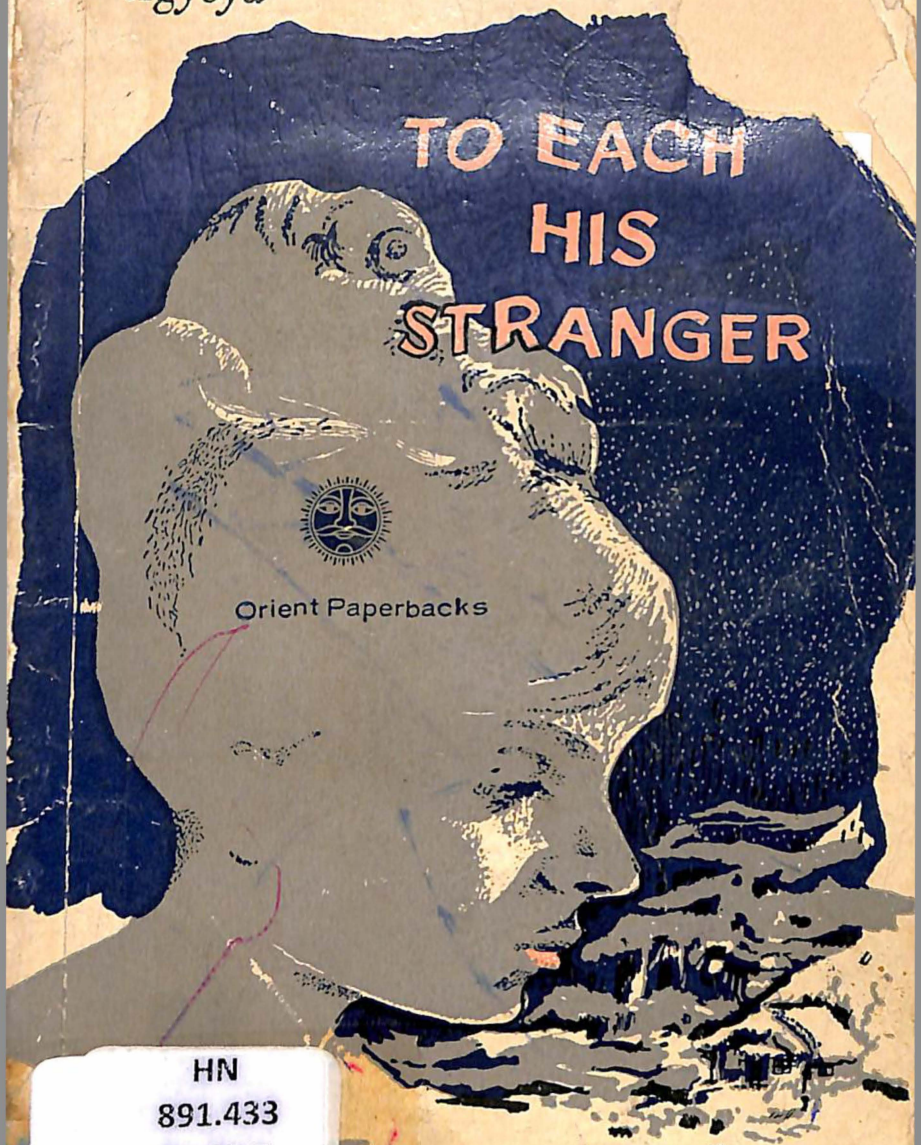
Agyeya

TO EACH HIS STRANGER



Orient Paperbacks

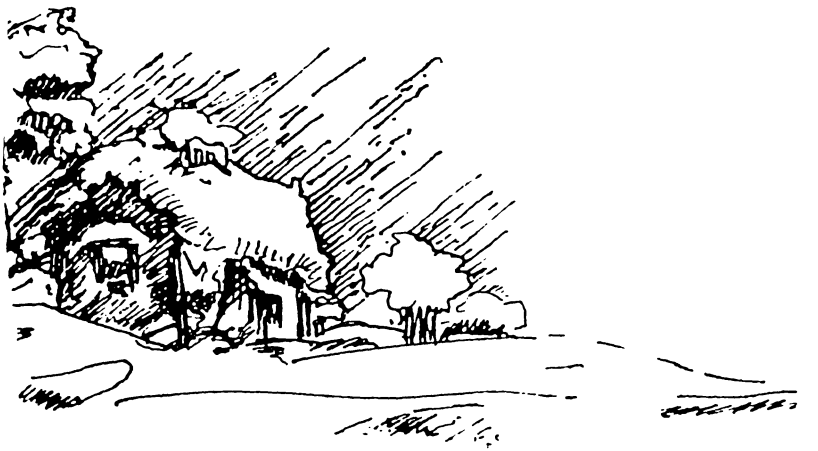
TO EACH HIS STRANGER

This is the English rendering of a highly commended Hindi novel, **Apne Apne Ajnabi,** by Agyeya, a veteran Hindi writer of international repute. All his novels have been regarded as the most significant works of their respective decades. In this novel the author explores the regions of human loneliness and examines the problems of existence, death, God, etc. He has treated a difficult subject with an ease and confidence that is astonishing.

Agyeya, or Sachchidananda H. Vatsyayan as his full name goes, has dominated the Hindi literary scene for nearly two decades. He was born in 1911. His father was an archaeologist with whom he had the opportunity of travelling throughout the country. After graduating in Science he embarked on the hazardous career of a revolutionary. He was arrested, tried for sedition, and remained in jail for a number of years.

His first novel and a number of poems were written in jail. Since then over twenty volumes of his writing have been published, one of which, **Aangan Ke Paar Dwar**, has won for him the Sahitya Akademi Award, the highest literary award in India. He has also edited a number of literary magazines and anthologies of experimental poetry.

He has travelled widely and taught for some time at the University of California, U.S.A.



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AGYEYA

TRANSLATED BY THE AUTHOR
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GORDON C. ROADARMEL

Orient Paperbacks

To Each His Stranger

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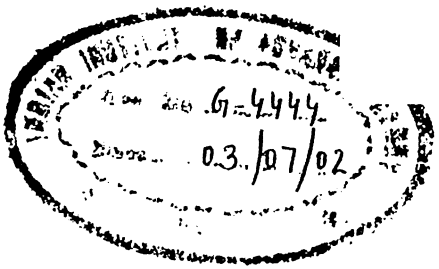


A SILENCE closed in upon her. Only in that sudden hush could Jokke realize fully what a tremendous crash had taken place just a moment before—as though a flood of silence had choked off the crash right in the middle, and then filled the room with its vast presence.

Was it only this silence that had made Jokke's heart begin to pound with such force, or was it also her subconscious grasp of the real significance of the silence? The pressure of her pulse seemed to be trying to overcome the oppression of the stillness.

Snow had been falling ever since the previous night. Not that the falling of snow there during that season, or even its continuous falling, was a matter of surprise. Its failure to fall would have been more unusual. But Jokke had not considered the possibility that a mountain of snow might suddenly crash like this and fall on them, burying them beneath it. That must be what had happened. What else could explain that uncompleted crash and the stillness following it?

"*We* must be buried."—Suddenly she remembered that she was not alone, and her immediate

problem seemed to be solved now that she had found something to divert her attention from the storm. What could have happened to Mrs. Akelov? Jokke ran to the other room, but stopped as soon as she crossed the threshold. Mrs. Akelov, her back to Jokke, was kneeling by the clouded window. Her scarf-covered head was slightly bowed, by which Jokke inferred that she must be praying. She was about to tiptoe away when Mrs. Akelov stood up and asked, "Weren't you frightened, Jokke?"

"Of what?" Jokke said casually, offended by the question.

"We've been buried under the snow. There's no telling how many days we'll remain imprisoned like this. Of course I've spent a few winters this way before, but you—"

"I'm not afraid of snow," Jokke declared. "If I were, why would I have come here? I've climbed the snowy cliffs of the Alps before. Once I even slipped and fell from a glacier. I was rescued—but I might easily have broken an arm or a leg. And yet I've come back for another excursion in the snow."

"Yes, that's so," Mrs. Akelov said. "Much can be endured—even fear—because of the attraction of danger. But here there is nothing at all that one can do."

"Don't worry about me, Auntie Selma — I'll manage. But as for yourself, some—"

An affectionate smile bloomed on Selma Akelov's face. Perhaps it pleased her to be addressed as "Auntie." She paused briefly, casting a long look at Jokke, and then asked, "What time is it now?"

"About half-past eleven," Jokke said, glancing at her wrist watch.

"Then it must still be light outside. Let's go and see if we can discover from anywhere how deep the snow is—or if there is any way to dig ourselves out. We'll know then whether we're closed in for the whole winter."

"I don't have that much free time," Jokke said, and then began to laugh at the inappropriateness of her remark.

"In regard to time—I may not have long either, but—"

"You mean your holiday, Aunt Selma?" Jokke asked with surprise.

As though to change the subject, Mrs. Akelov said, "We ought also to see how much the cabin holds by way of provisions—there should be enough to last through the winter. Let's go and look."

Jokke turned and moved toward the kitchen, listening to the slow, heavy, and somewhat dragging footsteps of Mrs. Akelov behind her. From the kitchen, and from the storeroom near it, they should be able to discover the answer to both questions—about the supplies and the snow—because if there were a possibility of even the faintest ray of light appearing through that mass of snow,

it would be visible from those rooms which faced directly southeast, the only place where sunshine could fall. Not that there would be much sunshine right now, of course — but whatever light might persist in this gale of snow would be found there.

It appeared that there was a common answer to both questions: that whatever there was, would last for the whole winter. There was a supply of food, and enough fuel for the animal-fat stove; and they had been buried under so much snow that there was little likelihood of its melting before March.

The layer of snow was probably not so deep that it could not have been dug through from the outside, but who was around to do so? And if they could somehow get through the expanse of snow by digging from the inside, what assurance was there that more snow would not have fallen in the meantime? This was one of the first storms of winter, and snow would now keep falling continually. They should consider themselves fortunate, of course, to have been buried only under snow, so that the cabin was left unharmed and could be considered secure for the whole winter. Now if the cliff had crashed and fallen also, then —

Jokke shivered suddenly at the idea. "Come on, let's go and sit down," she said. "There's nothing to do right now. I'll prepare dinner in a little while."

Mrs. Akelov went into the other room and sat down. "This time it'll be a proper Christmas," she said. "There really should be snow for Christmas, and this time there will be nothing but snow — above and below, nothing but snow!"

She laughed softly. "There's even a little wood left. If we bring it inside here, it will keep dry; and we'll light a roaring fire on Christmas day — since warmth is no less necessary than snow on Christmas."

"But Auntie," Jokke said in a lost voice, "Christmas is still a long way off. Anything might happen before then!"

Selma got up, came over to Jokke, put a hand on her shoulder, and said, "Jokke, it only seems that way because of your age, right? Everything seems a long time away. Ask me — Christmas is not that far away — only for me —" Leaving the statement unfinished, she fell silent.

Jokke looked at her intensely. What was it that Auntie Selma wanted to say, or did not want to say, which came to her lips time after time? Should she ask her directly what she was thinking? Did Auntie Selma really believe that they would not be saved? Would this snow-covered log cabin become their grave? In fact, why the "become"? The grave was already there, and now they had only to die! The grave had been ready right on time; the delay was only in their dying. Destiny should certainly not be blamed for this

error of time.

But what could she ask Aunt Selma? And how could she ask it? She had come here of her own free will to ski in the snow and had been attracted by this wooden cottage on the plateau of the mountain. And she herself had made the suggestion about staying here. Aunt Selma was the mother of shepherds — two were still shepherds, while the third had become a wood-cutter. The three had gone lower down, and would come back only when the winter was over. This was their annual routine — in winter they took their flocks below, and in spring they returned again. Auntie Selma should have gone too, for that matter, but for some reason she had stayed behind this year. At first Jokke had been surprised to see her, having assumed that the log cabin would be empty, as was generally the case in these mountains. She had conjectured secretly that the old woman must be miserly and suspicious, not wanting to leave empty a house full of possessions. There is of course no work to be done in winter, though, and it would not be as cold under the snow as outside in the open air, and for an old person there's nothing to worry about — they just sit in one place and chew their cud. Having scraped off the memories of the past, they chew the cud of memory and then swallow.

But to stay alone like this all winter takes courage — just being miserly is not enough — and

if something happened to the old woman, then —

As though to stop her train of thought, Jokke said, "We could burn just a little wood today too, though. Shall I light the fire?"

Aunt Selma thought awhile. "No, why do it right now? Light it tonight if you wish." Then suddenly, after a pause: "Or do you want to light the fire right now and sit by it? Of course I like a fire, but —"

But what? That too much wood might be used up? Such a thought would not be pure miserliness. They would have to consider the possibility of spending two-and-a-half months here, that is if they survived. It might even be three months. But it would not be completely impossible, for that matter, that someone might come searching for her. The folks back home knew, and Paul should be just one day's distance away. Paul would not rest — surely he would conduct a search — Paul, who so often had said, "If you had been in any country of the world, I would have found you. I'd have searched for you and picked you out immediately from the thousands and millions of people." He had gone with a different group to another mountain, and there had been talk of meeting at the bottom after coming down from the snow country. Two months — three months! A graveyard — Christmas! A festival of the child-god in the underworld. God in hell! Paul would certainly find — but what

would be found?—she or her—

"Auntie Selma, I'm not feeling well," Jokke burst out. "Perhaps with a fire—"

Aunt Selma sat quietly for a moment, her eyes fixed on Jokke. Then she spoke, very slowly, and as if half to herself: "There's no danger, Jokke. And anyway, danger's nothing new for you. You like to play all kinds of dangerous sports. But there's one thing to realize: fear has two faces, one of which is called adventure. Some people, seeing only that face, do great work and go far. But when one is resigned, fear has only one side, and you can't avoid it. It's better to recognize it—then you're not so alone. How can one endure being imprisoned with a fear which is a stranger? It can't be endured—it absolutely can't be endured! All right, light the fire; then sit beside me, and we'll talk about a lot of things. I spoke about fear being a stranger—so far you and I are strangers too—first let us become fully acquainted!"

December 15

Ten days in this tomb... it's been said that on the tenth day corpses rise up and assemble in front of some angel to settle their accounts. But there are only the two of us in this tomb, and there's no question of rising up—and which of us could be considered an angel!

