A TIME WHEN
NOT VERY MUCH
HAPPENED

Tetra Balestri
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in memoriam
Augusta Fagin outside 31 Traunstrasse, Salzburg, 1952
Day Zero

1:00 P.M.

I’m outside Larry’s apartment building on East 12th Street in Manhattan. I’m clenching the handle of an old black suitcase that is on its last legs. I’m here because of a voicemail I received last week:

Tetra, it’s Larry. This is a desperation call. I need you. I don’t know if it’s possible, but, if you call me, I’ll tell you what it is. It’s something that would be fabulous for you and fabulous for me too. And we would just have to leave Milenko at home. I need you for eight days. I’m going to take you to Europe first class, all expenses paid. I need a . . . I need someone to make sure I’m OK. I’m pretty good, but doing it alone would be really rough. It wouldn’t require anything, except ensuring that I’m not going to fall down or anything. There’s something special about this and I’d like to talk to you about it. I know you’re in school; I thought maybe Spring Break is coming up. The dates are the twenty-second to the thirtieth of March. That’s eleven days from now, the twenty-second. We’d fly you into New York the day before and you can stay with us. Then, I need you to come with me. I know it’s absurd. I know how short notice this is. I will explain how important it is, because I won’t be able to go back for at least a year or two because of my treatment in the hospital. I’m free now, I’m in pretty good shape, and I’m going to abduct you. I want you to take this as seriously as possible. Consider it like a death in the family. Say you have to go. I’ll compensate you. You won’t have to spend a penny. I will feed you . . . we have these gorgeous hotels. It’s all gravy. Call me back. Bye.

I stare at the rows of buzzers outside the apartment building, panicked and embarrassed. It’s all numbers, no names, and I’ve forgotten his apartment number. I once lived in this building, albeit years ago; how could I forget the apartment number? I assumed once I got here,
it would all come back to me, like riding a bike. Well, it hasn’t. I ring the wrong buzzer and the wrong angry voice barks at me from the speaker. A woman opens the door to exit the building and I move forward, ready to sneak through. My bag hits her feet and she howls and storms off, but I’m in. I carry my suitcase up the four flights to Larry’s apartment. The paint is still peeling off the walls but the guardrail may have been replaced—it’s hard to tell.

I knock on a familiar metal door, the one with a sticker that says, “Save Tibet.” A man I hardly recognize, wearing a heavy beard and clothes that look too big for him, opens up. “Why didn’t you ring the bell?” is how he greets me. I can only smile; it’s Larry, all right. His hair is shorter and his beard is longer and he’s thin as a rail. He bashfully smiles; he’s happy to see me. He puts his hand beneath his chin and points up at his face. “From here up: terrorist.” He points down to the rest of his body. “From here down: Auschwitz.” I cautiously enter. Am I glad to be back? The smell of week-old kitty litter is the first thing that hits me. Just like riding a bike.

Larry is right where I left him seven years ago, surrounded by the hundreds of books and records that take up all the wall and floor space in his one-bedroom apartment. The place hasn’t changed much except for a few more stacks of papers and a few more cracks in the walls, and I notice the stuffing of his finely upholstered Italian chair is now completely exposed. The only clean surface is a round oak table against the wall, reserved for eating and studying. I enter the kitchen, which is also the bathroom. The bathtub is next to the sink, across from the refrigerator. Larry built a removable tabletop that can be placed on top of the tub to allow him more counter space to clutter with more papers and books. This is an old tenement apartment from the turn of the twentieth century that Larry has lived in since 1969. One of the girls who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 used to live in the building, and now Larry does, on rent control.
Larry directs me to the only other clear space in the apartment—his bed. He sits me down with a photo book, Ed van der Elsken’s *Love on the Left Bank*, to get me out of his hair while he “takes care of some business.” He sits at his table and uses a black felt-tip pen to manage the lists he keeps on his index cards. He writes a few things down and crosses a few things off. He sits in silence while he does this. The Germans have a word for it: *entlastungsfreude*. The pleasure of crossing things off a list. My first assignment from Larry, over ten years ago, was to make a list of my fifty favorite things. He then gave me some lists of his own, such as recommended reading lists of both poetry and prose and a list of his favorite films. His list taking, like much of his behavior, became mildly compulsive and dictatorial. Once, before meeting a mutual friend for lunch, he gave me an index card with a list of subjects to discuss with her. Subjects included: Van and Schenck, Noah Kramer on the Sumerians, and a newly discovered website, PennSound. I don’t think we talked about any of them.

2:00 P.M.

I hear the steel door open with a howl. It’s Susan, Larry’s wife. She too is frail. When I hug her I mistake her for a matchstick. She carries a small slinky in her hand that slides through her fingers as we talk. It’s good for her arthritis. In the days leading up to this trip, Susan sent me a flurry of emails describing Larry’s condition. He tires easily, is weak, and needs afternoon naps, although he won’t admit it. He should eat small meals throughout the day and I should tell him to put his fork down between bites to remind him to eat slowly. She ended with the note: *I’m really glad it’s you that’s going with him—I’m sad that I can’t go, but I trust you completely and know you are so capable and that you two will have a great time.*

Here in New York, Susan and I talk briefly about Buddhist logic. She talks about the five elements that make up the human body and the dance that correlates with them. Larry nervously putters around
us as we talk, then asks Susan to let him finish packing. After some bickering, Susan tells us to call her when we’re ready to leave. She lives in the apartment next door. She just got a new Tempur-Pedic mattress that occupies most of her day.

