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opening extract from

Centre of my World

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prologue

glass

It was a cold, wet April morning as Glass boarded the huge ocean liner, bound for Europe from Boston Harbor. With the handle of a battered imitation leather suitcase in her left hand, her right hand gripped the handrail of the swaying gangway. The pier was swarming with people, and water surged against the quayside. A stinging, nauseous stench hung in the air, a mixture of burnt tar and rotten fish. Glass tilted her head back and, narrowing her eyes, gazed up at the banks of fat clouds stacked up over the coast of Massachusetts. A fine drizzle spattered the light coat flapping about her incredibly thin legs. She was seventeen years old, and nine months pregnant.

Goodbyes rang out, white handkerchiefs fluttered in the wind, and engines sprang into action. In the middle of the

seething mass of people gathered on the pier to wave goodbye to relatives and friends stood a child. Laughing, he raised a hand and pointed up at the gray sky. Seagulls were fluttering in the sea breeze, like confetti on a Fourth of July parade. Moved by this innocent gesture, Glass almost regretted her decision to leave America. But suddenly the steamer picked up speed. With a mournful blast on the horn, it cast off and left the harbor. The bow cut deep into the water. Glass turned away from the mainland. She never looked back.

During the days that followed, the other passengers watched the girl standing at the bow of the pounding ship, gazing fixedly at the ocean, her grotesquely swollen belly pressed against the railing. Defiantly Glass ignored their curious stares and whispers. No one dared to speak to her.

A week after she had left America for good, Glass tasted the salt of seaweed on her tongue. At noon on the eighth day she stepped ashore into the Old World. For hours afterward Glass continued to feel a rocking motion under her feet. She had tried telegraphing Stella several times from on board ship to say she was on her way to Visible, where she wished to stay for an indefinite period. Her older sister, whom she had not seen since she was a small child, and whose most recent letter had arrived only four weeks before, had not cabled a reply. Couldn't be helped. Glass hadn't put thousands of sea miles behind her only to turn back again in her highly pregnant state for nothing.

It took the remainder of the day and half the night to

complete the rest of the journey south by train—the trains became progressively shorter, slower, and more uncomfortable. Nothing about the landscape flashing past outside reminded Glass in the least of America. In America the sky was vast, the horizon endless, at times framed by seemingly unconquerable snow-covered mountain ranges, and the rivers were sluggish and boundless. But here the countryside seemed to shrink progressively as they left the coast. As far as the eye could see, the snow-powdered forests, the frost-stiffened hills and mountains, and the villages and towns in between had the miniature scale of a toy landscape—even the broadest rivers seemed tame. After she had changed trains for the last time, Glass sat alone in the overheated compartment, her hands clasped around her belly, wearily staring out of the window into the ink-black night, wondering whether she had done the right thing. At last she fell into a restless sleep. In a dream she saw an unremarkable brown bird being pursued by a mighty eagle with golden wings. Far below was the ocean, and a zigzagging line of huntsmen were firing this way and that across the stormy black skies until the exhausted little bird gave up the struggle and, folding its wings against its body, allowed itself to fall. It hit the sea like a stone and sank into the raging blue-gray waves.

Glass awoke with a fright as the train jerked to a halt. She felt a sudden cramp in her lower abdomen and for the first time seriously feared the contractions might be about to begin. Peering nervously out of the window, she saw a small

station building enveloped in a pool of dim yellow light, and a worn, barely legible sign. She had arrived.

On the platform she was hit by the biting cold. The few people leaving the train fluttered through the darkness like pigeons startled out of their sleep. There was no sign of Stella. Speaking in harsh consonants with much gesticulation, the aged, suspicious stationmaster informed Glass there were no taxis. According to Stella's letters, Visible was in easy walking distance, a mere quarter of an hour from the town, by the edge of the wood on the far side of a narrow river. Unnerved by the old man, whose eyes wandered over her belly like inquisitive hands, and cursing the bitter cold, Glass trudged off in the direction indicated by the stationmaster in response to her repeated mention of Stella's name.

Hardly had she crossed the bridge linking the edge of the town with the adjoining dense wood when her abdomen contracted in jerks like an accordion. Cramps charged through her body in waves, followed by dull vague nausea. There seemed no sense in blindly running back. Glass forced herself to take deep breaths and keep going, calmly placing one foot in front of the other. Soon after the bridge the asphalt path petered out into a forest trail. The ground was frozen hard below a thin covering of crisp snow. If she started running now, if she was to slip, to fall . . .

