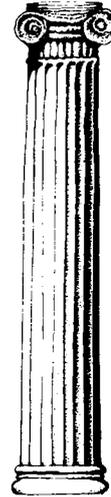


# A CLASSICAL REBIRTH




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A STORY BY DAVID STERN

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Kastnerr, a professor of Greek at Columbia University, had been mugged the night before; however, he had entirely forgotten the incident by the time he awakened the following morning. When his alarm clock rang at seven forty-five, he stirred uneasily in bed, as if astonished to discover himself there and equally uncertain if the bed were his own. He sensed disorder. Pulling the bedsheets tightly around his shoulders, he opened one eye and peered cautiously around the room. His books—the twenty-odd shelves of red-bound classical texts, arranged carefully in their correct chronological order — had not been disturbed; the papers on his desk were still neatly stacked, as he had left them the previous morning, in three piles — memoranda, correspondence, and the bills which he had not yet paid; and atop the center of the desk, a bunch of roses and chrysanthemums, set in a tall Cretan vase, were turning their flowers toward the thin broken rays of sunlight which penetrated the metal gate secured across the single window on the opposite side of the room. No, everything, as far as Kastnerr could see, was in order — except that it was

now eight o'clock and he was a quarter hour late. Dismissing the feeling of displacement as no more than an after-effect of a forgotten dream, he pulled himself out of bed and showered.

While he washed himself, as was his habit, he conjugated the Greek verb in its four moods, and while he dried himself, he declined the Greek noun in its three declensions, singing the paradigms to himself in rhyming couplets he had learned in his youth. Kastnerr cherished the regularity of the Greek verb, just as he cherished the symmetry of Greek sculpture and the orderliness of Greek philosophy. The three together had sealed into his own life regularity, symmetry, and order. Kastnerr cherished classical Greece no less because it was dead — and, perhaps, precisely because he need never fear that it would leap up suddenly and surprise him. He especially enjoyed talking to himself in Attic, as well as in the less common dialects of Ionic and Sapphic, even if he knew no one with whom he might

hold a conversation. There was nothing mad in this. Kastnerr's happiness was even greater because he was certain no one would ever talk back to him.

Kastnerr dressed and ate his breakfast. By nine-fifteen, he was ready to go to his office. Gathering his books and papers into his briefcase, he put on his jacket and checked, as he habitually did before stepping out the front door, first his right pocket for his keys (a silver keyring upon which he had hung his four keys — two for his apartment and two for his office), then his left pocket for change (whatever he had, just so long as he had something), and finally, his back pocket for his wallet, which he now found disconcertingly empty: the wallet was missing. For an instant, Kastnerr was again seized by an overwhelming sensation of displacement and stood paralyzed, his right hand on the brass doorknob, the palm of his left upon his posterior—similar to the statue of the Greek athlete whose discus has slipped from his grip at the precise moment he is about to hurl it—until he recalled that the previous night his wallet had been stolen. More annoyed





Illustration/Bill Plymton

than comforted by the memory, Kastnerr slammed the door behind him, walked out through the front lobby to Riverside Drive, and then down Riverside, against the wind, to 116th Street.

All his life, Kastnerr had been walking against the wind, both real and metaphorical. In France, in Turkey, and in America, and not once had he been blown away. Now he was certain he was about to be lifted high aloft to Palisades Park. He saw himself dangling upside down, his coat caught in the spoke of the ferris wheel as it turned round and round in its revolutions. Without his wallet, Kastnerr felt weightless, so light as no longer to be ruled by the laws of gravity. And what had he carried in his wallet? Almost nothing: seven dollars (thankfully, he had not carried more) and his university identification card, which he intended to replace that morning. Nothing — and yet he felt so insubstantial he had to force his legs down on the pavement. All his life, Kastnerr had been conceiving theories, and now he conceived still another: a man either had weight or no weight. There was no

heavier or lighter, only an invisible magical line which distinguished between weight and no weight, and over which one could unwittingly trespass. Thus his wallet: with it, Kastnerr possessed weight and without it, none. He had unknowingly, innocently passed over the line. And all this solely on account of a wallet, a stolen wallet. He wondered where it was now. Probably in some dope addict's room in Harlem, or lying discarded and forlorn in a gutter, or — but the wallet had already vanished from before his eyes. Poor Kastnerr's wallet! And without it, how would he ever get back onto the other side of the line? By the time he had arrived at this unanswerable question, he had also reached 116th Street, climbed the hill to Broadway, and ascended College Walk towards his office in Hamilton Hall on the Amsterdam end of the campus.

Leo Kastnerr, in his grey woolen suit, made his way up College Walk towards Hamilton, as he did and had done every day since his arrival in

America in 1946. For the past twenty-five years, Kastnerr had led a life of absolute unerring regularity in order, he believed, to atone for the absolute irregularity of the thirteen preceding years. Those thirteen years had, in turn, absolved him of the regularity of the first twenty-five years of his life; or so he had intended them at the time. Kastnerr, first of all, was the only child of an inflexibly Orthodox German rabbi who kicked his son out of his house when he first discovered him studying the forbidden wisdom of the Greeks. Kastnerr, who had already devoted himself in spirit to the pagan gods, was determined not to permit minor incidents to impede the path of his career. After packing his belongings, and among them his small collection of Greek texts, he walked confidently out the front door of his paternal home, secured a position for himself at the Warburg Institute, and began his remarkable ascendancy as a classicist. Four years later, the aged Rabbi Kastnerr repented of his earlier actions, searched his son out, and came knocking on his door to forgive him for his transgressions. Kastnerr took one quick glance at his father, familiar in





enough of himself to their cause. Kastnerr decided, once and forever, to dedicate himself to the gods.

