X Number of Possibilities · *Joanna Scott*

THEODORE VON GRIFT lives a counterfeit life neither out of habit nor choice but out of self-defense. His tastes have been carefully acquired. Soft-boiled eggs, steak tartare, the smell of peonies, lawn tennis: the list has nothing genuine about it, since appreciation for Theodore von Grift is only an act. He abandoned his authentic self so long ago that he wouldn't recognize him if he met him on a street in downtown Baltimore. That he lives at number fifty-five Penrose Street in Baltimore, Maryland, is as unnatural as any other aspect of his life. His position as a bank officer, his wife and two children, his four bedroom house—all contribute to the elaborate composition. He is not who he is and doesn't try to resolve the paradox. Instead, he fills in the role he originated, each day adds new details and by 1927 has grown so intricate, so complex, that the many people who early on identified the mask of personality for what it was have dwindled to a perceptive few. To one, in fact.

Theodore is being revealed, investigated, stripped and examined by a mere child. He doesn't even know the boy's name, nor have they ever spoken. But every morning the boy is sitting on the porch steps of number sixty-three when Theodore walks by on his way to the trolley stop on Fulton Avenue. Sixty-three is the most dilapidated house on the block, the shingles sloughing, the shutters hanging crookedly, and ordinarily Theodore would have ignored these neighbors. But there is something about the way the boy looks up from the scab on his knee and stares: a wise, unnerving stare, as though he can see beneath Theodore's clothes. Theodore has spent half his lifetime protecting himself from acute observation, has perfected impenetrability and is to acquaintances and family what lead is to the x-ray. And now, in his forty-ninth year, he has met his match in an unkempt little boy.

He could easily take a roundabout route and avoid the child. But the challenge is too compelling: he walks by number sixty- three in order to test himself, and though he continues to fail the test, he has not given in to discouragement. If one sheet of lead doesn't shield him from those prying eyes he will try two; if two don't suffice he will try platinum. Eventually he will be to the child what he is to everyone else—only surface—and the boy will forget what he has seen. Young children have short, selective memo-

ries. There will be enough distractions in his life, and Theodore von Grift will fade with most of the boy's past, just as he has faded from himself.

"I should remember," Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen, inventor of the x-ray, once wrote to a friend, "where there is much light there is also much shadow." Theodore's adult life remains clear in his memory, but the years of his childhood are hidden in shadow. It is not *as if* he died on or around his eighteenth birthday. The figurative expression is nearly literal in his case, a case notable enough to be written up in *Scientific American,* earning him invitations to lecture at two German universities. But because the fame of the case was inspired by the new Roentgen rays rather than by his remarkable recovery, and, more importantly, because he had to reconstruct his personality from scratch, he had declined the invitations, booked a passage to America, and under a pseudonym (now his permanent name, thirty-one years later) began life over again.

He remembers the first days of adulthood only through a few stark impressions: the face of an old woman, her crooked teeth that looked as soft as hot tallow. A man, presumably his doctor, breathing stale tobacco as he peered into his ear. And nuns, dozens of nuns bustling about the room—like rats, Theodore had thought as he sleepily watched them from his bed.

He had been living in Munich; where he'd come from he didn't know. The doctor could tell him only this: that he'd been found lying in a park by an old woman, his hair matted with blood, his fingers still tangled around the trigger of a pistol. No identification was found. He'd been transported to a nearby hospital. A surgeon neatly sutured the wound after deciding that the bullet was too deeply embedded to be removed, and Theodore remained an invalid for five months.

The hospital nuns called him Anton because he often murmured the name in his sleep. They grew fond of him, intrigued, perhaps, by his amnesia, and when he was strong enough to leave they gave him a wallet full of money to maintain him until he could find work. They offered to be his family if he couldn't locate his own, told him to consider the hospital his permanent home. But life on the busy city streets of Munich absorbed him as soon as he walked out into daylight, and he left the hospital behind forever.

While he had been convalescing, the police had made inquiries and advertised in newspapers for any information concerning the young man known as Anton, age approximately eighteen. But no one had come

forward. He must have been a stranger in Munich, without friends or relatives in the city. And Theodore, then Anton, found himself increasingly grateful for the mystery of his past. Whatever he'd been in his previous life, he'd been driven to suicide. So it was best to forget that life, along with the nuns, the hospital, the bullet in his head. The German language and an impressive mathematical ability were the only souvenirs from his youth. At the age of eighteen (approximately), he had thirty crowns to his name, whatever name he chose. Even as he'd boarded a train for Hamburg the day he was released from the hospital, he gave himself a new name, Hermann, as though this were enough to dismiss his former self entirely, the self hidden just beyond the boundary of his awareness.

