

# ISLAND

## SENICA MALTESE


 After breakfast, Marnie'll tell Annabella she had an out-of-body experience last night, which may or may not be true, in terms of solid (shall we say, verifiable) fact, but which at the very least, is true for Marnie, who stands upside down now in sirsasana, even though the floor is still tacky from last night's beer and hasn't been mopped since—ages, Auntie's séance perhaps, in May, but also probably much earlier or (indistinguishably) much later, insofar as the past is past and the present is hot, ripe July with no coffee, which isn't so bad, thinks Marnie, in a rare and beautiful mood because she's—miraculous—only a little hung over and, besides, the cabin isn't too muggy, what with the breeze coming in through the window and the room being sharp-sweet like apples from the garden, indeed from the tree she and Annabella once planted, whereupon two robins sing their warbled song so high and heartfelt Marnie itches for those early mornings: for sleeping bags and citronella, the trampoline still wet with dew—for all those summers she and Annabella stayed on the island and camped out in Auntie's garden, on the trampoline or underneath it, drowned in blue grasses, and presently Marnie would see it all (the craters in the earth where the trampoline used to be, the flowerbeds golden warm and heavy with pollen) if only she could stand on her head and look through the glass doors at once, but she can't; it gives her a headache pitched so she may even topple and break something else her sister's deemed precious (the little green mug, for instance, with all the gold specks round the rim), and then Annabella really would lock herself

in the bathroom again, take to soaking all day in the tub and smoke cigarettes by the pack and not eat a thing till past midnight because that's what their mother would have done, exactly, if Auntie'd gone first (and when Marnie and Annabella had arrived to an empty cabin that spring, Marnie had feared that the apple tree too must die: the branches were so brittle and the apples so late that when they finally budded, tiny and hard and green, she almost cried)—but, yes, after breakfast is best: Annabella is seventeen and so painfully serious, irascible without coffee; she can't be expected to listen to anything that might sound spiritual or in the least like advice, and right now, the cabin hasn't a speck anywhere, only the broken press shedding glass in a brown paper bag on the porch and, though that's all fine for Marnie, Annabella's been much affected by the lack of caffeine, so perhaps today they will bike into town for their breakfast, and Annabella can drink her coffee and smoke her cigarettes and look moodily out across the bay, which will refuse to be gloomy because it is summer and everything is beautiful, and Annabella will see this when the coffee's kicked in and she gets bored with smoking, and she will smile and remind Marnie of something that happened nearby when they were kids, about how Auntie once asked the bookshop teller across the street to read their palms and how he said they'd both grow up gorgeous and break hearts (a thought Marnie, at twenty-two, still finds romantic, no matter how much it shames her), and then, finally, she'll tell Annabella about how last night everything had become clear—how for a moment, she had not been herself but someone, *something*, on the outside, and she had seen their whole situation, all of their aimless grief and the dread they are somehow irreparably lost, if only she could find the right words—words that do not belong to the body, for the body cannot comprehend a space in which the body isn't, cannot, it seems, hold consciousness (heartache and love) and death in one beat—and with the blood rushing to her head and her toes pointed, numb now, to the ceiling, Marnie thinks that this task may, in fact, be impossible: isn't language necessarily of the body? necessarily embodied in breath and the shape of one's mouth? unknown outside of itself and impossible, sometimes, within itself? language fails and such a momentous failure it seems when Marnie could have sworn she'd learned something last night, without articulation, perhaps inarticulate—oh, but she had felt it, as fully as it is possible to feel any one thing, isolated in time (with great conviction!), and her fingers and toes had trembled and she'd been light and—there are no words: Marnie cannot remind herself of it, let alone explain to Annabella, and all this time upside down, she's been trying to