Thus the middle period of his life commenced. After losing his position, Kastnerr lost his desire to remain in Hamburg. From Germany, he had gone to France, and in Paris, all manner of strange and wonderful things had happened to the young classicist. Stepping off the train, which had carried him there from Hamburg on a Saturday afternoon at three, he lit up a cigarette and strolled down the Faubourg Rue St. Honoré until he met a young, saucy redhead named Ariane whom he accompanied to a tiny hotel where the two fornicated the remainder of the Sabbath afternoon. Once the sun had set, Ariane and Kastnerr dressed and went out for dinner. They sat elegantly on the Champs Elysée, shared a plate of clams, and sipped Chablis. Kastnerr remembered the Herrs Warburg and Panofsky sipping wine together; around them, the leather bound volumes of the Institute's library had glowed like the ashes of a dying fire. He looked back at Ariane. The two returned to the hotel room and, both slightly drunk, copulated again. After midnight, and several more bottles of wine, they strolled through the foreign silent streets. Passing a Jewish cemetery, Kastnerr dragged Ariane within and attempted unsuccessfully to embrace her. Finally, he dropped her on the ground, climbed atop one grave, cried out, "Papa! Papa!" and peed on the tombstone. Ariane watched him in astonishment and concluded that he was so drunk he had gone mad. Taking him by the hand, like an infant, she led him back to their room. When Kastnerr awoke the next morning and found her sleeping next to him, he could not even remember her name.

The classicist did no work in Paris. He nearly forgot all his Greek, Latin, and Indo-European philology, except

that the time was too short to forget everything. But Kastnerr did his best. He supported himself well enough to live like an aristocratic emigré by selling, to various private collectors, a number of classical manuscripts and texts he had stolen from the Warburg's library and taken with him when he left Hamburg. He slept with Ariane, with Catherine, with Anne-Marie, with others whose names he either forgot or never bothered to learn. He lived riotously. Until one September morning in 1939, he awoke to a bull horn which was ordering all aliens to report to a certain place called Saint-Mille. Kastnerr dressed, walked outside, asked directions to Saint-Mille, and, finding that it was not within walking distance, hired a taxi to take him there. Saint-Mille, he discovered to his immense surprise, was a football stadium. Since there appeared to be no admission charge, he simply walked inside and sat down high in the stands. Surrounded by thousands of other aliens, Kastnerr wasn't very comfortable, and especially in a football stadium. The stadium, in fact, reminded him of a Roman amphitheater, and he found himself wishing for gladiatorial combat. Kastnerr wanted to be entertained. He longed for a violent struggle. He thirsted for blood.

Instead of a gladiator, a man, so tiny he could hardly be seen behind the huge bullhorn through which he spoke, walked out into the center of the playing field and told Kastnerr and his fellow aliens that, because they were not French citizens in time of war, they must remain in this football stadium until their fate was determined by higher authorities. How tedious! thought Kastnerr. He calmly stood up, made his way to the exit, and, back in Paris, departed France for Spain. Once he arrived at the Spanish border, however, he realized that he had no papers and would have to bribe the customs officials. Unfortunately, no customs officials were present. The

his tall opera hat and greying black beard, slammed the door in his face, and shouted out from behind it, "Too late!" The rabbi, who was as proud as his son, gathered himself up, walked calmly away, and never looked back. Kastnerr, however, watched his father disappear down the street, recognized the regularity of the old man's walk, and suddenly realized that, although he had long since given up all belief in his father's faith, he had nevertheless preserved all the forms of regularity which were nothing less than the routine of pious observance he had inherited from his father, though stripped of his father's zealous belief. Yet even more remarkably, Kastnerr realized that, in all the years since he had left his father's house, as if through some oversight, he had unwittingly remained observant of the commandments: he had continued to keep dietary laws; he did not publicly transgress the Sabbath and its laws; he observed the prohibitions against sexual indulgence prior to marriage. The realization was so abrupt, it threw Kastnerr into a state of shock, out of which he did not awaken for two weeks until, on July 6, 1933, he was fired, along with his other Jewish colleagues, from his position at the Warburg Institute. Kastnerr knew that the connection between the two events — his father's visit and the loss of his job — was wholly fortuitous; still he could not help but feel that the latter was punishment for the former: either his father's fury had somehow pursued him in order to bring disaster down upon his head, or the gods had betrayed him because he had not given





border had been closed that same day, indefinitely, and the officials had all gone on vacation. Kastnerr lacked the courage to bribe the soldiers who stood in their place, especially since they appeared to him truly threatening. He imagined himself sent back. To Paris. To Germany. Never, he told himself. Kastnerr began to hunt for a gun. He wrote a brief note to Ariane, towards whom he still maintained (despite everything, he told himself) affectionate feelings: "I am going to kill myself. Goodbye. With love, Kastnerr," and mailed it. All afternoon and evening, he searched for a gun in the tired, dusty French-Spanish village; but not a single gun was to be found, even if only to commit suicide. He regretted having mailed the letter to Ariane. He should have waited until he had found a gun. He had spoken — or rather, written — too early. Now the evil eye had averted his good. Kastnerr recalled his father, the vehemence with which he would spit over his left shoulder whenever he passed a cemetery, and the terrors of the evil eye about which he had warned his son. Then Kastnerr dreamt of himself dead and buried in a long rolling meadow filled with statues of the gods and heroes. He himself had been turned into a fountain, into one of the cupids who, splashing water out of his mouth and ears onto a small circular pool, was doomed forever to stare at his own reflection. This was punishment; retribution for his sins, and vengeance for having left his father's faith. Kastnerr resolved, if he should survive, to repent and to return to the faith. He also resolved, if he should live, to write another letter to Ariane and explain.

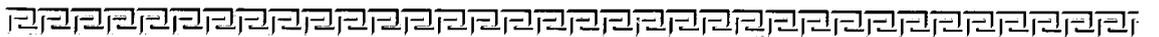
Kastnerr never wrote again to Ariane, but when he awoke the next morning with a stiff neck and a cramped back, he discovered that the threatening, burly soldiers had vanished and that the customs officials, all

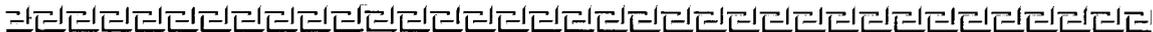
meek-looking humiliated souls, were back at their stations. Dismissing the events of the previous day as no more than an unpleasant dream, Kastnerr chose one official who appeared especially humble, bribed him with his gold watch, and crossed over to Spain. A week later, after finding that he did not particularly care for Spanish women, Kastnerr bought, with two banknotes he had procured upon the black market in exchange for a silver cigarette case, a boat ticket to Turkey. He wanted to get away from Europe, as far distant as possible, to America, hopefully; but he knew he didn't have enough money to reach America, and so he went to Turkey. Turkey was next best to nothing.

