THE NIGHTMARE OF 1944

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I'm driving through Linz, an industrial city surrounded by mountains. It is snowing lightly, the sky is smoky gray. The car is small, black and unfamiliar, and because of the snow I'm worried I won't make it to Vienna by nightfall. Though the road to the city is traced in red on my map, emphatically circled, I'm not exactly sure why Vienna—someone once told me I should see the old city with its accordions and pastries, the concert halls with their red velvet curtains and lush decorations. The reason for my vacation is probably much more simple: I felt the need to travel, to escape from my wife. So now I am going, by myself. I don't know the language but I hum myself a Strauss waltz and bend over the wheel to concentrate on the winding road.

But suddenly I hit a patch of ice and begin to slide down a huge hill—I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. I'm on a dirt road, pebbles bouncing against the side of the car like a spray of bullets. If someone should come up the hill from the other direction I'm sure we'll both be killed. But when a car does come it swerves effortlessly out of my way. A woman is driving, I can see the fear in her face as she passes. I mouth the words, "I'm sorry," in English. I'm sure she can't understand. At the bottom of the hill the car turns completely around, faces the path I have just made in the snow, and stalls to a stop. When I get out of the car, my legs are rubbery, without substance.

To my right, just over a metal construction fence, there is a large piece of land which has been leveled by a bulldozer, filled in with concrete like a factory parking lot. On that side of the fence the sun is shining, there is no snow on the ground. But in the distance there are several horse-drawn wooden carts, filled with old men and women, small children, draped in overcoats which make them blend into one another: dark gray, olive drab, khaki browns. Their mouths seem to be moving but I can't make out what they are saying, only the rumbling of their voices and deep, raspy coughs. And now approaching me is a woman, the same woman who was in the car, a beautiful Germanic looking woman with short red hair which is cut in bangs over her forehead. She is wearing a navy blue suit, her skirt is straight and cut well below the knee, in the style of the 1940's. She is beautiful, yet so official look-
ing I find her unbearably frightening. Before she can speak I ask her, “What are you going to do with all these people?”

“We have to move them for purposes of health,” she says. “They need to be taken care of.”

“Then why are they being hauled off in carts? Why is there so much fear in their faces?”

“Fear? You’re just imagining things, my friend. These people need our help.” She is standing with her hands poised on her hips, as though she were about to be photographed. “You don’t believe me? You could climb the fence and prove it to yourself.”

“Oh no, not me.”

“Is that how concerned you are for these people, these sickly old people?”

I’m wondering why it’s snowing on my side of the fence while the sun is shining over there, on the concrete and the horse-drawn carts. Why she is not wearing an overcoat like the rest of them.

“I can see you don’t believe me,” she says, moving closer to me, leaning over the fence. “Why don’t you come with us and see for yourself?” Now she reaches out with her hand, touches my cold cheek with her palm, caresses my face.

“I’m supposed to be in Vienna by nightfall,” I say, but now I cannot remember why. I can’t control the urge to leave my car for this beautiful woman, her seductive hand on my arm, while snow is falling on my shoulder like a tap of a finger, my body swaying back and forth like a car out of control on a mountain road.