Auntie Selma is an old woman, of course, so

her day of reckoning will come first. Or at least her state of mind is closer to that point than mine. But then am I to be the angel? Considering the thoughts that rise up within me, nothing could be more ironic! If one of us is an angel, then it must be Auntie Selma, on whose face an unworldly expression sometimes seems to appear — and on seeing which, I become upset and feel like smashing things.

December 16

An unending, unchanging, hazy light, not of day nor of night nor of any moment in between, an unearthly light which perhaps is not even light, but only the absence of darkness. I hear that in the grave there is vast darkness, but here even that is incomplete and varied! Perhaps death is really like this, where everything is about to happen but never does. This interrupted becoming is the special form of death chosen for man, who has intelligence, who has a knowledge of good and evil. If man lacked this faculty, then death could be complete for him. Then what is finished would be completely finished, and what remained would be completely certain. This is the penalty for the moral sense accumulated over the ages, that even our dying is incomplete: even in death, the account contains some arrears.

A dim light — a petrified, detached life — as if a clock alone governs life, as if a tiny mechanism

whose key lies in our hands has taken God's place. And then there are we humans, who do not even have the power to quit winding that mechanism, to let the clock stop, to rebel against the machine for having usurped the place of God, to declare ourselves free! Time would not stop, of course, by the stopping of a clock, and even if it did, what difference would that make here? Even when the clock runs, time stands still here. I live in just an unending, prolonged, petrified moment—I go on living—and that moment doesn't change at all—it is fixed. Despite all our development, aren't we humans just young plants who grow helplessly toward the sun? Even in the dark, far inside the earth, a sprout grows toward the sun. Having been trampled and bent, it still turns in the direction of the sun. Some people say that these shoots grow out from the earth's centre: that it is their tendency to push away from the centre of the earth that pushes them toward the sun. But to accept this centrifugal force as the whole answer is like considering the earth as separate from the solar system.

Even the earth is drawn toward the sun and is pushed away by the sun. In just the same way, a sprout throws its roots downward and pushes itself upward, toward the sun. Perhaps we don't throw any roots downward, at most just spreading them haphazardly over the surface, but we live only by the aid of the sun, which, without

our knowing, is directing every activity and every movement of our lives. We are all basically sun-worshippers—and, regardless of what we think, in our lives the sun is synonymous with God. The sun and God, the sun and time—therefore the sun and our lives—where there is no sun, there is no time either.

But is there really no sun where I am? Is there really no time? Isn't this my sole problem: that I can't answer this positively? It's as though I am suspended in a moment unrelated to time. That moment has broken away from the chain of time and lost itself somewhere, and has thus become endless—endless and meaningless.

December 19

This evening we sat down to play cards. From somewhere Auntie Selma had brought an old box in which there were two packs of cards. "I don't know how to play," she told me. "But I'll learn if you'll teach me. This will also keep your mind occupied."

As it turned out, she was not completely ignorant about card-playing. When we began to play, I soon found that we were doing so with interest, not just to keep the old lady occupied, or just to pass the time. The game was going strong. But then, when the old lady took a long time to throw down a card, I raised my eyes and saw that she had fallen asleep while extracting a card,

though her grip had not loosened on the cards. I kept sitting there quietly. If the cards had slipped from her hand, I could have gathered them up, but as it was, any attempt to take them away would have awakened her. Not knowing what to do, I kept looking at her face. Ordinarily I don't look at her face much, being afraid that some hidden sign of hostility might be evident somewhere in my eyes. And what good would that do, when we've got to live in this tomb as long as we have . . .

Then it suddenly struck me, while looking at her face, that it was a very interesting one, which could be studied for a long time — but only secretly, since it would change completely if one were to meet the old woman's eyes.

Every line of a face has a history, and on Auntie Selma's face, so full of lines, they're not all the result of snowy winters. But can I read this history correctly? In the lines which radiate from the corners of her eyes, form a kind of net, and then are lost, there is great pity — an active pity which flows toward other people, not the kind which would turn inward and demand compassion from others. But the lines beneath her nostrils and at the corners of her lips, though not denying this pity, reveal something altogether different. My eyes circled her face and then stopped on the old woman's closed eyes. If only her eyelids were transparent, transparent from just one

direction, so that I could peek into her eyes while she remained asleep — perhaps I would find the answer to this riddle. I would ask those eyes to explain the secret of the old lady's life — just what it is in her accumulation of experience that I am unable to grasp.

But suddenly I knew that the old woman's eyes were open. Effortlessly, without a flicker, they had opened and were peering intently into mine. Embarrassed, I lowered my eyes.

As though to ease my embarrassment she said, "I fell asleep. Please forgive me," and played the card in her hand.

This was all that happened. But for some unknown reason I felt that she had not been asleep. In sleep — however light it may be — the tendons relax somewhat, and one can notice that loosening of tension. But at no time had there been any such sign anywhere in the old woman's body. It was more as though she had suddenly faded away somewhere and then returned, catching me unaware.

December 20

The very same thing happened again today. The old woman suddenly closed her eyes, and seemed to be asleep. But I wasn't about to be caught twice. Instead of fixing my eyes on her face, I only glanced at it now and then out of the corners of my eyes. But it seemed to me that her

face had turned white—and that if I could dare to raise my eyes and look, I would find that her eyelids really were transparent—perhaps, indeed, that her whole skin was transparent. When she didn't wake up after a long time, I summoned the courage to look at her face, or at least to a point just beneath her eyes. Though her face was completely still, it seemed to me that her lips had not only failed to relax, but had actually tightened a bit more. And an intermittent throbbing was discernible on one side of her throat, as though the veins were tightening and then loosening, tightening again and then loosening again. Surely this couldn't be sleep, and speaking would not disturb it. "Are you all right, Auntie?" I asked.

Opening her eyes without a tremor, she replied, "Yes, I'm quite all right—just a little weary for some reason."

I sat quietly. After a little while Auntie moved slightly, changed her position in the chair, and then woke up completely. "Shall I bring you a wrap?" I asked.

She gave no answer, but it was clear that she was evading the question—that she didn't like my paying such close attention to her.

December 21

We talk about time as a constant flow. A flow of what? Of moments. But what is a moment? I have no way of knowing. One way to

measure it is by the ticking of the clock. That ticking can be broken down even further, and that smallest fragment can be thought of as a moment. Science has other methods—it can figure out entirely by mathematics just what the smallest indivisible fraction of time is, and that fraction can be called a moment.

But of what use is that kind of science and knowledge? For us, time is primarily experience—what is not experienced is not time. The movement of the sun is not time; it is what happens consecutively during that movement which is the measure of time. And what is a moment in terms of experience?

Time is merely experience; it is history. In this context, a "moment" is that in which there is experience but in which there is no history, which has no past or future, but is pure present, beyond history, uncorrupted by memory, freed from the course of events. Otherwise it is not a moment, because my living in a fragment of time, however small it may be, makes it relative to time, since it is living historically. It is then not a point, but a line; a line has sequence, whereas a moment must be freed from that sequence.

Auntie Selma can't conceive of these things, or I'd talk to her about them. Something in her life is completely detached from all such matters. Although that something is unknown to me, I feel that it contains some truth which I have not

known, a truth completely separate and different from my truth. Truth! . . . That truth also is not independent of time—Selma lives in time, as we all do, but she seems not to live in any one time, but rather in all time. It's as though time is not a stream for her, as though it has no before or after, but only everything together. Everything is simultaneous, and therefore there is no history. So there is memory, but it is freed from continuity —everything is a moment.

This is what I think; but I also feel that such thinking is dishonest—that it can't be like this. Indeed, sometimes when I'm looking at her, my feeling of estrangement becomes so great that I feel like grabbing her shoulders shaking them, and asking "Who are you?" My fists close and I move away from her, suddenly afraid of myself. I don't know what I might do!

December 22

I can't believe that I've been buried here for half a month. A little water has seeped through the walls of the kitchen and storeroom and is coming inside, so we've carried a number of things into the main room. A small door, now blocked by snow, opens from the storeroom to the woodpile. By shoving the door a little, we've made room to pull one or two piece of wood through. With that wood inside, the door can be opened just a little more, and in this way we've managed

to bring in a little wood. Although it has gotten soaked, and a little water trickles into the storeroom from opening the door, that's nothing to worry about. The little cooking we do is done on the big stove in the living room. The pieces of wood lean against the stove and are slowly drying out. And then every two or three days we also light the fireplace, which casts a strange reddish light through the room. A strange red light inside the tomb—is this the fire of hell? I suddenly blurted out this idea to Auntie today: "Seeing this reddish fire makes me feel as though the devil is about to come down the chimney and enter this grave, in order to go over our accounts." Then, to lighten the mood, I forced a laugh.

If Auntie was surprised, she gave no sign of it. After quietly looking at me awhile, she said, "The Devil doesn't come down the chimney—Saint Nicholas does. How many days is it now until Christmas?"

I should have dropped the subject right there. But I persisted: "Saint Nicholas might arrive up above there—but he'll never come into this grave."

"Jokke," the old woman asked, "why is your attention always directed towards death?"

Anger instantly welled up in me. "Because that is the one and only reality," I said harshly. "Because we all have to die."

The statement had been uttered; but then I felt troubled. And yet I couldn't bring myself to

beg for forgiveness. So I explained, "Because of being idle for so many days, my nerves have gotten so that . . . ."

She dropped the matter right there. Granting forgiveness as indirectly as I had asked for it, she said, "How many days is it now until Christmas? We must celebrate. I'll prepare everything."

"No, Auntie," I said. "You figure out what has to be done—but I'll do it all myself. It would be a lot of trouble for you, and I need the work."

"That's fine," said the old woman.

Then we worked out what would be prepared. There should be plenty of work for both of us tomorrow and the next day—though what is tomorrow in this place, and what is the day after tomorrow!

And what is Christmas, except that we'll consider one day as the big day—not even one day in fact, but only a particular revolution on the clock.

December 24

Midnight!

According to custom, we should be sitting up together at this hour to greet the arrival of Christmas; but it was tacitly understood between us, without even any discussion, that we would not sit up late In the first place, we both had gotten rather tired from the work yesterday and today. And secondly, it had seemed all day, for some unknown reason, that this happiness of Christmas, though not false or artificial, is like an extremely thin sheet of

glass, so delicate that it could be broken not only by our touching it, but also by just slightest sound—as a glass can be cracked by the sound of a violin. We are both laughing as though we sit on the surface of just such a thin glass; it's a miracle that just our sitting doesn't break the glass, but this much is certain, that the slightest movement would shatter it to bits. And it's as though there is nothing underneath the glass, only a dark bottomless pit into which we will fall and keep falling . . . The old woman is sitting in the living room right now. We had wanted to make Christmas tree, but although ready to give credence to any kind of make-believe, our eyes just couldn't accept the tree that we made by tying pieces of firewood together with string. We couldn't swallow such falseness, and it was Auntie who said, "No, let's forget it."

So we just sat for awhile , as though neither of us had anything to say. To fill the void, I suggested that we might as well have dinner. That was accomplished and then we sat by the fire and kept staring into it. What a good excuse that fire provided for not looking at each other!

Once again, though, the silence gradually became very heavy, and it became impossible to ignore it.

"Auntie," I asked, "do you know how to tell the future by reading cards?"

"No, Jokke! Can you?"

Having found an excuse for getting up, I said,

"I'll get the cards—Let's discover your future."

Smiling a little, the old woman said, "My future! Is it that easy to read?"

"Everyone thinks that his own future is tangled and hard to decipher," I said. "But this is the other side of that urgent desire to discover it—that the more one believes it unintelligible, the more he desires to know it."

"No, it's not that way with me," she said, keeping up the same smile. "My future's very simple from that angle. There is nothing at all to know —and no desire to know it."

"How can that be? All right, tell me: don't you want to know where you'll be next Christmas—and how you will be?"

"No, I know already. I—will be right here and—I will be in just the same condition."

I was taken aback for a moment. As a matter of fact, the old woman's words might even be true. She will be right here just like this because for years she has stayed here just like this. It might even be that she has always been here like this, and will always remain thus! Like these mountains: continuously changing, but unending and desireless.

"But many other people might be here too—"

Interrupting me, she said, "I'll be alone, Jokke. If I didn't know this, I probably wouldn't have stayed here alone this year. Knowing it, I remained here by myself—your coming was an accident

which I had not anticipated."

"Auntie, has my staying here been painful for you?" I asked, and then added with a slight laugh, "If that's so, then I'm sorry. I can't very well say that I'll leave right away. If that were in my power—"

Suddenly becoming serious, the old woman said, "Nothing at all is in anyone's power, Jokke. One thing alone is in our power: to recognize that fact. Beyond it we know nothing."

A terrible resentment began to boil again inside me. To conceal it, I quickly got up and went out. When, after spending an unnecessary amount of time in the search, I brought the cards and began spreading them out, the old lady just kept looking at me silently. Then, without any warning, she said, "Jokke, you wish that I would die, don't you?"

The cards fell from my hands. "What—what kind of talk is that, Selma!" I even forgot to call her Auntie.

"I'm not offended, Jokke. Your desire for it is quite natural. I might also have wished to die, but my wishing is no longer necessary. I know that I don't have many days left."

Regaining my self-control, I protested, "No, Auntie! Why do you talk like this—of course you still have many days—"

"It's natural for you to speak this way—you have to say something. But I know. And today

I'm so happy that I might as well tell you, so that by tomorrow you'll be accustomed to the idea — Jokke, I am ill, and I know that I won't be around next spring."

After some time I picked the cards up off the floor, and, like a machine — like an especially stupid machine — kept shuffling them . . .

That long awkward silence was not the kind that could be connected in any way with Christmas Eve. In fact the whole situation was so inappropriate. I felt no pleasure, no excitement, over the imminent advent of the divine child. If anything seemed imminent, then it was something entirely different, which I don't want to see, don't want to know, don't want to give a name to — but, like a weight thrust on my chest, one thing alone kept coming to mind, making my breath catch in my throat: that, in addition to Jokke and Selma, there was a third presence here, and that unseen third was not the divine child . . . I seemed to hear it throbbing in the atmosphere, and found myself unable to get up — as though it would suddenly take on solid form if I did, and then Selma would know that I had summoned it . . . .

But I could stand it no longer. Forcing myself to get up, I said, "Now get some rest, Selma. Good night."

She looked at me with surprise. Then, having checked whatever she was about to say,

she responded, "Merry Christmas, Jokke."

