

From the Life of a Dog

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The heart beats, Peter van Doorn thinks as he awakes, and the blood flows. All in all, this is the most sensible thing you could say about it.

It is a peculiar thought and an unlikely start to the day, to his renewed consciousness, but at least it does what a beginning is supposed to do: suggest a continuation. Along with that initial thought, new details emerge: the space he is occupying (his bedroom), the time (somewhere between eight and nine) and the weather (sunny). It's not exactly going wholeheartedly. The new details come trudging in like grumpy, half-asleep teenagers flopping down at the breakfast table, resentful at being saddled with yet another new day. Peter observes the new details from a fair distance, still lazy and heavy on the mattress: it is Saturday; Scamp seemed under the weather last night and might have eaten something he shouldn't have; later today he's got to call his niece Rosa, whose birthday it is. The amount of information grows, and with it, his awareness of the man that he is. Peter van Doorn, ICU nurse, 56 years old.

When he checks the clock, he discovers that information is not always reliable. It is still just after six. This raises the question of whether to turn over and close his eyes and thus release the information gathered thus far into fresh slumber. It is a tempting thought, but it's too late. A critical mass has been reached, and new information comes charging in from all sides, more spirited now, not like those surly teenagers but more

like the yearling cows in the field a few days ago that followed Scamp and him along the fence, excited, rambunctious, until he took a step in their direction, *boo!*, and they collectively backed off and stared at him from a few meters away, a semicircle of wet noses and dreamy eyes – rather like the details about who and what he is now stare at him, that still-motionless man in bed.

The heart beats, he hears again, and the blood flows. He realizes that this thought is a remnant of the discussion he had yesterday evening at the end of his shift with a new colleague, a young woman whose name he's forgotten already. They were talking about the symbolism assigned to the heart: how it can hold a secret; how you can grasp it; that it can overflow with love, but in some cases remain terrifyingly cold. Nonsense, the woman had said in a resolute and, to his mind, disagreeable tone of voice. Nonsense. The heart is a pump. It beats, the blood flows, that's that.

Now he starts to stir. He rolls onto his back and stretches. Sunlight streams in, making it abundantly clear that it's summer. July, to be exact. The dog days. It has been sultry for some days now; exhausted from the heat, tired foliage droops on the trees that silently line the street; streets and shops have a deserted air because people are on vacation. Peter is not on vacation because there is no one to go on vacation with and there's no way in hell he's going to join a singles trip to classical Greece, gorgeous Gambia or the mysterious Antarctic, as his brother suggested. He'd rather die. Jesus Christ, he thinks, flaring up, what's up with Fred, anyway? Why does he think I have a *problem*? And that something should be *done* about it? His hairy fists clench on top of the sheets, although he is unaware of this, and he curses Fred as so often before: his younger brother is spineless and can deal with nothing outside the norm. *His* norm. Peter is not of his norm. Peter is divorced: wrong. Peter is single: wrong. Peter does not go on vacation: wrong. And so on and so forth. No investments: wrong. No Audi: wrong. No home ownership: wrong. No gym membership: wrong. His fists imitate the motion of the heart and pump around his anger like black blood, poisoning him – his *joie de vivre*, his vitality. He pulls himself together. Anger is bad for him. It makes him bitter and

unattractive. It makes him older. It wouldn't surprise him if it also made him gain weight, which is certainly not the idea.

Saskia, that's the name of his new colleague. She is petite and bleached-blond and has piercing eyes and Peter knows just how she sees him: an old man, spent, overweight, and not entirely with it. Old guard. On his way out. She, on the other hand, is not aware of how he sees her. A newbie. More knowledge than experience. More spirit than sense, kind of like those yearlings. Their discussion last night took place in the intimate, reflective ambience that sometimes arises at the end of an evening shift, especially when no one has died under their watch. The poor suckers might well die during the next shift, or the one after that, but for now they're still alive. They, the staff, have performed their work satisfactorily. They sat at the nurses' station and drank coffee and talked about the heart. It is a wondrous organ, he said. It expresses our deepest feelings. Nonsense, Saskia said. Mushy sentimentality.

