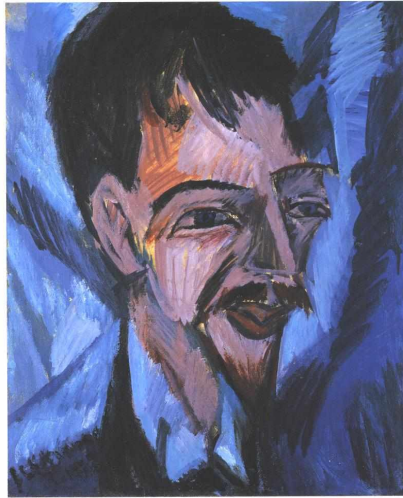


Alfred Doeblin

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*Beyond Alexanderplatz*

## *THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR*

*EIGHT OUTCAST AND ORPHANED PIECES FROM THE  
PROLIFIC PEN OF*

*ALFRED DÖBLIN*

Selected, translated and introduced  
by C.D. Godwin

<https://beyondalexanderplatz.com>



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Introductions © C D Godwin 2024

**Alfred Döblin** (10 August 1878 – 26 June 1957) is now recognised as one of the three great literary figures of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany (alongside Thomas Mann and Bert Brecht). His works encompass epic fictions, novels, short stories, plays, theatre reviews, political essays and journalism, natural philosophy, the theory and practice of literary creation, and autobiographical excursions. His many-sided, controversial, even contradictory ideas made him a lightning-rod for the philosophical and political confusions that permeated 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

In the half century after his death, virtually all Döblin's vast output has gradually been published in modern editions, often with useful editorial commentary. But in the Anglosphere he remains known, if at all, only for one work: *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

*The Cutting Room Floor* brings together eight Döblin pieces which for one reason or another remained unpublished during his lifetime, or were cut from the text for which they were originally intended, or have suffered almost total neglect by the now very active field of Döblin studies. The introductory material sets each piece in the context of Döblin's life and work.

Included are a screenplay which narrowly failed to gain Döblin an Oscar; a novella-length storyline cut from the English translation of *November 1918 A German Revolution*; Döblin's only explicitly Christian work of fiction; and the suppressed story of a passionate relationship.

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## Introduction

Over five decades of an almost unbelievably productive life,<sup>1</sup> several of Alfred Döblin's writings fell by the wayside. The manner of their non-appearance varied: unpublished in his lifetime, but retrieved posthumously from archived papers; excised from a manuscript before the original German publication; cut from an English translation; published but immediately banned and burned by the German dictatorship. Even today, some of Döblin's writings are resolutely ignored by polite Döblin scholarship.

This collection brings together eight remarkably varied pieces: a movie script; an anguished attempt at autobiography; an early reflection on Jewishness; a short story; some letters; an excised scene from the first epic novel; a novella cut from the English translation of a late epic novel; and Döblin's only explicitly Christian fiction.

Döblin was for too long known to English readers for only one of his many works: the big city epic *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Two other epics were translated in the 1980s (*November 1918*, minus the first volume and other material; and *Tales of a Long Night*). They made little impact, have long been out of print, and the publisher has disappeared. Happily, during the past decade five Döblin epics have become readily available: a new translation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a new edition of *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun*, and the first appearance in English of the dystopia *Mountains Oceans Giants*, the verse-epic *Manas*, the South American trilogy *Land without Death*, and *Citizens & Soldiers*, the missing first volume of *November 1918*. There's also a slim volume of Döblin's short stories (*Bright Magic*).

Still almost totally unknown in the English-speaking world is the vast corpus of Döblin's non-fiction writings: journalism, theatre and book reviews, polemics about politics, the writer's life, culture, literary theory, history, natural philosophy, religion, travel writing. His fascinating criminological study (*Two Women and a Poisoning*) recently appeared – self-published. *German Masquerade*, my extensive compilation of Döblin's writings on politics, life, and literature in a chaotic age, is at present available only at <https://beyondalexanderplatz.com>.

That website was launched in 2018 to introduce Döblin to a wider public. It attracted interest from the independent publisher Galileo, who have so far brought out four of my translations of the epic novels, as well as *The Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin: an Adventurous Reader's Guide*. In 2023 the podcast "The Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin" was launched: Season One took the story from Alfred's birth to exile in 1933; Season Two follows events up to and after Döblin's death in 1957.

Each of the pieces in this collection is introduced to set it in the context of Döblin's life and works. I hope the presentations will whet the reader's appetite for further explorations of his vast oeuvre, as more titles become available in English.

C D Godwin  
Stroud, UK  
2024

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<sup>1</sup> "He found production in no way difficult; on the contrary (exactly as before) he was *incapable of fully turning off the spigot of production*," recalled Günther Anders of Döblin in 1930s exile.

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# 1. THE DUNKIRK FLOTILLA

## An episode for the film *Mrs Miniver* (1941)

### How Alfred Döblin almost won an Oscar

*MGM's 1942 blockbuster Mrs Miniver won several Oscars, and was said by Winston Churchill to have done as much for the British war effort as a fleet of destroyers. It also offered Alfred Döblin his best chance for stardom in the strange world of Hollywood. Alas, this screenplay, despite praise from the film's producer, failed to make it to the final cut.*

*Döblin's arrival in New York on 13 September 1940, along with his wife Erna and youngest son Stephan, after gruelling months fleeing across France, Spain and Portugal, went almost unnoticed. His name was little known; the only two of his works translated into English (Berlin Alexanderplatz, and Men without Mercy) had drawn little attention, in contrast to the best-seller status of e.g. Thomas Mann (Buddenbrooks and The Magic Mountain), and Franz Werfel (Forty Days of Mussa Dag and Song of Bernadette).*

*But a temporary lifeline was provided. From October 1940 to October 1941, Döblin (along with two Berlin contemporaries active in Expressionist, Dadaist and cabaret circles) was given a one-year contract with MGM. His account of this year in letters to friends is included in German Masquerade, my selection of his non-fiction.*

*The three writers were placed in the care of George Froeschel, an Austrian novelist and screenwriter active in the Berlin film world in the 1920s; he emigrated to the USA in 1936. In an interview with Die Zeit (15 June 1962), Froeschel described the situation:*

*I was employed by MGM as a script writer from 1939 to 1956. In 1940, Louis B Mayer, the head of this, the biggest US movie corporation, summoned me to his office and told me roughly as follows:*

*'In a few days three Jewish writers will arrive here, having fled from Germany and been brought to America with the help of an aid committee. I don't know these gentlemen and know next to nothing about them. They are said to be gifted people. They will work with us for a year, on probation. Do your best to acclimatise the gentlemen to the way things are done here, and keep an eye on what they do and get up to. Tell them nothing of this discussion.'*

*Thus did I become, without their knowledge, the supervisor of Walter Mehring, Alfred Polgar, and Alfred Döblin.<sup>2</sup>*

*Almost at the same time as the arrival of these three writers, I was given the task of adapting Jan Struthers' book Mrs Miniver as a film script. The book comprised a number of sketches dealing with little domestic events in the Miniver family. My boss, the film producer Sidney Franklin, had the idea of making the Mrs Miniver character the central point of a dramatic treatment, in which the courage and sufferings of the English people, currently in a state of war while America was still at peace, would be brought before the eyes of an American audience.*

*I presented all this to Alfred Döblin shortly after he joined MGM, and asked him to take a week thinking about how Mrs Miniver might be turned into a dramatic character. Exactly a week later, Döblin turned up at my office and spent two hours telling me the*

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<sup>2</sup> A fourth writer, Wilhelm Speyer, was also taken on by MGM.

