

CHRISTOPH H E I N

THE DISTANT LOVER



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HEIN

THE DISTANT
LOVER

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
BY KRISHNA WINSTON

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In the beginning was a landscape.

A background, cypress-green, a narrow line of gleaming crystalline emptiness. Then a bridge spanning an abyss, a gorge, a stream flowing far below. As we approach—not walking or striding, more like a camera zooming in—we

realize the bridge is broken down, a ruin. Two beams spanning a bottomless deep. I, or this person who may be me, hesitate. I—let's say it is me—look around. My companion (his face remains dream-blurred, a man, definitely someone I know, a friend) raises his hands. We have to cross. There's no turning back. We must get to the other side. Far below, boulders, brambles, and water, dimly sensed. We step onto the bridge. A shiver runs through me. For the first three or four steps we cling to the railing. Then it ends, splintered, jagged, thrusting into the air, a severed torso. My companion places one foot on the beam and offers me his hand. He edges forward, standing sideways, sliding one foot out a few inches, then pulling the other one after it. I slip off my shoes, take his hand, my left foot tests the ground, the beam. His hand is clammy. He should let go of me, I think. Each for himself. But his fingers are digging into my hand and won't let go. I keep my eyes fixed on the line of trees opposite, so as not to look down. Down into the abyss. I know if I look, I will fall. We've only started, and the beam seems to stretch on interminably. Slowly we edge forward. An unexpected change in the cypress-green background, a movement along our side of the chasm. At first an indistinguishable flickering in the air, then, all too distinct against the glistening void, five runners emerge from the

woods, one after the other. Their shorts are white, and a rune-like symbol adorns their jerseys. I want to point them out to my companion. I speak, I shout, but cannot hear a sound. I cannot hear my own voice. The runners are nearing the bridge. Our bridge. They run evenly, with the elegant, regular movement of machines. Muscular young men with open, glowing faces, panting but not straining. With amazement I notice how alike they are—they could be brothers. Quintuplets running toward the shattered bridge. I shout at them to stop. My mouth moves without a sound. All remains silent. It frightens me that I can make out their faces. Not like my companion's cloud-face. Each feature stands out clearly: sculpted, sharp, masculine. They've reached the bridge. They keep their pace steady. They rush toward us on the second beam, past us, heading for the other bank. I see their even movements, their panting mouths, yet still there is no sound. A silent scene. My companion is gripping me tightly. His nails are cutting into my arm. We stand, transfixed. The other beam trembles after the runners have crossed, and then grows still. We could go on. Or maybe we should turn back. But for us there is no turning back; we have to cross. And now it is even more hopeless.

Then the images vanish. Fog, or grayness, or nothingness.

And now, the sound. The measured footsteps of the run, evenly hammering, like clockwork. The quivering beat the soft whistle of an amplitude. Finally a high tone, echoes away. Imageless. Asynchronic.

Later, much later, attempts at reconstruction. Re-creation of an event. Hoped-for approximation. To grasp, to comprehend. Its precise nature remains uncertain. A dream. Or a distant remembering. An image I cannot reach, nor ultimately understand. Nonetheless a reassuring presence within the nameless, inexplicable entity that is also me. Finally the desire passes. Finished. Buried beneath my over-real reality, beneath images of my daily life, gaudy, loud, insignificant. Healing. And only the terror, the experience of utter helplessness, remains inside me, elusive, ineradicable.

1



Even on the morning of the funeral I still wasn't sure whether I'd go. And since I didn't know what I would decide by noon, I took my mid-season coat out of the closet. It was a dark blue that might pass for black, with a rabbit-fur collar. It was obviously wrong for warm weather, but I didn't want to run around all day in a black suit. And in

case I did decide to go, it seemed just as inappropriate to turn up at the cemetery in a summer dress. The coat was a compromise. In case I actually went. I draped it over my arm before locking the door to my apartment.

I had to wait for the elevator. The officer from Frau Rupprecht's apartment was standing between the two elevator doors, pressing both call buttons. He too had a coat over his arm, a sort of military raincape. Maybe he was with the police and not the army. I can't tell all their uniforms apart. A bag stuck out from under his cape, some kind of attaché case. He nodded to me when I approached, then without a word turned back to the elevator buttons. He kept tapping out a rhythm with the toe of his boot.