Then he thinks of Groucho Marx and has to laugh. *I intend to live forever, or die trying*. His laughter washes away the irritation. He stretches out again and sits up in the knowledge that he's got a long, free weekend before him. Not bad. The sunlight falls onto the liver-colored wood floor and the birch bookcases he built himself. He has lived here since the divorce, three years ago now. A grumpy elderly couple lives on the ground floor, and he has the two upper floors. The bedroom is upstairs and looks out over the neighboring rooftops and a jumble of backyards, sheds and alleyways. Light shines in from two sides but no one can look in, so it's as though the room hovers above the town. It is his tree house, his crow's nest. He feels disengaged, in a good way. Here, he is free, un beholden, away from the tumult that interaction with others brings. His eyes scan the full bookcase: he knows all the books intimately, each of them means something to him. There, that orange spine, the thin one, a brilliant book. He read it the year of the divorce. Lydia thought it was rubbish, and perhaps that was the last straw: anyone who didn't think it was a brilliant book was no good, period.

He pulls himself upright, his thoughts already elsewhere, further along, at the forefront of his life. It's going fast now. The information cakes and congeals, and

gradually creates sufficient substance. He can get up. And he gets up, driven by a lust for life, smiling about the free Saturday that, like a child, skips out ahead of him.

* * *

Peter is a prudent man. He considers this a good quality, so he accepts that he is not one to have a quick, elegant or witty riposte. But at times it's a burden, like yesterday evening with Saskia. She talked, he listened. A few times, he tried to interject a nuance or a counterargument, but she didn't even seem to hear him. Her stubbornness annoyed him. He doesn't like people with stubbornly-held opinions, especially young people – it behooves young people to realize that their perspective is limited.

All right, she was stubborn, but was she wrong? What would he have said if he had the gift of the snappy comeback? Something like: of course the heart is a pump, Saskia, but like nearly every body part it's more than that. The body simply lends itself well to metaphors for what we think and feel. We can look down our nose at someone, or give them the cold shoulder. Something can cost us an arm and a leg. When we're in love we feel it in our chest, so we say our heart swells. Language wells up out of the body, and that is what I'm referring to. The real question is: what's bothering you, exactly? Do you feel the body mustn't be misused as a source of metaphors? What do you mean by 'mushy sentimentality'? I'm guessing you don't know. You have no idea. Your stubbornness and that flood of words, the repetitions, and the way you ignored my retort, express not conviction, but the recklessness of youth. What you said was no more than letting off steam, which with this job just –

I'm 28. That's not so young.

Youth is not always a matter of years, Saskia. To me you're young because you lack the aptitude for reflection. You air your feelings without really understanding them, by willy-nilly assigning them a meaning, just to be rid of them. But having said that –

Well, I never!

— having said that, Saskia, I acknowledge that you've touched on an interesting point. The heart pumps, the blood flows. We are *stuff*. To be more precise: we are biologically activated stuff. This to me is a factual observation, but an amazing number of people resist it. Just stuff! How could you say such a thing! How cold and cheerless! This resistance boils down to the belief that we are *more* than just stuff. That we have a soul, or a spirit, an inner god, something noble or unique that elevates us above *common matter*. It is a sentiment that echoes the centuries when we believed we were special, the apex of creation or the logical and glorious result of evolution, but now we know better. Nothing intended or wanted us, or dreamed us up. There's nothing indispensable about us. Unlike many people, I consider this a wonderful, liberating insight. We can do whatever we want and are therefore truly free, not bound to some religious plan or scheme. So you're right, Saskia, we are stuff —

That's just what I said!

That's what you said, and I'm agreeing with you. Borges wrote, 'We are made of *stuff and time*.' Do you know who Borges was? Of course you don't. Stuff and time. I am stuff that existed billions of years before I was born and was lucky enough, in 1961, for it to have assumed this form. After I die, it will lose this form. That's a sad prospect — I am, despite the obvious shortcomings, rather attached to my form — but who knows, bits and pieces of that stuff that now carries my name might become reassembled in other forms, like a cat, or a cloud, or a novel, or a kiss. Is that 'common'? Is it cold or heartless? I actually see *grandeur* in it. Grandeur: a glorious, riveting story that —

But no, Peter had no snappy comeback. He is a prudent man. He prefers to think before he speaks, and occasionally pays the price for it. Driving home last night, he replayed the discussion with Saskia in his head, but without her there. No one was there, and although he tackled the reprise with gusto, this only emphasized the loneliness of the exercise. He took the A9 and then the Driemond exit, drove along the canal and then turned left, then right, into Weesp, straight over the cobblestones toward the town hall that stood massively silhouetted against the summer night sky, then right along the canal.

In a word: he was alone.