*content of the book's various scenes. Too polite to interrupt the writer, I asked him once he'd finished: 'So, doctor, what do you think? Can we make a start on Mrs Miniver?'*

*Döblin: 'We could turn the material into an excellent film for Charlie Chaplin.'*

*In the circumstances of that time in the world and in films, this response was so absurd that I had no hope of Döblin ever offering anything usable for our script. He, Polgar and Mehring received a salary of a hundred dollars a week – miserably little in the context of the American film industry – but the modest Döblins did very well on the hundred dollars, lived in a little house in Hollywood, under palm trees admittedly, but not much differently than formerly in Berlin East, in the Frankfurter Allee. Every day I picked Döblin up in my car and brought him to Culver City. There the small, slightly unsteady man with the ruddy cheeks and flashing eyes behind thick lenses wrote his book about his escape from France. He showed not the slightest interest in the film, and the film industry at present had nothing to offer him.*

*After many weeks I managed to develop a storyline for the Mrs Miniver film. One episode was to show how the husband sets off in a little boat down the Thames and sails across the Channel to help bring the trapped English army back to England. I asked Döblin to write down how he imagined the experiences of Mr Miniver.*

*Just two days later he delivered a manuscript, written in German, of around forty pages. Brightening the tragic episode with flashes of humour, with a compelling verve and yet also proceeding by means of little details, Döblin depicted the story of the amateur sailor's heroic voyage. It was a masterpiece.*

*I had the manuscript translated at once into English, and presented Döblin's work to Mr Franklin, who summoned Döblin and thanked him heartily. In the film Mrs Miniver there is little of Döblin's contribution to be seen. But it is certain that the Dunkirk episode is based mainly on his ideas. The film itself won eight Oscars in 1943, including one for me.*

*The Oscar for Best Screenplay credited four writers: Froeschel, and the British writers James Hilton, Arthur Wimperis, and Claudine West. Had Döblin's contribution been retained, he would no doubt have been included in the credits.*

*As an Oscar winner, would the spiritual and financial stress of the California years have been alleviated? Might he even have seen some of his own work adapted for the big screen?*

Grey dawn. The Minivers' bedroom. Her bed on the Left by the window, his to the Right has the little table with the telephone. The telephone jangles. Both lie asleep. The woman sits up: 'Clem.' The telephone jangles again. Mrs Miniver gives him a shake. 'Clem, telephone.'

He bleary, not moving: 'What?' – 'The telephone.'

He puts out a hand without sitting up, to the Right. To make light for him and orient herself she draws back the curtain a little; they see it is dawn.

Clem, half lying, has the receiver to his ear: 'Yes. Speaking.' Suddenly he sits up, listens, looks to the window, asks his wife: 'How late is it?' – 'Half past three.' He into the phone: 'At once? Of course.' He replaces the receiver, pulls his legs from the covers, ponders. 'Night exercise. Or something of the sort.'



Mrs Miniver: 'Didn't they give any details?' – 'It was the Yacht Club. The steward never makes himself clear.' – 'Perhaps you misheard, Clem.' – 'No, I must go over to the Club at once, with the boat.'

Clem is standing, ready. The woman too is out of bed, has thrown a coat around her. 'You'll be back soon, of course, for breakfast perhaps. I'll find you a warm rug.' – Clem: 'Absolutely not necessary. The leather jacket will do. I'll be back in a couple of hours.' – They say their farewells. Mrs Miniver: 'You can catch up on your sleep then.' – Clem: 'Don't bother making the bed. I'll put my shoes on downstairs. I hope the children haven't been woken. Byebye.'

Mrs Miniver: 'Byebye.' He goes. But at the door she throws another rug over him. He leaves sleepily.

Down in the garden. Clem stumbles blearily, the rug falls off. He picks it up.

She stands above at the window, smiles to see him stumble, closes the curtain, throws down the coat, lies down.

He leaves the garden. He finds himself in a little street leading down to the river. Two men run past. In his sleepy state he takes no notice.

The Countess' gardener, smartly dressed, laden with rugs, overtakes him, looks back at Clem, nods: 'Mr Miniver. Good morning. Too early, eh?' Clem looks after him as he is already hastening on: 'Hey, you, what are you up to? I thought it was just the Yacht Club.' He gets no answer.

Still others cross his path.

Now he is at the river. You hear shouts, see other boats and people. He goes down the pair of wooden steps, climbs aboard his boat, throws the rug in. He bends over the motor. It won't start. He perseveres: 'God almighty, it's not working.'

He straightens up, looks around, is about to climb off the boat when another comes past. He calls: 'Jackson, halloo, can you lend a hand, my motor.'

Answer: 'Don't you have oars? Can't you row?'

The man is gone, Clem shrugs, stands there in despair, has already picked up the rug when suddenly the motor begins to turn. He sits down, pulls out. He crosses the river, quite close on the other side is the flat wooden building of the Yacht Club. Jackson is just tying up. 'So there you are. Those motors are like that.'

They walk up the planks. Inside the steward has prepared coffee, he serves the gentlemen, who stand around as if it is an early party, and drink. They exchange greetings.

'It's supposed to be a muster. An exercise.'

'Why an exercise? Is something up? It's not just our club.'

'Who else then? A football team?' (laughter)

'Didn't you see the Countess' gardener? And the fisherman with his sons? They were woken up by the town hall.'

'So what's up, teams, what's happening? Is it an exercise or is it not? They wouldn't call out our Yacht Club together with fishermen and who else.'

The steward, a youngish man, serious, interjects: 'Pardon me: the word is, if you have lifesaver rings, swimming vests and suchlike, bring them with you.'

Someone parodies: 'Quite right. And the word as well is: if you have a rifle and a steel helmet, bring it with you.'

Steward: 'Pardon me, sir, that was also the word, I have passed it on.'

'You're mad. Not to me. You're spreading rumours.' Steward, protesting: 'I have...'

Another interrupts: 'He told me too. I've brought along my fowling piece. No idea what I'm to do with it.'

'Parachute troops.'

'No jokes, please. It wasn't an alarm.'

The telephone jangles, the steward picks it up: 'Yes, yes, right, at once.'

He returns to the men: 'They're calling from the bridge. Everything must move out at once. Not one boat must stay behind.'

The cheerful man pushes forward with a laugh: 'To arms, gentlemen. To the fowling piece. It's going to be a jolly big show.'

The elderly teacher stumbles behind Miniver: 'When do you think we'll be back home, Mr Miniver? The school has exams tomorrow. I have so much to do. I won't be fresh for work.'

Miniver: 'Don't worry about it.'

Outside some have moved off already. The steward comes along and confirms that two boats are still there.

The teacher climbs aboard, says to Miniver: 'You'd think people would know that night time is better used for sleeping. Exercises like this are no use to the country.'

The steward: 'This boat...'

