

Ne Dazio

Aradue

ON THE BANKS of the dry riverbed stands the high-rise project. It is a city in its own right, with scores of apartment buildings - great gray concrete cliffs standing upright on the level asphalt grounds, surrounded by a sweeping landscape of rubble hills, highways, bridges, the river's dusty shingle bed, and the incinerator plant trailing its acrid, heavy cloud over the valley. Here, it's quite a distance to the sea, quite a distance to the town, quite a distance to freedom, quite a distance from simple fresh air on account of the smoke from the incinerator plant, and quite a distance from human contact, for the project looks like an abandoned town. Perhaps there really is no one there - no one in the tall gray buildings with thousands of rectangular windows, no one in the stairwells, in the elevators, and still no one in the great parking lots where the cars are parked. Perhaps all the doors and windows have been bricked up, blinded, and no one can escape from within the walls, the apartments, the basements. An yet aren't the people moving around between the great gray walls - the men, the women, the children, even the dogs occasionally - rather like shadowless ghosts, disembodied, intangible, blank-eyed beings lost in lifeless space? And they can never meet one another, never find one another. As if they had no names.

From time to time, a shadow slips by, fleeing between the white walls. Sometimes one can get a glimpse of the sky, despite the haze, despite the heavy cloud drifting down from the chimney of the incinerator plant in the west. You see airplanes too, having torn free of the clouds for an instant, drawing long, cottony filaments behind their shimmering wings.

But there are no birds around here, no flies, no grasshoppers. Now and again one finds a stray ladybug on one of the big cement parking lots. It walks along on the ground, then tries to escape, flying heavily over in the direction of the planters filled with parched earth, where a scorched geranium stands.

There are children too at times. Stopped in front of the entrances to the buildings, they've thrown their book satchels on the ground and are playing, yelling, fighting. But that doesn't last long. They enter the cubicles inside the walls, and television voices can be heard muttering, snickering, humming. Or suddenly, at nightfall, there's the shrieking sound of motorcycles, and the gang whips by at top speed, zigzagging across the parking lot, circling the lampposts. Maybe ten, twenty bikes, and all the boys wear Plexiglas masks, imitation black leather jackets, orange or multicolored helmets. The noise of their motors bounces off the concrete walls, roars through the hallways, through the underground passageways, makes a few dogs start barking. Then, all of a sudden, they're gone, and the sound of their motors fades away, snuffed out between other walls, deep in the bowels of some other basement.

Sometimes they go out beyond the incinerator plant, far into the Ariadne Valley, or else they wind their way around the curves that lead up to the cemetery; they climb Lauvette's rise. It's a strange sound, like a herd of wild beasts squalling and bellowing in the night, rolling echoes around in the dark ravines. It's a terrifying sound, for it comes from all sides at once, incomprehensible, almost supernatural. At night, the air blows coldly between the buildings and over the parking lots, like over rocky plateaus. The sky is black, starless, moonless, with the great metal lampposts casting blinding circles of light on the asphalt. By day, the sun bounces off the concrete-colored walls, trapped by the thick layer of clouds, and the light is filled with infinite silence. There are reflections; there are shadows. Cars pass on the highway that runs along by the river and further below, on the free-way bridge. The motors rattle and roll incessantly between the high cliffs, cement trucks, trucks hauling wood, gas, bricks, trucks carrying meat or milk. Cars head out to the supermarkets or come back, windshields blind, as if no one were really driving them.

Today, Easter Monday, the huge high-rise project is even emptier even vaster. The sky is gray; a cold wind is blowing down the dry riverbed, swelling up between the embankments, between the tall cliffs of the buildings. The white light of the clouds glints off the windows all the way up to the fifteenth floor, with flashes that seem to move, something like reflections. Faint shadows can be made out on the great empty parking lots.

The people aren't anywhere to be seen; they've disappeared. The hulls of parked cars stand alone, just like those out in the immense car graveyards a little way upriver. This is their day, a day for abandoned carcasses with no motors, no doors, no wheels, with headlights gouged out, windshields shattered, hoods gaping and showing the black holes from which their cylinder heads have been torn.