The dog is out of sorts. Scamp tags along behind as always, but his heart is not in it. Every now and then he stops, panting, listless tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth, more or less reproachingly.

‘Come, boy!’

He tries to sound enthusiastic, but hears his own anxiety. Scamp is out of sorts. Peter doesn’t recognize the animal. Not really. The dog is almost like a stranger. And he has the impression that he has become a stranger to Scamp. The matter-of-fact way the dog normally responds and looks at him, and always seems to know where he is and what he wants, is absent. The mutual alienation betrays what is really wrong: Scamp is sick. He is not old and tired, not bogged down by the heat, he has not eaten something; no, he is sick. That is what sickness does: it disrupts normal relationships and reduces us to strangers. It destroys the matter-of-factness of who and what we are. It impairs intimacy. And so the two of them look at each other from opposite sides of a chasm, Peter with paralyzing fear in his chest, and Scamp with, well, Peter doesn’t know.

But he perseveres. The dog mustn’t get discouraged. Peter has to find a way to entice him back to a familiar world. He has to stick to his role, so that the dog can recognize him. He is the boss. He is the man with the sturdy gait, swinging the unclipped leash. He is the man of the sudden commands, like this one: ‘Come!’

He breaks into a jog along the waters of the Vecht. Scamp, he knows, enjoys a good run. Running is exciting. Running implies that a bad guy has to be nabbed, or a ball chased, or prey retrieved, and so the dog runs gladly after him, barking, exuberant, bursting with life.

It is, Peter notices after only a few meters, far too hot for a serious workout, but he cannot turn back now, for the dog has to be enticed and so he trots bravely onward. He is dressed for it. He’s wearing jogging pants and an old, faded T-shirt with the hospital logo he once won in a raffle at work. His jogging shoes are still as good as new – for more than a year now, which betrays his lack of discipline. Every so often his

steady weight gain leads him to piously resolve to jog regularly (and to eat less, of course, and really avoid those cheese snacks, and absolutely plan in some alcohol-free days, and under no circumstances put sugar in his coffee), but usually after three, four weeks he gives up. You have to have some guilty pleasures, he tells himself, life's too short. But if you don't jog, Fred points out, you only make it shorter.

He runs. He sweats. He waits for the gentle clicking of the dog's nails on the asphalt, for barking, but nothing happens, and when he turns around he sees that Scamp is not following him. He is lying down in the grass on the shoulder. Peter stops and walks back and kneels by the dog, whose look gives him nothing to go on. He cannot tell what the dog is thinking. He pets Scamp's head and allows a silky ear to pass between his thumb and index finger, the way he likes doing.

'Aww, boy . . .'

'He must be thirsty.'

The female voice takes him entirely by surprise. Peter realizes as he turns that he's taken in almost nothing of his surroundings, engrossed as he is with the dog. The woman is standing at a waist-high ornamental gate that leads to a disorderly patch of ground covered in rough paving stones; it belongs to the houseboat behind. There is a stack of scrap wood, gray from weathering and age. A sea of pots, jam jars, and pans is home to plants in various stages of vegetal wellness – from exuberant blossoming to utterly withered. The path to the door is blocked by a motorcycle, largely dismantled and surrounded by tools and parts. The woman, too, makes a rather dismantled impression. She was once pretty, Peter observes, but that was some time ago now. The years are harsher on women than on men. No, Peter corrects himself, it's not the years, but the men that are harsher on women than on themselves. Peter sees himself as a feminist and is pleased with this correction, but the irksome downside is that every thought about women makes him unsure of himself – he: a man, after all. Now, too. Hamstrung by the gush of thoughts of the wrongs men inflict upon women, he neglects to respond and just stands there, stock-still. No matter. The woman is paying attention to the dog, not to him.

'Just look at him,' she says. 'Poor thing.'

Scamp lies with front paws outstretched and hind legs folded up under his body, so that his hips stick out above his spine. He pants. The tongue makes a sickly, pallid impression, like a dried-out old dishrag. The woman goes off and returns with a bowl of water. She opens the gate, crosses the road and sets the bowl down in front of the dog. Scamp is not interested. He looks at Peter. Peter slides the bowl a bit closer.

'Here, boy . . .'

Now the dog laps at the water, at first rather dutifully, then with more energy. He even gets up. From one moment to the next, the tail starts swooshing enthusiastically through the July heat.

'Attaboy! Good dog . . .'

