

Walter Such was a translator. He liked to write with a green fountain pen that he had
5 a habit of raising in the air slightly after each sentence, almost as if his hand were a
mechanical device. He could recite lines of Blok in Russian and then give Rilke's
translation of them in German, pointing out their beauty. He was a sociable but also
sometimes prickly man, who stuttered a little at first and who lived with his wife in a
manner they liked. But Marit, his wife, was ill.

10 He was sitting with Susanna, a family friend. Finally, they heard Marit on the stairs,
and she came into the room. She was wearing a red silk dress in which she had always
been seductive, with her loose breasts and sleek, dark hair. In the white wire baskets
in her closet were stacks of folded clothes, underwear, sport things, nightgowns, the
shoes jumbled beneath on the floor. Things she would never again need. Also jewelry,
15 bracelets and necklaces, and a lacquer box with all her rings. She had looked through
the lacquer box at length and picked several. She didn't want her fingers, bony now,
to be naked.

"You look re-really nice," her husband said.

"I feel as if it's my first date or something. Are you having a drink?"

20 "Yes."

"I think I'll have one. Lots of ice, she said."

She sat down.

"I have no energy," she said. "That's the most terrible part. It's gone. It doesn't come
back. I don't even like to get up and walk around."

25 "It must be very difficult," Susanna said.

"You have no idea."

Walter came back with the drink and handed it to his wife.

"Well, happy days," she said. Then, as if suddenly remembering, she smiled at them.
A frightening smile. It seemed to mean just the opposite.

It was the night they had decided would be the one. On a saucer in the refrigerator, the syringe lay. Her doctor had supplied the contents. But a farewell dinner first, if she were able. It should not be just the two of them, Marit had said. Her instinct. They had asked Susanna rather than someone closer and grief-filled, Marit's sister, for example, with whom she was not on good terms, anyway, or older friends. Susanna was younger. She had a wide face and high, pure forehead. She looked like the daughter of a professor or banker, slightly errant. Dirty girl, one of their friends had commented about her, with a degree of admiration.

Susanna, sitting in a short skirt, was already a little nervous. It was hard to pretend it would be just an ordinary dinner. It would be hard to be offhanded and herself. She had come as dusk was falling. The house with its lighted windows – every room seemed to be lit – had stood out from all the others like a place in which something festive was happening.

Marit gazed at things in the room, the photographs with their silver frames, the lamps, the large books on Surrealism, landscape design, or country houses that she had always meant to sit down with and read, the chairs, even the rug with its beautiful faded color. She looked at it all as if she were somehow noting it, when in fact it all meant nothing. Susanna's long hair and freshness meant something, though she was not sure what.

Certain memories are what you long to take with you, she thought, memories before Walter, from when she was a girl. Home, not this one but the original one with her childhood bed, the window on the landing out of which she had watched the swirling storms of long-ago winters, her father bending over her to say good night, the lamplight in which her mother was holding out a wrist, trying to fasten a bracelet.

That home. The rest was less dense. The rest was a long novel so like your life; you were going through it without thinking and then one morning it ended: there were bloodstains.

"I've had a lot of these," Marit reflected.

"The drink?" Susanna asked.

"Yes."

"Over the years, you mean."

"Yes, over the years. What time is it getting to be?"

"Quarter to eight," her husband said.

“Shall we go?”

“Whenever you like, he said. No need to hurry.”

“I don’t want to hurry.”

She had, in fact, little desire to go. It was one step closer.

5 “What time is the reservation?” she asked.

“Any time we like.”

“Let’s go, then.”

10 It was in the uterus and had travelled from there to the lungs. In the end, she had accepted it. Above the square neckline of her dress the skin, pallid, seemed to emanate a darkness. She no longer resembled herself. What she had been was gone; it had been taken from her. The change was fearful, especially in her face. She had a face now that was for the afterlife and those she would meet there. It was hard for Walter to remember how she had once been. She was almost a different woman from the one to whom he had made a solemn promise to help when the time came.