A quiet crackling noise sounded through the undergrowth. For one terror-stricken moment Glass thought she saw long thin shadows darting toward her, straining dogs, maybe

wolves, driven together by hunger and cold. She stood rooted to the spot holding up her suitcase, which suddenly seemed much too small to use in self-defense, and listened, half expecting a threatening snarling sound in the wood.

Nothing.

The next contraction took its time, and Glass marched on, suddenly full of anger at herself. She knew nothing about this country she had so impulsively chosen to come to, nothing, not even whether there were in fact wolves here. And then the rows of trees parted, and her anger faded as the outline of Visible suddenly rose ahead of her in the night sky. Taken by surprise, Glass breathed in through clenched teeth. She had never imagined the house was so big, so really . . . castlelike. She could distinguish the outlines of battlements, gables, and small chimneys, countless barred windows, and a covered veranda. Dim orange light shone through two tall ground-floor windows.

Glass was about to press onward in relief when her knees gave way without warning. She simply sank to the ground as if a rug had been pulled from under her feet. She fell forward. Instinctively she raised her arms; her suitcase slipped from her hand, and before she reached the ground, her hands closed around the trunk of a sapling birch in front of her. Warm fluid ran down her thighs, instantly turning to ice, and froze to her stockings. The palms of her hands were stinging from grazes caused as she fell. Panting, she pulled herself up. The next contraction hit her like an ax blow.

Glass clutched at the tree trunk, threw back her head, and screamed. She was vaguely aware of someone running out of the house, a young woman with long hair that in the darkness seemed a dull red, unlike any color Stella's hair had ever been. When Glass screamed again, it was not because of the tiny little girl emerging almost effortlessly between her legs to face the world, but because of the agitated words of the young woman—for Stella was dead, she was dead, dead. . . . What was more, there was absolutely no chance of calling a midwife for help, as the phone bill had not been paid for ages, and the line had been disconnected. So the young woman rushed back to the house, came back with blankets, and wrapped the little girl in them, while Glass propped herself up against the tree, pushing and panting and screaming, until the first ray of sunlight touched the horizon and finally the boy also emerged from her body, far more reluctantly than his twin sister.

That is how Dianne and I came to be born: two wet little creatures, we dropped onto the crisp snow and were then picked up by Tereza, who from that moment on was to be our friend and companion, counselor and second mother. It was Tereza too who was later to present me with Paleiko, the moody black china doll.

It's a very strange thing, Phil. There are times when he'll speak to you and answer your questions.

Why has he got such a funny name?

That's a secret.

But that was many years later, on a warm summer's day,

when none of us was thinking of snow and ice. Glass, who should know better, still insists to this day that that far-off morning was a magical instant, at the moment of Dianne's and my birth, when night became day and winter became spring. Be that as it may, three days after Dianne and I saw the light of day, a warm desert wind really did begin to blow. It melted the last of the snow, transformed Visible's garden into a sea of multicolored crocuses and swaying white snowdrops, and lasted for an entire week.

part one

attics and cellars

chapter 1

martin's towel

I never even saw most of the men Glass had affairs with. They used to come to Visible late at night, when Dianne and I were fast asleep. Then doors would slam and unknown voices would penetrate our dreams. In the morning we used to find telltale signs of their existence: a warm mug of hastily gulped coffee abandoned on the kitchen table; a toothbrush wrapper in the bathroom, crumpled carelessly and dropped on the floor. Sometimes it was no more than a sleepy aroma hanging in the air like a strange shadow.

Once it was the telephones. Dianne and I had spent the weekend with Tereza, and when we got home, there were the phones in our bedrooms, connected to newly laid cables,

and the plaster still damp on the walls. Glass had pulled an electrician.

"Now each of us has our own phone," she stated smugly, with Dianne on her left arm and me on her right. "Isn't that fantastic? Don't you think it's terribly American?"

I'm sprawled on my bed when the telephone rings. The July heat has wiped me out—even at night it crawls through the rooms and passages like a tired animal, looking for a place to bed down. I know who it is—I've been waiting for this call for the past three weeks. Kat (her name is Katja, but apart from her parents and some of the teachers, no one calls her by her full name) is back from holiday.

"I'm back again, Phil," she shrieks down the line.

"Sounds like it. How was it?"