The teacher: 'It's X's. He's ill. (He sets off.) Lucky beggar, lying in bed.'

Steward stands alone, calls back to the house: 'Alice (his wife). Alice. She appears at an upstairs window.'

Steward: 'Alice, get ready, you must come along. Every boat must be deployed.'

'But I can't come along, husband.'

'The boat must go out. They insist.'

'What shall I do with the child?'

'Take it with you. Wrap it up well. We'll be back in an hour.'

'Is it something bad?'

'Just some nonsense. I won't take you, in the end. We only have to report to the bridge, that's all.'

He in the boat. The woman comes at once, cheerful, with the bundled up child. She climbs into the second boat.

Off they go. A little rowing boat is behind them, the sick man in it. 'Hallo, hallo. Steward. My boat. Who's taken her?'

Steward stops, the man climbs across, they hitch the little boat to it. Steward: 'Forgive me, we waited for you, but there's a hurry.' The man points to the second boat: 'Who's that?' – 'My wife,

Alice.' – 'How funny. It's going to be a jolly party. Where shall we have breakfast? Oh thunder, I forgot my tie.'

Steward, as they move on: 'Bad news, sir.'

'There's nothing doing, don't fall for it. You shouldn't have come along, you should have stayed behind to prepare breakfast.'

'I heard on the radio...'

'The radio. The radio, if you must know, is a magic box. And it tells magic tales. I can't appear without a tie. Do you have a brush?'

Steward: 'Not with me, sir. But perhaps my tie would do?'

He hands over his little black cravat.

The man is delighted. 'Wonderful. I'll never forget this. Now I'm human again.'

He waves across to another boat: 'Morning, gentlemen.' The other boat: 'Good morning. Are you recovered? How delectable, a dawn excursion on the water. Really perks you up. You feel young again.'

The man: 'Young. That's overdoing it. My rheumatism will start up again.'

The other boat: 'Dear chap, just look about you. Isn't it fine, these boats, the two steamers, a veritable mass gathering, a race. What would Jerry say. They sing: For off we go to Eng-er-land. Hallo, we're off to Ger-ma-ny.'

Another in the other boat: 'You're lively today.'

'Well, it stirs the heart.'

Shouts on the water have increased. The big bridge is signalling with lights and gestures. A small flotilla has assembled, all different kinds of vessel. A throng of people on the bridge and down the steps. A big steamer: an officer with a megaphone calls down: 'Line up to starboard. Halt. One from each boat onto the bridge.'

A crowd on the bridge. A strident female voice is heard. An elderly simple woman pleads: 'Why shouldn't I go? My son's over there.'

Soldier, sentry: 'One of us to each boat. You'll just take up space. Be sensible.'

'It's my boat. I'm going across. I won't be chased away.'

Sergeant comes over: 'What's up?' Soldier: 'She has a son over there and wants to go in the boat.'

The woman: 'I'm going over, I tell you.'

Sergeant: 'Leave her be.' The old woman rushes down the steps.

Below, among the men in the boats, the teacher: 'Whatever is going on? Everyone is so agitated.'

One yawns: 'Woke up too soon. How can you be in a good mood when they drag you out of bed at three.'

The teacher worried, looks up: 'I don't know.'

The other man, calm: 'We've never had an exercise like this. We'll manage it better next time.'

The steward's wife: 'Are you going further? Let me come with you. Why not.'

Steward: 'And the child?'

The woman looks up: 'I'll leave it with a nurse.'

Before he can reply, she runs up the steps with the baby, to the table with First Aiders and nurses. 'Please, can you take the child.'

'But you'll be staying here.'

'My husband is steward at the Yacht Club. I should go with him.'

She runs gaily back down.

A small group of young people comes along singing. A lady to the sergeant: 'Surely it is not required that the members of a rowing club should go along?'

'Everything that's a boat and can sail should come.'

'But you can't order people under 20, not yet conscripted...'

Sergeant: 'It's not a question of orders. It's what they should do.'

Lady: 'So they don't have to?'

'No. They should.'

The son in the group listens with two others. 'Bye, mother. Don't upset yourself.'

She screams: 'Bob' and pushes after him. The soldier at the steps holds her back. Sergeant: 'Madam, don't make a scene. The young man knows what he has to do.'

'But he has an exam tomorrow!'

Sergeant laughs: 'He's already passed it.'

Officer with megaphone: 'Anyone with no business at the boats must leave the bridge.' The officer gives instructions to the delegates at the steps: 'You will go to Dover. Each group must stay together. No lights. Blankets will be distributed. Take drinking water with you. Hurry. Blankets on the left by the First Aiders.'

Delegates wave to those below: 'Fetch blankets.'

A man from the Yacht Club: 'I say, something doesn't add up. They said Dover. They should be straight with us. What's happening in Dover?'

'Take your blankets, sir.'

The man: 'If it's something serious, I'd like to telephone my wife.'

The officer, coldly: 'On your way.'

The man hurries angrily down the steps, accosts the steward: 'Steward, you've roused us with an alarm. You will now find out what's really going on. Since you woke us from our slumbers you must know what it's for. Are we children?'

Steward: 'We have to make for Dover, sir. I can't say more than that.' The steward rows away. The man stands rigid. Someone else climbs into the boat. 'Sit down. We'll find out soon enough.'

The man: 'But I really must telephone.'

Blankets are thrown in the boat. They set off without a particular signal given, glide over the water. Low singing from some rowing boats.

An old fisherman, a former sailor, sits beside Miniver on the boat. Fisherman: 'Spare your motor, sir. We don't have much petrol. I'll row.'

Miniver: 'None of us were prepared. I hear ships were sunk off Dover.'

Fisherman: 'Sir, I was in the Navy. This is no ordinary sinking. They wouldn't alert the whole coast for that.'

Miniver: 'Then it must be a major exercise.'

Fisherman: 'They all seem a bit too serious for that.'

The fisherman sees someone he knows in another boat; it's getting lighter: 'Ahoy, Willy! See him there? Morning, Willy!'

Willy: 'Charles, haven't seen you in a while. Where do you live now?'

'Ten steps from here.'

Willy: 'And we never see each other.' Fisherman: 'And here we meet again! (He is very cheerful.) Do you see him, sir, what a fine boat he has, it's his, cross my heart.'

Miniver, patient: 'I'm sure it's his.'

Fisherman: 'You can depend on it. He's got it made. He was always a hard worker. (He gives a great laugh and shouts at the others)

Miniver: 'They're far ahead already.'

Fisherman (wipes his face, still laughing): 'Begging your pardon. Him and I go back a bit. We were in Calcutta one time, or Singapore. Walking down a street and see an Indian cauliflower or something. We were amazed, hadn't eaten cauliflower in ages. And this such a fine one. So he says to me: "If we don't get some cauliflower to eat in this city, my name's not Willy." Of course I said the same. So he says, we have to find something to go with it, a rabbit, and something to drink, whisky. And that was our bad luck. 'Cos in those parts there was no good whisky. Lots of bad stuff, but the fine stuff had all been drunk.'

(During this story there are interruptions, greetings. Once he points out the steward's wife, rowing: 'Look at her, rowing like the devil.')

'So we get hold of a rabbit, and he hangs it all tidy like under his jacket by his belt, 'cos he doesn't want to be holding it in his hands all the time.'