15 Susanna sat in the back as they drove. The roads were empty. They passed houses showing a shifting, bluish light downstairs. Marit sat silent. She felt sadness but also a kind of confusion. She was trying to imagine all of it tomorrow, without her being here to see it. She could not imagine it. It was difficult to think the world would still be there.

20 At the hotel, they waited near the bar, which was noisy. Men without jackets, girls talking or laughing loudly, girls who knew nothing. On the walls were large French posters, old lithographs, in darkened frames.

“I don’t recognize anyone,” Marit commented. “Luckily,” she added.

Walter had seen a talkative couple they knew, the Apthalls.

25 “Don’t look,” he said. “They haven’t seen us. I’ll get a table in the other room.”

“Did they see us?” Marit asked as they were seated. “I don’t feel like talking to anyone.”

“We’re all right,” he said.

The waiter was wearing a white apron and black bow tie. He handed them the menu and a wine list.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

5 “Yes, definitely,” Walter said. He was looking at the list, on which the prices were in roughly ascending order. There was a Cheval-Blanc for five hundred and seventy-five dollars. “This Cheval-Blanc, do you have this?”

“The 1989?” the waiter asked.

“Bring us a bottle of that.”

“What is Cheval-Blanc? Is it a white?” Susanna asked when the waiter had gone.

10 “No, it’s a red,” Walter said.

“You know, it was very nice of you to join us tonight,” Marit said to Susanna. “It’s quite a special evening.”

“Yes.”

“We don’t usually order wine this good,” she explained.

15 The two of them had often eaten here, usually near the bar, with its gleaming rows of bottles. They had never ordered wine that cost more than thirty-five dollars.

How was she feeling, Walter asked while they waited. Was she feeling O.K.?

20 “I don’t know how to express how I’m feeling. I’m taking morphine,” Marit told Susanna. “It’s doing the job, but . . . she stopped. There are a lot of things that shouldn’t happen to you,” she said.

Dinner was quiet. It was difficult to talk casually. They had two bottles of the wine, however. He would never drink this well again, Walter could not help thinking. He poured the last of the second bottle into Susanna’s glass.

“No, you should drink it,” she said. “It’s really for you.”

25 “He’s had enough,” Marit said. “It was good, though, wasn’t it?”

“Fabulously good.”

“Makes you realize there are things . . . oh, I don’t know, various things. It would be nice to have always drunk it. She said it in a way that was enormously touching.”

They were all feeling better. They sat for a while and finally made their way out. The bar was still noisy.

5 Marit stared out the window as they drove. She was tired. They were going home now. The wind was moving in the tops of the shadowy trees. In the night sky there were brilliant blue clouds, shining as if in daylight.

“It’s very beautiful tonight, isn’t it?” Marit said. “I’m struck by that. Am I mistaken?”

10 “No.” Walter cleared his throat. “It is beautiful.”

“Have you noticed it?” she asked Susanna. “I’m sure you have. How old are you? I forget.”

“Twenty-nine.”

15 “Twenty-nine,” Marit said. She was silent for a few moments. “We never had children,” she said. “Do you wish you had children?”

“Oh, sometimes, I suppose. I haven’t thought about it too much. It’s one of those things you have to be married to really think about.”

“You’ll be married.”

“Yes, perhaps.”

20 “You could be married in a minute,” Marit said.

She was tired when they reached the house. They sat together in the living room as if they had come from a big party but were not quite ready for bed. Walter was thinking of what lay ahead, the light that would come on in the refrigerator when the door was opened. The needle of the syringe was sharp, the stainless-steel point cut at an angle
25 and like a razor. He was going to have to insert it into her vein. He tried not to dwell on it. He would manage somehow. He was becoming more and more nervous.