Turkey, Kastnerr discovered on his arrival, was better than that. Occasionally, in the midst of an unusually oppressive hangover, he remembered his resolution to repent — was it some kind of vow he had inadvertently once made to his father? — but otherwise, he continued, even learned to excel, in his irregular life. There were more Arianes, more Catherines, and more Anne-Maries. There was a dark, shining boy but Kastnerr did not really enjoy that. He was not, however, afraid to try anything once. He therefore tried everything. Two women, a ten-year-old girl, a woman and a dog. A massive orgy, arranged by a friend, also from Hamburg. Liquor and hashish, even an attempt at opium smoking. There were endless diversions in Istanbul. He sold the remainder of his stolen manuscripts, including his prize text, which he had even hoped to keep for himself, a rare copy of Longinus' *Philosophi et Rhetoris*, printed in Salmuri in 1663 by the mad classicist and printer Tanaquillus Fabrus. But money, Kastnerr decided, was more crucial than sentiment. He stayed up all night, gambled away his money, and slept all day. He did no classical research, but then, after he had sold the Longinus, he no longer had any

books. And where were books to be gotten in Turkey?

Next door to Kastnerr, in the same hotel in which he stayed, there was a short, moustachioed Jew from Berlin, also an emigrant with no destination. Unlike Kastnerr, however, the Herr Professor, as he called himself, kept to his room and worked all day and night. He was laboring over an immense, grandiose project — a study of all literature as imitation — but he, too, labored without any of the texts which he was analyzing. Kastnerr laughed at and taunted the Herr Professor's audacity. Wasn't it mad, hopelessly insane? And without any of the books as well! Until late one night, after the two had spent hours arguing over the merits of the Bible and Homer as species of imitation — Kastnerr supporting Homer, while his friend argued for the Bible — the short moustachioed man confessed to Kastnerr that he would never have dared to begin his work unless he had been absolutely assured that the texts were wholly inaccessible to him. Kastnerr laughed again and went to bed, convinced that he had won the argument and equally certain that his friend was lost to all hope. In a dream that night, God, wearing a black beard and a high opera hat, very similar, in fact, to the classicist's recollection of his own father, appeared to Kastnerr and angrily berated him for having claimed the superiority of a pagan song over the revelation of divine wisdom. When Kastnerr awoke the next afternoon, he could no longer recall the dream; although he was now entirely convinced that his friend had been cor-





rect all along. He rushed to confess to the Herr Professor that the Bible was infinitely greater than Homer, but it was too late. The short, mustachioed man had departed Istanbul that very morning, on a special visa, for America.

Kastnerr, who could not leave, remained alone in Istanbul. The war dragged on, and he forgot more of his Greek and Latin. He tired of his irregular life, but was unable to find his way back to any semblance of regularity. He despaired, and after he had tired of despair, the war finally ended. Time to move on, to America. He wrote letters to several friends who had already arrived in New York, including the Herr Professor, and asked for their help in aiding him to rejoin them. Months dragged by until he received his first reply. More letters, documents, and finally, a visa followed. On a cloudy September morning, Kastnerr embarked from Istanbul, and on a rainy October afternoon, he disembarked at New York. From the dock, through an uninteresting round of bureaucratic shuffles, he made his way to Columbia. Finally in 1959, the classicist received tenure and his own office in Hamilton Hall before which he now stood.

This man, therefore, was Kastnerr in the year 25 following his coming to Columbia. Neither Ariane, nor Catherine, nor Anne-Marie would have recognized him. Gone was the flowing black beard which had distinguished the young emigré in Paris or in Istanbul. Shrunk was the tall, handsome lover. Vanished was the bold,

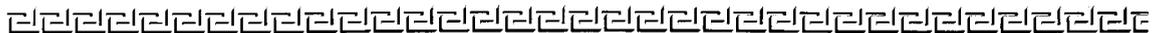
foreign face of France and Turkey, and in its stead, an earlier one — half absentmindedness, half simplemindedness, the countenance of innocence, beguiling and beguiled innocence. Kastnerr, at the close of his second quarter century, more closely resembled the Kastnerr of the year one of his first twenty-five years. In his grey woolen suit, with a toothpick-thin red tie, Kastnerr had long ago passed all fashion. He had long since foregone all time. He now was the model of regularity. Through his devotion to time, he had defeated time. He had almost returned — Kastnerr thought, amused at the idea — to his dead father's piety.

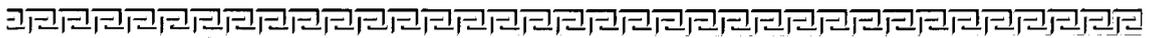
In the classicist today, there remained not the least trace of the 13 — 12½, to be exact — intermediate years. He himself no longer thought about them. Or if he did, he dismissed them as a lacuna between the two sets of twenty-five years, or as a caesura, like those caesuras found in the middle of any one of Homer's precious lines. In fact, the first article that Kastnerr had published after his arrival in New York, "Exceptional Caesuras in the *Iliad*," had suggested, very radically at the time, that the caesura was so irregular as either to defy discussion or, conversely, as to be nonexistent. The article had made Kastnerr famous, even celebrated as the greatest member of the new generation of classicists, and had eventually merited translation back into the German in which Kastnerr had, in fact, originally composed it. Except that the Germans, when translating it, regularly misspelled Kastnerr's name and left out the second "r."

Yet even this Kastnerr, whom his most devoted admirers considered the greatest living classicist, could get no closer than a dozen feet to Hamilton Hall, past the mob of students, non-students, workers, and professors, all milling about furiously and blocking his way. In class, Kastnerr often had

difficulty distinguishing between his students, but here he could not separate the students from the workers or the professors from the non-students. They were wedged and packed in so tightly he could hardly tell the males from the females. Kastnerr, however, was no fool. He knew a demonstration when he saw one, and especially if, as now, he was caught in its center. He gathered, after listening to the talk of those around him, that this particular demonstration was in protest against the bombing of Cambodia, but he didn't care. All demonstrations, all protests, he had long ago concluded, were indistinguishable and equally boring. He didn't care who was bombing what. Kastnerr wanted only one thing: to get to his office and to work.