To cover my embarrassment at having said just my ordinary "Good night," I added, "Merry Christmas, Selma. Many Christmases!" Then, somewhat hesitantly, "We should have sat down and sung, but...."

"But it doesn't matter," she assured me. "He comes just as naturally in the silence — singing is not necessary."

I quickly repeated "Merry Christmas!" and came away.

And now midnight!

"He comes just as naturally in the silence." Who is "he"? He — he... that same one who had come as a third between Selma and me, and was present there — uninvited...

No! No! No! Whoever is coming, whoever is going to come, must be kept outside...

Paul must be celebrating Christmas somewhere too — but where and with whom? He must be singing heartily — could he be thinking of me right now too? — me, to be alone with whom he had come here to this land of snow — to fill his nostrils with the fresh glacial air and drink it in, and while drinking it in to discover what a friendly warmth is within us — friendly, sweet, exhilarating, and — ours...

But he is on top of the land of snow... in the

open air with who knows whom; and I—I am here beneath the land of snow, suffocating, and with me is that, that, that...

December 25

I was sitting there on the bed, and had fallen asleep with my head resting on the table — perhaps a few tears had first stung my eyes like smoke, and then — I don't know when — I had dozed off. I awoke with a start, hearing the sound of singing. The clock said one-thirty. Selma was singing softly — in a voice only slightly louder than humming — a song of happiness at the Son of God. I don't think she had been singing for long — perhaps just at intervals — she must not have been able to sleep, and of course she doesn't have a watch...

I heard the old song quavering through the silence, and felt ill at ease. At times the old woman's voice seemed to break — as if she might be gasping, as if her old breath was being torn apart. Then, taking a deep audible breath, she would start to sing again, but after awhile the song would again break, in a kind of moan.

The empty room began to feel suffocating, as though there were some pressure. I got up and, bare-footed, crept slowly over near the bed of the old woman.

She was squatting. There was no sign of movement except in her lips. So I too remained motionless, hidden behind her; but she somehow became aware of someone else in the room — not only of someone else, but of me — and without even turning, she said, "I was humming a song of birth — remembered from childhood — but did I wake you up?"

"No, Auntie," I said, "I wasn't able to sleep. Then I heard your voice and came to see — whether you might need something."

"To have come to such a state that when I sing it appears that I must be suffering — that I need something! But yes, I do need something — and yes, I am suffering also. But I'm singing only out of happiness. Sit down. Will you sing too?"

"I don't know that song."

"Then sing something you do know. Perhaps I can sing it too — my songs aren't all from childhood. I've learned a few since then also."

I sat down. But despite all my efforts, no sound came out. Something seemed very wrong in the whole situation, as though this matter of the advent was itself a falsehood, and the songs about it a lie also. If there had been an advent, then it was of death, and death is not the kind of thing that should be welcomed with singing. It is sitting on my shoulders and strangling me. How relentless that grasp is, which will not let go but yet will not leave even the mark of its fingers! I ima-

gined that my hands were on the old woman's throat and were strangling her — relentless hands — I don't know if their grip is also the kind that would leave no mark. But the skin on the old woman's throat is already so bloodless and transparent that an imprint could hardly be left!

"Forget it," she said after awhile. "I'm being a tyrant. I can sing because I am unseeing. The blind sing well. But you see everything — you like what is seen better than what is heard. You must be getting cold. Go and sleep. God bless you. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I repeated mechanically and came back.

I didn't go to sleep. The old woman probably didn't sleep either. She stopped singing. But periodically there was a sound like a very soft cry, and I couldn't distinguish whether it was a result of difficulty in breathing, whether it was a snatch of a remembered song, or whether it was an outright moan.

Morning came — morning by the clock. The light didn't seem to be increasing at all. In fact the room felt somewhat suffocating, as though we had used up whatever oxygen was in the air that had been imprisoned with us in the tomb. I remembered that oxygen, although keeping as alive, also consumes us — to be living is to be aging; but

when oxygen, the means of life, no longer remains, then the action of aging also stops. The carbon gas we have created, which will kill us, will later preserve us in the tomb! Then—and I don't know of course what meaning this "then" has after we die!—when the snow melts and people come searching for us, we will be preserved right here exactly as we are: I, just as I am here—still whole, but dull; and the old woman there, just as she is, bloodless and transparent, but still having a glow! Thinking about this, I again became angry at her. But I forced myself to remember that today is Christmas, the great day, the day of forgiveness and good will. And of course her old breath must consume somewhat less oxygen than mine—indeed, considering the very low level on which her life is moving, she can probably manage without oxygen! I have heard that the need for oxygen becomes greatly reduced in people buried under the snow, so that they can get by on just what is sealed in the flakes of snow...

Christmas. Day of forgiveness, of peace and good will to men. Birthday of the prophet of love. Forcing some gaiety into my voice, I said, "Merry Christmas, Auntie Selma."

The response startled me: "I have lighted the fire and made coffee—come. Merry Christmas!"

When did she do all this? I heard no sound of footsteps or of jangling pots. The old woman

works very quietly! There should at least have been some sound from her dragging feet. And here I thought that I was hearing her moan continually.

While having some breakfast — I made the food myself; Auntie didn't eat anything, and even her coffee had to be diluted with water before she would take three or four sips — Auntie said, "I keep imagining that there's lots of bright sunshine outside: clean, friendly sunshine, so warm that one's body would become lazy basking in it!"

"What good is there in imagining such things?" I said. "Even if there is sunshine outside, what does it matter to us who —"

"Why shouldn't it matter to us? How can we give out what is not within us — how can we even want to give it? Bright, clean, affectionate, smiling sunshine — if I imagine it outside, then it comes within and fills me also, and then I can believe that I'm able to share it with others. Without that, the darkness would be very cold within one who has to die and for whom there's nothing left to do but die."

"How can you talk like that on Christmas Day, Auntie?" I chided her.

She said, simply and naturally, "I have cancer."

As though throwing a rope across the silence which had come between us, Selma went on: "Sunshine — blossoming, bright, smiling sunshine

— the sunshine of Christmas Day! Jokke, I don't have enough breath — but why don't you sing — your voice is so melodious."

I wanted to mention that she had just asked how we could bring forth what is not within us. But I couldn't bring myself to say it. "I will, Auntie, I will. But first let me get accustomed to this dark tomb."

"Accustomed," the old woman repeated, and then made a sign with her hands that could have meant anything...

December 30

I can't endure this any longer. I wonder what's happened, that I'm no longer concerned even about the snow all around — that I've even forgotten that both of us are equally partners in a grave! I think about just one thing: as to when my partner will be out of the way and I will be left alone in this grave.

Not that I want to remain in the grave. Not that I want to be alone and apart. Nor even, perhaps, that I don't want her to get out of this grave sometime. But I know that, in regard to her, my wishing or not wishing won't make any difference. She knows this as well as I do...

And right here is the difference. She knows, and, knowing this, continues to live though dying. And then there is I, who, though living, am dying, and wanting to kill...

She has no hostility of any kind within her — neither against me, nor against my murderous feelings, nor against death itself. I can't understand this; I can't accept it. How can any living thing be beyond desiring life? We can be disenchanted with everything else, but how can we be disenchanted with life itself? Somewhere or other there certainly must be some falseness in the old woman, some self-deception. Perhaps it is hidden in the depths — but it can't be completely nonexistent...

Her illness is advancing daily. She eats nothing, drinks almost nothing, and becomes more colorless and transparent every day. A living ghost. Even that does not bring out the full contradiction — but a solid ghost! And even more objectionable and intolerable is the compassion of that solid ghost, a compassion that flows out, helping everyone. How can a ghost feel compassion for anyone? Indeed, one is only a ghost who dies feeling sorry for himself — without that, one cannot even get into the category of ghosts!

Not that an unsatisfied longing or desire is sufficient to make one a ghost. Everyone in the world dies unfulfilled, but that doesn't mean that everyone becomes a ghost. Only one who feels self-pity because of his unfulfilled desire becomes a ghost. The old woman's pity, however, does not turn in toward herself. In fact I sometimes feel that when she picks up a cup and saucer, or

stretches her hands toward the fire, she is caressing and blessing even these lifeless things. She blesses the fire — she who ought to weep on seeing the fire since the fire within her will soon be extinguished and she will become — what? Ashes — even less than ashes! Looking at her, I feel like screaming out loud, like lifting up a burning piece of wood and striking her wrists so that the hands which are about to dare to bless the fire may drop down—so that her heart may suddenly stop beating from the shock!

December 31

Not only in her presence, but sometimes when I am alone also, I feel that I may scream, may tear my hair, may stand in front of a mirror and hit myself, may pick up the small scissors and drive them into my cheeks, may slash my forehead, nose, ears and chin with the nailfile — that I may pick up the water-jug, hurl it at the mirror and smash the mirror to bits! The mirror and also my reflection in it which stares at me with such shamelessness and throws back in my face all my lawless murderousness.

Dropping all that, I came and sat on my bed. Some time later, before getting ready for bed, I peeked in and saw that she was sitting just as before. In all this time she had not even moved. Of course tonight there was a good excuse to stay awake like this, since it is customary to greet the

new year at midnight. But I hadn't mentioned it to her, and the old woman who had been so enthusiastic about Christmas had not suggested staying up late that night. That was why I had come to bed. But there she sits. I don't know whether she is awake or asleep — nor even whether she is conscious or unconscious — but she is sitting motionless! I went in and said, "Auntie Selma, go and get some sleep. Shall I help you to bed?"

"No, Jokke," she said, straightening her sagging shoulders a little. "I'll just sit for awhile. — You go to sleep."

"Are you staying up to welcome the New Year?" I asked.

"Yes!" she replied. "Or perhaps just the new day. After all, how is any day of the year less than any other day! Actually I can believe that any day at all is New Year's Day—because just the fact of a day is no less miraculous, is it?"

She was not talking just to me, but also to herself. All these hair-splitting matters were too much for me at that time of night, however. Somewhat harshly, I said, "Yes, but you don't sit up waiting for every day."

"Forgive me, Jokke. Not everything that an old woman says is logical — some things just slip out unawares."

Oof! What peevishness there was in her voice! And how much satisfaction that gave me!

Well, the old woman's armor isn't completely without holes — there must be a flaw somewhere. At some point or other she too will know the fear of death and will whimper, "No, I don't want to die!" A strong, uncontrollable merriment, a pride in victory, welled up inside me. "Auntie," I said, "why do you sit counting the days and the hours like beads on a rosary? The days will pass just as they always do — we can't push them ahead by counting them. Nor can we stop them by lamenting. Whatever work you have to do, go on doing it. If you have to live, go on living, that's all!"

"Yes, that's so," she said. "I'm just counting the beads of a rosary. Not that it will change anything. But one who is destined to count rosary beads doesn't have the power to stop doing it."

"But when one decides for himself just what is destined for him, isn't he wrapping himself with what should be God's responsibility?" I tried not to show the full force of the sarcasm I felt, but I certainly didn't want her to miss it entirely.

The old woman suddenly stood up. Even her standing up came as a shock to me then; but it was what she said that still seems impossible to me: "Yes, Jokke, I do want to wrap God around myself — to wrap myself up so completely in him that nothing is left exposed anywhere. You don't

know how wonderful the form of each bead can seem to one who recognizes that she is not going to get as far as the last one."

She put her transparent hands on my shoulders and said, "Look, Jokke, look into my eyes. Can't you see that except for God I have nothing to protect me?"

Quickly pulling away my shoulders, I left the room. But I still feel two icy daggers piercing me where her hands rested.

Out there, though, the old woman has probably begun to hum something again. It's not the sound of singing—perhaps she is repeating some prayer.

Oh, when will this grave be torn open, or else this shameless life be removed, hers or mine or both of ours!...

January 5

Still the same drab monotony—and now it seems that even the support given by this diary will come to an end, because there is nothing to write that would not be repetition. Just one day and then another day, one more circle of the clock and then another circle...

Early on New Year's morning, when I heard Selma singing again, I became angry. But I somehow forced myself to offer formal New Year con-

gratulations and thanked her for her greetings. After that, we remained like strangers for the rest of the day. It could scarcely have been otherwise, since once she goes and sits in a chair, she hardly moves from there at all. She gets up only when it is absolutely necessary. And I—of course, I can't go outside—have to keep moving about to keep my muscles active. Only after completing I don't know how many rounds of this three-room house am I somehow able to persuade myself that my muscles are still in my own control: I can move my hands and feet at will; I can clench my fists; I can grasp something in my hands; I can throw pieces of firewood; and, if the opportunity to get out of this tomb ever arises, I will even be able to walk erect—yes, even if that departure is only in order to go and stand before some angel on the Day of Judgment, I will still be able to stand erect...

But even that is not easy while Selma keeps sitting on a chair in the middle room. I have to tiptoe around, constantly having to be careful, unable to forget her presence even for a moment. It's gotten so that I don't have an opportunity even to be aware of my own presence until I'm alone in bed at night. One would think that she is the only one in the house, that I don't even exist, when in fact it is I who am alive and who wants to stay alive! And she—she sits, semiconscious, on the borderline between living and

not living, not even knowing where she is...

How is it that those who are not alive can rule so harshly those who are struggling with life!

Yesterday, though, there was a slight change. What I should say is that yesterday morning, for the first time, something happened in the grave.

About to pass through the living room on my way to the kitchen, I was startled to find Selma sitting in her chair. On first seeing her, I thought that she had been sitting right there all night, or that she was actually a part of the chair itself and had been right there forever. Had she not slept at all during the night? My recollection was that when I started to go to bed last night, she too had moved toward her room. But the way she was sitting made me doubt my memory for a moment. Just as I was about to inquire, the old woman said, "I've made you some coffee and set it in the kitchen. I've already had some. I don't want anything more."

This was somewhat unusual, but not completely unprecedented. On a few previous occasions she had also eaten something without waiting for me. I went quietly into the kitchen. Breakfast had been set out for me. But there were no dirty dishes in the sink. Had she washed her cup and saucer and put them away, or

had she not taken anything at all?

Going back, I asked her, "Have you really had something to eat? I see no signs of it anywhere."

"I took just as much as I need."

I returned. After eating, I washed the dishes and put them away.

The thought that she had fixed breakfast for me and probably nothing for herself kept irritating me for some reason. Going back to the living room, I said, "Auntie, there's no need to go to all that trouble on my account, particularly when you're not having anything yourself."

"I told you that I took as much as I needed."

Somewhat annoyed, I asked, "What did you take? A cup of warm water?"