In the empty streets there are a few children running around after a black and white ball; some women have stopped by the curb and are talking. Sometimes there's music. It's coming from a window thrown wide open in spite of the cold wind - heavy music, with languid accents and an oddly high-pitched voice quavering interminably and hands clapping in rhythm. Who is that voice singing for? The silence behind it is so great, so endless! The silence comes from the treeless mountains whose crest is lost in the clouds; the silence comes from the roads, from the dry riverbed, and from the freeway on its giant pillars off in the distance. A bitter cold silence, a silence chafing with dust and cement, thick as the dark smoke billowing from the chimneys of the incinerator plant. A silence from beyond the rumbling of motors. A silence that dwells up in the hills over by the cemetery, that mingles with the acrid smell of smoke from the incinerator plant and descends heavily onto the floor of the valley, onto the project's parking lots, seeping all the way down into the depths of the dark basements.

Christine is there walking, along by the tall buildings, with her head cast down, not looking at anything, not stopping. She is tall and slim,

especially in her black corduroy pants and her low-cut boots with very high heels. She's also wearing a white plastic jacket and a red and white striped sweater. Her blond hair is tied up in a ponytail, and gold-colored earrings are clipped to her ears. The cold wind comes in from the sea, out there beyond the hills, and whips along the interminable street; it blows up the river valley, raising the dust. It's still a winter wind, and Christine wraps herself tightly in her plastic jacket, holding the collar closed with her right hand as she thrusts the left one down into the back pocket of her pants, onto her buttocks.

The silence is so great that she can hear the hollow sound of her heels reverberating through the labyrinth of parking lots, bouncing off the walls of the tall buildings, and even down in the deepest of basements. But maybe it's the cold that keeps her from hearing anything else. Her heels hit the cement sidewalk with a metallic sound, hard and insistent; the sound echoes deeply through her body and in her mind.

Every now and again, as she is walking along, she tries to catch a glimpse of herself in the windows of parked vans or else in the rear-view mirrors on the outside of big trucks. She tries to see herself, somewhat anxiously tilting her head a bit, squinting her eyes. Then, in the small convex mirrors, she can see her long black and white shape come dancing up as if in a blue haze. Long legs, long arms, her body splayed out at the hips like a funnel, with a small pinhead of a face framed by her golden hair. Then the face grows larger, wider, until it becomes a bit deformed – a long nose, black eyes too far apart like those of a fish, a cherry-colored, smiling mouth showing her absolutely pearl-white teeth. There had been a time when Christine would have invariably laughed faced with her deformed reflection. But now she's much too anxious and closes her eyes after passing the mirror, trying to piece her real face, her real body, back together again from the grotesque image.

She doesn't know why it's so important for her to see herself. It's something inside, something that is just beginning to bud, and it's almost painful. After she's walked for a long time on the street, finding only her gray reflection in the shop windows or her deformed face in the rearview mirrors of cars, she looks for a mirror, a real mirror, no matter where – in the entrance hall of a building, in the restroom of a café, in front of a beauty parlor. She goes up to it, stops, stares at herself avidly for a long time, not moving, almost not even breathing, with her eyes glued to the other's, out to infinity.

The sun is invisible on account of the gray clouds, but Christine knows that it must be getting late. Night will be falling soon, not too abruptly; it will creep up along the river valley with the wind. But Christine doesn't want to go back to her place. Her place – that means the apartment with grimy narrow walls, with the greasy smell of food cooking that makes her sick, with the blaring television set, the shouting neighbors, the clattering dishes, all the noises resounding in the cement stairwell, the elevator door creaking and banging from floor to floor. Christine thinks of her father too – her father sitting in front of the television set, stubbled cheeks, hair disheveled; she thinks of her younger sister, her pale face, her eyes with dark circles under them, her sly, ten-year-old-girl ways. She is thinking so intently about her that she screws up her eyebrows and murmurs a few words without really knowing what – an insult maybe or perhaps just like this: "Go away!" She thinks of her mother too, with her tired face, her dyed hair, her heavy limbs and stomach, her heavy silence too, as if there were a mountain of things that had accumulated like so much extra fat.

Christine doesn't really think about all of this, but it crosses her mind, very quickly – images, odors, sounds colliding with one another so rapidly and with such force that for an instant it blows out the surrounding immensity of parking lots and walls with three hundred

identical windows aligned. So then she stops, closes her eyes against the great whiteness of this place, against this crust of salt, of snow.

