EASTERN TIME

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HOMS, SYRIA

The man across the coffeehouse sat reading a newspaper that hid his face, but I was still certain it was him. The front page showed the grainy image of a Tunisian street vendor who had just made headlines for self-immolating in front of the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid. The cover date read 17 DECEMBER 2010 but I felt in that moment that I had been transported a decade backward in time. The man's dark hair, thick-set and parted asymmetrically, was visible above the newspaper, and on his right wrist was a leather-banded timepiece, of which there were only three in the country. As for the remaining two, one had belonged to his father and was buried with him at his death, and the other was destroyed in a fire whose cause formally remains unknown, though not to me, because I watched him set it fifteen years ago with the same brand of Egyptian-imported matchsticks that now sits next to his half-empty pack of Gauloises.

Historically, he refused to use a lighter because of his irrational fear that the fluid might escape and catch something, anything, on fire. Matches, he once argued as he sat opposite me in a coffee house in Al-Qusur, not too far from here, were lower-risk, more controlled, for there was a separating step, the lithe striking of a match across the strip, between withdrawal and ignition. The lever on a lighter, however, made things far too easy, mechanizing what he thought to be some of the most human actions: enslavement to substance and unfettered destruction. That separating step, he had told me, holding up his matchbox with his index finger and thumb, was like the safety on a firearm; it made sure that the fire set was deliberate, in which the perpetrator withdrew the box, then the match itself, and took care to correctly strike it along the strip, igniting a chemical reaction by friction before feeding it to the flammable prime mover. He was smiling as he explained this and I had laughed; matchstick or lighter, it didn't much matter—a fire was a fire, and no one would care for the implement so much as the conflagration that followed. But now I wondered what the Tunisian street vendor used, and whether the answer would vindicate him.

Indignation, doused in gasoline and made to burn. Self-immolation is a kind of non-violence, a red-hot sacrifice, which journalists describe with words such as 'extreme', 'disturbing', and 'haunting', a lexicon seldom used to describe the moral outrage being protested against in the first place. After all, the word 'immolation' first meant, in the sixteenth century, the killing of a sacrificial victim, a sacrifice: Buddhist monks in South Vietnam; the anti-Vietnam-war activist below the office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense; Soviet bloc protestors against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. It makes headlines, flashbulb photographs on front pages and footage filmed by trembling hands on the evening news, preceded by a perfectly enunciated sensitivity warning. But what does another burning man matter to a nation-state government that issues top-

down orders to strike refugee camps, half-functioning hospitals, children who they prophesize will become national security threats? What does he matter to a nation-state government that sets many men like him on fire? This immolation, too, is a sacrifice; but the greater good it is made for does not include men who look like the Tunisian street vendor in Sidi Bouzid.

He and I had argued about this, once, when he had come to visit me while I was completing my undergraduate degree in England. It's about autonomy, he had said, about not letting the nation-state burn you, but sending *yourself* up in flames—on your own terms, for your own cause. He was more fevered then, and every sacrifice appeared to him as some great martyrdom, venerated by posthumous portraits in his mind's museums, all Joan of Arcs and Husayn ibn Alis. Not all men burn as martyrs, I told him; some men simply burn. The moonlight from the perpendicular window stretched across his face, his eyes fervent, and in that moment I realized that we were arguing about far more than just men setting themselves on fire in front of government offices; it was only a conduit.

What, then, would he make of the Tunisian street vendor? Would we argue about it, just as we did then, when things became unsalvageable? I so badly wanted to cross the coffeehouse and ask him. To ask what he makes of the self-immolation, how he still finds those same Egyptian-imported matchboxes; if he regrets any of it, misses it, or would rather let it be lost to time. Much is lost to time; more still is lost in traveling through it. Perhaps I wanted to see it all again for myself, to cross-examine the Frankenstein I had stitched together from dimly lit memories, washed-out photographs, and the first notes of a certain record, against the slow-burning reality of fifteen years.

The waiter brought him a second cup of coffee—black, with two sugars, I was sure—and he set his newspaper on the table. The past decade showed on his face. He checked his timepiece, and I wondered if he knew that the third watch he believed he burned was now on my wrist.

He lifted the coffee to his lips with his left hand, bare of a wedding band, and stared ahead, fathomless.

He stared right through me. It was as though I was not there at all.