Now the woman kneels next to the dog, too, and suddenly there Peter is, squatting next to a strange woman on the bank of the river Vecht. This is awkward for him. Moreover, the distance between them is too close for his liking – he feels her warmth, he smells the scent of her body – and this creates tension, which makes him want to stand up. But he does not, because that could easily be interpreted as rudeness. There has to be some kind of contact first. He strokes the dog's head.

'Guess he needed that. Thanks.'

'Hot as hell, isn't it?'

'They say it's the hottest July since 1897.'

'Yeah, climate change and all.'

There. Now he can safely get up. The dog keeps lapping up the water. Peter wonders if it was that simple: that he just hadn't given Scamp enough to drink. He wants to believe this, but it does not entirely banish his anxiety over the dog's earlier behavior. Still, he can breathe again. The water in the Vecht smells slightly of rot, but not unpleasantly so. Further up, the air shimmers above the road in a heat that will bring everything to a standstill in the course of the day. He might be smart to –

Hold on a minute. The woman is *attractive*. He hesitated to stand up just now not because she got too close to him but because she *arouses* him. He is flabbergasted. It's

been God knows how long since he was so abruptly turned on by a woman, and apparently did not even recognize right away the feeling of being turned on—the stirring at the bottom of the balls, the member that announces itself, impatiently, a bit like Scamp around feeding time. Peter looks down at the crown of her head, where dark contrasts with lighter gray. The neckline of her blue dress pleats open, offering a view of her back. He registers that she is not wearing a bra and feels how the impatience in his member is now accelerating towards urgency—the urgency, for example, to wrest the woman onto the grass, to undress her, and to . . . well, no, that’s out of the question. Startled, he takes a step back, onto the road. Just then, a racing bike whooshes past. He feels the shifting of warm air and smells a sour odor, of massage oil perhaps, and hears the hum of the tires on the asphalt. The near-miss has thrown the cyclist off balance. The man—it is a man, Peter sees, he has reflexively twisted a quarter-turn in his direction—veers sharply to the middle of the road, loses his balance, lurches, but miraculously rights himself and continues unharmed on his way. But the cyclist is angry anyway. He sits upright, turns and sticks up his middle finger. Peter is taken aback, because there was nothing intentional about it, clumsiness at most, and besides there was no harm done, so what’s the guy making such a big deal about, what a stupid reaction, what an asshole, and sure enough: up goes Peter’s hand too, raised middle finger, a typical masculine reflex, provoked by the poison of his testosterone.

* * *

The house is oddly quiet and deserted. After the brightness of outdoors, it seems like twilight. Peter feels unwelcome, an intruder almost, which might explain why he asserts his presence in an unusual way. He jerks the refrigerator open. He yanks apart the flaps on the carton of buttermilk with such force that it tears, and he plonks the empty glass onto the counter with a thud. Then, still panting from having drained the glass in a single swig, he is visited by an unpleasant memory. This is absolutely the last thing he wants but there’s no avoiding it, so the best option is to bring it on and get it over with.

About five years ago he came home (not here, of course, but in Amsterdam) in the same way, on a similarly hot day. It was an unusual hour: he had gone to work but felt feverish and had returned home. The house was just as deserted and dark as now, but after a few moments he realized he was not alone. He could hear groaning and panting from upstairs. He recognized Lydia but not the man with whom she was apparently having sex. He wondered, as he walked up the stairs, ready to catch them in the act, who it could be. It turned out to be the neighbor. Arie. Arie was a small, stout man, did he something or other on the city council. Peter thought him a smug jerk. Arie's buttocks, he noticed, were intensely white and remarkably hairless compared to his hirsute thighs and back, and had little musculature, because they pumped – if that is the word – without much conviction. Lydia nevertheless made plenty of noise. She moaned and groaned and pulled up her legs as high as possible, while her pelvis twisted and wriggled under those white buttocks. Peter, flummoxed, let them get on with it and waited downstairs at the kitchen table until they were finished. What makes the memory bearable were the scenes on Arie's face, still adjusting his clothes on his way downstairs, when he discovered Peter at the kitchen table. His expression was at once trapped in an array of impulses that do not readily mix: the triumph that men like Arie feel after having adulterous sex; the unpleasant realization of having been caught; a quick assessment of the possible consequences (fistfight with Peter, trouble at home); irritation to have been put in this situation; and so on. Peter still has difficulty accurately describing the resulting expression. *Nonplussed* misses that trace of embarrassment. *Awkward. Tongue-tied. Furtive*, maybe. In any case, a few moments later Lydia appeared, and her expression was easier to read: indignant.