"A nightmare, and stop grinning, I can tell you are! I'm suffering from parental abuse, and that island was the absolute pits, you can't imagine. I want to see you."

I look at my watch. "In half an hour on the castle hill?"

"I'd have died if you'd said no."

"Join the club. I've been bored out of my mind the last three weeks."

"Listen, I need a bit, longer—about an hour? I've got to unpack."

"No problem."

"Can't wait to see you. . . . Phil?"

"Mm?"

"I missed you."

"Didn't miss you."

"Thought so. Asshole!"

I put down the phone and stay lying on my back, blinking at the blinding white ceiling for the next quarter of an hour. The scent of cypress comes wafting in waves on the summer breeze through the open windows. I roll over and get out of the sweaty bed, grab boxer shorts and T-shirt, and pad along the creaking floorboards in the passage to the shower.

I hate the bathroom on this floor of the house. The door frame is so warped, you have to lean against the door with all your weight to get it open. Inside, you're met with broken black and white tiles, cracks in the ceiling, and flaking plaster. The antiquated plumbing takes three minutes before the water finally comes through. In the winter, the rusty boiler connected to it comes to life only after you've given it several hefty kicks. I turn on the tap, hear the familiar wheezing of the system, and once again regret that Glass never got involved with a plumber.

"For the sake of the plumbing?" she asked in astonishment when I once suggested how practical such a relationship could be. "What d'you take me for, darling—a hooker?"

Visible's architect must have been just as crazy as my aunt Stella, who discovered the house, already then in an advanced state of disrepair, a quarter of a century ago while on a trip to Europe. She fell in love with its southern charm, quite

uncharacteristic of this part of the world, and promptly bought it. *For peanuts, my little chick,* she proudly wrote to Glass in America. *I've even got some money left over for the essential repairs!*

Stella was financially independent. Hers had been the classic career path of the American high school beauty, not thinking about the future until it was almost over and done with—early marriage, early divorce, overdue but relatively generous alimony payments. The money wasn't enough for Stella to live in great style, but it allowed for a life more or less free of financial worries. It was enough to buy Visible.

Surrounded by an extensive plot of land, Stella wrote, the house stood on a hill overlooking the edge of a tiny town on the other side of the river. The two-story façade with its colonnaded porch, the tiny bay windows and the tall casement windows, the innumerable gables and the battlemented roof were visible for all to see from a distance of miles. Seeking to give it an appropriately American name, she quite logically called the entire estate—the house, with its outhouses and garden sheds at the rear, as well as the huge garden bordering the wood, where life-sized statues of discolored sandstone stood about like lost souls—by the name Visible. It soon became evident that the money left over from the purchase was barely enough to cover the merest fraction of the renovation costs. The masonry was crumbling, the roof leaked in several places, and the garden was a jungle.

In its dilapidated state, Visible seems to be waiting and dreaming

of better times, wrote Stella in one of her increasingly rare letters to Boston. *And the residents of the town seem to be waiting too. They don't like this house. The tall windows scare them. And d'you know why, little one? Because you only have to see these windows from afar to know and feel they call for a broader view of the world.*

I grew up with photos of Stella, countless snaps that Glass had dug out from her sister's papers a few months after her death and put up all around the house. They are everywhere: in the dark entrance hall, up the staircase, in almost every room. In their cheap frames they hang there like kitschy religious images, propped up on wobbly chests of drawers and tables, crowding on windowsills and window seats.

My favorite portrait of Stella shows her angular suntanned face. She had large, clear eyes and a lot of laugh lines. It's the only photo where my aunt looks soft and vulnerable. All the other pictures show a mixture of childish defiance and stormy provocation. These make Stella look like glowing steel tempered in fire.

Three days before Glass arrived at Visible, my aunt Stella's broad view on the world proved her undoing. She was cleaning the windows on the second floor when she fell to the drive below, where the postman found her next day. With her head resting on one arm and her legs slightly drawn up, she looked as if she was asleep. She had broken her neck. Later Glass found the cable she herself had wired from on board ship, and the draft of a reply her older, only sister had been unable to send. *Baby, looking forward to you and your offspring. Love, Stella.*

Stella's death affected Glass deeply. She had idolized her sister, even after she had left America. Their mother had died young of the Big C, as Glass put it, and their father had shown more interest in alcohol than in the fate of his daughters. The fact that both of them disappeared to Europe was met with drunken indifference. No one knew what had become of him. Once when I asked Glass about my grandfather, her curt reply was that the continent of America had swallowed him, and she hoped it would not spew him up again. After her initial mourning over Stella, she adopted a pragmatic attitude toward her death. One of her favorite sayings was "As one door closes, another opens." Death had taken Stella from her but given her Tereza instead: not such a bad exchange.

