Montauk

Max Frisch

$7.95

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A love story, tender and tenuous, serves to illuminate a lifetime of attachments. Max Frisch, Swiss novelist and playwright, reveals himself as a man, loving, jealous, possessive, and possessed. Rather than veiling personal experience in the trappings of fiction, he writes of it as though he were "telling a tale," casting himself as both subject and observer.

The present moment shows him on a weekend tryst with a thirty-year-old divorcee at Gurney's Inn in Montauk Point, Long Island. It is a rendezvous that by prearrangement will have no aftermath. In this meeting between a young American and an aging European, memory is released, partly by her questions, but also by his own need to make peace with his life. The writer, under shock from a painful revelation, considers himself as a human being—lover, husband, father, friend—and his "potency" as both a man and a writer. He resolutely faces his past and his relentlessly diminishing future. He sees that in the long view a friendship may be as affecting as love, and that love always requires the readiness to relinquish. So uncompromisingly personal is this document that the reader listens for his own inner response to the writer's voice, and the experience of reading becomes a dialogue of absorbing intensity.

Translated by Geoffrey Skelton

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A HELEN AND KURT WOLFF BOOK

HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH

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B C D E

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN IN GOOD FAITH, READER. IT WARNS YOU FROM THE OUTSET THAT IN IT I HAVE SET MYSELF NO GOAL BUT A DOMESTIC AND PRIVATE ONE. . . . I HAVE DEDICATED IT TO THE PRIVATE CONVENIENCE OF MY RELATIVES AND FRIENDS, SO THAT WHEN THEY HAVE LOST ME (AS SOON THEY MUST), THEY MAY RECOVER HERE SOME FEATURES OF MY HABITS AND TEMPERAMENT . . . FOR IT IS MYSELF THAT I PORTRAY. MY DEFECTS WILL HERE BE READ TO THE LIFE, AND ALSO MY NATURAL FORM, AS FAR AS RESPECT FOR THE PUBLIC HAS ALLOWED. . . . THUS, READER, I AM MYSELF THE MATTER OF MY BOOK; YOU WOULD BE UNREASONABLE TO SPEND YOUR LEISURE ON SO FRIVOLOUS AND VAIN A SUBJECT. / SO FAREWELL. MONTAIGNE, THIS FIRST DAY OF MARCH, FIFTEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The few slight divergences from the original text in this translation have been made either at the author's instigation or with his consent.

Montauk

A sign promising a view across the island: OVERLOOK. It was he who suggested stopping here. A parking lot for at least a hundred cars, at the moment empty; their car is the only one standing in the grids painted on the asphalt. It is morning. Sunny. Shrubs and bushes around the empty parking lot; so no view here, but there is a path leading off through the shrubs which, they decide, will take them to the viewing point. Then she goes back to the car, and he waits. They have plenty of time: a whole weekend. He stands there not really knowing what he is thinking at the moment . . . In Berlin it is now three in the afternoon . . . He does not usually like waiting, but she has suddenly realized she does not really need her purse just to look at the Atlantic. Everything seems to him a bit improbable, but after a while he begins to accept the simple reality: a rustling in the bushes, her jeans (a pale washed-out blue), her feet on the path, her reddish hair through the twigs and branches. Her return to the car was worthwhile: YOUR PIPE. Then she walks on ahead, ducking here and there beneath the tangle of branches, and he ducks down under the same branches when she is already walking upright again: the figure of a strange young woman. It is still undergrowth in which they are walking. The overgrown path is only a path of sorts, not always clearly recognizable. At the outset he had gone first—in his role as a man, since neither of them knows the way around here. At one point, a swampy ditch over which he had to help her. Since then she has been walking in front, and he prefers it that way. It makes her happy, as he can see from the lightness and springiness of her step. The Atlantic cannot be far