Miniver amused: 'So why didn't you carry it?'

Fisherman: 'Cos of the bottle. I didn't have it yet but I wanted my hands free. So then we discover that there's no good whisky anywhere, which we do by visiting a number of drinking spots.'

Miniver: 'Aha.'

Fisherman: 'You see. And why did we buy the rabbit when we had nothing to drink with it?'

Miniver: 'And the cauliflower.'

Fisherman: 'We haven't bought that yet, that's still to come. And so we both flew into such a rage about this city and the whole business. And now there's a man on the corner and he's scolding us, and he's maybe a policeman.' (He laughs loudly and shouts again: 'Willy!')

Miniver: 'They're well ahead.'

Fisherman: 'So now being an old soldier he really lets rip. And he pulls out the rabbit and lets fly with it at the policeman, like this.'

(Meanwhile they are approaching Dover, thuds of cannon-fire can be heard. Seagulls circle over the water. There is mist, growing thicker. Ship sirens.)

A hospital ship is disembarking. Wounded are led down or carried on stretchers. A dense crowd on the shore. In boats. A man from the Yacht Club: 'Here we are. This must be the place. It took long enough. We won't be back home before 10.'

As the other boats line up tightly along the shore, awaiting instructions, a few stragglers row in, among them the boat with the solitary old woman. A small steamer comes straight ahead, the old woman seems to want to tie up to it. From one boat: 'What's she up to? Look at the old lady. She was making a fuss at the bridge. Looks like she wants to row across the Channel.'

The steamer throws a line to the woman, she grabs it, hitches it to her boat. The Yacht Club men gape astonished. Several motor boats also shoot off behind the steamer.

From one Yacht Club boat: 'They have plans for us. Mark my words, we won't be staying here. What good are we here. This is definitely not an exercise.'

'That's what I said. I wanted to telephone the wife and the sergeant wouldn't let me.'

The steward, already on shore, shouts: 'Mr Miniver, over here, on the bridge.' A circle has formed up there, instructions are being passed around. You can hear: 'You will keep as closely together as possible. Be sparing of fuel. If you can go under your own power, do so, or else attach yourself to a ship. Take no superfluous passengers. So, on your way!'

Some disembarked soldiers, some of them led by First Aiders and limping, pass close to the group. A soldier: 'Gentlemen, make haste. Look sharp! Our people are waiting.'

Second soldier: 'You got nothing better to do than hang around here?' Clem stands with the others and watches the troops pass by. 'Something's happened.'

Another, hurrying up to him: 'Dreadful news. Our soldiers over there, the French too, the whole army, is stuck at Dunkirk and wants to come over. Our fleet has to go and fetch them. The Germans are bombing the ships. If we don't go and fetch them, they'll all be captured or killed.' They rush down the steps. The bridge commander orders: 'Move out, those at the front, make way.'

Several boats are already provisioned and moving. The commander to an officer: 'Look at them, nutshells. Is this really a good idea. They're crossing the Channel.'

An officer: 'You can see, there's no holding them back.'

Tumult on the bridge. Many are trying to get down to the boats, looking for their own boat. Elegant gentlemen climb down. Blankets and bottles are thrown into boats. One comes half-dressed, a woman throws him her coat, he puts it on. The flotilla sets out. Miniver and the others have hurried into the boats without a word. The fisherman welcomes him with a wild look: 'Where are they?' Miniver: 'Dunkirk.' Fisherman: 'Is it bad over there? Well, sir, I thought it must be as soon as I saw that old lady. She's after something.'

As they move he stumbles around in the boat. 'How much petrol, have you got, sir? You have no water, sir, no drinking water. Are there any tins? Didn't think of anything!' (He is furious.)

Miniver: 'The worst thing is the motor. It has its moods.'

Fisherman: 'You leave that to me. Otherwise we have the oars, or can hitch a ride.'

They are en voyage. It is the Channel. The boats bob and fall. Miniver's boat is using the motor.

Fisherman: 'So now, because you heard something up there and you're just a landlubber, and we only have these few boats, you're thinking we won't manage it.'

Miniver has become very grave, answers absently: 'I'm thinking absolutely nothing, old man.'

Fisherman: 'Well, first off we're not just a few boats. Just take a look around. We're a few hundred. Thousands. And you can be sure it's not just these few boats that we can see. Our Admiralty is not so stupid to think a few boats can ring the whole army over. There's ship after ship. You'll see soon enough. The whole of England is over there.'

Miniver: 'I think that's so.'

Fisherman: 'You mark my words. Well then. We'd better cut the motor and start rowing. Save the petrol for the return journey.'

On they go. The mist thickens. Nearby boats can hardly be seen, each boat seems to be alone on the sea.

The Yacht Club man who came late: 'Allow me to make myself comfortable.' (He removes his jacket, collar and tie.)

His companion: 'We never dreamt yesterday that today we'd be travelling across the Channel.'

The man, rowing: 'it's really not so bad.'

As they row, the thunder of cannonfire grows louder.

Miniver's boat. Miniver: 'My son is off to the front today. So here I am doing my part.'

Fisherman (rowing): Mark my words, sir. Dangers only look splendid in the cinema or the newspaper. When you're in the thick of it, it's nothing at all. I've only ever noticed what a bad do it was after I was telling about it. For instance -'

A big wave comes, they struggle, it lasts a good while. The boat is now full of water. Only the dripping rowing fisherman is seen, working away wildly. He shouts: 'Sir! Sir, are you there?'

Miniver has been thrown from the bench, is lying below, picking himself out of the water.

Fisherman: 'There you are. We'll dry off soon enough. You've got woollens there. Hold tight to the bench. Give me one too. Now what was I telling you?'

A big rescue boat with fishermen passes them. The fisherman calls a greeting. He regards Miniver with suspicion. 'What is it you do, sir?' - 'Architect.' - 'I'm only asking because I'm doing the rowing, would it tire you out to take a turn?' Miniver smiles: 'Let's see.'

Several cannon shots close together. Pictures of Dunkirk harbour inserted. Big warships and transports are seen. Clusters of troops arrive with carts and guns. At the harbour, positions for defensive weapons are set up. Many planes. Anti-aircraft guns cracking over the ships. The smaller boats rock back with every blow.

The mist is less thick here than on the open sea. Along the coast, fires from burning oil tanks. Searchlights in the mist. Near the beach, as the flotilla of small boats approaches, a burnt-out destroyer lies askew. The bigger vessels stand farther offshore. Boats bring rescued people to them. People jump out of the boats, run towards them, run to the beach. Some troops throw their kitbags down and drag wounded through the water.

Wide view of the beach. It is rather empty, covered in grenade and bomb craters. Troops emerge singly from holes.

Boats stop in the surf. Miniver and his two companions pick someone off the beach, carry him to the boat, row to a ship. The three of them row back to the beach, pick up more men. People reach water down to them from the ship.

While they are on the beach a plane flies across spraying machine gun fire. Miniver lies beside the skipper. The skipper rises first and pulls Miniver up. 'It's not so bad, sir.'

The old woman sits in her boat as the plane approaches. She does not duck, she curses and threatens. People bring men to the boat. The companion: 'A lot of wounded are lying in the shell-holes. We have to fetch them out.'