Can the ragamuffin sitting on the steps of number sixty-three Penrose Street in Baltimore see what Theodore can't see? The secrets of his past, which are to Theodore no more than countless possibilities. He is like a pocket watch and the boy with childish ferocity does what most children will do if given the chance. He smashes the watch so he can investigate its parts. Smashes Theodore every time he walks by. Twirls his dirty little forefinger in his cowlick and stares at Theodore with smug innocence, which makes the man, by contrast, guilty.

What have I done? Theodore has been wondering since the boy first stationed himself on the steps last August. His first memory is of the old woman's teeth. Before that, his recollections are all speculative. He imagines himself sprawled on the ground, spread-eagled, blood crusted on his brow. Is this what the little boy sees? Or worse? And what came before? What crime did Theodore commit that drove him to the crime of suicide?

Try this, he tells himself repeatedly. *Make your mind blank. White.* Beyond the oranges and reds of Baltimore row houses he sees white walls, four windowless walls as white as paper. Anton, Hermann, Theodore. Anton's eyes were covered with white bandages. Hermann was surrounded by whitewashed walls. Theodore's mind is nearly blank, dominated by these memories of blankness, and what he wants is identical to what he wanted: to escape. His was a wild animal's rage. As Hermann he had leaped at a man, gripped his throat, throttled him, all the while blinded by the intensity of white. *This is what I will do to you, boy,* Theodore von Grift thinks, flexing his fingers as he walks on. *Don't touch me. They called me mad once. Come too close and you won't live to tell what happened.*

It is the same sequence every morning, and by the time Theodore has reached State Street his face shines with perspiration, his chest heaves—the design of his life has begun to unravel.

In truth, he was never mad, or at least no more mad than a man strung on the rack. He had a bullet in his head, and Theodore—rather, Hermann—believed that if the bullet were removed he would regain control over himself. But he was living in Hamburg by then, and he couldn't recall the name of the hospital in Munich where he'd been treated. He could only point to the side of his head and insist repeatedly, "Here, I shot myself here." But the Hamburg doctors, seeing no sign of a scar, labelled him insane.

The fault was his. Without references or personal history—before he'd invented a story for himself—he'd been unable to find a job in Hamburg, so in the beginning he'd done nothing but wander the streets, spending his money on coffee, bean soup, schnapps, and rent. Soon the headaches began, and after three months, when the pain grew too intense to bear, he'd gone to a doctor and begged him to remove the bullet. The doctor asked for a detailed account, so Theodore explained how at the age of eighteen he had tried to kill himself.

It was in the doctor's office where Theodore first lost control. In the middle of his visit, without provocation, he suddenly seized the doctor by his neck, nearly strangling him to death. He attacked the policemen who came to carry him off to jail. He fought with the attendants transporting him to the asylum. He even sprang at a nurse, a young woman who, with astonishing strength, subdued him with a punch that split his lower lip. Not until the director informed him that he'd been committed to the Hamburg asylum did he realize what he'd done.

I have a bullet embedded in my head. I am not mad; the bullet makes me crazy, blinds me, all I can see is the white light of my pain. I want to stop the pain, nothing else. Don't blame me—blame the bullet in my head. You think these are a lunatic's ravings. Cut me open, see for yourself. I don't remember who I was, how I survived. I know I shot myself. I can't explain why there is no scar. The nuns, ask the nuns. I don't remember where they were, but they must be somewhere still. Let me out and I'll find them. They'll assure you that I'm speaking the truth. My name is Hermann Glasser. I give you my permission to operate. I implore you. Go ahead—for curiosity's sake, then, if for no other reason. I want to live a normal life, work hard all week and on Sundays shoot woodcocks from the window of a little

bird-branch hut. But I cannot acquire a hunting license as long as I am legally insane. Help me.

For ten years he had raged, pleaded, wept, but the doctors remained unmoved. In their informed opinion everything he said was governed by the skewed logic of his main delusion: the patient named Hermann believed he had a bullet in his head. After extensive examination the doctors proclaimed him incurable, and he became just another inmate of the asylum, another child-man to hide from his easily disgusted fellow Germans.