As if on his best behavior, Larry gently asks me to take out the trash. Upon opening the trash can, the cat-litter aroma hits me full force. The litter box has been changed—in fact, it has changed locations. Larry says his assistant doesn’t take the litter all the way downstairs so it has a tendency to stink up the place. I don’t say anything, but hide my nose in my scarf and hurry the garbage downstairs. I open the back door and stack the black trash bag in a bin with the rest of the building’s refuse. New York air never smelled so good.

Back in the apartment, I take in a few deep breaths. Larry orders us soup from a Vietnamese restaurant. He asks me about Los Angeles, about school. I tell him I’m studying concepts like “epistemic boundedness” and he tells me I’m lying. He asks me about my husband, Milenko, and I tell him we are considering “outsourcing.” Before I can explain myself, he falls into a coughing fit, something of a routine now after each meal. I get up and he signals me to sit back down. Since the doctors put the stent in his esophagus, food doesn’t go down like it used to.

3:00 P.M.

We still have an hour before we have to leave for the airport. Larry pulls out a shoebox filled with old photos. He starts rummaging through them until he stumbles on an old square black-and-white photo of his mother standing in front of a house. Handwritten on the back of the photo is “31 Traunstrasse, 1952.” That’s the address of Larry’s childhood home in Salzburg and that’s where we’re going. “God bless my mother!” says Larry. He places the photograph on the table. “Do you remember The Sound of Music?” “Of course,” I reply. He points his finger a few inches to the right of the photo. “That’s where the von Trapp
family lived.” He finds another photo, of his father on the balcony of the same house: it looks sunny but cold and his father seems amused. Larry tucks both photos into the pages of his pocket-size Michelin Guide for Paris, and hands me the book. He asks me to look up a Paris address for him, the location of an old bookstore he used to frequent called José Corti. I can’t make sense of the Michelin Guide and pull out my smartphone instead—at least Google allows me to magnify the maps to human size. An address comes up for José Corti; whether or not the bookstore still exists is unclear.

Larry then reaches for a book from the top of one of the many piles around him. He tells me to scooched closer to his so he can show me something. It’s *Apollinaire chez lui*, a little book of photographs of Apollinaire’s tiny apartment on the top floor at 202 boulevard Saint-Germain. Apollinaire’s widow, Jacqueline, had left the apartment untouched since his death in 1918, and it remained so until her death in 1967. The photos were taken around this time. Books take up most of the wall space, along with some exotic sculptures. Larry points out Apollinaire’s war helmet, discreetly hanging on a nail. He tells me about Apollinaire, sick and dying in this apartment, listening to mobs of people in the street shouting “À bas Guillaume!” celebrating the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm. In his delirium, Apollinaire thought they were denouncing him. Untouched and thick with dust, Apollinaire’s apartment doesn’t look much different from the one we’re in right now.

4:00 P.M.

The car has arrived exactly on time. We pile into the back seat of a black Cadillac with beige leather interior. I lock eyes with Larry and whisper, “La fête commence.” The taxi ride to the airport is all talk about Larry’s condition: the discovery of the tumor in September, the doctors, the GP, the specialists and their misgivings, the stent in his throat, and the beautiful Jewish doctor who never knew about the second endoscopy.
Larry is not suing for malpractice, but Miles, as his friend and witness, has everything written down. “I’ve made it seventy-nine years,” Larry says, “that’s pretty good.” We agree to leave the cancer behind us in New York. Talk soon turns to his student Porter’s broken heart. According to Larry, drunken canoodling is just a speed bump in any relationship. Porter is somewhere on the border of Canada, having a think. This is the longest Larry has ever gone without talking to him. We quiet down as the taxi pulls into the Air France terminal.

5:00 P.M.

Our flight isn’t until 8:00 p.m., which leaves us plenty of time to get anywhere we need to be. As we wander through the terminal, we don’t know which line to stand in for check-in: Larry’s flying first class and I’m flying coach. I suggest making a beeline for the first class desk—it’s around the corner and there isn’t a wait. There’s a makeshift lounge in front of the check-in counter with white leather chairs, a red carpet, and a few houseplants. Larry explains our situation to the attendant: “I am sick with cancer, this is my assistant who needs to be by my side at all times . . . I don’t need a wheelchair just yet . . . here are all my documents.” They check us in simultaneously, despite the class difference. Although I don’t have a first class ticket, I soon learn that being in proximity to one is just as good. We are immediately assigned two attendants. They take our passports and usher us to the TSA checkpoint. We are brought to our designated priority line only to find that there is no line at all. The attendants help us through security and place our bags on the conveyor belt. I have never passed through security so fast. Our attendants gather our things and take us through a series of clandestine empty hallways that eventually lead to an elevator. We have surrendered ourselves to Air France; there’s no turning back. We board an elevator and it opens into the Air France lounge. We are escorted through the main lounge into our own private room with a full-service bar and a view of the runway. “Would you like to board the