I had spoken in an irritable tone, but I didn't feel that I had said anything that would upset her much.

"Yes, one cup of warm water," she declared. "In fact, if you really want to know, half a cup of warm water. I told you that I took what I needed. What business is it of yours what I eat and drink? You may be a guest here, but just because of that—"

I was stunned. Was this really Selma speaking?

"All right," I somehow stammered, "I have no right to ask. But I deserve to have some freedom too. I didn't ask to be buried here. And a

healthy person can't feel free about being waited upon by a sick person."

I don't know whether I said this just to hurt her or not. But she must have been hurt, because she said, "There's no need to keep repeating time after time that I am sick—I know that I'm sick. Did I get sick on purpose? Or just in order to torment you? And as for freedom—who is free? Who is able to choose how he will live, or not live? Am I free not to remain ill? Or if I am ill now, then am I also free to die? I wanted not to have anyone near me during my last days. But could I choose even that? Do you think it doesn't disturb me that God sent a—a stranger—to see what I didn't want even my own folks to see?"

After a pause she said, "Forgive me, Jokke. Please leave me for a little while. I didn't choose you for a witness, and I'll try my best not to make you see anything. To the extent that this is not in my power, forgive me!"

Why did I feel pleased at having seen her suffer? Of course she probably suffers constantly, but why did I feel so satisfied to have seen her break down over it? What a mean satisfaction this is which comes from seeing others fail and break down—what an utterly perverted expression of the will to live!

And yet am I quite correct in even thinking that she is being defeated, that she is breaking

down? It's true that she is suffering, and also that she could not conceal it entirely. But that alone is not enough to prove that she's defeated. At least it doesn't prove that she is broken, even if the inability to hide suffering can be considered as one kind of defeat.

We didn't speak to each other until noon. I thought about fixing something to eat, and that I might ask her what she would like, but whenever I thought about the prospect of approaching her, I felt that we had no common language, at least not for the present. Fretting inside, I kept sitting in my room and Selma in the living room, in her usual chair and in her usual motionless position.

But no, she was not in the living room. Suddenly I heard her voice coming from the storeroom. It was undoubtedly her voice, but so different, so unfamiliar! I tiptoed over and stood concealed behind the door. The old woman was setting things here and there in the storeroom—or rather flinging them—and at the same time muttering abuse, as though cursing the very existence of the things that she was touching, lifting and knocking around. And as though not satisfied with cursing just the things in the storeroom, she jerked open the outside door, pulled at a piece of wood, and began swearing at it also. She lifted up the wood as though about to beat the door,

but it slipped and fell from her hand, and a helpless moan came from her lips. Looking at her hands, she cursed them also—"Worthless dead hands!"

"Auntie Selma, can I do anything?" I asked, stepping into the doorway.

Embarrassed, the old woman gaped at me somewhat sheepishly for a moment. Then she suddenly giggled and began to laugh—a wonderful, unexpected, spontaneous laugh—and said, "You must forgive me, Jokke. I was working off my anger on all these lifeless things. I feel somewhat relieved now. Curses are a strange thing—the ones heard in childhood begin to seem useful in old age."

"There's no reason for you to ask forgiveness, Selma," I reassured her. "I was about to say that you've saved me from the mistake of thinking of you as inhuman. Those who can swear are certainly human."

Coming out of the storeroom, she said, "Well, if that was all the proof you needed, then it's a simple matter! In fact I could give so much of that kind of proof that you *would* think me inhuman!"

The intimacy created by this little episode might have lasted all day if the old woman had not come right out of the storeroom and plopped herself, as though unconscious, into the chair. I tried to help her, but she checked me with a wave

of her hand. The gesture of that weak hand was so compelling that I couldn't touch her. I couldn't even go near her. And so, in just a moment, we two became strangers again.

That night she said, "Tomorrow is the festival of Epiphany. Tomorrow—but do you believe in God, Jokke?"

I can't imagine myself ever having the nerve to ask anyone this question. I was unable to think of what I could answer or even of how I could answer. "I don't know," I said.

"As a matter of fact I can't say that I know either, that I really believe. But sometimes, when I think about the fact that I am about to die, and then remember that you are present here—when I think about you as a living presence apart from myself—then I feel very strongly that there is a God—that the only name for a living presence is God—that any presence is God. Because otherwise how could there be that presence?"

I remained silent.

After awhile she went on: "Epiphany is the day when God revealed himself. I think that tomorrow he will be revealed even to me; even I may recognize him. Jokke—if I should die tomorrow, how would you feel? I suddenly think at times that the hour has come. But I don't want to die before the snow melts. Other than that it doesn't matter—except that I don't want to keep you as my prisoner. As far as I'm concerned,

I'm ready. On the day that you get your freedom, I'll be able to go. I too will see the sun!"

Formerly I used to stop her whenever the subject of death arose. Now, finding it useless, I've quit trying. If she is going to talk about death, then she'll do so, and my objections won't stop her. And then again, perhaps what she says is right, and I too should get used to the idea.

"Thank you, Selma," I said. "I hope that you'll see the snow of several more years—and some of the sunshine after the snow!"

She smiled and then made that same indescribable gesture with her hands which could mean anything...

January 6

I sat up startled in the middle of the night. It felt like an earthquake. The whole house was shaking. Then suddenly there was a crash somewhere, after which a bitterly cold blast seemed to pour into the room. I just sat for awhile, stunned. Then I realized that if I could hear a crash, the mass of snow up above must have fallen off; and it dawned on me that the noise might have been just that. I jumped to my feet, wanting to rush to the door right then to see whether it would open or not.

But, controlling myself somehow, I wrapped up in a blanket and lay down. In just that little time my body had gotten chilled.

After somehow remaining in bed for a few hours, I got up, and decided that I should first have some breakfast. The living room had become somewhat colder than it was before, so any attempt to open the door would just be foolish.

But right after breakfast there did seem to be a slight change in the amount of light in the room —it had become somewhat brighter. I laid a blanket over the old woman's knees and then went over to try the door. It didn't open, so I came back and sat down. "The snow probably is gone from up above," said the old woman, "but we can't get out yet, and it will still be cold. Perhaps today or tomorrow a little sunshine may be visible."

Today, for the first time in a long while, I raised my eyes unselfconsciously and looked directly into the face of the old woman. That face had aged considerably in the last few days. All the lines had become clearer, deeper and harder, making more explicit and unambiguous whatever detached and pitiless message life wanted to convey through them.

"Auntie Selma," I said, "I often wonder about one thing—I want to ask you—what is it that supports you during times that make me afraid?"

She didn't answer right away. After a little while she said, "Is it really like that? I don't know what supports me. I can't really say that it's God. Perhaps death is what supports me. It

exists, very close by, standing in front of me—I feel as though I could stretch out my hands and touch it. And what difference is there between saying this, and saying that I can reach out and get support from it? God...to use the name of God is very easy; but it's also very difficult. And only at times can one even perceive a difference between death and God. In fact perhaps God can be known only when he is known in death."

"I don't follow you," I muttered. "On the contrary, I was taught that God exists and therefore death does not exist. Death is only an illusion."

'Well, of course that's what I was taught too. But is illusion in any way less than God? And what do we know of God that is not illusion? How can we know God? What we can know are certain attributes, but because they are attributes, they are not God's. We can recognize the unavoidable, we can recognize the ultimate, the final and complete and unfailing negation—beyond which there are no questions and no further answers...and because of this, death is the only recognizable form of God. Only a complete knowledge of non-being is a true knowledge of God. All other talk of the Supreme Being is superficial and false."

I stared at the old woman, speechless. Was this the language of a peasant woman, living in the desolate snows? Or is there another mystery

here, and a hidden deception?

January 7

During the chilly night I gradually began to feel angry again at the old woman. Whenever I repeated inwardly the things that she had said, I felt that some sharp sarcasm directed against me was hidden within them, and that this dying woman, even in her last hours, was insulting my healthy youth, belittling me. Why am I forced to tolerate all this, to be humiliated by her in this way? If I can't believe in God, then I can't believe; and if God is just another name for death, why should I believe in him? I don't believe in death. I can't believe in it. I don't want to believe in it! Death is a lie, because it is a refutation of life. And I live and know that I am living. Some day I will no longer be living. But who will remain that knows I am not alive, that I have died? Death can only exist in regard to others, whose being and non-being we can know—or accept. But what meaning does one's own death have? That can be judged only by observing others—that it's this way with them and therefore will also be thus with me. But do we know that it will happen to us in just the way it does with others? Don't "He is" and "I am" belong basically to two separate categories, two separate classes of things, two separate worlds? In addition to the perception "He is" there is also the perception

"He is not," but there is no antithesis to "I am." The awareness "I am not" doesn't exist—there is only absence of awareness.

But on that chilly night, I felt that the old woman might possess even that awareness. She knows the state of being and is also able to live in a state of non-being. This was the meaning of her talk about total negation! And the completeness of that perception of non-being spread like a new terror over and above my chilliness.

What is this "non-being"? I got out of bed and stood up. Wrapping a warm scarf around my throat, I put on my bathrobe and began to pace the floor.

Non-being. Non-being...being, non-being! Being and non-being—and both being and non-being simultaneously...suddenly I found that I was not only thinking about these words, but that I was slowly repeating them while opening and closing my fists.

Being and non-being. Open hands and clenched fists. My nails are piercing my hands and I feel pain there. And from that pain I can tell that I exist. The pain of being! What is the pain of non-being like? And then all of a sudden some demon took possession of me. I felt like smashing and destroying something. I want to feel a deeper and greater pain than that of these nails piercing my hands—that I may live and feel pain, that I may feel pain and live and actually

be aware that I am living...

In just my stocking-feet, I headed for the old woman's room. The door was not closed. Slowly pulling back the curtain, I went inside. I could recognize her form on the bed. I went close, leaned over, and saw that on her white face, which seemed ghostly in that darkness, the lines had melted away somewhat and the wrinkles in the corners of her closed eyes were becoming smoothed out. I leaned over still closer and looked—so close that if her face had not been covered on one side by the sheet, my close breath would have touched her cheeks!

Being and non-being—the pain of being, the illusion of non-being. Not illusion, but non-being alone is true knowledge. The illusion of God. My hands advanced toward the old woman's throat involuntarily, as though I were only a witness to their automatic movement. I saw that those two hands had formed a semi-circle in front of her neck—not yet on the neck but so close that even the trembling of a hair would have made them touch—and both of those hands were trembling—not because of any weakness, but only because of their own rigidity.

I bent over a little further, above the hands. I recalled that the old woman had said that it is good when the sun comes out...but what does it matter to a corpse whether there is sunshine or not—except that when there is sunshine, it will

decay. Are these hands, these capable and strong hands, in which there is free will and the potentiality for action, really mine? Because the person leaning over them, looking at them so closely, is not I. How near the old woman's closed eyelids are—Are the eyes concealed beneath them really only the old woman's, or mine, or—

But those eyes were suddenly open and the old woman was looking at me, unblinking. Without moving at all, she said, "Several times I've felt like telling you myself to strangle me—I didn't have the courage to say it. But why did you stop?"

A long shriek burst from my lips, and I ran and buried myself in my bedcovers. Soon after, it seemed to me that I was crying. But there were no tears in my eyes. It was just my body trembling badly.

I don't remember how I got to sleep or how I woke up. After what had happened I couldn't think about what the next morning would be like. Nor could I even bring myself to consider the question of how to face the old woman. But when I looked in the living room, no one was there. I tiptoed to the kitchen, fixed some breakfast, and ate it right there. Then, putting some coffee on a tray, I went to the old lady's room. She lay motionless in bed. I couldn't tell whether she was asleep or awake. And, perhaps because she realized this, she didn't open her eyes.

It was convenient for me—I set the tray on the table near her bed and came away.

It was noon when she called to me in a feeble voice. Going to her room, I stood at the head of the bed, where she couldn't see me—or at least where I wouldn't have to meet her eyes. But she tilted her head back, raised her eyelids, and said, looking at me, "Jokke, would you mind sitting by me for a little while? I have some things to say to you and I can't get up today."

The imminent approach of death is said to have an odor. We humans have lost the ability to recognize it, but animals can distinguish it and become uneasy when they discover it. I have also heard that in the last stages of cancer this odor becomes so strong that even human beings can recognize it. Did I only imagine that the old woman's room was filled with this distinctive odor of death? Was I only imagining that it was so strong that I was starting to feel nauseated? Controlling myself somehow, I pulled over a chair and sat down beside her. Though still unable to meet her eyes, I somehow said, "Forgive me for last night. I had gone mad."

"I'm the one who should be forgiven," she replied, "for putting you in such a situation. It's not good to want to do something and not be able to do it."

Stung by her words, I said, "But that desire itself is so wrong and so terrible—"

"Not at all. If it had been terrible, how could it have been desired? It was I who put you in such a dilemma that you had to split yourself in two. Truly I alone am at fault, and you must forgive me."

I kept quiet. What could I say? She too kept quiet for a considerable length of time before going on: "Can't you forgive? I'll give you this much reassurance: an opportunity such as yesterday's won't occur again. I won't provide the opportunity—I won't be able to provide it. But I want you to forgive me and moreover I want you to be able to say with your own lips that you have forgiven, so that you'll have more peace in the future."

"But it's I who am guilty," I said, "and I'm weak, which increases my guilt. And exasperation over this pushes me into evil conduct, which is a greater sin."

"No, no, Jokke. You're loading yourself with guilt unreasonably," she said. "The fact that you consider yourself free is the sole basis for all the difficulties. We are neither alone nor are we free. In fact it is because we are not alone, and can't be, that we are not free. And therefore we don't have the right to choose or to decide. I told you that I wanted to die in solitude. But was that really within my power? Could I choose the situation my heart desired? And you—are you free not to witness my dying? All such assump-

tions of freedom are pure conceit and there is no other freedom than the freedom from that conceit."

I said hesitantly, "But you *are* free, Selma, or at least it seems to me that you're free! And perhaps you're right in saying that I'm not free, since your saying it provokes me."

For some time the old woman gave no answer. And then what she said was not an answer, though stated in such a way that my remark was being answered: "It's a great blessing to be young."

When she said nothing more for quite awhile, I asked, "But weren't you going to talk about something?"

"Oh, that! I only wanted to ask forgiveness, which I did. As yet, though, you haven't said whether you grant it; but I'll persuade you to do so. Some other—"

Again there was a silence, and then she said with a deep sigh, "I get tired."