'What are you doing here?'

'I don't feel well. Flu.'

'In the middle of the day?'

'Yes.'

'Couldn't you have called first?'

Well, that wasn't precisely how it went, but that was the gist of it. That he had landed in such a thorny situation was his own fault. And yet, at that moment their marriage did not seem irreparably damaged. Adultery was adultery – stupid, blatant, but understandable enough, we're just stuff, after all, and all things considered not the reason why a marriage hits the rocks. Peter himself had not always been faithful. He suspected that Lydia knew this but felt the same as he did about it and had secretly forgiven him, so he in turn would do the same. Now, in retrospect, he realizes that the moment he caught her with Arie was indeed a breaking point. He never did forgive her. Just look: he's still angry. He's behaving childishly: he was seduced by the notion of being a big-hearted man, open to forgiveness, and that deception had –

Here he interrupts himself. All well and good, he thinks resolutely, so resolutely in fact that he says out loud: 'All well and good, but now it's time for a shower.'

On the way to the bathroom he kneels down next to Scamp, who is lying quietly in his basket, a bit limp, perhaps, but not in pain. The dog looks at him. He recognizes the pool-like depth in the dark canine eyes, the comical raising of one eyebrow, the sigh he lets out as he rests his chin back on the edge of the basket after sniffing Peter's hand. It reassures him, that recognition – it makes up for the alienation he felt earlier this morning.

After showering he calls Rosa. While the phone rings, he sees on the kitchen clock that it's still before eight, much too early for her, but someone answers. It's Fred.

'Wow, that's early. Somebody die?'

There's no one left to die who Peter would call Fred about. The last time he called Fred for this reason was when their older brother Jan died, already eighteen years ago.

'What are you doing with Rosa's phone?'

'It's lying here on the table. No idea why. I saw it was you. Do you know how you're listed in her contacts? Crazy Petey.'

'Yeah, and in mine she's called Weird Rosa. Inside joke. You had to be there.'

He adds that last bit after a brief hesitation because there's the risk that Fred will make a big deal out of it. Fred sees himself as a modern father: open, understanding. He

has a terrific relationship with his children, who keep nothing from him, but now he suddenly realizes they do just that. Peter does not wait for Fred's reaction.

'Congratulations on your daughter's birthday.'

'Thanks.'

'Seventeen already . . .'

'Seventeen.'

Fred sounds listless. What's up? Normally he is quick to take the lead in a conversation. He is the managing director of a machine factory, so he's used to that. He spends all day in meetings and is constantly talking. Do this, do that. Fred himself explains.

'That photo on Rosa's phone . . .' he says. Now he sounds more hesitant than listless. 'Wasn't that at Jan's funeral?'

Peter has no idea but is touched that Fred has brought up Jan's death. The passing of their brother is one of the few things he and Fred bond over. In the weeks and months following the funeral they visited each other regularly, always out somewhere, in a café or restaurant, just the two of them, because having anyone else around would disrupt their camaraderie. Jan's death was exclusively their business. The surviving brothers. Mostly they would just shoot the breeze. If Jan came up, it was in passing. Remember when he ... What about when ... Over the years their contact petered out to what it was now, and with it their bonding, but at times like this Peter feels a bit of the warmth he felt in those days for his self-assured, know-it-all, arrogant little brother. He can picture Fred looking at the photo, not with his usual piercing gaze, not with those hard lines around his mouth, but milder, moved, more compassionate. He tries to think of something nice to say, but Fred speaks first.

'You've put on a lot of weight since then.'

Peter closes his eyes and rubs his free hand over his scalp, a tender gesture he often makes. He likes his scalp, with its round, even form, always warm, even in winter – the sign of an active brain, he likes to joke. It is, moreover, a gesture that, in subtle variations, is capable of conveying a range of sentiments: surprise, bashfulness,

well-being. This time it is irritation, evidenced by the acceleration of the strokes, from the front of his scalp to the back, fingers bent.

'So anyway,' Fred says, 'how's life?'

And thus their telephone conversation settles into the familiar groove. They spend a few minutes chatting about everyday thises and thats. The heat, Peter's new (second-hand) car, Fred's upcoming vacation (a swell *gîte* in Provence). Fred asks after Scamp and Peter says that the dog is getting old and Fred replies, 'Well, what do you expect, he's already . . . how old is he again?'