Somewhere in the depths of the elevator shaft came a rustling, a vibration of steel cables, the promise of a change long wished for, the sort of hope that fosters patience. Then the light appeared behind the little window. The officer slid the door open and got into the elevator, which wasn't empty. With my bulky coat over my arm, I pushed in behind him. The stolid faces became downright unfriendly. A silent descent into the depths. The elevator stopped twice, but no one got out, no one got in. I stared wordlessly at the faces pressing in all around me, and was stared at in turn, just as wordlessly and directly. An undesired introduction with all our senses, especially offensive to the sense of smell.

Down in the lobby I glanced at the mailboxes. Nothing but newspapers; the mail would come later. The death notice was still posted. A standard form, with name, cemetery, and time of day written in blue ball-point. Someone had tacked it to the bulletin board. Probably the building superintendent. He must have got it in the mail. Eventually

he'll get notices like that for everyone in the building who dies. And that, aside from fixing a leaky faucet, or taking a screwdriver to an accidentally locked door which he then opens with a powerful shove of his shoulder, will be the only personal contact he has with the tenants.

I doubt this notice means anything to anyone. Too many people die in my building. There are simply too many old people here. Every month these sheets of paper bordered in black hang on the bulletin board for three or four days, until someone pulls them down. I doubt if anyone in the building besides me knew Henry. He would have mentioned it.

I laid my coat on the back seat and drove to the hospital.

There was a note under my door. The chief was asking me to go with him to the mayor's office that afternoon. He had requested an appointment because the housing commission had taken two rooms away from the hospital. Our space allotment had never been reduced before. We need those rooms so we can recruit nurses from the provinces; they won't work for us unless we can give them a room in Berlin. I had no idea why he wanted me to come along. Maybe he thought I was still the social-welfare steward for the union. I'd given up that position last year. Or maybe he just wanted company. Our chief of staff was known for liking to appear with a retinue wherever he went. I was to call him right away.

At eight-fifteen the nurse, Carla, arrived. As always she rushed into my office, saying she was a bit late because of the children—you know. Carla's a bit late every day, and it always has something to do with the children. I'm sure she only mentions it because she thinks I'll feel guilty. She's the type of woman who clings to her domestic role. That

cow-eyed, steamy bliss is something we won't let go; after all, it's our purpose in life. We live for our children, who live for their children, who live . . . Apparently humankind has fallen into a vicious circle. The succession of generations—all based on false premises. The devil as past master of the syllogism. That might make for a nice rude awakening someday. But for the time being, life does have a meaning. At least Carla thinks so. She's also sure she knows what caused my divorce. She's convinced my husband left me because I failed to present him with chubby little babies, or because I don't have a large bust, or because I don't use makeup.

When Carla opened the wardrobe and saw my coat, she asked if I was going to a funeral. I was annoyed I hadn't left it in the car. Her asking decided the matter: I would go to the cemetery that afternoon. Any reservations I might have felt vanished in the face of her tactlessness. I could feel myself tensing with anger. Then came the usual remarks—a relative? Oh, a friend, how awful, was he young? Oh, that's really terrible, I know how you must feel, you look so pale. I busied myself with some files. Carla was changing into her uniform. Since the file cabinet and storage cupboards were in the front room, they had put our wardrobe into my office. So my nurse had to come in here to change, wash up, and do her hair. Carla's very big on grooming. She contrives to hop around in her brassiere for hours, busy with her nails or applying various lotions. One time she told me she felt all sweaty, an expression that nauseated me.

While Carla was changing, I phoned the chief. I said I had to go to a funeral that afternoon. He didn't comment. I was relieved he didn't try to express his sympathy. I also

told him that the new woman in ophthalmology had taken over my position in the union. She hadn't been around long enough to come up with any plausible excuse for not serving. I pointed out to him that she was prettier and younger than I. He pretended to be indignant and talked about my charm, which had supposedly made him my eternal captive. Then he hung up. Carla went out into the front room. I could hear her unlock the door and call in the patients.

