

Afterwards, he is completely overcome with sleep. When he opens his eyes again, the sun (a pale, faint sun) is high in the sky and Hildegarda is sitting in the armchair with a blue robe on (sky blue, bluer by far than today's gray sky), painting her toenails, each nail a different color: one pink, one blue, one gold, one black, one purple, one white, one silver, one yellow, and one gray.

Hildegarda is reconstructing the (approximately) two weeks they've been involved, weighing the pros and cons of the relationship. Heribert thinks that the terms she's using ("involved," "our relationship") are mere euphemisms. Euphemisms for what, though? What does "involved" mean? The two weeks we've spent touching each other? "Touching each other" sounded like another euphemism to him, though. "The two weeks we've spent kissing and caressing each other's genitals?" He finds the last expression cold enough to be accurate. Then he turns his attention entirely to what Hildegarda is saying to him: everything he hears is a euphemism.

"You don't know," she's saying, "how hard it was for me to convince Tiziana I wasn't coming here. She wanted to come along. 'You go there every year and you never invite me,' she said. She said that I always say I'm not coming and then I always come. That's why I'm afraid she might surprise us and show up with a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. She gets more and more melancholy every year, and she wants someone to put up with her gloom, and, frankly, I just can't do it any more. Not only that, why should I be the one to get stuck holding her hand when Marino's gone. She should call him. I can't stand her dependency. And not only that, but I wouldn't like her to know that you and I . . . can you imagine? You didn't like Tiziana at all, did you? But the party was a lot of fun. Didn't you think so? Marino didn't like her much at the beginning, either, and now look at them . . . Everyone changes. Even him. He's a strange guy. Not because he changes. He's strange for lots of reasons; he goes off on these tangents. You artists are all a little strange, no matter what field you're in, or at least you all pretend to be. And not just artists, either. I used to get along so well with him. Now it's as if he weren't interested in me at all. I used to study (have I told you this?) in a school of *bel canto*. I wanted to sing in the opera. Have you ever sung, opera or anything? Or done anything onstage, like acting? I really love the feeling of being onstage . . . I know what it's like, because I've been there, in the chorus, and I know the feeling of being alone before the abyss of the audience. ('The abyss of the audience . . . that's pretty good, isn't it?) I've never been up there alone, of course, but I know what I'm saying. You feel alone all the same, no matter how many people are up there with you. Tiziana used to sing with me. We met at the school. I met Marino in my last year, before I sang in the chorus. He was the one who got me into the chorus, because he was really pursuing me back then. Not any more. He's such a great singer, and he always has so much work that he doesn't have any time for me. I don't know what I stopped liking first: him or the

opera. I've come to realize that opera is not what I thought it was, what I dreamed of. Do you think I've become disillusioned because I married an opera singer? (Perhaps I shouldn't just say a singer, but the *best* singer, but I don't want to brag; though it isn't really bragging if I'm not talking about myself, is it?) There was a time when I wanted to write. (I've already told you that, haven't I?) I was a teenager . . . The other day I heard a piece I really loved. No, it was jazz. Now I'm starting to like jazz. It was called *Blue Rondo à la Turk*, and it's by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. You've heard it? Oh, since I don't know much about jazz yet, I didn't realize it was very well known . . . You have the record? With *Take Five*? What's *Take Five*? Oh. Would you lend it to me? Oh, I'm so thrilled. Please lend it to me. Don't forget. Maybe some day . . . No, forget it. No . . . well, maybe some day . . . I'd like to try jazz. But I don't know which instrument would be best for me. No, no, it's out of the question. Painting is the thing that totally absorbs me now, ever since I married Marino and abandoned opera. I think I should try having a show. Contact with the public is essential, isn't it? How can a body of work evolve if it doesn't come into contact with the viewers it's meant for? I'm not hinting around, but we've known each other for a while now . . . No, I don't want to show you my paintings, it's too embarrassing. Anyway, I don't know if I'm still interested in painting. But I've been saying I'm not interested any more for a couple of years now, and I'm still at it. No, no. I'd be too embarrassed, you're too good. Give me a kiss. Mmm. All right, if you promise not to make fun of me, I'll show them to you. Really. We

can arrange it some other time. But you have to be very honest. If you don't like them, say so. I don't want you humoring me. I couldn't bear it! Are you in a hurry? I'll drive you into the city. I have to go home, too; I have so much to do . . . I've had a wonderful time, though, all these days we've spent together.

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gether. It was nice to start the year with you. Do you think it's a good sign? For you or for me? Don't you have anything to say? Give me a great big hug. We'll get together soon, won't we? I'll let you off at the subway stop, okay?" ■