“I remember my mother,” Marit said. “She wanted to tell me things at the end, things that had happened when I was young. Rae Mahin had gone to bed with Teddy Hudner. Anne Herring had, too. They were married women. Teddy Hudner wasn’t
30 married. He worked in advertising and was always playing golf. My mother went on

like that, who slept with whom. That's what she wanted to tell me, finally. Of course, at the time, Rae Mahin was really something."

Then Marit said, "I think I'll go upstairs."

5 She stood up. "I'm all right," she told her husband. "Don't come up just yet. Good night, Susanna."

When there were just the two of them, Susanna said, "I have to go."

"No, don't. Please don't go. Stay here."

She shook her head. "I can't," she said.

10 "Please, you have to. I'm going to go upstairs in a little while, but when I come down I can't be alone. Please."

There was silence.

"Susanna."

They sat without speaking.

"I know you've thought all this out," she said.

15 "Yes, absolutely."

After a few minutes, Walter looked at his watch; he began to say something but then did not. A little later, he looked at it again, then left the room.

20 The kitchen was in the shape of an L, old-fashioned and unplanned, with a white enamel sink and wooden cabinets painted many times. In the summers they had made preserves here when boxes of strawberries were sold at the stairway going down to the train platform in the city, unforgettable strawberries, their fragrance like perfume. There were still some jars. He went to the refrigerator and opened the door.

25 There it was, the small etched lines on the side. There were ten ccs. He tried to think of a way not to go on. If he dropped the syringe, broke it somehow, and said his hand had been shaking...

He took the saucer and covered it with a dish towel. It was worse that way. He put it down and picked up the syringe, holding it in various ways – finally, almost concealed against his leg. He felt light as a sheet of paper, devoid of strength.

5 Marit had prepared herself. She had made up her eyes and put on an ivory satin nightgown, low in back. It was the gown she would be wearing in the next world. She had made an effort to believe in an afterworld. The crossing was by boat, something the ancients knew with certainty. Over her collarbones lay strands of a silver necklace. She was weary. The wine had had an effect, but she was not calm.

10 In the doorway, Walter stood, as if waiting for permission. She looked at him without speaking. He had it in his hand, she saw. Her heart skidded nervously, but she was determined not to show it.

‘Well, darling,’ she said.

He tried to reply. She had on fresh lipstick, he saw; her mouth looked dark. There were some photographs she had arranged around her on the bed.

15 “Come in.”

“No, I’ll be back,” he managed to say.

20 He hurried downstairs. He was going to fail; he had to have a drink. The living room was empty. Susanna had gone. He had never felt more completely alone. He went into the kitchen and poured some vodka, odorless and clear, into a glass and quickly drank it. He went slowly upstairs again and sat on the bed near his wife. The vodka was making him drunk. He felt unlike himself.

“Walter,” she said.

“Yes?”

“This is the right thing.”

25 She reached to take his hand. Somehow it frightened him, as if it might mean an appeal to come with her.

“You know,” she said evenly, “I’ve loved you as much as I’ve ever loved anyone in the world – I’m sounding maudlin, I know.”

“Ah, Marit!” he cried.

“Did you love me?”

His stomach was churning in despair.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes!”

“Take care of yourself.”

5 “Yes.”

He was in good health, as it happened, a little heavier than he might have been, but nevertheless... His roundish, scholarly stomach was covered with a layer of soft, dark hair, his hands and nails well cared for.

10 She leaned forward and embraced him. She kissed him. For a moment, she was not afraid. She would live again, be young again as she once had been. She held out her arm. On the inside, two veins the color of verdigris were visible. He began to press to make them rise. Her head was turned away.

“Do you remember,” she said to him, “when I was working at Bates and we met that first time? I knew right away.”

15 The needle was wavering as he tried to position it.

“I was lucky,” she said. “I was very lucky.”

20 He was barely breathing. He waited, but she did not say anything more. Hardly believing what he was doing, he pushed the needle in – it was effortless – and slowly injected the contents. He heard her sigh. Her eyes were closed as she lay back. Her face was peaceful. She had embarked. My God, he thought, my God. He had known her when she was in her twenties, long-legged and innocent. Now he had slipped her, as in a burial at sea, beneath the flow of time. Her hand was still warm. He took it and held it to his lips. He pulled the bedspread up to cover her legs. The house was
25 incredibly quiet. It had fallen into silence, the silence of a fatal act. He could not hear the wind.