That, however, was the sole thing Kastnerr could not do. He wormed his way three or four people closer to Hamilton through a hook-eye of breasts, elbows, and stomachs, but could get no closer. He wasn't even certain he wished to, although it was, at any rate, beyond the limits of any of his wishes. The longer he stood there, the more inextricably he was hemmed in by the mob around him. Kastnerr raised his head over the shoulders, glimpsed Hamilton, and realized that the building had been occupied: its doors were barricaded with chairs, tables, and filing cabinets; curtains had been drawn across the windows, although a masked face occasionally peered out from within with a sinister glance. In front of the barricaded doors stood a line of twenty policemen. At first, they reminded him of the Spanish guards at the border who had fixed in him so much ineffaceable terror one eventful day far in the past. But Kastnerr couldn't understand what they were doing here now, staring down the mob each time it surged forward, beating their nightsticks rhythmically in their palms, running in place, in curious steps that looked more like what he had always imagined was the dance





step of the tragic chorus. Kastnerr could not grasp their intentions: whether they were trying to keep those within inside and refusing to let them out, or whether they were preventing the mob from also rushing in, in order to join those inside. Yet in whatever manner he interpreted the figure, the result was invariably the same: Kastnerr could not get past the mob, the policemen, or the persons occupying the building. He could not get to his office, and therefore, he could not get to work.

This realization was more than a little disturbing to a man of Kastnerr's regularity. Oh, he whined to himself, why can't I get to work? What have I done that they should do this to me? The emptiness of his back pocket, the weightlessness of his body, and the morning's sensation of displacement suddenly returned. Before he could remember having been mugged the night before, Kastnerr's right hand shot back to feel himself and, feeling nothing, was seized by paralysis. Then he remembered — he recalled each detail of the mugging — but it was too late. A conviction of utter helplessness had already overwhelmed him, and Kastnerr could only grow furious at the entire unjust world. He wanted to hit someone, or be hit. He again thirsted for blood. His own, or another's, it didn't matter to him.

Kastnerr looked up. A girl had climbed atop the portico which rose on Doric columns before Hamilton's doors, and standing there, was haranguing the mob. He couldn't hear her words, but then he had no interest in them. Her breasts alternately jiggled and strained against her blue jersey t-shirt. He wanted to seize and throw her down. Kastnerr found himself reaching up towards her body on his tiptoes. She floated above him — also weightless, a vision, an Aphrodite. Kastnerr recalled the passage in

the *Iliad* where Ares wounds Aphrodite in the arm and Zeus later washes the wound clean with nectar. This girl was wearing a red bandana on her biceps. Kastnerr wanted to be Ares. If he couldn't get to his office or to work, he wanted to be Ares. He had to become someone.

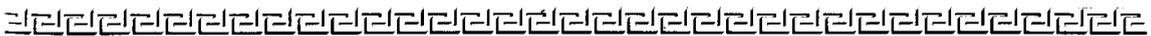
The crowd, in turn, even if they could not hear the girl, nevertheless responded to her words, as if under a magical spell. They rocked back and forth and chanted together. From the top of his eye, Kastnerr suddenly saw a rock fly over his head. As if it were moving in slow, retarded motion, he watched it cruise forward, dive, and crash into the helmet of a policeman. The helmet, and the ruddy head inside it, swung backward. He heard the crowd cheer some slogan. Then a second rock flew forward, a third, a fourth, and finally a quick succession, a whole flurry of rocks and stones. They crashed into the doors of Hamilton and shattered the glass. Kastnerr caught the eyes of one policeman rolling in fury. He could feel the violent pounding of the policeman's heart, as if he were holding him in his palm like a sparrow with his thumb atop its pulse. The mob in whose center Kastnerr stood began to rock backward and to move away. More stones flew, more glass shattered. The faces of the policemen swelled in rage. Their chests heaved, their heads reared, then, like boars in chase, they charged.

Kastnerr studied them carefully as they raised their nightsticks high in the air and beat them in that same pulsating rhythm. The crowd turned and ran. For one instant, Kastnerr could not move. Paralysis gripped his legs. Then he too began to run. He turned and ran as he had never before run in all his life. On his every side, others were running and falling, stumbling and sprawling, with cries of pain and surrender, but Kastnerr only ran harder. Something hit him on the back; he fell forward, saw the earth rising to

overwhelm him, but with a burst of obstinate energy, righted himself and escaped. The blow had felt as powerful as a massive statue falling atop to crush him, but Kastnerr did not stop to reflect upon the image. He ran as if he were doomed to run forever. From the gates of Hell or to the portals of heaven, it did not make the least difference.

Eventually, Kastnerr stopped. As it happened, he stopped upon a patch of green on the far side of the campus, opposite Hamilton. Although he had never closed his eyes all the time he was running, they now seemed mysteriously opened upon a world which, in all his sixty-three years, he had never before glimpsed.

Leo Kastnerr, classicist, stood dead still upon his grassy knoll and surveyed the new world he had chanced upon. He himself was a curious sight, as strange perhaps as any of the mythical beasts he had ever evoked in his lectures. The thick brown frames of his glasses were sliding down his nose towards his mouth. A smudge of dirt had lengthened into a scar-like mark which ran from his left eye to his chin. The two tufts of thin hair on either side of his head sprouted forth like young birds too weak to fly off into the blue heavens and already despairing of life. His coat had fallen off one shoulder and, twisted around his belly, appeared similar to a toga. To one of his students, Kastnerr might have looked like Ulysses, helplessly lost on some exotic island, but with none of Ulysses' determination to get back to Ithaca. About seventy yards distant, Kastnerr's brown hat lay in the dust. A





gust of wind arose and blew it another ten yards away. Kastnerr hardly cared.

He stood there motionless while it grew dark. Hamilton glowed dimly, as if it were an enchanted castle under siege. Two or three policemen stood at its doors, toy soldiers in their blue uniforms. Small clusters of students passed by and gave Kastnerr odd glances; perhaps someone or other made a comment. Kastnerr did not hear. There is no telling how he ever found his way back to his apartment that night.

The following morning, Kastnerr overslept. He no longer felt weightless — or more accurately, he had grown accustomed to the displacement of weightlessness — but, in its stead, he felt perpetually late. The next morning, and the one after that, he again overslept. By the time he dressed and walked over to Hamilton to find it — inevitably — still occupied, the entire morning was gone, and Kastnerr felt himself even further behind his

schedule. The feeling of lateness was even more disorienting than the weightlessness, and Kastnerr wished he could trade the former back for the latter; but he also realized that it was too late to do that. And by the time he came to this realization, the entire day was gone.