Against all odds he had survived, emerged from the asylum at the age of twenty-nine—approximately—not only sane but famous enough to share a page in *Scientific American* with an English swallow. The swallow's feat was to fly from London to its nest on a Shropshire farm at a speed of two miles per minute. Theodore's feat was to be among the first to demonstrate the usefulness of the recently discovered x-ray.

"A Hamburg young man has just had his sanity proved by the Roentgen rays. He declared ten years ago that he had a bullet in his head which he had fired into it in trying to commit suicide. He complained of pain, and as he attacked his keepers and the doctors could find no trace of the wound, was locked up as a dangerous lunatic. The Roentgen rays have now shown the exact place of the bullet." *Scientific American,* November 7, 1896.

This is the only true story of his life. Thirty-one years later Theodore von Grift, the former phenomenon, is an average man weighing 140 lbs and composed of enough water to fill a ten gallon barrel, enough fat for seven cakes of soap, enough carbon for 9,000 lead pencils, enough phosphorus to make 2,200 match heads, sufficient magnesium for one dose of salts, enough iron to make one medium-sized nail, sufficient lime to whitewash a chicken coup, and enough sulphur to rid one dog of fleas. An average man who is an average combination of nutrients and poisons. What more is there to know?

Ask the boy.

But Theodore has seen into his own head; he doesn't want to see anymore. The bullet was removed over three decades ago, and the only pain he felt for years, before the boy at number sixty-three began to haunt him, was the occasional late afternoon stab of hunger. Typical pain. Eight hours a day he has devoted himself to figures in the debit and credit columns. He eats lunch at Estes Grill with four associates from the bank,

always ordering the same chowder and the same beer. He leaves work at six, buys the evening paper, and walks to the trolley station alone.

The porch steps of number sixty-three are empty in the evening, the house as unconcerned as a drunk asleep on the street. His own home, number fifty-five, is always tidy on the outside and bustling inside, his ten-year-old son flying paper airplanes in the living room, his eight-year-old daughter screaming at her mother because she doesn't like onions, her mother knows she doesn't like onions yet still she puts chopped onions in the meatloaf.

You shouldn't speak to your mother that way.

Always the same routine, which is just how Theodore von Grift wants it, with occasional delicacies to relieve the tedium and distinguish him from the lower classes. Soft-boiled eggs, steak tartare. . . . He is a naturalized American now. His wife knows the few facts of her husband's life and so is content with the mystery of his youth, perhaps even intrigued by it, like the nuns had been. Easily contented, she fills her days with household chores and as a hobby raises African violets. Nothing makes her prouder than a blue ribbon in the annual garden competition. His son wants to be a fighter pilot; his daughter wants to grow her hair to her ankles.

What more is there to know? Or tell? Theodore's story begins and ends in a single paragraph in the November 7, 1896 issue of *Scientific American*. He has served his purpose and wants to be left alone. And whatever happens, whatever other injuries he sustains, he will never submit to an x-ray again. He hadn't anticipated the consequences or even understood at the time what an x-ray meant. X stood for unknown character. Because of the x-ray—he'd had ten x-rays taken before the doctors had finished with him—the bullet had been located and removed, and he no longer explodes in violent rages. But in recent months, ever since the impertinent boy assumed his place on the front steps of sixty-three Penrose, Theodore has rarely enjoyed a full night's rest. In the early morning hours he is woken by the same panic that he feels when he walks past the boy.

The dream recurs, with minor variations: he is herded with a group of people, about two dozen in all, into a large examination room. A doctor directs the group to chairs arranged opposite the long, tubular lens of an x-ray machine. The doctor turns the machine on, aims the lens, and after a few seconds—just long enough for him to reach the exit—hot light washes over the rows of patients.

What unnerves Theodore in the dream is the doctor's hasty retreat. Why must he leave the room when he turns on the machine? Theodore will puzzle over this, his confusion will escalate under the heat of the x-ray, and he will have to grip the seat of his chair in order to keep himself steady. Panic wakes him and keeps him awake for an hour or more, and the light that fills his mind during this time is not the familiar light of pain but of unspeakable fear.