The cold wind starts up again. Directly in front of her, at the foot of the giant building, is the Milk Bar. Christine likes to go there after school, to while away the time before returning to the narrow apartment with her father, her silent mother, and her sister's sly looks. She goes gaily up the steps, pushes open the glass door, and pleasurablely sniffs the odor she loves, the odor of vanilla, of coffee, of cigarettes. Today, there's no one in the Milk Bar. Everyone has gone into town or out for a walk by the shore or else for a motorcycle ride in the mountains. The owner of the Milk Bar is all alone, a big man with glasses, sitting behind the counter, reading the newspaper. He's leaning over the paper and reading each line so carefully that he doesn't even notice Christine as she comes in and sits down at a plastic table near the window.

What could he be reading so studiously? But Christine doesn't even think about it; she doesn't care. She loves sitting there, with her elbows on the plastic table, looking out through the window.

Now night is beginning to fall. In the empty street, under the gray sky, darkness creeps slowly up, settles in. From time to time, people walk by and look into the Milk Bar, then continue along their way. Christine would like to know what time it is, but she can't make up her mind to ask the owner, who is still reading his paper word by word, as if he didn't understand what he was reading.

And then Cathie walks past the Milk Bar, and she recognizes Christine. She waves her arms and bursts into the café, speaking so loudly that even the owner wakes up. Cathie is taller and heavier than Christine, with a faceful of freckles and black, frizzy hair. She's older too; she must be about sixteen or seventeen, but Christine manages to look the same age, with her clothes, high heels, and makeup. The

owner of the Milk Bar gets up from his stool and comes over to stand before the two girls:

"What will you have?"

"A black coffee," says Cathie.

"And I'll have mine with cream," says Christine.

The owner is still looking at them, waiting for them to say something else. Then he grumbles:

"All right, but I'm closing in ten minutes."

Cathie's always like that: she talks too much, too fast; she gesticulates too much, and it makes Christine a bit giddy, especially because she hasn't eaten anything since morning and she's been walking around outdoors all day long, down empty streets, through town squares, along by the shore. And also Cathie always criticizes everyone; she's truly spiteful, and that too makes your head reel, like a merry-go-round spinning too fast.

Luckily, it's dark out now. Despite his warning, the owner of the Milk Bar doesn't seem to want to close right away. He's still reading the paper but paying less attention, lifting his head regularly to look at the girls. Christine glances over in his direction and catches his shiny-eyed gaze upon her. She blushes and quickly turns her face toward the window.

"Come on!" she suddenly says to Cathie. "Let's go!"

And without waiting, she puts the money for her coffee on the plastic table and goes out. Cathie joins her at the bottom of the stairs.

"What's wrong? Do you want to go home already?"

"No, nothing," says Christine. But now that she's outside, she realizes that she must think about the apartment again, with its dingy walls, with the television babbling to itself, with her father's close-minded face, with her mother's weary body, with that look in her sister's eye.

"Ok, well, so long. I'm going home now," says Cathie. All of a sud-

den she seems bored. Christine urgently tries to hold her back, putting out her hand.

"Listen, is it —"

But she doesn't know what to say. It's a cold night; the wind is blowing. Cathie pulls up the collar of her blue jacket, gives a little wave, and runs off. Christine watches her go into the apartment building across the way, turn on the time switch. Cathie waits a few minutes in front of a door on the ground floor, then the door opens, closes again. Cathie's gone.

Christine walks a little way down the street, as far as the corner of the parking lot. She leans up against a wall for shelter, in a patch of shadow. The night chill makes her shiver after the fragrant warmth of the Milk Bar. She watches the gray sky, turned pink and luminous in the direction of town, with that dark swath still lingering over the chimneys of the incinerator plant. There's not a sound, or at least no sounds of any importance. Only the dull rumblings of cars and trucks out there on the freeway overpass and the sound of people and children inside the apartments or the nasal voices coming from television sets.

She doesn't want to go back to her parents' place, not yet. She wants to stand still here, leaning against the cold wall, watching the night, the gray, indistinct sky, the great white walls in which hundreds of windows are lit up. And the still cars in the parking lots, splashed with the dappled light of the streetlamps, the trucks parked along the street, the city lights blinking on like tarnished stars. She wants to listen to the jumbled sounds of life in the apartments, listen to them all at the same time, feel the coldness of night. She stands still like that, up against the wall, for a long time, until the cold numbs her legs, her arms, her shoulders. Drops of moisture glisten on her white plastic jacket, on her boots.