I remembered that she had eaten nothing all day. She had eaten almost nothing the previous day either. In fact she had not been eating for several days. So I said, "First I'll go and get something for you—just a little warm soup or coffee."

Cutting me short, she said, "I take as much as I need—as much as I can."

The conversation had not ended. But since

she closed her eyes and remained quiet for some time, I didn't think it proper to speak to her, and came away quietly.

January 11

In this cabin—and I notice that I've not written "tomb," but "cabin"—is some secret hope lurking somewhere within me?—now, for the first time, the light is not somewhere between darkness and twilight. This is the kind of light that can be recognized, that heartlessly exposes the lines on one's face, and the shamelessness of life which tries to hide in those furrows, that makes me afraid to look at anything because it stares back at me and in that staring becomes full of terror. This table, this bed, this mirror, this reflection of me in the mirror, these hands and feet of mine, these fingers of mine, and these movements of my fingers. This earthiness, solidity and mobility is so frightening! I clench and then open my fists, and the movement of my fingers frightens me. It seems to me that I am not moving them—they move on their own; and how frightening it is to think that my fingers move by themselves, independent of me, with an impersonal mind of their own! But how much more frightening it is to think that they do not move of their own accord but rather are directed by me. Because wouldn't this indicate that I must be just as impersonal?

Looking at Selma in this brightness is not

easy. But fortunately I don't have to look at her, and I very seldom have to talk to her. She hardly leaves her room, hardly even gets out of bed. And when she does, she refuses to let me help and sends me from the room. Sometimes at night I hear that she is up—a long time after the first, a second dragging step is heard, then a third and then a fourth...an anxious anticipation swells within me as, with tense nerves and needle-like concentration, I keep counting the steps until at last, along with the light creak of the bed, there is a final "Ooh!" of weariness! When I hear it—that final cry of utter exhaustion which comes with complete fulfillment—it's as though everything has been done that was desired, and nothing is left to be done. And then it suddenly seems as though life is nothing but the dragging of feet, and that this awareness of myself which I possess in between is illusion. I do not exist, and there is only the dragging of feet...

January 12

Wasn't that previous situation better than this grave without a shroud? Dying buried under the snow is also dying. But at least it is caused by being buried—there is a relation between cause and effect. But this causeless dying without being buried, without even the touch of snow—seems to insult our life experience. And even at the time of death we are not ready to tolerate

the denial of experience. We believe in it pathetically—the result of our longing to believe that if experience exists then we also exist; and if some experience has occurred to us, then, even though we die, the experience does not, but remains preserved in the form of a positive achievement. Supported by this belief, we like to feel that we also are preserved. But it is all a lie—nothing is left—we are not left; one can't even say that we had been there so that we could be left! Death—death—death—that is the one and only expectation, whether there is snow above or not—yes, even whether there is cancer or not! Is there any difference between what Selma can expect and what I can expect, just because she has cancer and I don't, or because she has proof of the relationship between cause and effect whereas I don't even have that? Am I not more helpless, more pitiful, more dead? Don't I have the greater cancer—that cancer which we call life?

January 14

A thin ray of sunshine. No, a small patch of sunlight, fallen on the floor after penetrating one corner of the skylight on the roof.

And in our lives—in the history of our sojourn in the grave—an occasion!

Without thinking I ran at once to Selma's room and said, "Sunshine, Selma! Come and look. There's a big patch of sunshine on the living room

floor."

The old woman just looked at me silently for awhile. Then, as though having decided that she really ought to smile at this information, she managed a smile. She muttered something then which I couldn't hear. And for awhile I didn't know whether I was even intended to hear it. "Selma, did you say something to me?" I inquired hesitantly, leaning toward her a little.

"Never mind, it was nothing," she replied.

"No, really," I repeated, "if there's anything at all you need—Wouldn't you like to see the sunshine?"

She smiled like a child caught doing something naughty. "Yes, I might have enjoyed that, but I don't have the strength."

"Shall I lift you up and carry you?"

"That can't be done. Not that you couldn't do it; but I can't."

"All right," I said, "I'll show it to you from here." Going to the door between her room and the parlor, I opened it and pulled the curtain to one side. That wasn't enough. I pulled the bed to one side. Then, standing at the head of her bed, I said, "I'll support you with my arm—raise up and look." And without waiting for an answer, I put my hand under her neck.

She was so light that it would have taken no great effort to lift her completely, what more just to support and raise her. But she was trying not

to depend too much on the support of my arm and mustered a little strength to lift herself. For a moment my hand just touched her hair, not feeling any weight. Then suddenly her neck loosened and the weight of her head rested on my hand. "No," she said. "But thank you, Jokke."

Withdrawing my hand, I glanced briefly at her face. There seemed to be drops of perspiration on it—cold drops. "Thank you, Jokke," she said. "The sunshine has chosen to appear today, but I'm not able to choose to see it. Thank it for me too."

I wanted to say something but couldn't figure out what might be said. And she didn't say anything more—her eyes remained closed. I looked silently at her face but then realized that there was nothing more I could do and that there was no reason for my standing there. I pulled down the shades in her room, went into the living room, and began staring at the tiny patch of sunlight. In just that much time it had become wrinkled and shrunk. And suddenly it seemed to me that the patch I was seeing was not sunshine, but was the face of Selma appearing on the floor.

A face on the floor. A face separated from a body—just face, an eternal face. I knew as though it were a firm truth that this face alone is Selma, and that Selma is this patch of sunshine which can disappear at any moment and yet remains unchanged because its being is not separate

from its non-being.

Selma has no history, only memories. And, similarly, Selma is not history: she is memory, pure memory. She lives simultaneously both here and elsewhere, yesterday and today, and in all days together. And therefore she is not separate. She is not alone.

And I—I live here, now, in this moment. There is no memory in me. I ought to be free, but I am consumed by history and am alone. Selma has to die. She will die. But I am dying I alone....

After about half an hour, Selma called out.

"I have a request," she said when I had reached her.

"Tell me."

"Forgive me for this. But could you lift me up and carry me to the sunshine? Don't listen to me even if I should scream—just this once—"

"But Selma, the sunshine has gone away," I said.

After a pause she said, "It is better that way. Anything else would not be right. Let it be.

A great sadness suddenly spread through me. For the first time—for the one and only time—I felt compassion for the old woman welling up within me. But my heart quickly hardened again. How could she say that it's better this way, or

that anything else would not be right? Such talk itself is not right—the old woman is not right!

"Jokke, I've already seen all this once before. I've already been through it."

I couldn't understand what she meant. But I said nothing and just stood there silently. "Years ago," she went on, "before I came here, when I was in the city—it's been twenty-eight years since I came here—that would be before your birth—"

"As far as I'm concerned, that's a matter of another world," I blurted out.

"For me too—it's a matter of another world—Would you care to hear about it?—Do you have time?"

"Certainly," I said. "Excuse me for just a minute though. I'll be right back after taking care of a few things."

But when I returned after a short while, she seemed unaware of my approach. I stood near her for quite some time, then pulled up a chair and sat down. Finally, some time later, I came away.

A matter of another world. A matter of another world. Is there any other world? Or is it that there is only the other world, and that this one does not exist?

SELMA

THE form of the community was changing somewhat faster than the speed at which colloquial speech changes. In conversation it was still called just a town but it had acquired all the characteristics of a city. Or rather the section that could with any justification still be called a town had become limited to one side of it. The architecture in that section was somewhat different and outdated. The streets were so narrow that they should rightly have been called mere alleys, which was just what the inhabitants there called them. Even the pace of life there was slow; and the people's outlook on life, like their customary way of speaking, was rather old-fashioned and backward.

At least the residents of the city—that is of the other part of the city—considered it backward, and spoke of the "townspeople" with implicit sarcasm—very sophisticated, concealed sarcasm, but no less biting because of its concealment or its sophistication.

On a level field beyond the town there was a garden. It too was old: an old and slow-paced garden in which no light and sprightly beds of

flowers changed with the seasons. Here and there, in the midst of the old and evergreen grass, were very large, old and slow-growing trees.

Beyond the garden there was a river—or rather, along the riverbank, a road forming the boundary of the garden—and then beyond the road another stretch of grass and beyond that the river.

The grass sloped toward the river, and every year during the rains all this grass became submerged, so that the road forming the borderline of the garden became the borderline of the river also. But when the river subsided and the earth under the grass became firm again, people would stroll from the garden across the road and onto the grass, sauntering as far as the bridge. The bridge crossed the river, of course, but it spanned the grass as well. Its arch was visible from a great distance, an important mark on the horizon for those who had come to wander on the grass. After a stroll they would feel thirsty, and sometimes hungry as well, feelings which could be assuaged there on the bridge. At the place where the bridge began to rise, or actually a little in front of it, where a sidewalk came off the road, the temporary shops began. First were the vendors with baskets or pushcarts; beyond them were the big carts which had a place for the shopkeeper to sit; and beyond these, at the highest section of the arch, were a few permanent shops.

The river overflowed every year, but once the

flood had reached the road, it would gradually subside. Only occasionally did it advance farther and flow over the road. But whenever that happened, the entire garden as well as the road would be inundated, and even the end of the bridge would be submerged. The large trees in the garden, as though having grown straight out of the water, would cast shadows on the water; and the bridge no longer seemed to have any connection with the river or with the desire to cross it. At such times it was as though the water-god living in the underworld was displaying his strength by raising an arm and thrusting a mammoth bow out of the water. But the people of the town, turning their backs on this challenge of iron and stone and concrete, would head for a new settlement on high ground to wait for the water to recede. When this symbol of the water-god's challenge to men would revert to a symbol of man's victory over the water-god, people could again come and go across the bridge. All kinds of refreshments would once more be sold there, and people could not only satisfy their hunger and thirst, but, strolling for pleasure, could also buy scarves and bouquets of flowers. Or they could have their pictures taken as souvenirs by the photographer on the side of the road.

People even now remember the flood of 1906. Just to say that it reached a record height there that year gives no idea of what the flood was

like. An earthquake hit simultaneously, opening up great chasms in the road to the new settlement and knocking down houses in the town. But the most startling thing that happened was the calamity of the arched bridge.

As had been the case every year, a few people stayed on the bridge during the flood. It would subside in three or four days, so the owners of the permanent shops were not afraid. They had everything they needed for those few days. And there were boats tied up which could be used if necessary. Actually they had seldom been needed, since even during the flood one could usually wade across the garden. Occasionally some of the braver residents of the new settlement would put on knee-high rubber boots and, crossing the garden, come over to the bridge. More fashionable and well-to-do people would get into boats and sail directly to the bridge, making a delightful outing during those days. To drink tea during the time of the flood while sitting at the teastalls on the highest part of the bridge was considered something very special. And in order to have some souvenir of the experience, people—or sometimes a pair of lovers wanting a reminder of their adventure—would have their picture taken by the photographer there.

Most of the pictures in the photographer's shop showed people embracing or posing with teacups or cigarettes in hand, while sitting or

standing surrounded by water.

But that year everything suddenly changed. In the very first flood, the water rose so high that the boats were torn from their lines and swept away. Even the road across the bridge was closed, and it became impossible for people to come over from the city because the boats there had been washed away also. No sightseers arrived. Only floating animals or corpses of animals, drawing a line of stench, passed by under the bridge.

Then the second flood came, together with an earthquake, bringing further misfortune. The whole foundation of the bridge was shaken. Both ends broke off and were carried away. And in the middle, where the highest section still stood, the pillars cracked, some even shifting a little from their positions. There was no telling when the slap of the violent current would dislodge them a little more or when its friction would wear away the lower supports so that the suspended arched portion would also be carried away, leaving nothing where it had once stood. On all sides was thundering, untamed, unfathomable water, as far as the eye could see. Even the big trees in the garden no longer cast shadows on the water, their upper branches appearing now like shadows on the water's surface. Some were uprooted and swept away. For a moment their

roots might be caught by the sunken ends of the bridge, but then, dragging a whirlpool of foam and muddy water behind them, the trees would rush on. And in the midst of all this pounding and smashing and devastation, the middle part of the bridge remained incongruously standing, suspended on three pillars, with three or four shops on top of it, and three or four people living in them.

Selma Dahlberg came out of her shop, and went as far as the railing. She glanced at the water and at the sky. Then, moving to the glass-enclosed veranda on one side of the shop, she sat on a high stool and began to stare blindly at the expanse of empty tables and chairs. In the teahouse there was only herself; in the photo shop alongside, the photographer; and in the shop on the other side, with its souvenir scarves, toy-sized teacups and facsimiles of the bridge, Jan Akelov—In the world of the bridge, suspended above the muddy currents of doom, only these three humans remained. It was as though Noah's Ark, its mast broken off, had drifted somewhere, gotten stuck and become meaningless, while three creatures, trembling with the fear of meaninglessness, clung to it counting their breaths. In no way superior to the animals saved by Noah were these three creatures, since they too were just

animals—or at least so they seemed to the unseeing eyes of Selma Dahlberg, sitting on the veranda of her teashop.

After a little while she got up, and had just begun to fix something to eat when the voice of Jan Akelov was heard from outside:

"Have you anything to eat?"

Selma scrutinized him from head to foot. "We're very short on fuel," she said. "The price for cooking anything will be double."

Unblinking, Jan stared at her for a moment. "I have a stove," he said. 'If I can get even some uncooked things from the shop—just a little flour or dry meat—I can manage."

"What do you want and how much?"

Turning to get the things, Selma declared, "You'll pay right away of course, won't you?"

Somewhat taken aback, Jan replied, "Why yes," and then, after a slight pause, "I can't claim that I've never run away without setting up my account, but this time you surely have no fear of that!"

When Selma, holding out a large package, announced the price, Jan was astonished. He thought he might have heard wrong. But when she repeated her statement, he quietly took out the money, gave it to her, picked up the package, and left. Never before could he recall having picked up and carried off his purchases like this without saying "Thank you."

He did not come back that day. Selma had thought it likely that he would return, since he had not taken enough to last until the next day. She thought briefly about the photographer too. But he didn't show up. He was better-off than Jan, though, and might possibly have some food on hand. Selma slowly pulled all the curtains and disappeared somewhere inside.

Early the next morning the photographer arrived, wanting to know whether Selma had any drinking water available.

"Water?" Selma exclaimed, feigning surprise, "I thought there was always clean water at your place. How can a photographer work without it?"