Just before lunch Herr Doyé came to see me. He's seventy-two, of French Huguenot descent. Married to a woman who's paralyzed, which doesn't prevent him from regularly "doing it" with her, as he puts it. He loves to talk about his sex life. Which probably explains why he comes in every week. There's nothing wrong with him. He sits in my office for five minutes, tells me what a man he used to be and still is. Then I throw him out, and he goes to sit with Carla or with the other patients in the waiting room, where he continues in the same vein. Last week he brought me a lipstick. He insisted that I try it right away. When I twisted the bottom part, up came a little dark-red phallus made of plastic. He thought it was hilarious. He said the two of us knew what the score was, there wasn't a thing anyone could tell us. He's a dirty, disgusting, very nice old man. Some days I find him quite bearable and hear him out. Sometimes I can't stand him and send him on his way immediately.

Today all he talked about was the funeral I was going to. That birdbrain Carla had told him about it. Now he wanted to hear how well I'd known Henry, and whether I'd "done it" with him. Finally he went out to sit with Carla. She often complains about his pawing her, but I'm not sure she really minds. I suspect she's one of those women who will let a man do anything he wants just because he's

a man. In any case, I have no intention of giving old Doyé a talking-to, as Carla says I should. She's a grown woman who can take care of herself. Why should I hurt a poor old man's feelings, when all he wants is to kill time until his television program comes on?

At lunch I noticed that the chief had already invited the new doctor to sit at his table. He winked at me and motioned toward her with his head. I sat down at my usual place and started in on my vegetable soup. My colleagues had heard about the funeral and asked a few questions out of politeness. But in fact no one cared, and soon we were back to the usual topics. One of the doctors from radiology had had his car stolen three weeks ago. He had bought it only a few months before that, for twice the book value. The police told him there was no hope of finding it, and referred him to the insurance company. Which, it turned out, would cover only a fraction of the book value. For three weeks he's talked about nothing else, and most of the others share his outrage. I think he'd kill the thief if he could catch him. The Hippocratic Oath has its limits. Like everything else.

After lunch I went out for a cup of coffee with Anne. Anne's three years older than I am. She started out as a dentist but had to give it up a few years ago, because her wrists tend to get inflamed. She went back to medical school and became an anesthesiologist. She has four children and a husband who rapes her every two weeks or so. Apart from that they enjoy their sex life, which is pretty regular, she says, but now and then he rapes her. She says he needs it. She doesn't want a divorce because of the children and because she's afraid of being alone. So she puts up with it. Whenever she's had a drink or two she starts to bitch and moan about her husband. But she stays with him. I keep

my distance. It's a strain being friends with a woman who's resigned to her own degradation. Her husband, who's also a doctor, is fourteen years older. Now she's just waiting for him to "go limp." Senility as hope. I suppose there are crazier things to look forward to.

At the café Anne is quite the lady: the doctor having her coffee. The usual flirtation with the proprietor. She'd probably flinch if he put his hand on her shoulder. She shows off her new suit, black with a lilac scarf. Her husband bought it for her yesterday. She says it was terribly expensive, but he paid for it without a word. The present after. Poor Anne. Maybe I should borrow the suit. It would be more appropriate for the cemetery than my heavy coat. On the other hand, what do I want with her rages? God knows she's earned the right not to have to share her suit with anyone.

She talked about a poetry reading she'd heard in a church last week. People had asked the poet all sorts of political questions, and he sidestepped them diplomatically, with a nice sense of humor. I tried not to stare at her plate. She was already on her third piece of cake. I knew that if I so much as mentioned it, her eyes would immediately fill with tears, so I kept quiet. There's no way to help her. Let her eat cake; her figure can stand it.

We ordered one more brandy. Then I said good-bye. I stopped at the office to get my dark coat. Carla was on the phone with a patient and waved frantically for me to wait. I made signs I was in a hurry and slipped out.