The municipal authorities appointed a local lawyer to go through the dead American woman's papers to establish whether there were any relatives overseas. Too busy to go himself, the man sent a trainee assistant to Visible, a young woman with long red hair, who, once she had got over her quite understandable initial fright, set about helping the two new additions to the family enter the world with impressive efficiency. (Tereza was a city girl but had turned her back on her hometown years earlier to go and study law somewhere in the northern mountain region.)

On the bitterly cold night preceding Dianne's and my birth, Tereza had brought her own sleeping bag and bedded down at Visible, intending to stay until she had completed her search. Here she found what she was looking for, as Stella

had indeed left a will. In it she appointed Glass as sole heir to Visible and her entire estate. Things were not straightforward, there were legal complications—Glass was underage, she was an American, and she did not have a residence permit. The fact that she spoke only English didn't make matters any easier.

Tereza took Glass under her wing and pleaded her case with the lawyer. The man was fond of Tereza and took a liking to Glass, and he had friends who in turn had friends in high places. Blind eyes were turned and rules bent, regulations were carefully bypassed and favorable documents drafted. In the end Glass was allowed to stay, but that was only the beginning. Stella had left very little liquid cash, but this was money Glass desperately needed. There was no question of putting Visible up for sale. The house was more than just her legacy from Stella; it was a roof over her head and a haven for her tiny new family. Once again, it was Tereza who saved the day. Through friends at the university she found Glass a job that consisted of dealing with a mound of English correspondence and summarizing articles from international specialist journals.

A year before Tereza completed her studies, her father, a widower for many years, died. He was quite well known as a professor emeritus of botany, the only academic the town had ever produced. Overnight Tereza became wealthy but homeless. She disliked living alone in her father's home, and so she regularly spent the college vacations at Visible. She looked

after Dianne and me while Glass first attended language courses and then trained at night school as a secretary.

By this time Dianne and I were four years old and trusting as young puppies. We had instantly taken Tereza to our hearts. In return she ruined our milk teeth with popcorn that she prepared for us every evening before putting us to bed. We would chew the sweet sticky stuff from cracked brightly colored dishes as Tereza read us fairy tales. She would usually nod off over the book, and then we would cover her with a woolen blanket and stick bits of corn up her nose.

Our love for her was blended with respect—after all, like the witches in the fairy tales, Tereza did have red hair. She could reduce us to tiny panic-stricken bundles when she threatened to turn us into frogs.

With her exams behind her, Tereza went to work in a lawyer's office. Two years on she had gained enough experience to set up her own practice in the second largest town in the region, and naturally she needed a secretary. The timing was perfect. Dianne and I were just about to start grade school, so Glass could work half days. Later, when we had learned how to look after ourselves, she took on the job full-time. Then she would get into her car (the old Ford that had belonged to Tereza's father) in the mornings, and come back home in the evening, and always bring us some small present—poison-green lollipops, a little picture book, a record that was quickly played to death.

When Dianne and I got home from school, we used to heat up the meals prepared for us the day before. We didn't need to be supervised or urged to do our schoolwork. Almost all our free time was spent out of doors, in the jungle of a garden and in the woods bordering the estate or by the river nearby. Glass took pride in our independence. As she pointed out more than once, our existence depended on her working, so Dianne and I didn't dare confide in her and tell her how frightened we were of Visible, left all alone in that big house. All those rooms tucked away in nooks and crannies, many of them never used, the immeasurably long and winding corridors, the high walls that gave off endless echoes at the faintest footstep—all this was scary. Visible was spooky, a gloomy, empty shell, and we were never more terrified than when Glass suggested we play hide-and-seek there. Dianne and I shared a bedroom on the ground floor; later on, when we had come to appreciate the privacy offered by the calm and peace of the upper floors, each of us moved into a room of our own up there. I took over a room with an unbroken view stretching beyond the river up to the town on the slopes of the castle hill, whose summit was crowned by an unimpressive early medieval fortress. It was in this room that I came to realize how different my personality must be from Stella's, for the view through the tall windows into the world beyond was never broad enough for me.