The shaking of the bridge, it seemed, had knocked some small bottles of medicine into the water, where they broke, spoiling his whole water supply.

"I have just enough water for making tea," Selma said, inwardly evaluating the situation. "But I haven't made any as yet. I can give that to you if you wish; or would you rather have a cup of tea right here?"

"No, in that case I won't trouble you," said the photographer. Tea can be made just as well from the river water—there's nothing to fear once it's been boiled." And he left.

There are several methods of measuring time.

One is by the clock, probably the least valuable method because it has little or no connection with experience. A second way is by days and nights, sunrise and sunset, daylight and darkness, and by the hunger and thirst, the waking and sleeping, associated with these. Since this is a way to measure experiential rather than mechanical time, it is somewhat truer and more accurate.

But there is yet another means of measuring time: by counting the currents swirling in the pounding water, and then counting one's breaths flowing to that rhythm. This is even more profoundly related to experience, because it brings the experience of time closer to the experience of life. And what is the borderline between time and freedom from time, between time and timelessness, between the temporal and the eternal, other than our breathing and our awareness of life in the awareness of breathing? Not that the awareness of life occurs through breathing alone, because drawing breath is an instinctive act. That awareness of life occurs only when breathing is obstructed, for only then do our minds recognize the intensity of the desire to cling to life. Thus the ultimate measure of time is fear—the fear of life...

Was Selma the only one gauging time by this measuring-rod? Were not Jan and the photographer, surrounded by the same flowing river, also looking at these same swirling currents? Did they

have any other gauge? The flow of the river and the flow of time were synonymous, because acquaintance with both of them meant acquaintance with fear: with the fear of life...

A kind of wall had grown up between Jan, the photographer, and Selma. At least it had grown up between the two of them and Selma, because, peeking through the window, she sometimes saw the other two exchanging a few words, or indicating something to each other by gestures. And she inferred from their actions that those two had probably also had tea together two or three times.

After four days Jan returned to buy something. On finding him in her presence, Selma suddenly felt that the wall had become even more rigid, and her heart hardened against him. Until this moment it had not occurred to her that sympathy would be inconceivable in their situation—there had been no need to think about it. But the nature of the conversation with Jan—or rather the way he began it—was such that Selma abruptly felt the meaning of the world to be nothing more than this: that on one side was she alone, and on the other was everything that she was not, and with which there could be only a relation of hostility. The one and only constancy in the world was this hostility, to which one must cling tenaciously, continuing to do so by every possible means.

"This isn't enough," Jan said, taking some money from his pocket. "But I'm bringing more

from over there—meanwhile set out the things."

The "things" were just a little dry meat and some tinned milk. By the time Selma had fetched them from inside, Jan had returned. He paid the money, took the goods, and left.

The wall became as solid as before: a firm but transparent wall through which Selma watched the movements of the rest of the world on the ruined bridge.

In mid-afternoon those two met again across the way. They had probably made tea. And not on the stove, Jan having built a fire by burning some of his toys instead. And the tea evidently didn't turn out well, since the two of them made faces while drinking it.

The next day, Selma saw the photographer's face through the wall of glass and felt compelled to take another look. Observing him a second time, she realized that his face had become deathly pale. He hung a tin can over the side, drank the river water, and then went back in his shop. A little later he emerged again, refilled the can, and returned; and it seemed to Selma that in the interval he had become somewhat more pallid.

During the afternoon she noticed that Jan had gone over to the photographer's place and was periodically giving him drinks of water. Having drunk the water, the photographer would disappear somewhere inside his shop, only to come dragging out again after just a short time.

These signs were not good. The photographer must be sick. But if he were sick, what could she do about it? And when she saw Jan look toward her veranda with undiscerning, unrecognizing eyes and then turn his face away, she felt not only that she couldn't do anything and that she didn't wish to do anything, but also that even if she could or wanted to, she would not be able to reach the separate world in which those two existed. They didn't even exist; they were part of a terrible nightmare; and how could anyone alive and aware reach people seen in a nightmare?

It was night. In the darkness, Selma kept out the pounding of time, and of the river, by closing all the curtains, as though wrapping herself up within herself. Between herself and the outside world there existed a fundamental hostility to which she must cling: that alone was permanent, and life to her was only the ability to hang on to it.

After all, this flood would subside sooner or later, and then the wrecked bridge would have an enhanced attraction. Sightseers had always visited the bridge; even more would come now that it was ruined and an object of curiosity. And business at the teahouse would prosper still more. Even now it was proving quite profitable. What is the old saying: that there is no misfortune which doesn't profit someone...

But in the dead of night she suddenly awoke

with a start and sat up. The smarting in her eyes and her nerves was saying that it was still deep night. But a smouldering glow coming through the shelter of the curtains seemed to contradict her experience. She threw a wrap around her shoulders and went out on the veranda. Pulling back the curtain, she peered out, and then stood transfixed.

The photographer's shop was ablaze with crackling flames.

Before she could think of anything to do, Selma saw the photographer come out of his shop, walk around in front, place his hands on his hips, and begin to stare at the fire. Then he suddenly threw back his head and laughed — Selma could not hear the laugh, but she had no trouble in deducing that he was laughing by the wild inhuman expression that shone on his face and by the way his worn-out frame began to shake. To call that inhuman outburst a laugh, however, would be a misuse of language.

All at once Selma's trance snapped. She jerked open the door and was about to go outside when she again stopped short. Jan had emerged across from her and was dashing toward the photographer. Suddenly the photographer screamed and leaped into the river. Selma could here that scream. It was suddenly cut off by the rushing water, but cut off in such a way as to raise some doubt as to whether it was part of an insane laugh

—the beginning of that mad laughter which starts with a scream and then disintegrates into little outbursts — or whether it was only the water that had suddenly stopped his breath and broken it into a few bubbles.

Her legs buckling, Selma sat down on the veranda step. But even if her legs had not given way, she probably could not have moved forward. Jan was walking slowly toward the place from which the photographer had jumped. Having reached the spot, he stood staring intently into the water. Nothing could be done. The photographer must have gone far out from under the bridge. One could not say for sure where he might have gone! For it would be false even to say that he was being carried away in the flood— the flood undoubtedly having become just as meaningless and unreal to him as his own body...

After some time Jan turned and looked in the direction of Selma's veranda. He saw that she was sitting on the steps, and then turned his face away. He started slowly for his own shop, but turned back after a few steps and sat down near the photographer's shop. Silently he watched it burn. The flames were endangering no one, and if Selma was right in figuring that the photographer had died of dysentery caused by drinking the filthy water — actually he had died from jumping into the water of course, but perhaps the drinking had caused that insanity — then in a way

the burning of the shop was a good thing.

Selma suddenly felt that she was about to utter this thought. She bit her lip.

Perhaps Jan too felt just then that Selma was about to say something — for he fixed a penetrating look on her for a moment. Then, with an air of finality, he turned away, his back to Selma. She got up, slammed the door, jerked the curtains shut, and went inside — inside her tea shop, inside herself, where there was no drowning photographer, no mocking Jan — where there was self-confidence and security and the assurance of a comfortable future. Not that fear was entirely absent, but there was no need to think about it right now. Such fear is purely of the body, and bodily fear can be pacified — as long as it does not reach within. After all, the body is always alone, so loneliness has no separate meaning for it. And besides, that which is within is never alone because it belongs to the whole. Only when that which is within is not shared by the whole, and one feels alone — or when the body no longer remains alone and becomes a part of the whole — only then does that fear arise which cannot be mollified, which mounts one's chest and seems to dig its claws into one's lungs, tearing out the breath.

Selma did not sleep. The smouldering red glow gradually became dark and then changed into yellowish light; then the outline of objects in

the room became clear and it was day.

Having gotten up, Selma washed her face and hands, stretched, and reassured herself that, despite the aching of her limbs, her body was still hers alone and was under her control. She made some strong tea and drank it down without milk or sugar. When even that bitterness failed to satisfy her, she put the wet leaves in the cup, took a mouthful, and swished it around. She spat it out after awhile and then twisted her tongue around her cheeks as though trying to prolong the bitter taste.

Then she raised the veranda curtains and opened a window. She felt no need to open the other windows and doors; in fact she may have subconsciously felt it important that they not be opened.

She had no desire to see Jan. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she didn't want Jan to see her; and she certainly did not want to find him looking at her. This fear was groundless, however. Jan was not looking at her. He was outside, still with his back toward her, in the same spot where she had last seen him before retiring at night.

But he had not been sitting there like that all night. Perhaps he had come and sat down just shortly before. Without a sound, Selma placed a chair by the window, sat down, and began to observe him from behind the shelter of the cur-

tains.

Jan got up after a little while, approached the embers of the burned house, and bent over. Selma saw that something was cooking in a tin on the smouldering coals. Jan shook the tin and then sat down again as before.

So he was cooking something in the ashes of the burned building. Suddenly the spectacle she had witnessed on the night of the shop's burning took shape before Selma's eyes, as though she again saw that insane expression on the photographer's face and again heard that mad scream, followed by the gurgling of water and then by the monotonous roar which had surrounded her for so many days. A wave of nausea came over her. She drew the curtain to shut the view from sight, and got up. But the sight was not there where it could be shut out by the pulling of a curtain! Wherever she turned, the identical scene appeared—because it was not in front of her eyes; it was within her eyes. Her feeling of nausea turning to vomiting, she ran inside uneasily.

The day had almost ended when Selma heard footsteps on the veranda stairs. So Jan had come! He did not open the door, but advanced as far as the window and stood there in a questioning attitude.

"Is there any meat?" he asked, without any

introduction and without looking at her.

Selma bristled instantly. "Yes, there is," she replied, controlling herself. "Bring the money."

"I have it," Jan declared, even more tersely.

Selma brought some meat on a tray and pushed it at him.

"How much?"

Telling him the price, Selma said, "Set it here."

Jan had picked up the meat with one hand and thrust the other into his pocket. Hearing Selma's statement, he suddenly raised his eyes, looked her in the face, and asked again, "How much?"

"Didn't you hear?" she demanded harshly.

Jan took his hand from his pocket, his fist clenched over a handful of coins. Suddenly he raised the fist and hurled the coins in Selma's face. "That may not be enough," he said. "But you can reduce the amount of meat that much if you wish. I have no more money." And he pushed the things back toward Selma.

Selma's eyes had closed involuntarily. Now, summoning all her strength and will power, she opened them. Stifling the pain, she reached out and took the things. For a moment she had considered forgoing the rest of the money. But she wouldn't let it go this way. She would never let it go! Hostility – the one and only constant – the anchor of life . . .

Picking up the coins, she stacked them, and then went inside, returning with the meat divided roughly in half. Without a word she again held out the tray to Jan. He picked up the meat, turned, and went out. A moment later Selma slammed the window shut and then began exploring her face to see where it was swollen. A wide red streak appeared on her palm.

She would not acknowledge defeat—never. And especially not after this insult! Just who was Jan to insult her or to get angry at her? Certainly she made a profit; everyone made a profit. Didn't Jan make a profit selling all kinds of worthless junk as souvenirs? Whether the price be less or more depends on the demand, she reasoned. It depends on one's fancy. Sightseers buy all kinds of useless things, paying whatever is asked out of sheer whimsey. Everyone knows that the price is for the pleasure, not for the object itself. Does this make the business immoral? The price is set by the demand; demand is produced by unequal opposition; opposition is constant and one must cling to it...

...Necessity is only another name for people's fancy. Both are demands. Different kinds of demands perhaps. Profit on fancy — profit on need — yes, there is a difference: with fancy there is no compulsion, whereas with need there is no alternative.

...But is there really no alternative? Am I

not taking a risk by living here? Is there no consideration of my needs—and am I less compelled?

... If the photographer went mad and died, what can I do about it? Am I guilty because I didn't go mad too?...

Selma had no dearth of arguments. But something kept accusing her. She went inside and sat down. Then, returning to the veranda, she pushed the chairs around, making a clear passageway, and began pacing rapidly back and forth. Nightfall passed her unawares; and not only the current of time but also the current of the river seemed to be left somewhere behind. Only the sound of her own footsteps on the veranda kept her company —

But suddenly she started violently. There was a knocking at the door.

What could Jan have come for at night? Her heart suddenly pounding, she grasped the arm of a chair and just stood there.

The knocking came again, this time loudly.

Selma went inside. After glancing around, she picked up an iron poker resting near the fireplace and then went back to the veranda.

The knock sounded a third time. Selma gripped the poker more tightly. Concealing it behind her, she opened the bolt on the window and asked, "What is it?"

"Open the door," Jan said.

"What do you want — so late at night?" Some-

what taken aback, Jan said again, "Open the door, Selma." Then, after a moment's pause, he declared, "Selma, I'd like to be forgiven. I lost my head in anger—I'm ashamed. After thinking about it, I realize that you were not to blame."

Selma hesitated briefly. Was this just his way of getting the door opened? But then the iron spike clutched in her hand propped up her faltering self-confidence and she opened the door.

Jan came in. "You wanted to take my life," he said, "but you couldn't — you can't. If I wished, I could take your life—but I don't want to."

Both remained silent for awhile. Selma's heart had begun pounding again. But, too bewildered to understand the situation, she was not really afraid. Controlling her embarrassment, she watched Jan cautiously.

"Probably neither of us will die," he said. "Despite your behavior, it doesn't seem likely that I will die. But if the flood should really keep up this way so long that I do die of hunger, where will you go to be saved? And if you die later, do you think there will be some great pleasure in dying alone? Actually, of course, you are alone even now, whereas I am not. And perhaps you're already dead — whereas I, right now, am alive."

Jan raised his eyes and looked squarely at Selma. She wanted to contradict what he'd said, but could say nothing — all at once, as her hands relaxed, she remembered the iron poker in her

hand. Leaning slowly to one side, she propped it against the wall and then straightened up again. Summoning all her strength she managed to say, "You came to ask for forgiveness — but aren't you just insulting me all over again?"

"How can you grant forgiveness?" Jan said. "One who doesn't recognize his own helplessness can't forgive someone else. I'm only trying to help you."

There was another short silence — a silence pulsating with thoughts and emotions.

Then, to relax the tension, Selma asked, "What's that in your hand?"

"This? Oh!"

Jan hesitated briefly. "Well, it's not an iron poker," he said pointedly. "But I came to give it to you — I've cooked this meat."

"What's that to me?" Selma exclaimed. "Go eat it yourself." Then, as though relenting a little, she added, "You bought it, and paid plenty for it."