Thus, for the next three days, as long as Hamilton was occupied, Kastnerr did nothing. Hamilton had been occupied late Sunday night. On Tuesday, after he had grown tired of pacing his rooms and fidgeting for three hours, Kastnerr took a bus to the East Side and bought a new wallet in a shop on Madison Avenue, but it could not replace the one he had lost. The new leather, in the first place, was too stiff and fresh, but even that was not the reason. Kastnerr's old wallet had accompanied him throughout his wanderings from Hamburg to Columbia. It alone was the sole object he had managed to keep over the years, the single vestige of the period of his caesura, and Kastnerr treasured the wallet over nearly all his possessions. He treasured the fullness of the leather and its tawny suppleness. Often, indeed, he had dreamt of the beast whose skin it had once been. He dreamt of a leopard, its jaws open and hungry, stalking the jungle, and of the leopard taut and vigorous, leaping upon its prey. As it pounced, its legs stretched boldly in the air, Kastnerr saw himself in the leopard. Sometimes, he saw a tiger. Leopard or tiger, it didn't make a difference to him. He watched the leopard or tiger fall into a pit which had been dug by hunters and covered with leaves. He watched the beast tumble into the depths of the earth, lie there furious at having been captured, and then growl audaciously into the barrel of a gun aimed directly between its eyes. Kastnerr, while he dreamt, cried real tears.

It was not, therefore, merely the weight of the wallet, or its materials, that Kastnerr missed. Nor was it the

fact that he had carried it with him for so long. The wallet was neither his most precious nor valuable possession. The most valuable object he owned was his typewriter — specifically, a special, irreplaceable ball upon whose surface were engraved the letters of the Greek alphabet, and for which Kastnerr had paid a skilled Greek metal worker nearly a thousand dollars. The ball, a sphere of gold, was the only one of its kind in the world, and Kastnerr had searched for two weeks during a hot summer thirteen years ago until he had finally found, near the harbor of Piraeus, on a narrow street cluttered with garbage and naked children, the goldsmith willing to build it. The artisan had worked on the ball for nearly half a year, cursed the work, cursed himself for having undertaken it, cursed Kastnerr, and vowed that he would never cast another. Kastnerr, however, had paid the man well for his trouble, and with the ball inserted into the prong of his advanced machine, he was now composing his autobiography. Having given his life over to the study of literature of ancient Greece, Kastnerr was convinced that his story could be told in classical Greek alone. He hoped eventually to publish it with a facing English translation. But without the ball there would be no *Life of Kastnerr*, and thus, the classicist guarded it with all his soul and might. He even had a special cover and lock installed upon the typewriter, an IBM Selectric. Kastnerr, who knew the value of all things, knew that his Greek ball was far more precious than his wallet. The wallet had been something else which until now he had not understood. It was a kind of amulet, a magical periapt which protected him from the memory of the years of his caesura. And now, without the wallet, those memories, the rotted, melancholic years of his past, rose up to curse him.

Or if not to curse, then to threaten





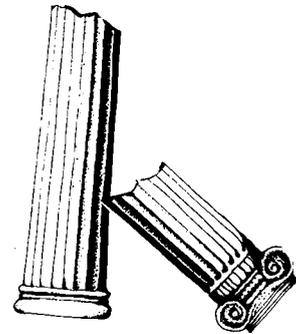
him. For Kastnerr was, in part, still enamored of those memories. No longer protected from them, Kastnerr stood naked before his past and Kastnerr, naked, was neither the most pleasant nor invigorating sight to behold. He had grown paunchy and flabby. He sagged. His head sagged, his belly sagged. The testicles, which had been cupped by a thousand hands, had sagged and shrivelled. Kastnerr had shrivelled into the dried skin of a rotten apple. It was not the best possible garb in which to stand before a past that rose before him in all the audacious, intimidating vigor of youth.

This past — it stretched back even earlier than the years of his caesura — rose before him in discontinuous, abrupt images, in fragments and remnants of sentences, phrases, and words, all of them as if inscribed upon a roll of ancient parchment which had been eaten away in part and decayed in part and now was no more than a cluster of holes separated one from the other by the thin, brittle remains of animal skin. There remained no complete phrases or sentences, and what he could make out on the faded parchment seemed hopelessly corrupt, beyond even the corrective powers of his own abilities as an emender of texts. Curiously, the letters were all inscribed in Hebrew — that, indeed, was the sole clue Kastnerr possessed with which to date the manuscript back to his own youth, the last time he had read or studied any Hebrew text. Of course, he could still read Hebrew; it came up occasionally in his research. But he had not heard Hebrew spoken for years, since his childhood, when his father, seated across the table in their living room, had sung to his son the wisdom of the Talmud. And now it was his father's voice which cried out to him these same incoherent possessed words, and drove the classicist from one room to the next, from the living room to the bedroom to the

kitchenette, and back again, fleeing but never escaping the semitic guttural of his father's hoarse, German cry.

That, however, was all Kastnerr could make of it. Until he suddenly discovered upon the parchment, amid the cluster of holes, a single phrase which had miraculously remained intact, and which, he realized at the identical moment, was the same phrase his father, or the voice which sounded to him like his father's, had been crying at him: *He alone who says, "I will sin and then repent," is never granted the time to repent.*

A wave mixed of nausea and disgust rose in Kastnerr's stomach. Rabbinic arguments on top of everything! "I don't want to repent," he shouted back to the voice. That was a silly thing to cry out, he immediately realized. He shouldn't pay the least attention. Let it die out and go away. What had he to repent for, anyhow? Then he recalled his vow, his long past vow to repent. Well, he had never said, I will sin and repent; if anything, he had only promised to repent and then had gone ahead and sinned some more. Yet what did it matter even if he had said it? Who believed in sin or repentance? Was he, Leo Kastnerr, sixty-three years old, a tenured professor of Greek at Columbia University, afraid of his father? And because of rabbinic, Talmudic nonsense? Repentance, sin? Perhaps salvation next. Kastnerr suddenly thought he saw, through the metal gate across his front window, his father, or a phantom of his father, walking away, across Riverside Drive, in his grey beard and opera hat and in the same measured steps he remembered so vividly. The vision dazzled Kastnerr and threw him into a cold, abrupt tremor. Throwing his hands above his head, palms lifted to the ceiling, Kastnerr began to supplicate the gods. "O Zeus," he prayed, "Get me out of this. Succour me. Deliver me." Hadn't he once already dedicated himself to the god?