The woman looks at the two who have been brought to her and shakes her head: 'I must go myself.' She wades to the beach.

At the beach she steps into a crater. Someone is lying there. 'Have you got water?' he asks. She gives him some, lifts him, pulls him to his feet. Others above receive him. She stands alone: 'Is my son there? He looks a lot like him.'

A small group of soldiers comes running past the woman. 'Out of the way, old lady. Better get yourself back home.'

She holds one back: 'What regiment are you?' The man pulls free: 'Mind your own business.' She grabs another: 'What regiment?' he goes on without answering. At last she stops one. Old woman: 'I'm looking for [number]. Do you know where they are?' The soldier considers: 'Wait a minute. [Number], I was with them at one point. They're farther back. They're not coming, they holding the line of retreat.'

He shakes his head, makes a gesture as if to say: 'There's no hope,' moves off.

The old woman stands rigid for a moment. She murmurs: 'Good, my son, good. You're doing the right thing. Take care of yourself, my boy.'

She begins to work like mad, goes into a crater, pulls one up. 'You can't lie her, son. Come.' 'I can't walk.' She grabs him. The young soldier: 'You can't carry me.' 'I can, I can do anything.'

Another plane, they are still on the beach. Soldier: 'Mother, watch out, take cover.' But she kneels by him, shakes both fists after the plane. She carries the man to the boat. 'You've got him. You'll be better soon, my boy. You'll show them.'

She returns to the beach, peers into a grenade hole, pulls one out. 'You can't laze about down there. Wounded? You'll soon recover. Come. Don't let that lot come after you.'

Picture: a bomb falls on a ship, bright flames, clouds of smoke, steam from the funnels. The ship lets down its lifeboats. Motorboats come speeding from all sides.

Miniver's boat: He carries a young French officer on his back, puts him down.

Miniver climbs in, collapses a little. 'So, that's enough, let's get going.'

The officer stammers: 'What are you doing. Leave me alone.' Miniver: 'Sir, you're not in your right mind.' Officer: 'I don't want to. Let me out. I won't go in a boat. I am French. Leave me in my own country. You are going to England?'

Miniver nods. Officer: 'I don't want to. We're finished. I can stay back here.'

Miniver, very stern and frowning: 'It's not finished by a long shot, sir.'

The young officer looks back at the shore, hides his face and sobs: 'Oh God, my France. I can't believe it. We are lost. My parents, my brothers, everything.'

Miniver, hard: 'Not by a long shot, sir.' – Officer: 'You don't know. You can't know. You didn't see any of it. We're emptying the country. We're leaving my homeland to them.'

Miniver: 'It won't last.'



Officer: 'The Germans are monsters, sir. Don't say that. They are monstrously strong. They must not think we are cowards. We are not weak. We were cut off on every side. We sat in a cauldron.'

Miniver: 'You're out of it now.'

Officer: 'Just look at it. Look at their planes, so many. If only we had guns. They are doing Blitzkrieg on us.'

Miniver: 'The storm's already over. We start blitzkrieging now, sir. It'll be a long time before a storm hits England. When it comes it's a smasher. Are you comfortable?' He takes off his leather jacket, stuffs it under the man's head. 'Here, take a sip of water. The sea air will do you good.'

Miniver sits silent and glowering as they move out. Now and then a flash lights up the horizon. It is early afternoon. Miniver's boat follows in the wake of a big ship. Soldiers sing on the ship.

Miniver to the officer: 'You hear what they're singing, sir?' [He recites the words of a lusty soldier's song.]

Officer, gloomy: 'I can't believe it, sir, I beg your pardon.'

They go on in silence, the singing continues. Miniver: 'You'll believe it soon enough.'

Large parts of the small boat flotilla are making their way back. Last booms of cannon. Everyone looks increasingly tired and weary. In boats that we recognise from the outward journey, all personal and social differences are dissolved. In several boats people are sleeping. The skipper sits beside the teacher, they play cards noisily. The old woman sits erect with a hard expression.

Pictures of the ship: soldiers standing on deck, stretchers with wounded, a doctor and nurses go around.

The white cliffs of Dover appear, the mouth of the river. Groups of people everywhere on shore. Silent train of boats. At the big bridge boats separate and tie up. The young wife of the steward runs up the steps, her clothing torn. A nurse standing there recognises her.

'You want the baby?' 'Where is it?' 'I'll bring it.' 'It's fast asleep. Thank you. Please keep it overnight. I'll come back early in the morning. Thanks a lot.'

Some boats tie up at the clubhouse. The steward, his wife and club members lead and carry soldiers into the clubhouse.

At the landing stage, crowds thronging at the roadside. Mrs Miniver is waiting among the watchers. Miniver and one other are carrying the officer up to the road, to an ambulance. As they pass she recognises him, approaches him. He nods calmly and continues on. She stands bewildered among others.

The fisherman and the teacher help two men to shore, say their goodbyes. The fisherman introduces the teacher to his wife. 'This is Mr X, we've been working as a team. I think, sir, we'll be meeting again before long.'

The teacher leaves. The fisherman whispers to his wife: 'It was amazing. He's the best cardplayer I ever met.' She: 'The things you say.'

They trail behind the departing teacher.

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## 2. DOCTOR DÖBLIN: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Written 1917/18

*This overheated piece, found in the archive, was Döblin's first attempt to come to terms with the childhood trauma he describes here – a trauma which nevertheless introduced him to the big city that became his home for forty years; his arrival was a "second birth". It took Döblin ten more years – and even then three efforts! – to reach a more mature assessment of his life: see his 1928 "First Look Back" in this volume.*

*When he wrote this piece, Döblin – working in a military hospital, afflicted now with serious stomach ailments – had been married five years. (No love match, but approved by the two families.) His wife Erna had already borne three sons. His first epic novel (The Three Leaps of Wang Lun) had just been published to critical acclaim, and he was increasingly sought out by magazine editors.*

*There was also a fourth child. In 1912, at the time of Alfred's engagement with Erna, he brought his five-year love affair with a young nurse, Friede Kunke, to a close. Nine months later she gave birth to a son, Bodo. (Döblin declared paternity, and kept in touch with Bodo all his life.) In January 1918, Friede died of TB, no doubt exacerbated by poor wartime diet. It seems likely that news of her death prompted the soul-searching which resulted in this piece of autobiography.*

These are no trivial matters, the shocks and excitements under which I embark on this account of my life, which impel me to this beginning. There's an unnatural physical fire, a heat, which I must confront with self-observation, revisiting the past. Bromide is no help, I can't sleep, my appetite seems to have disappeared. I must ponder, relieve the pressure in my breast, the restless unease that drives me through streets and squares and back again to my room, to fling myself down, lie without a word. I walk and hardly notice anyone, I lose my way because I pay no attention to street names; I am in torment, haunted. I hope: haunted by myself.