Around lunchtime the streets are empty, so I could drive fast. I stopped at a flower shop on the way and bought nine white carnations. The closer I got to the cemetery, the more nervous I felt. It occurred to me that I hadn't thought about

Henry all day. Even now all I could think of was that I was supposed to remember him. It wasn't too late to turn around, go home, grab my camera, and spend the afternoon driving around taking pictures. Henry certainly didn't expect me to "pay my last respects." To him, funerals and sickbed visits were like other people's marital quarrels you overhear without meaning to. They're unpleasant and turn you into a voyeur. A waste of time. Atavistic cults of the dead. Toying, though not admitting it, with the hope of eternity, never quite abandoned. Or else plain gloating: Look who's burying whom! After all, there are funeral homes that handle these things professionally, impeccably. Why be there in person? Solidarity with a corpse? Why do people feel compelled to actually be there when they throw the dirt on someone or slide him into the oven? Why do they feel they must? It isn't the person you loved any longer. I had hoped Henry would be buried in Dresden. Dresden is far enough away that it would have been easy to decide not to go.

The engine began to knock. I shifted into neutral and pumped the accelerator twice. Remember to get gas afterward, I told myself.

I parked on a side street, even though there were plenty of spaces in front of the cemetery. I sat in the car for a few seconds, my mind quite blank. Then I took the flowers, got out, and wrapped the coat over my shoulders.

From the cemetery gate I could see people standing outside the chapel, waiting in two groups. Probably the undertaker was late, and each group was waiting to be called in and processed. It struck me that I had never met any of Henry's relatives. Which group was I supposed to join? Given my distaste for funerals, it would be ironic if I ended

up at a total stranger's. But I didn't know whom to ask. I didn't even know how to phrase the question. Excuse me, which corpse do you belong to?

I had hoped to see Henry's colleague, a familiar face as a token of my right to be there. He was not in either group. I had stopped short, and everyone turned to stare at me. The awkward waiting for solemnity, the self-conscious, muted comments about the departed, about the future, about fate, about the likelihood of rain. The conversational possibilities are limited, and all talk breaks off with the arrival of someone new. A liberating apparition: now it's all right to examine the stranger in silence.

I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my handbag, but put them back immediately. Ashes to ashes, but smoking isn't very acceptable.

They were still staring at me. Obviously we were all troubled by the same question: to whom do I belong, to which corpse? Was there someone I was supposed to say hello to? I entered the flower shop just inside the gate. As I opened the door, a bell tinkled. Inside, a wet, tiled rotunda, green plants and white bows. A bead curtain separated the shop from the workroom behind. Through the window I could see the groups waiting in front of the chapel. The saleswoman came out, a gaunt woman in black with deep creases around her mouth. It comes with the business, the proximity to death.

May I help you?

She looked at my carnations.

Could you tell me which funeral is taking place now?

Ask the sexton.

Her voice was weary. Now she was convinced of what she had already suspected: I wasn't buying anything.

Where would I find the sexton?

Somewhere around there.

She pointed in the direction of the cemetery. Then she went toward the back room and stood there surrounded by the bead curtain, watching until I left the shop.

Outside I looked at the window display and wondered what to do. Maybe I was at the wrong cemetery altogether, maybe Henry was being buried somewhere else while I stood waiting here. In the glass I could see the door to the chapel opening. I turned around. A man came out, small, his head bowed. He said something, but I couldn't make it out. One group began to move, and then stopped a few steps outside of the chapel. I went over to them. Just as I was about to speak to the little man, he asked me if I was part of the "Henry Sommer service." I nodded. He said it would be starting in a few minutes.

I was standing in the middle of about twenty people, who now examined me even more boldly. I straightened my coat and stared alternately at my flowers and the toes of my shoes.

When the doors to the chapel swung open, we had to step aside. Four men carried out a coffin, and behind it walked three young men, with long, unkempt hair, none older than twenty. One of the young men noticed me watching. He raised his head, looked me in the eye for a moment, and grinned. I turned away. The double doors closed, then immediately opened again. The difficult rites of death. The little man with the stoop waved us inside. I followed the others. In front of the altar stood the coffin. The stooped man removed the wreaths and flowers and placed them around the platform. An arrangement: he deliberated, selected. The wreaths in the center, two inscribed bows care-