And hadn't the god then delivered him? "O Zeus," he prayed again, "If you deliver me now, I will dedicate my most valuable possession to you."

The phone suddenly rang. Kastnerr listened, distracted. The phone rang again, and with what seemed to him a kind of inhuman strength, he pulled himself over to its side and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello."

"Kastnerr?"

Kastnerr couldn't believe the voice he heard on the other end. "Papa?" he whispered into the receiver. "Papa, where are you?"

"I'm in your office."

"In my office —"

The voice on the other end suddenly dropped into deep, booming laughter. "This ain't no Papa, Kastnerr. This' the revolution."

Kastnerr still didn't understand; for a second, he was completely bewildered: the vision of the ferris wheel in Palisades Park whirled through his





head. "The revolution? The revolution of what?"

"The Revolution. Don't smart-ass, Kastnerr."

"Oh, the Revolution," Kastnerr repeated, breathing a sigh of relief. "But where, may I ask, does the Revolution speak from?"

"We already told you once, Kastnerr. The Revolution speaks from your office."

Kastnerr's heart fell into another bottomless pit. "My office!" he hissed.

"Your office, Kastnerr. So don't bullshit us."

Kastnerr blew up. His eyes narrowed, his fist rose above his head. "Get the hell out of my office, you Revolution."

"The Revolution ain't moving one step, Kastnerr."

"Get out!" Kastnerr yelled into the phone. "Get out. I'll throw you out."

"No use yelling, Kastnerr. You're not going to throw anybody out over the phone. The Revolution has already thrown you out."

"Get out! Get out! On the double! Now!"

"Don't yell at us, Kastnerr."

Kastnerr caught himself and lowered his voice. "What are you doing in my office?"

"What are we doing? Oh, not much. We're sitting in your chair, we're reading your papers and books. Those are pretty funny books, Kastnerr."

"They're not funny. They're important, they're — holy books."

"Holy books! Come on, Kastnerr.

We know they're not holy."

"Don't touch them."

"We touch anything, Kastnerr. Don't order us around. We're in your office. You're not, remember that. Stick that up your ass."

"But why me? Why my office?" Kastnerr cried.

"Because we don't like you. Because your time's up."

"You people are crazy."

"Maybe we're crazy, but your time's up."

"What do you mean, my time's up?"

"Where were you last night, Kastnerr?"

"I was at home, why?"

"What about the night before?"

"The night before?" The night before was the night of the mugging. "I had dinner with a friend."

"A friend, Kastnerr? Male or female?"

"Male, but it's none of your business who I ate with."

"Everything's our business. What did you eat?"

"I ate *quiche lorraine*."

"How was it?"

"Good, a little dry, but good."

"What did you drink with it?"

"A dry white wine."

"So Kastnerr had *quiche lorraine* and was drinking dry white wine Sunday night." The voice seemed to be speaking to someone else, perhaps to several other people. So there was a whole group of revolutionaries in his office, in Kastnerr's *sanctum sanctorum*. "Kastnerr, you were drinking white wine and eating *quiche lorraine* Sunday night while they were dropping napalm on Vietnamese babies."

"God almighty, what does that have to do with what I eat?"

"Don't God us, and don't worry what that has to do with what you eat, Kastnerr. What did you do after you finished eating?"

"I went home."

"You went home? With your male

friend, Kastnerr?" There was laughter in his office.

"No, I went home alone."

"And then what happened?"

"I didn't get home."

"What do you mean you didn't get home?"

"I —" he didn't want to tell them about the mugging.

"What, Kastnerr? Go on."

"I was mugged."

"Kastnerr was mugged! Where were you mugged?"

"On my way home. I don't want to talk about it."

"You better talk about it. What street were you mugged on?"

"On 41st. Between 7th and 8th."

"What were you doing on 41st between 7th and 8th?"

"I made a mistake. A wrong turn."

"Kastnerr sure made a wrong turn. What happened then?"

"I was walking down 41st —"

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone, and a man stepped out from between two buildings with a gun, and told me to give him my wallet."

"What about your watch?"

"I don't wear a watch."

"So you gave him your wallet."

"Of course, I gave him my wallet. He had a gun."

"What did he look like?"

"Who?"

"The guy you gave your wallet to."

"I didn't give it to him. He stole it. He had a gun."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't remember. I didn't look at him."

"You must remember. Was he black?"

"Yes, he was black."

"You're sure he was black. Maybe he was white?"

"I told you. I don't remember. White, black. He was a junkie. He robbed my wallet."

"How do you know he was a junkie, Kastnerr? Did you see his arms?"



Did you see his needle?"

"His eyes were bloodshot. He couldn't talk."

"His eyes were bloodshot. He couldn't talk. Therefore Kastnerr says he was a junkie." Another round of laughter from his office. "Did he shoot you, Kastnerr?"

"No, he didn't shoot me. If he shot me, how could I talk to you?"

"Don't wise-ass, Kastnerr. Did he hit you?"

"Yes, he hit me."

"Where?"

"In the groin."

"In the groin. Near your balls?"

Kastnerr didn't answer. The voice waited. "So Kastnerr got kicked in the balls! A full peal of laughter, of high feminine giggles. "Kastnerr, do you know who he was?"

"No. Who?"

"He was the Revolution, Kastnerr. He was part of the Revolution. Part of us. We're everywhere, black, white, bloodshot. We're going to kick you in the balls again, Kastnerr. But this time harder."

"Shut up with your threats!" Kastnerr screamed into the phone.

"Kastnerr, do you know why you were mugged?" the voice calmly continued. "You were mugged because you were eating *quiche lorraine* and drinking dry white wine while your nazi friends were bombing Vietnamese villages and innocent people. Do you understand, Kastnerr? While you drank wine, they were dropping napalm on Vietnamese babies."

Kastnerr was tired, but still more furious than tired. "I don't give a shit about Vietnamese babies or napalm," he screamed into the receiver.

"You know what, Kastnerr," it answered. "You better start giving a shit about dropping napalm on Vietnamese babies. You better start giving a shit. Real quick. The Revolution is coming, Kastnerr."

"I don't give a shit about the Revolution, either," he screamed back.