bring that feeling back, to dissolve and move outside herself again, but a woodpecker has begun to hammer at a tree out past the garden, and her back has begun to ache, and old soreness rising in her neck, and she is light-headed and not being these things, not feeling and becoming synonymous with these experiences, no longer seems possible when the faucet upstairs has begun to creak, meaning it must be after ten now and Annabella's awake—in short, that the day has begun to close in on them in earnest—and as Marnie presses her foot to the cool wall for stability, she thinks that maybe she'd like to forget it all, that it might be better to erase the last eight months, the last ten years even and be a child again, plant that tree again, see Auntie in her loose paisley dress again, and Annabella would be mischievous and gullible again, and they would sleep outside in the grass, swim in the rivers and ocean, bake to toffee on the warm rock beaches and feel all of this—*bodies in motion*—but as the pipes whine upstairs, it hits Marnie all over that Auntie really is dead, an absurdity she thought she'd memorized (not only in her mind, in her body as well), but the nausea trickles up her throat now, and it could be the hangover or that she's been upside down for too long, or it could be the first sign of that deeper ache, a sign that she should get back on her feet now, tumble gently down now and be ... awake, when the dream had been so sweet and Annabella had wanted so badly to stay in that bright place where no one had faces and everyone was present, even little Jimmy Nichols whose shins she'd kicked in first grade—she can't remember why—and as she looks at the grime of the tub and the irregular spurts and gurgles from the tap, Annabella could for a moment not be Annabella at all but her mother instead: standing just here as she waits for the bath to fill and listens to Auntie in the kitchen below, setting the kettle to boil as she fries eggs in dark butter and hums that song about wheels a' turning, times a' changing—but that thump, that shatter of something against the tile floor, is so unforgivably Marnie that Annabella must be Annabella and, in fact, no one else, a disheartening prospect when she's quite forgotten how to be Annabella, in any true sense of how one might exist as (or with) oneself, which is to say a full embodiment, all manner of things: joys, sorrows, longings, that clean sense of future, stretched out and hazy and three steps ahead—and now, with her mother long gone and Auntie gone with her, Annabella dreads that, sooner than later, she will become only one in a number of women, that she will no longer imagine herself as her mother but functionally be her, or Auntie, or some strange ghost in between, and as Annabella steps into the tub, scalded by the water, which she's run too hot again; always, just like her

mother—she thinks about Auntie’s theory that time doesn’t move properly in the bath, it stops—and if Annabella can put everything on hold, even for an hour, then maybe she can find a way to—what? isn’t that the trouble? that Annabella has never known what: too busy to worry, too ahead of schedule to wonder—the homework done, the dishes cleaned, the plants watered and faced to the sun, running and leaping and all together too quick for time with scabs on her knees and twigs in her hair, lips bruised from kissing whatever boy happened to live across the street because the Annabella Annabella remembers is magnetic, full to the brim with premeditated abandon because even a mistake isn’t a mistake if you can make something of it—that’s what her mother taught her, what she’s always believed, what Auntie confirmed whenever she came back from the beach crying for jellyfish stings, with swollen flesh on her ankles that made her feel weak, for a moment, human—and here and now, Annabella couldn’t feel more detached from that girl—no, closer to a slug, an urchin, some compact slow-moving thing, not quite cognizant as it blooms below water, as the submerged tips of Annabella’s hair bloom, as the ashes falling from her cigarette bloom, clinging together in masses on the blue-hot surface, and out through the submarine window, the branches of the apple tree dance, globes of fruit clasped, unripe and unwilling to drop despite the brisk island air, and the birds titter such a racket that Annabella sparks with what can only be her mother’s annoyance: yes, she can feel her—here in the tub, with Annabella’s legs as her legs, Annabella’s arms as her arms, cigarette drawn to lips that are her lips, not Annabella’s, and in all this steam and smoke, this girl-urchin-mother-child could simply melt, become one with the water but for that distant thunder in her head, a memento of last night’s dizziness: cherry-wine-stained lips and Marnie spinning circles around the firepit, a golden-haired dervish with her head thrown back, eyes red in the ember-light while Annabella swayed, chipped ceramic mug in hand, and tried for all her might to transform her feet into roots, her back to the woods, her eyes to the shadow-clad porch: the black, wavering shapes like long dresses in the doorway—Auntie, her mother, then Marnie caught mid-spin and Annabella in the cold grass: wine spilled down the front of her green dress and the stars—the stars so loud in the sky and, directly above her, the apple tree’s branches, visible only where they blocked the dark light, and Annabella had thought then that it was okay, really, all okay in the end because there was cherry wine and not all of it had soaked into her dress, and there was Marnie with her tart strawberry beer, still spinning, exhausting herself in the light of a fire they had made with

their own hands, from wood they'd collected and chopped by the shed that Auntie had built herself, and the apple tree was here, alive despite the cold, long winter, and she and Marnie had done that, planted that tree from seed with all its inedible, beautiful apples, and she—Annabella—was here, recognizably so, and not afraid to become a ghost, and now, with only her head and her ashy knees above water, Annabella butts her cigarette and sinks herself to the chin, watching the apple tree bend with the wind, then straighten, bend then straighten, on and on and on and on—still here ... while outside, the apple tree sways, pulling water from deep in the earth, roots entwined with the spider-silk threads of mushrooms, the far-reaching roots of distant fellows, the dead wood and the living, the ant-cleansed bones of a long-buried cat and the birds and mice it hunted—yes, the tree saw and remembers every burial: the hushed voices at midnight, the single lit candle, and whomsoever's bones the earth had called back, cradled for a moment longer in the girls' soft hands...