away. High above, one solitary seagull. As he walks, he fills his pipe and marvels, not asking himself what he is marveling at. Now and again he catches the scent of flowers, but he has no idea what they are, the plants here are unfamiliar. He has assured her that he can find the car again quite easily, and she seems to trust him. To light his pipe he has to stop briefly; it is windy, and it takes five matches. In the meantime she walks on, so for a few moments he loses sight of her; moments in which this walk with a young woman seems to him like a fantasy or a distant memory. In fact, there are now a lot of paths, or what look like paths, and so she has stopped: Which way? The map he bought yesterday is still in the car; it would not help much anyway in this territory. They just follow the sun. It is no path for conversations. In places where the undergrowth thins, the surrounding countryside can be seen: it does not look strange to him, though he has never been here before. It is not Greece—different vegetation entirely. All the same, he thinks of Greece, then again of the island of Sylt. He wishes there did not always have to be memories. They have been walking for half an hour. They want to see the Atlantic. They have nothing else to do, they have plenty of time. It is also not Brittany, where he was last at the seaside, a year ago. The same sea air. Maybe he is even wearing the same shirt, the same shoes, all of them a year older. He knows where they are:

MONTAUK

an Indian name, applied to the northern point of Long Island, one hundred and twenty miles from Manhattan. He could also name the date:

5/11/74

There are not only branches hanging over the path, causing them to duck; there are also withered ones lying here and there on

the ground, and she has to hop over them. She is very slim, but not bony. Her blue jeans are rolled up over her calves; her bottom looks small beneath the tight pants, which she is wearing without a belt, and there is a comb stuck in the side pocket. She is neither taller nor shorter than he, but lightly built. Her hair, when she wears it loose, reaches down to her hips, but now she has it tied up, a red ponytail which swings as she walks. Since he has to watch the path (if you can call it that) and also keep an eye open for the best way of getting out of this tangled undergrowth, he sees her figure only from time to time; her blouse bright in the sunshine, which makes her hair look fair too. Frequently it is a tossup which way to go—no path. Sometimes she takes a huge step to get up on a rock or a tree stump; her legs are long, but the step is too large, and to raise herself she has to make an effort. That she would do too if she were alone: toss her head sharply to throw the ponytail back over her shoulder. The prospect of reaching the coast seems ever more unlikely, but still they keep going. Then for a while it looks as if she is walking along a rope, putting one foot before the other like a tightrope walker, her shoulders bending pliantly to adjust the balance. Still no sign of sand dunes; not a gull now in the sky. She stops to roll up the sleeves of her blouse; down here in the hollow it is hot—no sea breeze. Now they are standing side by side: a peculiar sense of present togetherness. He notices that he has both hands in his pockets, a cold pipe in his mouth. Her face: he has not forgotten it, but with those huge sunglasses she is wearing he cannot see her eyes. Her lips during the daytime are narrow, often mocking.

HOW DID I ENCOURAGE YOU?

Her question—not now, but yesterday on the journey here. Obviously she is as astonished as he that he is here now, standing beside her.

His flight is booked for Tuesday.

At first I thought she was just the camera girl usual on such occasions, suddenly crouching down and clicking, telling one how to sit and then, just as one has at last forgotten her, clicking again, once, twice, three times, four times. But she had no camera. She just sat there in silence, not interrupting, as a man from some wretched newspaper questioned me for a full hour. HAVE YOU BEEN IN THIS COUNTRY BEFORE? etc. A personal interview. ARE YOU MARRIED? WHERE IN EUROPE ARE YOU LIVING? DO YOU HAVE CHILDREN? etc. So now she knew it all too, this young woman. At one stage she picked up the telephone, since she happened to be sitting next to it, and dealt efficiently with the inquiry. I thanked her. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO WRITE NEXT, PLAY OR NOVEL OR ANOTHER DIARY? My spirits rose, for this is always the last question, or at least the last but one. I tell the American public in my unpracticed English that life is boring, that I have experiences now only when I am writing. It was not meant as a joke, but all the same he laughed. She did not. When later I was helping her into her shaggy white jacket I once more, out of courtesy, asked her name. LYNN, she said, as if the first name was all I needed to know. Her long flowing hair got in the way as she put on the jacket, but I could not assist her—that hair was not for my hand to touch. One last question: DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A DOOMED MAN? Afterward I saw that she had left her cigarettes behind, and her lighter. It remained there under the lamp for two weeks, a cheap green lighter.