"That's why I've come to share it. I gave the last of my resources to purchase this final meal. I can't eat it alone!"

He remained quiet for a short time. "And even the cooking of it wasn't easy: it is cooked on the flames of the photographer's burning shop. It certainly should be tasty — being bought at the price of my life and cooked at the price of the photographer's life. Take it —"

While speaking he had set the tin on the chair in front of Selma. She moved forward, intending to show her contempt for Jan and throw him out. But somehow, when she put her hand on his shoulder and said "Jan, get out of my sight!" there was no contempt left in her voice. She was stunned at herself — so stunned that her hand remained resting on his shoulder.

"Well, I wasn't returning it all to you," Jan said. "I'm only giving you half — because I've come not to insult you, but just to share with you. Take out your portion and give me the rest. I'll go back over there and eat it."

Selma's hand slipped slowly from his shoulder. Still looking at him, she groped with her other hand for a chair and then, moving back a step, sat down. "No, Jan, you'll not eat alone. If you did, I'd first have to give back your money."

A thin smile of sarcasm appeared on Jan's face. "Oh!"

Selma stood up as though possessed. The sharp sarcasm in that "Oh!" suddenly revived all her feelings of hostility with a force that wiped away the weakness of just a moment before.

But then she suddenly blurted out, "Jan, will you marry me?"

Astounded, Jan stared at her as though he hadn't heard correctly. But then he realized that there was no mistake.

Selma herself was surprised, as though unable

to understand what had come from her lips. But then she too realized what she had said.

The unanswered question reverberated for awhile in the silence and then became petrified like a rock. It was not the only thing petrified — for it had so petrified those two that neither one could move until an answer was given and the spell broken.

"Marry you?" Jan said at last. "You mean marry all your rotten earnings from sin? No, that's not for me — take your part of my last meal and let me go free." After pausing just a moment, he added, "Or if you won't take a part, keep it all yourself." And he turned and went away again.

Selma sat staring at the tin for a long time. In that staring she lived and died several times— lived and died as though she were someone else, and then came back to herself again, estranged and unrecognizable. She looked at her hands and feet and knees— as though questioning whether they really belonged to her — and whether she really existed.

The door, blown by the force of the wind, swung closed and then open again. Selma got up to fasten the window and then began to close the door also; but instead she opened both doors wide. Leaving the veranda, she went inside. She wrote something slowly, carefully and neatly on a piece of paper, folded it, and put it in her pocket. Then she took some more food from the closet,

went out on the veranda, picked up the tin from the chair, and headed for Jan's shop.

Jan was sitting just outside the shop looking at the water. "You came to give me an invitation," Selma said, setting the things in front of him. "I've accepted it. I've even brought two plates. Serve me on one of them."

Jan eyed her intently. For just an instant, Selma thought he was going to refuse. Then he quietly picked up the plate and began to serve the meat from the can. "What's this?" he asked.

"That's from me – it should be shared too."

After a slight pause, Jan said, "Then you serve it."

She had hardly begun serving it up when he stopped her: "Enough! Enough!"

"Is it all right if I sit here and eat?" Selma asked.

"Does the bridge belong to me?" Jan replied, somewhat obliquely.

Before long Selma too felt unable to eat anything– it was impossible while sitting next to Jan. Picking up her plate, she stood and said, "I'm taking it over there – I can't eat just now." Then, before he could say anything, she took the paper from her pocket and set it next to him, saying, "Take this too – I brought it for you."

"What is it?"

"You came to give me an invitation, but insulted me and left – I have not come to insult

you, nor will I do so; but I can't eat right now — I just can't!"

Hastily she returned to the veranda, set her plate on a stool, and slammed the door. Then she picked up the plate and went inside, where she set it on a table. She glanced at the chair as though intending to sit, but did not do so, just standing there undecided. For suddenly a lurching darkness overwhelmed her — a sort of bubbling surged up somewhere within, rose as far as her throat, and then burst; and she began to sob.

This was the end. There was nothing more to ask. And there was nothing more to say either. There are turns in life beyond which there is no need for a road — sometimes there is only a blind alley. Morning came; evening came; a second day came; and then a third day. Selma did not go outside, nor did she peek out from the veranda, nor did she feel even the slightest desire to know what Jan might be doing. Or what might happen in the future. Everything had already ended; and she knew that everything had ended — she accepted the fact that this was the end. Jan had rejected her, and she all her earnings—for she had written a will putting them all in his name. There was nothing else anywhere! There was nothing else . . . no questions . . . no answers . . . no certainty left because there was no hostility left.

There was no flood outside, and there was not even the flow of time. Only a meaningless broken bridge — from where to what and to when! A meaningless broken bridge which was she herself — she, Selma, going from nowhere to nowhere — who, if she existed, did not know for how long.

When a knock sounded again at the door on the fourth day, she thought it might be what she was awaiting. But what Jan called out was not what she had anticipated.

"People are coming — there's a boat in the distance. The flood has subsided — Selma! Come outside!"

But this was not news to her. It was only a riddle. What flood? What people? From where were they coming? Nevertheless, as though mechanically propelled, Selma went out, opened the door, and began looking in the direction of the horizon, toward which Jan was pointing.

Yes, a boat, a large boat, a blackish boat, and, dimly recognizable, several dark heads...

Selma stood there next to Jan for some time. The boat had come near enough so that its occupants had probably spotted them. Two or three men in the boat were waving their hands and signalling. But it didn't seem to occur to Selma to answer their signals; she was only aware that in just a short time this rescue party would reach

them and they would be delivered — that is, they would be delivered from each other.

Turning suddenly to Jan, she said, "I have nothing now. I ask you again: will you accept me?"

Jan glanced at her. Then he put his hand in his pocket, took out the paper she had given him, carefully tore it into little pieces, and flung these into the wind. Other than that he gave no answer. Thereafter he seemed to concentrate completely on waving his hands, answering the signals of the people in the boat.

Everything after that seemed to take place in a dream. Only in a dream did Selma recognize that she was assisted into the boat, that Jan descended into it after her, that both of them sat in the boat, and that the boat was pulling away from the bridge. Only in a dream did she see the ruined bridge being left far behind, becoming a part of the sky — not a part of their lives, only a part of the empty sky.

After watching the bridge for a long time she suddenly turned and looked at Jan, and the shock of meeting his eyes instantly shattered her trance. A friendly smile had unexpectedly blossomed on his face: a smile between just the two of them, brighter than the sun, deeper than the sky, more drenching than the river... in which there was no rejection, no refusal, no hostility — but only certainty, a steady accepting certainty like a light in

the endless sky...

No, the end was not there on the bridge; the end was this new beginning — it was not a blind alley, nor was there any question of a turn, because there was not even a road, because this beginning was open sky... out of which a new life would spring forth — a new experience, a new household, and three children; a web of shared joys and sorrows in which they could catch who knows how much meaningfulness in life... Then came the day when Jan was no longer there, but the meaningfulness of life could not be destroyed, even though all the meanings they had found might be snatched away.

Life is always that last supper which is bought at the cost of life and is cooked by burning up life, and which must be shared because one can't swallow it alone — it cannot be borne alone. Only when life is renounced can it endure and be found in full measure; all assurance must be renounced in order to find certitude. Everything else has been lived and has died, all of it being based on darkness and fear. But this is a certainty which is lived afresh, and in the realization of which death no longer exists; which rests on light and in which there is no loneliness...

Outside the window, an expanse of snow: the kind of white untouched snow which is called virgin snow. A virginal, white, desolate, uninhabited expanse. There was something in that

untouched whiteness which was false, or which seemed false to Jokke. It was probably not the expanse of snow that was false, for its emptiness was as much an unbroken truth as death. Perhaps the feeling of falseness was transferred from her own rebellion against Selma's story.

But why rebellion against Selma's story? Did she think it was untrue? No, she couldn't really say that. Perhaps the manner of its telling — in bits and pieces, the intervals punctuated by the solid black shadow of death — had somewhat destroyed its credibility for her. There was something so complete, so unbroken, and so inexorably compelling in the story that to pause or to divide it into parts should have been impossible. So either the pauses must have been unreal, or else the story itself must have been untrue.

Jokke had said that Slema was talking about another world. What truth was there in another world? Would not just its "otherness" make it false? — since this world, this particular point in time and space, this one detached fixed moment is the one and only truth that can be experienced? But this itself is the biggest falsehood, the most inadmissible. Just because this world is false, does that make the other world true? If a dream be false, then should the world seen in the dream be taken as true? Isn't that which is imagined in a stage of delusion, in falsehood, even more false — isn't it the lie of lies?

Selma had told her story little by little, in intervals between trying to catch her breath. But her self-control had made this breathlessness appear to be just silence, rather than an interruption. Perhaps it was this very self-control that had deprived the story of that pain-throbbing naturalness which could have made it seem true to Jokke . . .

Once, while listening to the story, these hostile feelings of hers suddenly became so strong that she actually stopped Selma: "You talk of pain and suffering — but how can they be true if you don't even feel them?"

Selma had kept silent for a little while before answering. "That's just what I say too — but from another angle. Only in experiencing it does the truth of pain appear." And after a slight pause: "And also of death."

Jokke was saying to herself: "That there is she had not wanted to hear even this much. She had sprung up and gone into the other room. But she could not absorb herself in work — there was nothing to do. Returning, she had looked once or twice at Selma and then gone away. But finally, coming back again, she had sat down next to her.

Jokke was saying to herself: 'That there is Selma and this here is I. That it is really Selma, I can't even say — because I don't know whether she is alive or is already dead — she is so motion-

less — but her expression has not changed at all and her eyes are closed. I have heard — that the eyes open — but why am I looking at her? In order to reassure myself that I am not dead? In order to experience life, to experience my being alive, to recognize my 'I-ness'? In order to experience together both the feeling of 'I-ness' and the feeling of 'live-ness'— in order to mould both of them into one experience and be aware of that unified experience?"

Having put the question before herself thus, she became uneasy, stood up, and began pacing back and forth. There was something false here somewhere — some deception — because the sum of these two separate experiences did not add up to the single experience "I am alive". The integral experience "I am alive" is possible only when an individual is not conscious of it: for any kind of self-consciousness separates one from his experience in some way. It detaches him, makes him a witness; and how can one who is a witness be a participant? One can only experience life when he is unaware of experiencing it. And Jokke, sitting there, was not only continually aware of her experience, but wanted also to experience it! And this awareness, this desiring, in itself made life a lie . . . a lie, a lie, a lie!

Snow: white snow, dull snow, black snow — as though the flow of time were merely different shades of snow — as if time had no separate exist-

ence or reality. Or perhaps, rather than the shades of snow outside, time was the shadows on Selma's face inside — white, dull, black... only this was the passing of time, the passing of days and nights which Jokke was measuring by her own meaningless breaths.

Jokke did not know just when Selma died. There was no way of knowing. Perhaps Selma herself did not know — since her death did not occur at any one point in time. Jokke was in the other room when suddenly she knew with a deep and firm certainty beyond logic that Selma had died. The odor in the room seemed suddenly to have changed — for several days she had been subjected so intimately to the door of imminent death that the edges of her awareness had become dulled — but this present odor seemed somewhat different — as though her perceptions had been sharpened again on the grindstone of death.

The shock of the sensation staggered her for a moment. But then a sharp reaction sprang up: that she must do something immediately; that she would go mad if she didn't do something. She dashed over and slammed the door to Selma's room, and then stood pushing against it with her back. She would shut death up in that room — she would bury the odor of death in there —she could not endure it!

But her efforts were insufficient. The odor of death seemed to be pervading everything. Jokke struggled to seal every crack and crevice in the door with a sheet and a blanket, but even these seemed to be filled with the smell. Clenching her fists, she struck a hard blow at the blanket. But then, as though unsatisfied at not feeling pain, she began pounding directly on the door with both fists. A bitter malediction swelled within her; invectives heard long ago in men's quarrels came to mind, and like a mad woman she began cursing the name of God while beating on the door.

All at once Jokke sensed that the smell was not coming from anything exterior but was coming from herself — it was emerging from her own body. She moved away from the door and went over to the window. Filling a glass with snow from outside, she started rubbing handfuls of it over her hands, her arms and her face—Useless! The smell would not wash off, since it had lodged within her. It was the smell of Jokke herself — Jokke herself was that smell... Bewildered, she looked at her hands, then picked up the glass and smelled it — Oof! even the snow was permeated with the smell of death. Or else just her touching it had filled the snow with that smell.

Only to wait for death — to wait to die, to rot and to stink... that smell already exists everywhere and in everything and we keep stinking continually...

She and the death-odor — she alone and that death-odor diffused everywhere — just she alone with the death-odor. Filled with wild, superhuman determination, Jokke flung off the blanket and sheet and opened the door. She would pick Selma up and throw her in God's face — would say, "Take your rotting, stinking death and leave me with my loneliness!" But after advancing just two steps, she halted, as though struck by paralysis. Selma's open eyes seemed to be looking directly at her as they had been on that day when Selma had asked, "But why did you stop?"

Unable to move closer to Selma's bed, Jokke found her resentment against God growing strong again: A curse on God, who made me so alone and yet will not leave me alone, who has entered the eyes of a corpse and is peering out at me, spying on me—curse him!

Having made me so alone... being alone—alone with death—alone before death—alone in death. What difference is there between this utter loneliness and death itself? What does it matter if God is peering stealthily at that solitary death — is not God also dead?

Jokke reached out a hand to support herself. But there was no support anywhere, and it was impossible to move toward the bed. Helpless, she sat down right there on the floor.

It might have been only minutes—or hours—that Jokke remained there sitting on the floor.

A stinging sensation in her limbs aroused her. Somehow she stood up and staggered as far as the door. Supporting herself against the frame, she straightened her numbed legs. Then, controlling herself somewhat, she closed the door slowly behind her. For some reason the big mirror hanging in the room attracted her attention—the window had been open for so long that moisture had settled on it like a sheet of fog. Rubbing it with her hands, Jokke cleared a spot large enough to see in. First she looked at the feet in the reflection and then slowly raised her glance until her eyes met the eyes in the reflection. Then all at once she turned away.

Filled with new resolve, she opened the door to Selma's room, wrapped her body in a blanket, and lifted it in her arms. For a moment she thought she might have picked up only the blanket. But there was nothing on the bed; Selma must weigh only this much. Reaching the door, she pushed it open with her elbow and went outside.