'Nearly fourteen.'

'That's what I mean, what do you expect. And the job? Lots of dead people lately?'

The job. Never *your* job. And always the same joke. Well, *joke* . . . Peter suspects that Fred harbors a deep-seated fear of death: the swagger in his voice means he's putting on a brave face. Fred is a prime example of the kind of person he described to the absent Saskia last night, someone who has trouble with the concept of being *just stuff* of which, in the end, nothing recognizable is left. Now that Fred himself has raised the subject of death, Peter could choose to needle him a bit. He could bring up some statistics. Talk about incidence, prevalence. Relate some ICU anecdote. Say something like, Oh, when you're dead you're just gone, *poof*, it's as simple as that. This makes Fred nervous, he knows from experience, and he will at once dredge up old arguments: *nobody* can make hard and fast claims about life after death, *nobody* can *know* anything about it. True, Peter will reply, no one can know anything about it because death means there's nothing left *to* know. Ha! But after the few seconds these thoughts occupy, he abandons the idea of needling: despite the barb about his weight, he still has a soft spot for his younger brother. He therefore opts for the customary reply: his brother has made a standard quip, and now it's his turn to give the standard answer.

'The approved 2.3 per week.'

'Way to go,' Fred responds, jolly. This jollity is not only part of their little ritual, but also the consequence of it. He even chuckles: a brief, dry sound that evaporates

immediately. Then he starts in about business. That, too: *business*. Never the factory or my job or, if need be, the job—no, ‘business’. Business is more important than the individual. Business is more than stuff. Fred once gave Peter a tour of the hideous building on the west side of the city, through a large factory hall with machines that pounded and roared, operated by calm people wearing bright yellow hearing protectors and beige overalls with the company logo. Peter half-listens to the shop talk (new machine press, business trip to China) until Fred suddenly changes the subject.

‘Hey, I’ve got a brilliant idea. We’re gonna barbecue later. For Rosa. Small group. Some friends, the neighbors, a few school chums. You come too, then you can wish her happy birthday in person. Five-ish.’

The staccato in his delivery is a sign of insecurity. Fred, Peter knows, has allowed himself to get carried away by a momentary surge of brotherly love, or by the temptation to make a magnanimous gesture, which, judging from the staccato, he instantly regrets. He also knows why: Fred is afraid that Peter will not fit in. And Fred has a point. Chances are, he will feel like the odd man out. Peter vaguely recalls a retired pilot and his third wife, a smattering of colleagues, and a ceramist with whom Fred and his wife are, God knows why, close friends. Peter imagines the ‘chums’ being terrific young people who don’t get it but don’t realize this, and who take for granted the way everything simply lands in their lap. He therefore has no desire to accept the invitation. This is not a problem. Fred already regrets having invited him and will give him a free hand to turn it down.

‘Tonight? Actually, I had plans . . .’

‘But now you have a better plan.’

‘Yeah. No. I mean, I’d rather not leave Scamp home alone . . .’

‘Oh come on, it’s not that serious, is it? Do it for Rosa. You know she’s crazy about you.’

Peter rubs his scalp again. Fred not only knows full well that he doesn’t want to come, but also that he’s counting on Fred to cooperate with finding an excuse, which

Fred does not do, because he can't resist making big brother Peter squirm. The question is: will he give in or not?

'I don't even have a present . . .'

'Jeez, you've still got all day. Just say yes, so we can hang up.'

He says yes. They hang up. It's easy to imagine how, at each end of the line, the brothers stay motionless for a few moments, silent, lost in thought, occupied with the question of what exactly just happened, what exactly was said and intended, because as usual, during the conversation an abyss opened up, a chasm of incomprehension and alienation, fed by reflexes whose origins neither man can put his finger on, or even ever knew, and is further fueled by mistrust that has grown with the years and has calcified to the point that there is no getting it to budge. *Almost* no getting it to budge. Because it is also easy to imagine that in those few moments of motionless silence, it is not irritation that gets the upper hand, not ill will or even animosity, but a vague sensation of sadness, of regret, maybe of self-reproach. Why did they let it get this far? Was it inevitable? At least, this is what Peter experiences, a sadness, a regret, a vaguely guilty conscience, so that he remains motionless for quite a bit longer than a few moments, lost in thought, and after a few minutes stirs again, slowly, tentatively, like a rehabilitant taking his first steps.

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