"The Revolution is going to get you. Soon. Smear blood on your door, or else we'll take your apartment also. Good bye, Kastnerr." The phone clicked. Kastnerr yelled into the receiver, "Are you still there?" but there was no answer and he let the phone drop to the floor.

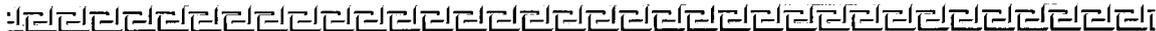
So the Revolution even knew the Old Testament, Kastnerr thought to himself. What were they doing in his office? He suddenly remembered his typewriter. They better not touch his typewriter. If they did, he'd kill them. He'd smear their blood over his door. At any rate, they hadn't mentioned the typewriter, so it was most probable they hadn't touched it. But there was no telling. What, however, he thought for the second time, was this business about blood? Whose blood? His own? He wasn't the first-born, anyhow. There had been an older brother, *Aryeleh*, who had died when Kastnerr was four. But even if he had been the first-born: Kastnerr envisioned the Angel of Death — in the person of a young, voluptuous girl, her breasts heavy and swaying — fly naked above him and point her finger down at him. He withered, and suddenly, felt himself falling into a hole which had mysteriously appeared beneath his feet, beneath the bedroom carpet, into the bowels of the earth. He looked up, directly into the barrel of a gun. His hand shot back to his rear, to touch his wallet, as if to reassure himself; though instead, it passed clear through his body. He looked up again. The gun had vanished. But then, so had Kastnerr.

That night, Kastnerr tried but could not fall asleep. First it was too early, then it was too late. Whenever he closed his eyes, he heard either the voice of his father warning him that whoever says, I will sin and repent, can never repent; or the voice on the telephone ordering him to smear blood on his door. He listened to the two

voices until they were indistinguishable. Suddenly, there was knocking on the door. Kastnerr got up, put on his nightrobe, went to the door, and looked out through the peephole. He saw nothing. "Who's there?" he cried out. There was no answer. Kastnerr walked back to his bedroom and switched on the light. It was too late, nearly three-thirty, to go back to sleep. He couldn't sleep even if he tried. Finally, he washed his face, dressed, and, sitting down in the living-room, sat down to read the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*, but even Homer could not settle his restless thoughts.

An urge to travel suddenly seized Kastnerr. To journey. To emigrate. That was ridiculous, he told himself. Yet he had to move. He had to go somewhere. It wasn't wise, he told himself again; but before he could stop himself, Kastnerr, keyring and new wallet in pocket, had walked out of his apartment, up 116th Street, and down into the subway.

The classicist got off the subway at 42nd Street and walked upstairs to Times Square. The cluster of intersections was empty and desolate, as abandoned and foreign as either Istanbul or Paris at 4 A.M. Kastnerr walked over to the corner of Broadway and 41st and peered up the street where he had been mugged. It too was empty — but in its barrenness, and in the harsh, glaring brightness of its streetlights, the street seemed almost an apparition, a vision of blankness. Kastnerr walked back to Times Square and stood on the island in the middle of the street until a black drunk, the first person he had yet seen that night, stumbled by. Kastnerr



times. He couldn't take his eyes off the girl. After the fifth drink, a hand moved up his thigh toward his crotch. He was drunk. "Ariane," Kastnerr moaned, and in one instant, he was back in Hamburg, Paris, and Istanbul. He was so drunk he was back in all three cities simultaneously.

At 6 A.M., they kicked Kastnerr, dead drunk, out of the bar. His knees buckling, his head thrown cockily back, as if he intended to stare down the sun which was just rising over Manhattan, Kastnerr stood in the center of the pavement until the cool, dry morning air had revived him. "Home," he finally muttered to himself. "Time to go home," and he stumbled down Broadway to the subway.

Once downstairs in the station and in front of the token booth, Kastnerr reached back for his wallet and discovered that his pocket was again empty. For the second time in three days, his wallet had been stolen. Goddamn it. He didn't have any change either. Then, however, he realized that he didn't care. All he had lost was seven or eight dollars. He didn't miss the new wallet anyhow. He reflected for a moment: either he could beg the agent to let him on the train for nothing, or he could walk home. The agent did not appear especially sympathetic. Kastnerr walked.

By the time he had made his way the seventy blocks uptown and reached 116th Street, it was close to nine. Kastnerr felt strangely rejuvenated, almost a youth. In front of Columbia's gates, between the twin robed statues, he debated whether to walk over to Hamilton to see, if by chance, it was open. In his mood, anything seemed possible to the classicist; but when he discovered that Hamilton was open, he was nevertheless so astonished he suspected that he was dreaming. A single policeman still stood guard before the glass doors, but people were moving

in and out of the building, and Kastnerr simply walked inside among them. The bottom lobby was a dismal mess. He waded through the splintered remains of chairs and desks, through litter and unidentifiable garbage, to the elevator. As he rose up to the sixth floor, his fingers dove into his pocket and clutched at his keyring. On the sixth floor, before he approached his office, Kastnerr stopped in the men's room and washed his face. He stared at himself in the mirror. Perhaps he was younger, perhaps older, maybe even timeless. All he was absolutely certain of was that now he was fully awake.

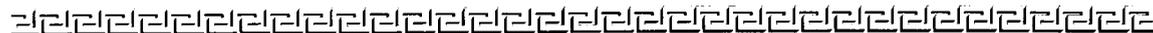
The keys to his office, Kastnerr discovered, were unnecessary. The plate glass which formerly had filled the door's frame had been shattered, and standing outside, Kastnerr surveyed the chaos of his office. Books and papers had been thrown off the shelves on to the floor. Empty cigarette boxes, coke bottles, a beer can or two, sandwich and candy wrappers littered his desk, the floor, and couch. In the midst of all the chaos, however, the typewriter, the classicist's priceless IBM Selectric, shone proudly on the desk top. His eyes fixed upon its formidable, Olympian shape, Kastnerr stepped through the door frame and walked over to it. The typewriter was untouched. They hadn't tampered with it. The top was still screwed on tightly. A special screwdriver was necessary in order to get the top off, and they had not played with it.