In 1927, Theodore's forty-ninth year, most scientists believe that light is only beneficial: light cures rickets in young children, protects against scurvy, regulates the absorption and metabolism of calcium, prevents pellagra in man and black tongue in animals. Light is necessary to life, and the x-ray, thirty-two years after its discovery, is essential to medical diagnosis. Decades will pass before opinions change and the dangers of light, even life-sustaining sunlight, are identified. So why does Theodore feel that he has been poisoned? He has ten x-rays inside his head. All it takes is a single able interpreter to see what the light exposes: the first eighteen years of his life, eighteen years of secrets.

It is the middle of December, ten days before Christmas, when Theodore finally decides to confront the boy at number sixty-three. He passes a restless night; woken at 3:00 A.M. by his dream, he lies awake until dawn imagining various retaliations against the boy. His visions disgust and delight him. Since the bullet had been removed he has steadily gained self-control and rarely even engages in an argument. He knows he could never harm an innocent child. But it is this very innocence that gives the boy his power, Theodore believes. The child sees what the light exposes. Theodore must be reasonable; instead of confronting the boy he will befriend him. He will convince the boy that he, Theodore von Grift, is hiding nothing. Children are gullible. In the name of self-defense Theodore will take advantage of the boy's trusting nature.

After a breakfast of toast—the crust slightly burnt, just the way he likes it—rich black coffee, and a soft-boiled egg in a silver-plated egg cup, he props his hat at a thirty degree tilt from left to right, winds his pocket watch, and sets off: a thoroughly average man on an average day. His breath frosts in the winter air. He feels both uneasy and capable—his enemy is only a child, after all. But wouldn't it be easier if the child were an adult, Theodore's equal? He's not sure how he will open the conversation, decides too late that he should have brought some candy to use as bait.

The boy is there, sitting on the second step of number sixty-three, pulling a loose thread from the cuff of his plaid jacket. He turns up his face at the tap of Theodore's footsteps on the sidewalk, and his eyes settle into that offensive stare.

Hello there, Theodore intends to begin. But the conversation needs direction. *Hello there, young man, fine day today.* No, this won't do at all—it is too stiff, too mature. *And how are you this morning?* Too intimate for a child. *Hello there. Tell me, shouldn't someone be looking after you?* Too accusatory. Try this: *Hello there, early riser.*

"Hello there, early riser."

"Hello."

Just then Theodore sees a woman cross behind the front window, and he hurries on guiltily, all too aware of the hint of impropriety in his address to the boy. There is more than neighborly cheer in his intentions. But what, exactly, does he intend? He still isn't certain, though he imagines that the boy's mother would not approve. As he rounds the corner onto State Street he grinds his fist into his open hand, furious at his stupidity. The child is not alone in the world—he'd forgotten this. If he's going to make a companion of the boy he'll have to contend with the mother. Or befriend the mother first. Now here's an idea: seduce the mother, and the boy will follow. Theodore has no interest in other women, though. His wife fits perfectly into his life, and he knows better than to take a risk that might lead to ruin. All he really needs to do is to convince the mother that he wants to help.

Help me.

To help himself—like a glutton at the dinner table, pleasure-seeker that he is, or so she might conclude and warn her boy away from him. That won't do. It's best to avoid the mother and go straight to the child. He shouldn't have hurried away so quickly this morning. The mother probably hadn't even noticed him.

By the time he arrives at his office building he has decided to be honest with the boy, the most difficult approach, since his honesty is rooted in an intricate deception. He is not who he is. If the boy sees this then surely he will see Theodore's true motives.

Stop looking at me. This is what he wants to tell the boy. But how to work his way toward the command? It is a difficult task, far more difficult than balancing expenditures against income, so Theodore can fulfill his duties at

the office even while his mind wanders and he contemplates various approaches to the dangerous little gorgon at number sixty-three.

By this point in the year Sacco and Vanzetti are dead, Trotsky has been expelled from the Communist party, the German economic system has collapsed, and Lindbergh has landed the Spirit of St. Louis in Paris. These are the subjects of lunchtime conversation, but today Theodore skips lunch, for he wants to be alone. He walks with shoulders hunched along Patapsco Street wishing he were entirely invisible. Because of the x-rays inside him his bones show through his transparent skin. No one notices except the boy. Now, even with the boy nowhere near, Theodore feels him watching from every downtown window.

