

THE END OF ENGLAND

76

The townspeople in the novel sit as patiently as schoolchildren, puzzling at the outdoor pageant on the lawn. Wouldn't they rather be in motion, walking through a forest, taking part in that view beyond the birches? Take Miss La Trobe, the director. Nothing would please her more than to spend the evening in the cottage she shares with the actress, no quarrels, just the two of them taking tea, or rubbing each other's feet through their socks. Instead, she must live as if the silences in the play might mean the death of the town. No one's told her, of course, that the town doesn't need her at all. The town's a construction of the author, who must make the story bearable, if only because its language is coming to pieces in front of our eyes. Not just its language but also the history of England itself, which is why the pageant's divided into three parts, representing three distinct eras of literary history. The German planes were flying over the writer's house as the book was coming together; no surprise that those same planes fly over the pageant in its final minutes. As for the cheerful tone of the book? What else should we expect when we're saying goodbye to a world we've loved so well.

I'm not halfway through the novel when an older woman bangs down the aisle of the plane. The pilot's about to take off, but that doesn't stop her from making a scene. "No one talks to me like that," she says, in a voice we can barely understand. "No one talks to me like that!" The book's shut for now, not because I no longer care about the end of England, but because the play coming undone in the novel could never compete with the woman coming undone in front of our eyes. She refuses to stay quiet, even after three flight attendants gather round to calm her down. Women her age don't behave like this; at least that's what we've always been told. And maybe that's why she's ferocious, why she's not to be appeased, why she stands up, unbuckling her seatbelt, just as the plane's lifting off the ground, to cry, "Greek is the root of English!" She's forgotten something, though she can't seem to figure out what it is. Her luggage? Her name? Where might that lost word be hiding? Under her seat? She's inconsolable, she's reaching into her bag for lipstick, handkerchief, breath mint, brush. She's smoothing out her paisley skirt. And then—silence. Silence and peace. Her eyelids are drowsing. Her head tilts to one side, mouth parting. Maybe she'll sleep now, maybe we'll finally get back

THE IOWA REVIEW

to the books on our tray tables, or concentrate on the Florida ahead of us, the soft air on our arms, the smells of wet foliage, sprinkler system, laundry room, and warm swimming pool. Anesthesia and menace: palms creaking against the night. Certainly that outburst would have taken the wind out of a younger person, and she'll wake up to say, what? What was I thinking? Instead, she turns to the person across from me, asks if she could take her hand, and when that person gives in, if only because she doesn't want to stir the woman up again, we hear customs, security. So that's it, customs, security: two words crashing, solving. The woman's voice drops, calm now, indignant, as if she's talking not to us, but to a band of schoolchildren. "This is America. This does not happen in America." And though we don't doubt that she's been wanded and scolded and wanded and scolded again, we also think, this is what you've come to tell us? This is news? Haven't we been so patient, so good? You who could have been our messenger. I'll open my book instead, and sink there, where at least the voice is sweet as it comes undone, where at least one might still hold a whole town inside him—the village idiot, Deb the maid, a duke, a priest, a shepherd—as the engines hum out of sight, just over the rain clouds.

77

I count the heads in the seats in front of me. Out the window, the farmhouses look so small against the green I'm surprised no one has taken them down yet.