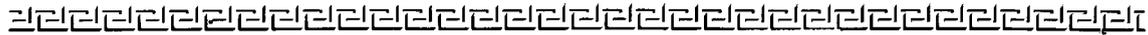
Inexplicably, Kastnerr began to laugh loudly. His laughter echoed through the empty room. The entire episode seemed now — afterwards — no more than an amusing dream. Kastnerr had a sense of humor. He could laugh, even at himself, and especially now, when he was back at home. His real home was his office. Back to order, to regularity. Kastnerr felt so good he decided to begin work immediately. Plugging in the type-

stared impatiently at him, "Mug me. Here I am. Mug me," his face cried out, but the black only inched away, terrified that the classicist was about to attack him. The drunk tottered across the street and entered a bar. Kastnerr watched him, and then followed. The bar, he discovered, was actually a striptease club. On its front window, painted black save for a tiny circle in its center, were lettered in gold:

TOPLESS BOTTOMLESS GIRLS

Kastnerr stood outside and squinted through the tiny, clear circle. He could see nothing. After some hesitation, he finally walked inside, past a sign which told him he had to be 21 to enter, and into the darkness. A cold, hard grip, the hand of the club's bouncer, immediately seized Kastnerr and steered him to a stool at the bar, next to a cage in which a red-headed girl, too heavy and too old, was bouncing her breasts and gyrating to a tinny recording of some blues song. When the record moaned forth, "Oh you can't give it to me hard enough," Kastnerr heard the bartender ask him what he wanted to drink. He stared at the girl, she shoved her pelvis at him, and Kastnerr heard his lips say, "A whiskey." Still not taking his eyes off her, he brought the glass to his lips, drank it down in one gulp, and placed it back on the bar counter. The bartender asked him if he wanted another drink, the girl shoved her pelvis at him again, and Kastnerr's lips ordered a second whiskey. In the course of the next hour, whenever the dancer shoved her pelvis at Kastnerr, his lips ordered another drink. Five





writer cord, he sat down, closed his eyes, and began to type in Greek.

*Dear Zeus,  
I do not mind your child, Dionysus. At times, I am even fond of him. Occasionally, however, he gets out of hand and makes a chaos of this world. You should watch him more carefully. And whatever happened to Apollo? We miss him dearly. Especially at times like this. At least, I do.  
Your obedient worshipper, etc.*

Kastnerr's fingers danced along the keys. He hummed and laughed gently to himself, amused at the originality of his letter. Once he had completed it, he opened his eyes, looked down at the paper, and found it blank. He closed and opened his eyes rapidly, and looked down again at the sheet of paper, but it was still blank. Kastnerr jumped up frantically, threw his chair over, and searched furiously through his desk drawers for the screwdriver. He couldn't find it. Suddenly his eyes caught the point of its sharp top gleaming out from beneath a candy wrapper at the typewriter's side. His mind raced, his fingers worked furiously at the tiny screws. Kastnerr's mind raced far beyond him. His fingers trembled in a palsy before he finally unscrewed the top. The interior of the machine was hollow. The Greek ball was gone, and the classicist began to search madly for it. He wasn't even certain they had left it in the room. He had to have it back. It was irreplaceable. Without it, he couldn't type. If he couldn't type, he couldn't work. *The Life of Kastnerr* would never be completed, and if he could not complete it — Kastnerr would not envision the possibility. It was an unfillable, absolute blank in the future.

Kastnerr searched all morning and afternoon. Through his desk and drawers, under the couch, behind the bookcase, and through the garbage on the floor; but it was nowhere to be

found. The classicist began to cry. He was certain he was going mad. The shambles which the revolutionaries had left incomplete he himself had completed. In the pale, reddish light of the setting sun, his office appeared like the primeval chaos one moment before God had commenced upon His creation of the universe.

Kastnerr stood in the room's center and cried. For what, or to what, he didn't know or care. Nothing could help now. It was far too late.

As he stood and cried, his glance fell, by chance, upon one spot in the rug that rose in a slight mound. A sudden gasp fell from his mouth. Kastnerr dropped to his knees and crawled under the rug. In the dense blackness ahead of him, he began to discern a gleaming, round point which, as he approached, scraping his knees on the splinters of the wooden floor, swiftly enlarged into the shape of a golden sphere. He crawled frantically, his hand shot out into the darkness, and he seized the engraved surface of his Greek ball.

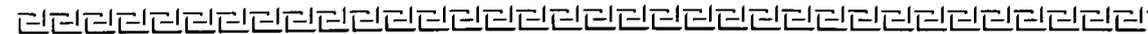
Kastnerr, like a chthonic god, roared in joy from beneath the rug. He crawled out, surfaced, and running to the window, for the office was now sunk in shadow, held the ball in the palm of his hand. The gold sphere shone like a tiny idol in the moonlight. "I have saved you," Kastnerr said to the little deity. "No, we have saved each other." All the wanderings and flights of his sixty-three years focussed upon the ball, as if it were his final habitation. Everything, Kastnerr thought, had come to this. Hamburg, Paris, Istanbul, New York; the first twenty-five years, the caesura, the last twenty-five years. Kastnerr lifted the ball higher, towards the moon, in the line between his eyes and the lunar planet in the distance. For a second, he thought he saw the figure of the god walking over the horizon; then, he thought it was his father; finally, Kastnerr realized that it was only himself.

The ball was his. It didn't belong to the gods. He'd smash the ball before he gave it to them, but Kastnerr knew better. He knew now, for one thing, the difference between the gods.

Closing his fist tightly about the ball, he walked back to the typewriter, inserted the ball into its prong, and began to type again.

*Dear Y-hw-h (for he also knew better than to write the Tetragrammaton)  
Kastnerr has come home.  
O God of my father's bible, the other gods have mouths but they do not speak; eyes but they do not see; ears but they do not hear. What do they know? This is yours.  
I have come home. At last.*

Kastnerr typed on all night. He did not know what he typed. He didn't care. His fingers moved along the keys as if he were a blind man reading the writing on the wall. He did not even bother to turn on the light, for he had no desire to see what he was typing. While he worked, he hummed to himself a melody which his father had sung on Saturday evening to celebrate the separation between the holy and the profane. Now Kastnerr had mysteriously recalled the tune, as if out of nowhere. When the sun rose again over Manhattan, Kastnerr, who had not slept for two days, watched it climb over the pillared heights of Butler Library and found himself, inexplicably, reciting in Hebrew the blessing over the new day, pulling the words out of nowhere.



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