He went slowly downstairs. A sense of relief came over him, enormous relief and sadness. Outside, the monumental blue clouds filled the night. He stood for a few minutes and then saw, sitting in her car, motionless, Susanna. She rolled down the window as he approached.

30 “You didn’t go,” he said.

“I couldn’t stay in there.”

“It’s over,” he said. “Come in. I’m going to get a drink.”

She stood in the kitchen with him, her arms folded, a hand on each elbow.

“It wasn’t terrible,” he said. “It’s just that I feel... I don’t know.”

5 They drank standing there.

“Did she really want me to come?” Susanna said.

“Darling, she suggested it. She didn’t know a thing.”

“I wonder.”

“Believe me. Nothing.”

10 She put down her drink.

“No, drink it,” he said. “It’ll help.”

“I feel funny.”

“Funny? You’re not feeling sick?”

“I don’t know.”

15 “Don’t be sick. Here, come with me. Wait, I’ll get you some water.”

She was concentrating on breathing evenly.

“You’d better lie down for a bit, he said.”

“No, I’m all right.”

“Come.”

20 He led her, in her short skirt and blouse, to a room to one side of the front door and made her sit on the bed. She was taking slow breaths.

“Susanna.”

“Yes.”

“I need you.”

She more or less heard him. Her head was thrown back like that of a woman longing for God.

“I shouldn’t have drunk so much,” she murmured.

5 He began to unbutton her blouse.

“No,” she said, “trying to rebutton it.”

10 He was unfastening her brassiere. Her gorgeous breasts emerged. He could not take his eyes from them. He kissed them passionately. She felt herself moved to the side as he pulled down the cover of the white sheets. She tried to speak again, but he put his hand over her mouth and pushed her down. He devoured her, shuddering as if in fright at the end and holding her to him tightly. They fell into a profound sleep.

15 In earliest morning, the light was clear and intensely bright. The house, standing in its path, became even whiter. It stood out from its neighbors, more pure and serene. The shadow of a tall elm beside it was traced on it as finely as if drawn by a pencil. The pale curtains hung unmoving. Nothing stirred within. In back was the wide lawn across which Susanna had been idly strolling as part of a garden tour on the day he had first seen her, shapely and tall. It was a vision he had not been able to erase, though the rest had started later, when she came to redo the garden with Marit.

20 They sat at the table drinking coffee. They were complicit, not long risen, and not regarding one another too closely. Walter was admiring her, however. Without makeup she was even more appealing. Her long hair was not combed. She seemed very approachable. There were calls that would have to be made, but he was not thinking of them. It was still too early. He was thinking past this day. Mornings to come. At first he hardly heard the sound behind him. It was a footstep and then, 25 slowly, another – Susanna turned white – as Marit came unsteadily down the stairs. The makeup on her face was stale, and her dark lipstick showed fissures. He stared in disbelief.

“Something went wrong,” she said.

“Are you all right?” he asked foolishly.

30 “No, you must have done it wrong.”

“Oh, God,” Walter murmured.

She sat weakly on the bottom step. She did not seem to notice Susanna.

“I thought you were going to help me,” she said, and began to cry.

“I can’t understand it,” he said.

“It’s all wrong,” Marit was repeating. Then, to Susanna, “You’re still here?”

5 “I was just leaving,” Susanna said.

“I don’t understand,” Walter said again.

“I have to do it all over,” Marit sobbed.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

10 He could think of nothing more to say. Susanna had gone to get her clothes. She left by the front door.

That was how she and Walter came to part, upon being discovered by his wife. They met two or three times afterward, at his insistence, but to no avail. Whatever holds people together was gone. She told him she could not help it. That was just the way it was.