There was no need to dig—even to try would have been useless just then. There was only snow. Later, when it melted down, a grave could be dug and the burial take place, but not right away . . . Jokke laid the body there on the snow. Then she brought a bucket from inside and began scooping a trench in the snow. After a little while she laid the corpse in it and had

just filled the bucket with snow and raised it up when she checked herself—

Could she recall some prayer? Did she even feel like praying? Did she know or even think of God other than to spit at his name? God was only a habit, and spitting at his name was also a habit...

"Forgive me!" she recalled Selma's saying to her. Whenever any situation had arisen in which forgiveness was called for, it had always been Selma who had asked Jokke's forgiveness.

"Forgive me!" she recalled Selma's saying to and poured the bucket of snow over her. Then, refilling it again and again, she kept pouring.

...Is there a God anywhere other than in this relationship of men's seeking each other's forgiveness? Such forgiveness is not natural, nor is such asking for it. So it must be genuine, and if there were a God he would exist in this relationship. He must be somewhere in its depths... but what forgiveness, what kind of forgiveness, forgiveness from whom? I am what I am; and Selma—she's dead—she just isn't. Nevertheless my forgiveness is of Selma, not of God, who is sick and stinking—the God of the odor of death...

When the body was covered completely, Jokke set down the bucket and straightened up. Then she turned and looked at the house. It was still only a cave in the snow from whose door she had emerged and into which she would re-

turn—this time alone. Great pity for Selma welled up in her. Selma was, and now she was not! Poor Selma!

But Jokke immediately arrested this feeling of pity. Pity was wrong. There was no safety in pity. If hatred was the door to hell, then so was pity. Pity would land her in exactly the same place as hate! ...

Just then Jokke recalled the monk who had shut himself up in a solitary cell to meditate. But one day he seemed to wake up to his loneliness and, from fear of himself, started to dig a tunnel out of his room. After digging most of his life, he finally perceived a small opening in front of him. He pushed his head through and climbed out—only to find himself in another solitary cell of the same monastery, just as sealed as his own cell had been! The only difference was that this other cell contained an old metal pot and a skeleton—some other devotee who had died in that solitude...

Did the fulfillment of man's existence amount only to this: advancement from one solitary cell to a second cell where the solitude was doubled by a skeleton?

Selma had said, "There is no freedom of choice anywhere. We don't choose anything with free will." Perhaps God was not independent either—being forced to create just because the job of creating was inescapable in order to save him-

self from insanity; if he did not create then he would go mad...

But this was not a matter of creation. It was a matter of death—death, death, death... Was there any room here for constructiveness, for creation? Was this the secret which Selma had glimpsed: that there is no freedom of choice but that creation is still possible—and that the only way to salvation lies in that creation?

Jokke filled another bucket with snow and slowly poured it over Selma's concealed body. Although this was superfluous, its very superfluity gave completeness to the funeral—gave it finality.

Before returning inside, Jokke was just taking a look around—when a black dot on the snow-line caught her eye.

The dot was moving. Someone was coming over the rim of the mountain. A name echoed as though from some other world—Paul Soren. Yes, it was Paul.

So this was to be the end. Strange that the funeral of one and the salvation of the other should be occurring simultaneously!

But whose funeral and whose salvation? Who was dying and who had become free? How unbelievable the cry seemed in that stillness! Paul was calling—waving his hands to show his delight at seeing her—and to encourage the three or four black dots behind him to push ahead

faster...

Paul Soren, Jokke's friend and fellow-adventurer. But who was Paul? Who was the stranger that, shouting and waving like this, was advancing toward her!

There is no freedom of choice anywhere. We can't choose our friends—nor our strangers... we are not even free to choose our own stranger...

A stranger, the unrecognizable fear... are we even free to get acquainted with a stranger?

JOKKE

THE store was crowded. It had been closed for several days and, although open today, there was no assurance as to how long it would remain open. And what certainty was there, even if it did not close, that its goods would not all be exhausted in a short time? Although everyone was apprehensive, no pushing and shoving was evident in that atmosphere of fear. But it was not hard to guess that, for the customers, this coming to trade at the store was part of a struggle for survival itself. They all knew that whoever lagged behind would die; only in somehow moving forward to buy was there a chance of self-preservation.

The store was in an alley. Though the Germans did not use this alley, it was not spared from the terror that had seized the town since the Germans took over. It was because of that terror that the store was closed when it was closed and open when it was open. Prices had not gone up for the same reason: when things were gone, they were gone. And though blackmarketing was sometimes carried on hidden in the rear, there was no sign of it in front. Everyone knew that

there was more blackmarketing in the public square than in the back alley, and that there was greater risk in the alley.

The crowd was large, but everyone in it was alone, and not only because of competitive feelings. Darkened, sealed faces, as though not only the windows of the house had been closed but also the blinds; subdued and unemotional but relentless voices, as though determined to get what they wanted. Estranged faces, estranged voices, estranged gestures, in an estrangement that involved not only the self-protection of keeping others at a distance, but also an inability to establish contact with each other: an estrangement from their people and their world; an estrangement from the value of life.

Black, white and brown faces; black, red, yellow, brown, auburn, gold and blonde hair; paint-smeared and leathery faces. Pleated and ironed or wrinkled clothes; shining or dirt-smeared, creaking or flapping or dragging shoes. And in the faces, the eyes, the clothes, from head to foot, in the movement of every limb, an expression of relentless hunger for life—as though this was a shop not for buying supplies but for purchasing life itself.

Jagannathan had somehow managed to buy a few things: a large chunk of cheese, some sweet

wafers, and a little dry bread. Having set them in front of him, he was surveying the display of goods along the wall to see what else he might take, when suddenly a new tension arose in the already taut atmosphere at the shop's entrance. Jagannathan turned and looked in the direction where people were staring.

The newcomer's clothes were dishevelled. But attention was focussed not on them but on her face and eyes, which were even more dishevelled—as though an entire autumnal forest dwelt in them. Wide-eyed, she was casting a wild look around. Glancing over everyone, her eyes settled on Jagannathan and examined him from head to foot. Something in that look made Jagannathan uneasy and anxious. But he could understand neither the look nor his reaction to it. That in itself would have been disturbing, but then he also realized semi-consciously that people were whispering something among themselves, something about this newcomer. Although he vaguely heard, nothing registered except that uneasy feeling which had spread and was now enveloping his entire consciousness.

All at once the new arrival took the cigarette from her lower lip and rubbed it out against the cheese that Jagannathan had bought. Then she absent-mindedly stuck it right into the cheese and looked at Jagannathan.

He was astonished. Slowly picking up a piece

of cheese, he said wearily, "Look what you've done!"

The newcomer took the cheese from his hand and let it fall to the floor. Then suddenly she turned and ran out.

A few people laughed. For a moment Jagannathan stood confused; then he picked up his things and dashed after her. "She's caught him," someone shouted from behind.

"He seems to be in rather a hurry," sneered another voice. "Chasing her in broad daylight."

Jagannathan became aware of these voices as he ran, and the earlier comments also came to mind. It dawned on him that the newcomer was a prostitute.

Should he go back? The cheese was ruined of course. What good would it do to find out why she had done it? And what would he do if he chased and caught her?

But she stopped of her own accord, panting hard. And her expression clearly showed that she knew she had entered a blind alley and could no longer save herself by running away— She would have to return in the direction of her pursuer. She sat down on a nearby step and cowered as though expecting a blow, as a dog crouches when certain that it can't escape and is going to be beaten.

Approaching her, Jagannathan asked in a muted and gentle voice, "What made you do that?

Why was it necessary?"

"How was I to know that it was cheese?" Her voice was defiant. "I thought it must be some worthless garbage."

This was hard to believe. Nevertheless Jagannathan said, "But when I showed it to you, you could have said—that you were sorry. That was my food for the next three days. I—I'm not exactly rich."

She eyed him sharply. "It was necessary," she said in a somewhat altered tone.

"What was necessary?" Jagannathan wondered if the woman might be a little mad.

"It was necessary. I have to go. My call has come."

Jagannathan was even more perplexed. The woman went on: "But you were chasing me. You wanted to hit me—why don't you? Go ahead; here I am—hit!

Embarrassed, Jagannathan said, "No, I didn't want to—I—I only wanted to—"

"Or else—or else was it because you—were those people right in what they were saying?"

At first Jagannathan didn't understand her question. Then, like a flood, its implication became clear. "How can you even think such a thing?" he exclaimed. "In all my life, I've never gone to a—"

He wanted to say that he'd never gone near a prostitute, but his voice stuck on the word

"prostitute." He couldn't bring himself to say it in front of this woman.

"You only wanted to what?" she asked, looking him straight in the eye.

"I, I—I don't know!"

She stared at him for a little while and then burst out laughing. But the laugh stopped just as unexpectedly, and her previous expression returned. A deep line of suffering stretched across her face. She thrust her hand in her pocket, took something out, and quickly put it in her mouth. Was it medicine? Or some drug?

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be all right now—very soon." Hearing this, Jagannathan decided it was a drug, rather than medicine.

Her body relaxed somewhat. Resting her elbow on the top step, she leaned her back against the wall. She turned her left wrist, glanced at her watch, and then let her arms fall limply to her sides.

"What time is it? I can't see anything." Her voice seemed to be getting very weak also.

Jagannathan looked at his watch and told her the time.

"What is your name?"

A little hesitantly he replied, "Jagannathan!"

"Ja—jagan—ja—I'll call you just Nathan—it's shorter and nicer. Nathan, forgive me. I've caused you trouble. But don't hold that against

me—don't remember it afterwards. I am dying."

"Why—what did you do—what on earth have you done! What did you just swallow?"

"I made a choice: I chose freedom." Slowly she said, "I'm very happy. I've never chosen anything. Never since I can remember have I had an opportunity to choose. But now I have chosen. I chose exactly what I wanted. I am happy." She gasped a little and then continued, "I wanted to die near some good man. Because I didn't want to die—I never wanted to!" She paused and then said, "Forgive me, Nathan. Surely you will forgive me. You're a good man. Tell me—you are a good man, aren't you?"

Straightening up, he said, "I'll call a doctor."

"No! No! It won't do any good now. Don't leave me now—this is what I have chosen!" Then, seeming to have thought of something, she added, "Oh, yes, there will be others to consider—but I'll explain to them myself. Don't you go away!"

The sharpness of an entreaty came through despite the weakness of her voice.

Jagannathan could not leave. But he turned and shouted, "Is anyone there?—We need help—Is anyone there?" Then, facing the woman, he asked, "What will you tell them?"

"I'll tell them that I chose, that I chose of my own free will. I'll tell everything. I'll explain to the whole bastard world that for once I did exactly what I chose! Bastard—bastard

world! Nathan—good man—forgive me!"

Jagannathan was in a quandary. First he would turn as though to run for help; then he would look at the woman whose request—perhaps her last request—was that he not go away and leave her. He reflected that probably she was not in her full senses, probably didn't know what she was saying, and probably was not even cognizant that he was standing next to her. But Jagannathan was aware, even if she was not, of what she had asked! And perhaps his duty was just to be a witness to whatever she was saying—even if it were just insane raving—because that might be all she had left to say. And perhaps the saying of this was the essential thing for which she had been living, whatever kind of life...

Falteringly she started to speak again. "Tell —tell the whole bastard world, I did not lose in the end—in the end I did exactly what I wanted—according to my own desire. I chose it and did it. I—Mary—Mother of God—Mary, Mother of God—whom the Germans made a prostitute—"

"Is your name Mary?" Jagannathan inquired slowly.

"Yes. My name is Mary. The name of the mother of God—Mary. The chosen mother—who can never die—prostitute of the Germans. Before that my name was Jokke. I didn't choose that, but it's a good name. Jokke died, though. Mary never dies."

Jagannathan saw that some people were just turning the corner into the alley. He thought that Mary—Jokke—would not be sufficiently conscious to realize they were coming. But she saw them and somehow raised her hand to beckon to them. Two or three men came running up. They glanced curiously at Jagannathan and then bent over Jokke.

"I have chosen with my own free will," she declared. "I am dying—dying by my own wish—a bastard death."

Her voice had grown still fainter. It seemed to Jagannathan that her body was growing limp also, and that a kind of greyness was creeping into the increasing pallor of her face. Her back seemed to be slipping to one side against the wall. Kneeling quickly he supported her with one arm. As though recognizing his touch, Jokke turned slightly and said, "I told them—I told all the bastards." She hesitated briefly and then added with great effort, "I told him also—him also."

That "him" was stressed so forcefully that Jagannathan automatically inquired, "Him? Told whom?"

"Paul, that stranger."

All the onlookers had suddenly become quiet. There is something in everyone which recognizes that a momentous event is about to take place, and people become silent under its impact. In that stillness Jokke and Jagannathan seemed iso-

lated from the crowd. Jokke spoke again: "I chose. We don't choose strangers; we choose good men. I chose a man—a good man. I will live in him. Nathan, forgive me."

Jagannathan's arm encircled her a little more, and he rested her head on his shoulder.

"Did you?" she asked.

"Did I what?" Jagannathan inquired tenderly, putting his lips close to her ear. Then, suddenly understanding her question, he replied quickly, "Yes, Jokke! I do, I grant you my forgiveness—but there's nothing to forgive."

Slowly and almost inaudibly, Jokke murmured, "I grant mine too. Good man... to him also—"

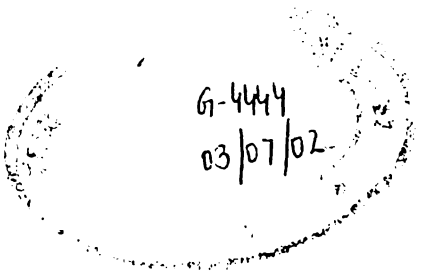
"To Paul?" asked Jagannathan.

A fleeting expression of hesitation crossed her face. Or was it just that her mind was drifting in the moment before unconsciousness? Then she said something which Jagannathan could not quite hear precisely. He was only sure that she had not uttered Paul's name. She had spoken some other name. Just what she had said, there was already no way for him to discover. But suddenly Jagannathan, the witness, was absolutely certain that she had said "To God."

All at once their solitude vanished. Jagannathan became aware that he was surrounded by a crowd, and that his arm was supporting Jokke's lifeless body.

He looked at the people with unseeing eyes and said, "She is gone."

In the stunned crowd it occurred to only one old man to raise his hand and make the sign of the cross. That sign remained hanging in lonely space, as though it were a stranger.



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