I'm approaching forty. Many grey hairs at the temples, much that once I found enticing now means nothing to me. I walk down streets, see proud automobiles drive by – and am jealous; I would like to be calm, free of the cares that encroach constantly. Pretty girls, proud young ladies with their smiling gentlemen: it means nothing to me, has no connection to me, it's dull tepid water; I have been too severely burned and scorched; why should my organism not be sensible and still find a little bit of feeling for this, waste a little energy on it. I do not hide from these females; I have something akin to sympathy for them and a distant, barely outlined painful memory, a pale sadness on which I can smile. Yes, this is progress: they no longer call out to me: you're alone, solitary, utterly abandoned – my throat was sewn up, I crawled back to my room, hid away, shut the window so as to hear no footsteps, no laughter, no plinking strings, no passers-by strolling home.

Those horrible evenings and half-nights in Freiburg<sup>3</sup> are etched in my memory, when for days, days I spoke not a syllable, often hummed to myself and sang just to hear my voice again, as comforting as a stranger's voice; I would speak to children in the street, my voice was my only friend. I did not seek out this solitude, I never sought it out; I went about freely, maintained my solitude! What use to me are hills, glorious sunny weather, hills and forests and lakes? For years and even now I nursed a hatred of them, an antipathy; they offered anguish; it was as if you

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<sup>3</sup> As a medical student, 1904-5.

enter a big entertainment venue and no one's there, all the tables bare: who could enjoy it. Bitterness: that is the word; that is how I feel often enough even now about forests. When I'm not enamoured of them in a melancholy way, I sit down on a root, ripe, gentle, tender, acquiescent as a filial son, gaze up at the leafy canopy and think myself in my grave – in a lovely space away from the world. The little creatures around me, the beetles: all dumb, encoffining, yet calling to me, so that I lie down, stretch out.

I shall tell no untruths in these lines, I want to help myself. But I am not yet calm, not by a long chalk.

Is there such a thing as a father you can look up to? It must be such a lovely cocooning feeling. It's hard on someone like me, who for hours at a time, days, even months is haunted and nobody offers him shelter. A god – such a nice concept, it's proud and wise in the ways of humans, this concept – it says: there is no human being you can turn to, God alone can help; this god produced by mistrustful humans.

The strange thing is that I often have the urge to write an autobiography. I resist: I am still young enough, I have other things to do than look back; but my earlier deeply-cherished conviction that "I still have time" has quite faded now. Sometimes it seems to me that I no longer have this wide Russian expanse in the sense of my life; the power has somehow become blocked, all my old proud cold feelings are now mere thoughts: certainty has vanished; I have a sense that life is not so expansive, I don't have so much time; not now. Sometimes it breathes down my neck: I ought to do some literary work, it badgers me, I must not be idle. And once upon a time my most precious thought was "It's all right to be idle, to just stroll along." This, and next to it the deeply cherished certainty, *rocher de bronze*<sup>4</sup>: "Nothing can happen to me. The worst is dying, the biggest life-change that life offers, and what has death to do with me? It's my fate, I remain, abide within it, my bed is bigger now, I can stretch out."

And then at certain times I feel so close to the forest, so friendly to animals, truly brotherly, and to the air, thunder, iron, stone: I'm as unconsciously silent and secure within myself as they; I thunder and it is gone, but anyway it was an untimely move; so untouchably proud is all this that is dead, is unconscious and yet exists. Death for me has no sting, we know one another, it snuggles deep within me, it is the core of my being; that is how it was earlier, that is how I felt. And now still to some extent. But I am often overcome with an existential fear, it suffocates me, I forget myself, I am a poor harried creature to whom Death is just a saviour, a rescuer to whom he flees like a refugee – we are no longer drinking pals stretching our legs under the same table. How changed, worn down, agitated I am now. And more so almost year by year. How ignominious my death will be. How much of it will be unworthy of me.

It is no help to write and write. It does not calm me. It just becomes written stuff. The subject here should not be me, but Doctor Döblin.

This rather small lively man of obviously Jewish profile with a long cranium, grey eyes behind a very shrewd gold-rimmed pince-nez, the lower jaw notably receding, revealing protruding upper teeth when smiling, the colourless face long and narrow, quite gaunt, sharply outlined on a weedy restless body – this person has not led the kind of colourful external life that lends itself to the depiction of adventures or curious situations. He has lived in only two cities, Stettin and Berlin, really only in Berlin from the age of ten, a fleeting half-year as a boy in Hamburg, spent

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<sup>4</sup> Cliff of bronze: said by King Wilhelm 1 in asserting his unrestricted sovereignty.

his last two semesters as a 26-year-old student in Freiburg, then spent about a year as a medical doctor in a lunatic asylum near Regensburg, a further two years at the asylum of Buch near Berlin, then, still only an Assistant Doctor despite being in his thirties, at a hospital in Berlin. Married three years later, doctor of internal medicine in Berlin. Once made an excursion to Basel while returning from Freiburg as a young doctor, once made a two-week trip to the World Exposition, taking in Brussels Antwerp Ostend, once spent a few days in Munich. A Berliner, with hazy knowledge of other places and regions.

Stettin – in his memory a drab decaying provincial town with a noisy annual fair in the Paradeplatz, the steeply descending steps of the Town Hall affording a playground – he left Stettin behind as a ten year old boy with his family under difficult circumstances: his father was the cause. He was a – well, let's say it: a superior kind of master tailor or maker of ready-to-wear clothing; he employed several tailors and cutters, as well as seamstresses and sewing girls; they occupied one or more workrooms in or near our house: long cutting tables on which cloth was cut with huge scissors; there were gigantic cupboards full of bolts of cloth. The work was done under contract to various outside firms; he often recalls hearing the name of one such supposedly grand Hamburg firm being spoken with respect, with deep respect.

His family lived in the Wilhelmstrasse, then in the Friedrichstrasse on the corner of Unter den Linden – anyway in Stettin; there was a view of the tree-lined avenue; once, as he recalls, old Kaiser Wilhelm came by on his way to the Paradeplatz; Prince Bismarck was there, he had a wrinkled little yellow head under an enormous shiny cuirassier's helmet; the procession puzzled rather than impressed him, he was especially disappointed by the much-venerated Bismarck. The old Kaiser died; he learned of this in the Friedrich-Wilhelm Practical Gymnasium, where he was in his first year of secondary school making a complete hash of Latin and Arithmetic. After the announcement he went home, handkerchief in hand; it seemed to him that now and again he dried a tear; he thought this was fitting, but he was not sad in the least, merely uncertain how to comport himself after the class teacher's melancholy grandiose oratory. Not long afterwards, flags again flew at half-mast when the Kaiser's son died; he often gazed at the flags from the corner window; he had no idea how to react to these events and would wander the streets to see what others, the adults, were doing.

The aged mother of his father had recently come to live in his parents' house; her room was long and narrow. There they found her one morning, dead in her bed. At the funeral he ran along behind the hearse for a while as an unofficial participant; then he came upon a crowd outside a house and let the hearse go on, asked what was happening in the passage; a man said, "A man's given birth to a child." Which gave the youth pause for thought. Incomprehensible words that he failed to recognise as a jest – they remain engraved in his memory even today.

He was a gentle, very strange, boy, his father's pet. Because of his big head he acquired among his siblings the nickname "Fathead" – they were four brothers and a sister, he was the second youngest child. He made poor progress in primary school, the first year of secondary school was already hard for him; he sat way at the back. But at home he read and read whatever came into his hands. While his siblings played with whip and spinning top out in the street, at the Town Hall, he was reading. He was already short-sighted, had inherited this bad trait from his father. The spectacles prescribed by the optician were rejected by his father; so for many subjects he had to sit right at the front near the blackboard. He had blonde, very pale blonde hair down to his shoulders; at that time he was considered a pretty child.