And so she starts walking again, through the empty streets, skirt-

ing the apartment blocks. She doesn't really know where she's going. First, toward the school building; then she crosses a small playground below street level and walks up the narrow alleys, where little dilapidated houses stand in sparse gardens. Small dogs come yapping against the gates at her, and there are black cats running under the parked cars ahead of her.

When she gets back to the apartment buildings, standing in the middle of their parking lots like giants, she feels the cold, moist light of the streetlamps again, and it makes her shudder.

Then there is the sound of motorcycles rushing toward her. She can hear it erupting between the buildings without knowing exactly where it is coming from. Where should she go? Christine wants to hide because she's standing in the middle of the wide street and because she's exposed by the harsh light of the lamps. She starts running toward the nearest building and flattens her back up against the wall just as the gang of bikers goes speeding down the street. There are six or seven of them, masked with helmets, dressed in black vinyl, with mud-splattered Trial bikes. Christine watches them go around the corner; she listens to the sound of their motors fade away in the distance, die out.

Suddenly she's terror stricken. She doesn't really know what the fear is based on, but it's there inside of her, like a spasm, and it's also all around her — in the silence of the wide, empty streets, the gigantic buildings with their hundreds, their thousands of windows, in the orange light of the streetlamps, in the cold wind blowing up through the valley, carrying with it the acrid smell of fumes and the rumor of the freeway. It is a strange, vague sort of fear that tightens in Christine's throat, making her hands and back break out in sweat despite the cold.

She walks quickly now, trying not to think of anything. Yet suddenly she remembers the piercing look of the Milk Bar owner, and

her heart starts beating faster, as though she could still feel those eyes upon her, spying on her from the shadows. Maybe he really is there. She recalls that he was going to close shop and that he watched her after she went out of the Milk Bar, when she was standing in the street.

And then all of a sudden the bikers are there again. This time she didn't hear them coming. They appeared at the same time as the sound of their bikes. Maybe they had come rolling up in low gear, turning and zigzagging through the lot, slipping between the parked cars to catch her by surprise. Now Christine is standing perfectly still in the parking lot, with the yellow light of the streetlamp shining on her blond hair, on her plastic jacket, on her boots, as the bikes go circling slowly around her. The bikers have their faces masked with the visors of their helmets, and not one of them seems to be looking at her; they are merely circling around her, giving little bursts of their accelerators, making their bikes lunge forward, head and tail lights casting about. As they turn, they narrow the circle down, and now they are passing so close to her that she can feel the heat of the exhaust from their mufflers. Christine stands there, frozen to the spot; her heart is pounding, her legs are wobbly. She glances around at the great buildings, but the walls are so high and there are so many windows lit up, there are so many cars in the vast parking lot, their painted bodies casting a myriad of reflections! The slow, deep sound of the circling motorcycles makes the ground vibrate, makes her whole body vibrate, fills her head. She can feel her legs trembling under her and a sort of dizziness coming over her. Then suddenly, with a cry, she jumps forward and starts running as fast as she can, making a beeline across the parking lot.

But the motorcycles are still behind her; they circle through the stopped cars and come back toward her, blinding her with their headlights, accelerating with short spurts, and the roar of the engines echoes loudly.

Christine doesn't stop. She crosses the parking lot, then runs along the main streets; she hugs the walls of the apartment buildings; she crosses the grounds covered with worn, stubby grass. She runs so fast she can hardly breathe anymore, and the cold wind makes tears stream down her cheeks. From having run so much, she doesn't know where she is anymore; all she can see on all sides are the great white walls of the identical buildings, stretching away into the distance; the hundreds, the thousands of windows; the parking lots spreading out with their parked cars; the streets lit with orange lamps; the scruffy grass on the grounds. Then, just as quickly as they'd come, the motorcycles are gone. Again the heavy silence, the cold, the emptiness grip the high-rise project, and Christine can hear the distant rumor of cars again, out there on the wide bridge crossing the river.