What am I really doing over here?

One can go out without an overcoat; a snowstorm on arrival, but shortly afterward it was spring again . . . The women's prison on

the corner, a tall block of brown brick, has been demolished; it is now a sandy square, surrounded by wire netting. Pigeons are cooing in the hedges, but they can fly out any time. Otherwise little has changed in two years. The little trees on Ninth Street are still thin and sparse; but their leaves are sprouting. (The courage of chlorophyll!) In the drugstore, where I again take my breakfast, the people serving behind the counter are still the same. The yellow taxis, the gleaming black garbage sacks on the street, the sirens of the red fire engines. In the hotel they recognize me as an old customer: DID YOU HAVE A GOOD TIME? A different room from the last time, two years ago, but furnished exactly the same: low table with marble top on which one can rest one's feet, yellow standing lamps, yellow bed coverings, green wall-to-wall carpet, a sofa the color of manure but not uncomfortable, two armchairs in the same color, the familiar whirring of the air conditioner, which one can, however, turn off. One can also open the two sash windows a bit by pushing up their rotting frames; the panes are always dirty. The parapets in front of these windows are low, and you have to be careful if you want to look down on the crossing below. It is only in dreams you can fly by your own power.

MAY I INTRODUCE YOU?

Then I either miss the name or forget it at once. I stand there and make answers and do not always know whom I have answered. Why does one do it? It must be done (say the publishers) for the sake of the book—

LYNN

I could ring her up on some professional pretext. Dinner perhaps. Now, whenever a woman attracts me, I feel presumptuous.

HUDSON:

Renewing acquaintance with the oily reflections on the water. A few fat gulls on the jetty. An old steamer is still lying at anchor; beards of seaweed on the chains. A solitary helicopter flies past. It is windy, the black water slaps against the jetty, whose beams were already rotten two years ago. A big white freighter, which will presumably sail tomorrow, lies quiet and unmoving: STATENDAM, Dutch flag waving in the wind. Behind me the old highway, at the moment under repair. The dingy little bar where they play billiards is also still there: BLUE RIBBON, the neon sign red as lemonade in the dusk. To the west there is a slimy sunset going on, in front of it a long black freighter. A few people on the jetty, idle strollers like myself. A young black is describing slaloms with a bicycle. A couple entwined on the furthermost plank look like a silhouette. An old man with a dog. Another dog without a master. The long thick hempen hawsers. A beer can begins to roll about in the wind.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS:

I rise and express my thanks.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART:

I skip the art and spend the whole morning sitting in the sculpture garden. Maybe art has nothing to say to me when I am alone. I enjoy sitting here under the few trees. I have been coming to sit in this garden (Moore, Picasso, Calder, etc.) for twenty years and more:

1951
1956
1963

1970
1971
1972

Back on my feet, I again have the feeling that my body has grown lighter. It is now quite light, as if the weight of gravity had lessened during my long walk. Everything I admit to myself also seems practicable; I must not just speak, but do.

CENTRAL PARK:

A reliable source has taught me that the famous squirrels are not in fact squirrels, but tree rats. Once there were squirrels here. The tree rats are not reddish like squirrels, but are no less decorative. One can watch them from quite close for minutes at a time, so tame are these tree rats. The main thing that distinguishes them from squirrels is that they destroy squirrels.

WHITE HORSE:

The writer is afraid of feelings that are not suited to publication; he takes refuge then in irony; all he perceives is considered from the point of view of whether it is worth describing, and he dislikes experiences that can never be expressed in words. A professional disease that drives many writers to drink.