He was often out in the streets by himself; once he strolled through the annual fair, a booth displayed a horrible, luridly coloured canvas picture of a murder; the boy ran home distraught, he could not put the picture out of his mind, it terrified him; long years later the awful impression it made, the torment which he tried to escape, remained with him.

Matters of sex made their sinister prelude between the ages of nine and ten. He often noted with astonishment the occasional swelling of his sexual organ, once as he climbed out of the bath he remarked to one of his brothers how annoying it was, he felt no shame at being in that state nor that someone saw him; he had no idea what it was; it was simply a nuisance. On another occasion he sat with several other children – no more than eight or nine years old – on the steps of a cellar, he did not know what they meant to do there or why they had brought him along. A little girl of the same age, or perhaps younger, was lying there on her face, and they were touching her in her secret places; he too, without anything more than an obscure sense of something indecent of which one must not speak. It had no effect on him, even years later he had no conception of the peculiarities of the female organism and their function. Indeed, as a twenty-three year old in his first year of medical studies, he still had no clear idea, and on his first stroll through the Anatomy Hall in Berlin was puzzled by the female corpses, which seemed to have a cut below the pubic ridge; he wanted to question one of his fellow students but did not do so, out of shame – he would have kicked himself to the end of his days. For you had to behave as if you knew it all – then and much earlier too; you had to.

He often went to the synagogue, where his father sang in the choir. His father was very musical, played violin and piano, both to an average standard, taught the older children the basics. He tended to lash out; beatings were not infrequent. He also sketched little pictures, which he coloured in.

But what the many-sided gifted flighty shiftless man did best was something else. His wife had good reason to be jealous. Finally one of his seamstresses came on to him. The word at home was that he had assignations in parks with this young and very pretty creature. Father was anyway not often at home, there was little family life to speak of; now he spent many nights away as well. Once he was discovered by Mother in some public park in Stettin, and screaming at the woman she wrecked her parasol. Later Father hit his wife in the corridor, I believe with a yardstick, after a scene. One day Father announced that he had to make a trip to Mainz, said goodbye as calm as you like, the boy helped him on with his travelling boots, retrieved just in time from the cobblers. But early one morning Mother came weeping and wailing into the room where we slept; a telegram or letter from Father had arrived: he wrote from Hamburg, he was on his way to America: "I shall offer you mountains of gold".

And so the family was destroyed. Up till then we were becoming comfortably off. At once everything had to be liquidated; representatives from Hamburg came to collect the stock. Later on one occasion the boy went with his mother along the Linden, he looked all around to see if anyone noticed him, he was ashamed of their notoriety: the whole town knew his father had absconded to America with his seamstress.

He was at once removed from school, began dismal sessions of private tuition. The woman was called Sauter, she lived somewhere high up, her room was very light, mostly she taught girls. You sat there in the morning at a table, she made you write and write and write; you called out, "Miss Sauter, two sides!" Then she wrote a new sentence on the first line of a new sheet –

you had to copy it exactly twenty times. So education was just calligraphy. The girls learned French poems too: "France adorée, douce contrée!"

This wretched intermezzo did not last long. My mother, initially completely at her wits' end, was brought to Berlin by her well-off brothers. An endless train journey in third class. Finally, as they approached Berlin, the boy could no longer suppress a minor natural need, which he dared not mention while his mother kept chatting with the other passengers about her Berlin relations. When they stopped at Schlesische Station, the boy pushed his way desperately to the door and a thin never-ending stream betrayed his action and his release; at the Janowitz Bridge, their destination, he darted away like a thief. On the way he learned that they were to live in Blumen Strasse (Flower Street); a gentleman said it was in the middle of the city, very smoky.

The apartment was small. They were in a state of real poverty. The father sent nothing, the mother owned hardly anything, her brothers kept our heads above water; the eldest son, who'd been in the ninth grade in Stettin, had to take an apprenticeship with the great firm of N. Israel on Spandauer Strasse. This was apparently something colossal, the boss was spoken of like a king, the smallest details of the business were topics of conversation. They lived packed together in a few little rooms on the ground floor; on the first morning the boy saw his first sign of Berlin the Metropolis: a noticeboard across to the right on the house of the writing tutor Rackow. The boy often stood by this noticeboard, marvelling at the wonderful curly confident letters; he thought it impossible anyone could write like that; but this was Berlin.

He was enrolled in a nearby parochial school. The school was in a rear courtyard. He was in the third class. He had not the slightest sense of having come down in the world, only during the course of the year was it impressed upon him, especially in interactions with the supportive-unsupportive rich uncles, that he belonged to a poor family. He was a success in this school. Once he even won a prize, an atlas; the fact that this atlas had a sticker in the front stating that it came from such-and-such a "Bookshop and Antiquariat" made him especially proud, since he did not know that "antiquariat" meant "second hand". And he told his aunt he'd been given an antiquarian book, and when she explained to him his shame was bottomless and he had no idea how to extricate himself.

There was a physical education teacher at the school whose passion was long distance running. They hardly ever did gymnastics, seldom marched, he set them to running. Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes; more and more of them fell back, hit their limit. The boy from Stettin kept up mostly; pride sustained him.

Then came a pleasant half-year: things had not gone at all well for the father in America, nothing he tried succeeded, everything was so expensive in Dollarland – it was all just an extended trip with his companion. The mother allowed herself to be persuaded, for of course poverty oppressed her as well, she was busy morn till night cooking, washing, she rented out a room, housekept for the man for a few pfennigs. At New Year the family moved to Hamburg. The father had obtained a position in the firm with which he'd previously been associated. The apartment was much better than in Berlin, on the third floor; a field or fenced grassy training ground lay square and wide before it, the barracks behind. He went to a state primary school. It was hard to adjust to the new schooling situation. When it was found that he and the brother who sat beside him were Jews, there in front of the class they had to chant a little Jewish prayer that they knew. Another time the teacher took him up and down stairs, a female teacher was sitting in a room, he had to perform for her a spring song that he knew, he sang without

embarrassment. He saw little of Hamburg, now and then he helped his mother carry shopping back from Altona market. He never saw the Elbe, only once or twice the Alster. Because they didn't stay there long on the third floor opposite the training ground. Marital bliss soon darkened again. There was talk of anonymous letters. It soon emerged that the infamous seamstress, of unblessed memory in Stettin and America, had been lodged by her lord and master in Hamburg where he was leading a sort of double life; he was an amphibian, but with the family he was on dry land. The mother had a strong suspicion that he'd married again in America; the word "bigamy" was often uttered, but the mother discussed it only with the eldest siblings. A closed group formed against the father, whom they seldom saw. The father and the seamstress were also supposed to have a child; disturbing assertions of this kind leapt from the anonymous letters.