Now she recognizes where she is. Without knowing how, her legs running wildly carried her right up to the building she lives in. She lifts her eyes; she's looking for the windows of the apartment where her father, her mother, and her little sister are. They've already been living there for five months, but she still has to look just as long before she can recognize the three windows right next to the ones with the potted geraniums. The two windows of the large room are lit because that is where her father is sitting in his armchair, eating dinner in front of the television. Christine is very tired now, and the prospect of going back to the narrow apartment, of smelling the greasy odor of food cooking, of hearing the nasal voice of the television almost comforts her.

She climbs the steps, pushes open the door to the entryway, puts her hand on the time switch. Then she sees them. They're there waiting for her, all of them, with their black vinyl jackets and their helmets with the visors drawn down, glimmering in the light of the stairwell. She can't cry out because something is stuck in her throat, and her legs can't move now. They've stepped up close to her. One of them, a

tall one with an aviator jacket and an orange helmet with a tinted Plexiglas visor, comes right up to her; he takes her by the arm. She tries to get away; she opens her mouth; she's going to scream. So then he punches her as hard as he can, with his fist, in the stomach, right in the place where the body bends, and breathing stops. They drag her over to the door by the elevator, and they go down the echoing cement stairs. You can hear the sounds of televisions on the first floor, the clatter of dishes, the cries of children. Underground, the light is gray; it's coming from two or three light bulbs set among the sewage pipes. The bikers are moving quickly; they're dragging Christine's body along, almost carrying her. They aren't saying anything. They open a door. It is a storage room, just barely forty to fifty square feet of space, gray cement, some crates, and on the floor there is an old mattress. They throw Christine to the floor, and one of the bikers lights a candle stuck on an old plate at the back of the compartment. The storage room is so small that they are all standing up against one another. Out in the passageway, the time switch clicks off; now there is only the flickering light from the candle. Christine catches her breath. Tears run down her cheeks, smearing her mascara and her liquid makeup. Her teeth are chattering.

"Get undressed!"

The tall one's voice echoes in the narrow compartment, a callous, gravelly voice that Christine isn't familiar with. When she doesn't move, he leans over her and yanks at her jacket, tears the collar. Then Christine is afraid; she thinks about her clothing that will be all torn. She takes off her jacket, lays it on the ground. She goes to the other end of the compartment, over by the candle, and takes off her striped sweater; she unzips her boots and slips her pants off, then her panties and bra. She's shivering, naked in the cold basement, looking all raw-boned and scrawny; her teeth are chattering so hard she knows she won't even be able to scream; she's crying a little, whimpering, and she

tears further smudge her cheeks with mascara and makeup. Then the boy comes up to her; he unbuckles his belt, pushes her down on the mattress, and lies down on top of her without taking his helmet off. The others crowd around, and she can see their faces looking down at her; she can feel their breath on her skin. Interminably, one after the other, they wrench her open; they tear her apart, and the pain is such that she feels neither fear nor cold, only a wheeling blackness deepening in her, crushing her even farther down than her womb, deeper, as if the wet mattress were falling down a frozen black well, breaking her back. It all lasts for such a long time that she doesn't really know what happened anymore. Every time a boy forces his way inside of her, the pain swells in her body and pulls her down into the well. Hands are smashing her wrists into the floor, pulling her legs apart. Mouths are pressing against her mouth, biting her breasts, stifling her breath. Then the candle sputters even more and drowns in its wax. There is silence, and such terrific cold that Christine curls up in a ball on the mattress; she faints.

When the electric light comes back on, she can see the door of the storage room open and the bikers standing in the passageway. She knows that it's all over with. She gets up, dresses herself, and teeters out of the compartment. Her belly is burning, bleeding; her lips are puffy, swollen. The tears have dried on her cheeks along with the mascara and makeup.

They push her up the cement stairs in front of them. In the entryway, only the tall one hangs back, with his helmet and his aviator jacket. Before going out, he leans over Christine, resting his hand on her neck.

"Bastard!" says Christine, and her voice is trembling with rage and fear. But he presses his hand down on her shoulder.

"If you talk, we'll kill you."

Christine sits down outside on the front steps. She sits there for a

long time, not moving, so that the cold will make her impervious, so that the dark night will envelop her and soothe the pain in her abdomen and the soreness of her bruised lips. Then she searches through the parking lot for a parked car with a large rearview mirror on the outside. Slowly, with the diligence of a little girl, she wipes the mascara from her eyes and smooths out the liquid makeup on her discolored cheeks.