SANITATION:

I still awake much too early. Before the daily round begins, people take their dogs, large and small, out into the street, holding tight to the lead as the animals piss or shit. One dog hour in the morning, another in the evening. One must just take care where one walks. They are clearly very dependent on their dogs and puppies, the people here; they have a craving for love and patiently allow

themselves to be dragged from one sniffing post to another, even when it is raining. Only when they come to a red traffic light do they resist being pulled along and put up a fight till the light turns green. A befouled area. Some have more than just one dog. An area full of love cravings. The white truck with the revolving brushes (SANITATION) can never reach it all; bits always remain behind.

LONG DISTANCE:

A woman weeping on the telephone makes me helpless, completely helpless; being unable to grasp her wrist—though that would make no difference anyway.

FIFTH AVENUE HOTEL:

In the day (without the glow of the yellow lamps) the carpet looks blue rather than green. At the moment the sun is on it, a slanting rectangle, but the air on my legs strikes cool. I had been reading and thinking of what I was reading; suddenly this memory of the skin: FRÜHLING, JA, DU BIST'S—namely, through the spring sunshine on this carpet, which I know: I once kissed it. I UNDERSTAND YOU NOW! All of a sudden, reading (FICTION) fails to help against this memory of the skin, which is due above all to the coolness around my legs above the socks. No bird song through the open window, but the traffic noises of a big city, quite specific noises as the buses start up again on the green light at the corner of FIFTH AVENUE and NINTH STREET. Again I place my feet, still in shoes, on the low table and eat nuts from a hollowed hand.

MY GREATEST FEAR: REPETITION

An American girl student studying literature at Yale does not put the usual academic questions. She asks: Does Stiller really want

Julika to be redeemed, or is he really only interested in being her redeemer?

WASHINGTON SQUARE:

Chess players around the stone tables with their weather-resistant chessboard tops, above them green leaves and twittering birds. I often stop there for a long time, but remain standing; I never sit down. Today someone, a black man, asked me if I would like a game. Not much of a player, as I had already noted, yet all the same I did not risk it. Can I not afford defeats? Or even a victory? Because it achieves nothing; on the contrary, afterward the knowledge of my domestic failure still yawns—

15 COMMERCE STREET:

I should never want to live in a place I had once lived in before, not even in this delightful house. One room on each floor. In the basement a perfect kitchen and an eating niche which felt like a cabin, lamplight even by day; what one saw through the little windows was not sea spray, but snow on the sidewalk, the legs of passers-by in snow and slush, the swifter legs of dogs. On the top floor, where I tried to work, the building shook most of all; the rumbling of the heavy trucks with their heavy trailers began long before dawn, and when that left off, because they had to stop for a minute at the traffic lights, there was the other rumbling of the subway. All the same, I had the feeling that the house was quiet; a quietness as if I had been deaf. The soft hum of the refrigerator, one's own footsteps, the crackle as I turned the pages of the newspaper. I could hear mail being pushed through the slit in the door, a key being inserted and turned in the front door. Had I been deaf? I heard what was said to me, and I believed it. A record of genuine sea sounds (to help me stop hearing the traffic) I could also hear; a friendly gift—

We heard Neruda reading.

VIA MARGUTTA:

The warm air has done that, the light: I am suddenly in Rome. Only the architectural background is wrong, of course. No idea what I should be doing in Rome; I am only there for a little while—

GOETHE HOUSE:

A successful man can look like a walrus and women will not only flock to him but even flaunt their charms unbidden, almost without reserve. Only out on the street, anonymous in the crowd, do I feel utterly like a walrus again.

EIGHTH STREET BOOKSHOP:

To be able to stand in a bookstore at midnight . . . I bought the little yellow Langenscheidt: only to see, when looking things up, how my memory lets me down, in almost every case. After all, one did once know:

SENSIBLE / SENSITIVE / SENSUAL

I read in the elevator that Konrad Farner has died in Zurich. I do not miss my floor on that account. Konrad Farner has been spared much. But the circle of dead friends is widening.

OLIVETTI LETTERA

I cannot help it, I have bought a small typewriter, though with no literary intentions. (A story set in Ticino has gone wrong for the