, as if a watchman between the waking and dreaming worlds. In the morning, Karl served her in bed, placing the molded wood tray with crusted bread, lingon berry jam and a boiled egg on the nightstand. In the morning’s lissome light hours, she was her most attentive, greeting him with kiss on each cheek and petting his head and saying, *My darling boy, my only joy*. He returned in the afternoon to retrieve the uneaten breakfast and replace it in vain with lunch’s ration of barley porridge and apple slices. During one such mealtime visit, Karl came upon her grieving so feverishly in bed that he was left pacified, turning to stone as he watched her from the ajar door with the tray in hand. Her cries were sharp, like the shattering of a vase, which caused him to drop the tray and bolt with dread back to the kitchen. Soon after, she too was gone, and everything at home sloped like it was dragged from the rope. Karl knew that the occasion of her departure was extraordinary.

The village parishioners promptly took an affinity for Karl's everyday welfare with a new faithfulness, escorting him to and from school and delivering homemade meals in the evenings. They even brought him small gifts, charcoal pencils and paper pads, all the while never hinting of the mother's vanishing, though only that catastrophe made him notable. The final departure was the father, Sören, a gaunt man with prodigal buoyancy that propelled him through life with force. He spent an hour each morning composing little sonnets, scrawling across the foolscap until the garbled phrases became the week's sermon or eulogy. In the habit of sleeping on the love-seat in the study, he rose before dawn to write, his mind a symphony of proverbs to be performed from the pulpit. After his morning spent writing, he marched out of the home for his church, leaving the family behind.

"I'm sorry," Bastien said, regretting his monologue. He felt himself flushing, the old embarrassment filled him like blood soaking into cotton. "I got away from myself. Did you say there's wine?"

"Yes," Karl said, coming back to his senses. "Let's stop talking about art and have some wine." At his workstation, Karl rummaged through his drawers in search of the corkscrew, placing items on the counter-top: matches, *washi* masking tape, a book. Bastien picked up the book, admiring the Guercino painting of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* on the cover. Finding the corkscrew and opening the cork with a *POP!*, Klaus poured the plum-colored wine into short tumbler glasses for them both. Bastien sat on the workstation's counter. His feet dangled above the floor as he thumbed through the book.

"I like how much you write in the margins," Bastien said.

"It's the only way I can seem to remember," Karl replied, offering him the wine. Bastien sat the book down and accepted the glass from Karl's hand, swirling the liquid before drawing it to his lips. The taste refracted into heavenly tangs of earth, conspiring to make Bastien think that he was fine.

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/ 30



