I remember a television program I once saw; a rerun, made years before. I must have been seven or eight, too young to understand it. It was the sort of thing my mother liked to watch: historical, educational. She tried to explain it to me afterwards, to tell me that the things in it had really happened, but to me it was only a story. I thought someone had made it up. I suppose all children think that, about any history before their own. If it's only a story, it becomes less frightening.

The program was a documentary, about one of those wars. They interviewed people and showed clips from films of the time, black and white, and still photos. I don't remember much about it, but I remember the quality of the pictures, the way everything in them seemed to be coated with a mixture of sunlight and dust, and how dark the shadows were under people's eyebrows and along their cheekbones.

The interviews with people still alive then were in color. The one I remember best was with a woman who had been the mistress of a man who had supervised one of the camps where they put the Jews, before they killed them. In ovens, my mother said; but there weren't any pictures of the ovens, so I got some confused notion that these deaths had taken place in kitchens. There is something especially terrifying to a child in that idea. Ovens mean cooking, and cooking comes before eating. I thought these people had been eaten. Which in a way I suppose they had been.

From what they said, the man had been cruel and brutal. The mistress — my mother explained *mistress*, she did not believe in mystification, I had a pop-up book of sexual organs by the time I was four — the mistress had once been very beautiful. There was a black-and-white shot of her and another woman, in the two-piece bathing suits and platform shoes and picture hats of the time; they were wearing cat's-eye sunglasses and sitting in deck chairs by a swimming pool. The swimming pool was beside their house, which was near the camp with the ovens. The woman said she didn't notice much that she found unusual. She denied knowing about the ovens.

At the time of the interview, forty or fifty years later, she was dying of emphysema. She coughed a lot, and she was very thin, almost emaciated; but she still took pride in her appearance. (Look at that, said my mother, half grudgingly, half admiringly. She still takes pride in her appearance.) She was carefully made up, heavy mascara on her eyelashes, rouge on the bones of her cheeks, over which the skin was stretched like a rubber glove pulled tight. She was wearing pearls.

He was not a monster, she said. People say he was a monster, but he was not one.

What could she have been thinking about? Not much, I guess; not back then, not at the time. She was thinking about how not to think. The times were abnormal. She took pride in her appearance. She did not believe he was a monster. He was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, offkey, in

144

145

the shower, he had a yen for truffles, he called his dog Liebchen and made it sit up for little pieces of raw steak. How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation. A big child, she would have said to herself. Her heart would have melted, she'd have smoothed the hair back from his forehead, kissed him on the ear, and not just to get something out of him either. The instinct to soothe, to make it better. There there, she'd say, as he woke from a nightmare. Things are so hard for you. All this she would have believed, because otherwise how could she have kept on living? She was very ordinary, under that beauty. She believed in decency, she was nice to the Jewish maid, or nice enough, nicer than she needed to be.

Several days after this interview with her was filmed, she killed herself. It said that, right on television.

Nobody asked her whether or not she had loved him.

What I remember now, most of all, is the make-up.