He pauses in front of a toy shop, locks himself in place and faces the display as though it were the child. *We'll see who falters first.* He is looking at a Christmas scene: wooden elves at work, Santa bulging like a ripe red bud from a chimney, reindeer on the roof, cotton snow on the ground, a wooden locomotive stalled on wooden tracks, its tiny conductor standing inside, looking blankly at the world. Christmas in Toyland, and Theodore's thoughts grind to a halt, as though he himself has changed from flesh to wood, transformed into a toy himself. He has been struck by an idea, a masterful idea, and he feels safer than he's felt in years. He sees his answer here in the conductor's eyes, painted beads no bigger than pinheads. How long has it been since he understood an image so completely, in its full meaning and potential?

He leaves work half an hour early that evening. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the streets were covered with cotton snow and reindeer were pulling the jalopies? There is no snow in Baltimore. Still, that doesn't mean a man can't celebrate tradition. In front of number sixty-three Theodore tucks the package inside his coat and clumps loudly up the warped porch steps. The woman has opened the door before he's had a chance to knock. Theodore is not afraid. He removes his hat and asks to see her little boy. He notices that she is rather old to be the mother of such a young child. With gray hair in a bun pulled so tight that it seems to stretch the wrinkles of her forehead into broad dents, she squints at him, arms folded, and clears her throat as if to speak. Then she changes her mind and disappears, leaving the door open. Theodore steps into the front hallway. The house is rank with the smells of cooking fat, kerosene, stale wine. In a moment the woman returns, pushing

her son ahead of her. Perhaps she thinks that Theodore is a benefactor; she wouldn't be far from the truth.

Now Theodore may study the boy up close. The child has a plump, round face that looks so young Theodore is almost surprised to see teeth when the boy smiles. He must be five years old, at least, but there is something oddly infantile about him, and with his aged mother behind the pair seems laughably anachronistic. She is still standing with her arms folded, waiting.

"Hello there, early riser."

Theodore and the boy grin at each other like old friends. For the first time Theodore can meet the assault with impervious good humor. It is time to make his offering. He removes the package from inside his coat and hands it to the boy, who gingerly peels off the wrapping, not taking his eyes from Theodore until he has dropped the paper to the floor.

At first Theodore imagines that it is himself being unwrapped, the boy peeling away the lies of his life with cruel, deliberate slowness. But it turns out just as he had hoped: the boy's attention shifts completely, he forgets about Theodore, forgets all that he knows about the man, and gives himself over to childish delight. Already he is rolling the locomotive across the chipped ceramic tiles of the floor, bringing the wooden train to life with his voice: "chuchu, chugchug." He's a child again, thoroughly a child, with all his interest devoted to a toy.

In returning the boy to his childhood, Theodore has freed himself. The mother needs an explanation, and then Theodore will dance up the street and enjoy his easily won freedom.

"I wanted . . ." Unexpectedly, he falters. But the mother nods, still unsmiling yet with a reassuring expression. She may not understand the reason for the gift, but she doesn't object.

Before he turns to leave Theodore squats, rests his elbows on his knees, and asks the boy his name. The child is too absorbed in play to notice, so Theodore asks again.

"The man wants to know your name." The mother blocks the train with her foot, and the boy stops just long enough to reply. "Tim," he snaps impatiently. Chuchu. Chugchug.

Tim. It's a fine name, pristine and to the point. Tim. Theodore looks admiringly at the child bending over his new toy. The straw-haired boy called Tim. Theodore almost wishes the child belonged to him. His hand

hovers an inch above the boy's head, palm open. Then he remembers where he is. He hastily bids goodbye to the mother with a slight nod, positions his hat, and leaves.

He descends the steps two at a time, hurries along the sidewalk and walks with such high-stepping vigor that he looks like he might break into a skip. By the time he has reached number fifty-five his pleasure has turned to glee. He's solved his problem, safely enclosed himself. Patting his coat collar to straighten it, he unlatches the picket gate and marches up the walk, thinking of young Tim, savoring the image of the boy bent over his wooden train. What is more satisfying than the sight of a delighted child? Theodore's only regret is that his own emotions are not equally instinctive, that he's had to forsake childish spontaneity along with his past. But he reminds himself that he's forty-nine years old, a fair representative of a type of man, precise, dependable, with distinguished tastes. He's completely filled himself in, and now, with the last threat averted, his mind is at ease. He has never felt more confident.