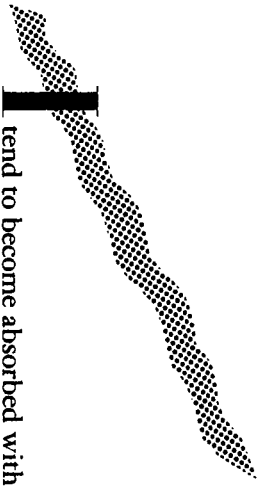


United States

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Preparations



I tend to become absorbed with possibilities other people find absurd. For example, what if the telephone rings while you are standing naked after a shower? Come quick, your child is unconscious. She is a block away. She has a chronic illness. You know what she needs. What do you do? Take the medication you need and rush over naked? Or take the extra minute to put on clothes? Which might be a fateful minute: you arrive dressed but too late. Put it in all its variations—you are making love, in conference, on the toilet, late for an appointment, about to eat: *somebody needs you at once*—the vast majority of mankind would arrive too late. Yet what good citizen, yourself included, would hesitate to smile at the man or woman who ran naked through the street? It simply is not done.

Obviously I am not talking nonsense. But thinking this way does make nonsense of my life. Looking at friends, I wonder, "Would you rush naked to my dying side?" It is, of course, like much else, a metaphor. There are many ways to be naked. How many, and which, trivial things come between you and life? Are they really trivial? Are they perhaps life itself (which would

require some serious rethinking)? But people do die. Terrible things do happen. Thus much of my internal life is spent *rehearsing* what I would do in certain circumstances. And I confess that I find myself wanting. I am forced to pay more attention to certain *small* things about myself (you can well imagine what) and take my measure anew. And, in a philosophical way, I am agnostic, I mutter, I smile even—how odd life is, what a coward I am, what a solid member of society.

I came to these reflections upon hearing of a certain Ukrainian woman I had seen around, a wife, illiterate. Her husband had heart trouble but was getting along. Friends were visiting, former students, a colleague. She was in the bedroom, changing. There was a loud knock: "Anya! Come quick! It's Fred!" (He was not Russian.) She came out instantly and rushed to the parlor. She was wearing only her underpants. She was fifty-five, much overweight, not pretty. Her breasts hung. Her stomach revealed its folds. Under her arms, at her back, was fat. She went to her husband, knelt, spoke maybe ten words, which no one heard, and he died. Of course, I thought, a peasant. She could do that. It didn't matter. But that was not so. She was, I found out, illiterate only in English, was, in fact, quite educated, had even, in her youth, published a book of poems. And that bothered me, as well as a number of other things. I might as well list them. They have no order.

1. What language did she speak to him in, and did it matter? Did Fred understand Russian? Is it possible that he did not understand Russian, that she nevertheless spoke in Russian, and that it was right that she did so, that is, that Fred heard more and better because he did not understand and died with as much grace as possible? (What language did she use when they made love? There is a question here, but irrelevant.)

2. Obviously, had she put on a bathrobe, her husband would have been dead when she got to him. Would it have mattered,

and if so, how much, and to whom? Not to Fred, certainly. The great evaders of life would no doubt quibble in the matter, missing the point entirely, e.g., she could have put on her bathrobe in transit, so to speak.

3. The people there (some were female)—they must have been shocked, perhaps more so at her nakedness than Fred's death. Did they find her gross? Ludicrous? Obscene? Would it have been easier for them had she been younger, slimmer, firmer, prettier?

4. Did Fred see their disgust at her nakedness? Was he, also, perhaps shocked? Did he appreciate the extraordinary swiftness, I might even say nakedness, of her response? Or would he have preferred to die more decorously, unspoken to by a fat and naked wife in full view of students, colleagues, friends?

5. When Anya finally got up, did she look at any of them? Did she suddenly feel naked? How did she walk out, as she must have, to get dressed (some things we always finish, if we live)? Did any one of them touch her, put an arm over her, perhaps hold her? Did anyone think to cover her, and if so, did she think how *ridiculous*, he is *dying!* May you choke on my flesh!

6. Was she swearing? Or was she cold as ice? Did she smell?

7. What had she looked like when young? Were there children? Why had I, before this incident, thought her a peasant? Why wasn't her English better? What were her poems about? Had they been translated?

8. The incident, I am sure, is etched inside the skulls of those who were privileged to bear witness. Does it remain sharp-edged, uncomfortable, troubling? Do they keep up the relationship? Do they avoid her, drop her? Does she retreat to her *Russians*, her language family? If she had been *completely* naked, could

they have lived, on any terms, with the memory? (What is the memory of those who hear the sounds and see the bodies of the mutilated of the world?)

9. How do they retell the story? What recedes, what becomes highlighted? Do they laugh more with each retelling? Or does the sour taste remain? Do they wonder about their own deaths, who will or will not be present and why? Will they, the next time, be among the dying, the present or the absent?

This woman is a mystery to me. She has something I do not have, and I do not know why. She had come to her dying husband and grasped his heart in her raw hand. It is the nature of civilization, of any culture, in fact, to interpose *things* (clothing, manners, systems of thought) between people and *life*, by which I mean the hidden life that simmers or bubbles beneath the surface like some molten pool out of dim time. The savage, I realize, is no different from me. Reduction is everywhere the law, perhaps the necessary law: there is no game without it. I wear my clothes; the savage carries his feather or magic pebble. We both suffer grievous loss for it; sometimes we even die for it. Only individuals escape, but who they are, how and why, I do not know. But I recognize their superiority, as I recognize the tragic limits and realness of my own *hesitations*: the measure of any civilization is in its hesitations, its pauses, its reservations. Outside of them is wildness, lawlessness, that is as frightening and lonely as it is free. And it is there that Anya is situated.

I have come to bear her a kind of cosmic love. I do not speak to her, but I have made certain modifications in my life to accommodate her existence. They are modest, to be sure, but I think they move in the right direction. For example, I don't sleep as well. It is conscious, on my part. I am deliberately more likely to awaken at a moment's notice. I am not about to go running anywhere *naked*, with my backside, so to speak, unwiped,

but I definitely sleep less well. And, oddly, I *dream* much more. Also, I eat differently. For years, it was my custom, when the telephone rang at dinner, to have my wife answer and say we were eating; could they call back. For a while I considered leaving it off the hook at dinner but thought my regular callers might eventually feel rebuffed. But now, when it rings, my wife (who is watching me carefully) says, "Just a moment," and there I am, quickly swallowing my microcosm of food, ready for whatever it is. It is trivial, perhaps even silly, yet I feel *proud*, a little more than proud, possibly a bit mad. If ever I were to die, it would be so comforting to me to have fat Anya, naked, kneeling, hovering over me, sweating like a pig, muttering incomprehensible guttural sweet Russian to me. If I could speak, I would answer, oh, so happily, "Yes. Yes. I know. You are right. Hold me, Anya." And it would be all right.