And when the presence of the young lady in the neighbourhood was attested through observation, the family moved – back to Berlin. It had been a nice summer holiday. All that the boy, the later Doctor Döblin, progenitor of multiple children, books and aimless activities, could rescue from the place was some memory or other. He was viewed at that school as something refined, genteel, he had company on the way home, they pressed themselves on him; he was still remarkably mild and compliant. In the big latrines or by garden fences they sometimes marvelled at his organ as it went about its watery business, and the Gentiles admired then what they would later recall with invective. Once he had to buy something; he had put the purchases in his bag, wanted to throw a stone with his left hand over the fence into the training ground; but look, he changed his mind, threw with his right hand – which had been holding the change wrapped in paper! What a to-do. He climbed over the fence; it took him ages to gather it all up again. Once he came home covered in blood: they had been shooting with bows made from corset stays, an arrow had hit him; the father laid a complaint against the boy and his father, a detective inspected the wound, he read about it proudly in the newspaper. It was not pain that made him cry, but it seemed the thing to do when blood flowed and because it attracted attention and annoyed the other boy ... *[the MS ends abruptly.]*

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### 3. GERMAN CONDITIONS – JEWISH RESPONSE

*This unpublished MS was probably written in late 1924 in connection with Döblin's travels in Poland; the final section was adapted and incorporated in Schicksalsreise (Destiny's Journey). [SLW 60-66] In Parisian exile in the 1930s, Döblin engaged intensively with various Zionist organisations, but eventually gave up, frustrated by what he saw as unrealistic and Utopian attitudes.*

You ask me, Mr Editor: "How have your views on the Jewish problem changed in the course of years and events? What was the triggering process or triggering realisation? How do you construe the Jewish problem and what concrete goals do you see for it?" You also write that a great mass of Jews have a direct interest in such utterances. Please understand me correctly, Mr Editor: I have no doubt that there is interest in such private autobiographical remarks – for who does not listen eagerly to gossip about those around them – but I fear that the matters in question here are being pulled down to a rather petty mean level, namely that of private experience. What use is Psychology to us in these times? I understand you quite clearly when you assume that a private experience, namely mine, is characteristic of a period and that publicising it will promote development. So in this sense I shall speak to the point.

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In the course of decades – I was born in Germany, in Stettin, my parents and grand-parents were Prussians – there can hardly be said to have been any real "change" or revolution in my relationship to Jewishness and Judaism. But at several points there was a change of emphasis. At home I had a father and mother, and knew and saw that they considered themselves Jews and I too was a Jew; I hardly noticed anything more than this. On the one hand I never attended classes of Protestant religious instruction, on the other, for two or three years (but very irregularly) I attended a kind of Jewish religious instruction, but this was not compulsory so mostly I didn't go. The lessons were boring, and I would often do my maths homework there. But then I enjoyed half a year of monstrous preparations for Bar Mitzvah. If instruction in school was a farce, then this "preparation" was a scandal. The "teacher" was a rabbi of a small synagogue, of course a good and pious man. We were given the necessary Hebrew sentences written out in Roman script along with a translation, and learned them by heart and then, the main point, we were given the text of a Bar Mitzvah speech, a dinner speech we were to deliver at the ceremonial meal at home. This speech took up a good five pages of typescript, its contents a supposedly pious, highly moral florid nonsense decked out with quotations, a dreadful piece of stilted rhetorical sermonising that we had to spout to our guests – who were brought in for the purpose. We had to learn this rubbish from beginning to end, and this was the main activity and the centrepiece of the preparations for Bar Mitzvah. Thus was one accepted into the community of Israel.

My interest in this "community of Israel", minimal from early on, faded even more over time. Any normal person will understand. It was due to spiritual weakness that I did not rebel at this point, went now and then to this or that synagogue in Berlin. The singing and organ music were nice – but the behaviour of the people, the so-called supplicants who, switching with frightful rapidity from declamation to whispers, murmured texts from books that they held before them, all the while swivelling their backsides, was beyond my understanding or sympathy. I could not, could not love or even come close to these people, who chatted to their neighbours during these supposed prayers, and even scolded anyone who chided them, before calmly resuming the



lesson. The reason was that I had a different conception of praying – if in fact you wanted to pray. But this whole prayer thing provided no enlightenment. Neither the manipulation nor the one to whom it was directed was clear to me. I rejected the whole business of community and synagogue, and I still recall from my schooldays being taken by a rich uncle one morning at Rosh Hashanah to the Oranienburger-strasse synagogue (we proles could not, even if we wanted to, attend any of the expensive synagogues on feast days, and there they all sat in the best clothes, the men below and the women upstairs, looking so well-fed and rich, and I was filled with the same repugnance I always felt at the sight of rich people wearing their good fortune so smugly.) And as we left, we went with an acquaintance of my uncle to his apartment, close to the upper Friedrichstrasse, the man was a bachelor, his housekeeper had already prepared breakfast and put more out for us guests, and calmly, with self-conscious irony, the gentlemen ate ham on rye and drank red wine. They even joked about it. But I was never able to laugh at such things, I did not understand this kind of humour and even later, in Jewish cabarets, I rejected and heartily despised it.

So from then on I never felt or accepted that I was Jewish. This supposed Jewish community, a familiar community of kin in which I could find mutual help but nothing of radicality, no spiritual resoluteness (rather the opposite, namely tepidity, complacency and bourgeois fustiness), this community was not mine. But from a young age I experienced from outside the negative of this: that I was “a Jew”. All I learned – and accepted – was the obverse of being Jewish, the disparagement, contempt, the evil poisonous hatred of the persecutor.

I always accepted the hate as a challenge from opponents, so little, so nugatory was the Jewishness, the Judaism I was acquainted with. This, I knew well, was no idiosyncrasy, but the stance of most decent men I came across, whose bonds with Judaism were just as slender. It is superfluous to relate how in a Berlin school one was enveloped in anti-Semitism, covert in some teachers but more open in others, and even among one’s fellow students.

That *you* are a Christian and *you* are a Jew hung unspoken over every relationship, however friendly; it did not establish an ethnic difference, rather it declared: “I am a proper person. There’s something not quite right about you, but we won’t talk about it.” I knew this, but it left me cold, it failed to produce in me even for a second a sense of inferiority or self-hatred. Very early on – it came with our circumstances – I staked out my position in an irksome world. It was all the same to me what afflictions the world might hurl at me, they only made me harder. It’s also unnecessary to relate how the finest outward friendships ended at the end of the school year (1901). Because of anti-semitism we were not in a position to put on a unified harmonious graduation ceremony. Obvious hatred of Jews flourished wonderfully at Berlin University, where I went next; and afterwards when I was a doctor in Berlin there were both Jew-free and mixed medical associations. In the mental asylum we doctors who were Jews stood together, we knew where the front lay. And the same in the casino of the hospital.

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“What was the triggering event or triggering insight?”

In 1923 (I think it was then), an actual pogrom erupted in Berlin in the Alexanderplatz district – Dragonerstrasse and Grenadierstrasse are favourite streets for Eastern Jews, first generation or transient. The police, slack against the attackers, arrested Jewish self-defence organisations. It was a breathtaking scene. Whatever excuses were made, it was undoubtedly an outbreak of ancient Jew-hatred, now massively stoked-up. “Breathtaking” alone would not have

taken me much farther. But in the district there was a clever legally established organisation which had the good instinct to exploit the situation to ambush the capital's Jewish intelligentsia. One day, in the week following the pogrom – while alone and with others I was still cursing the disgraceful police, the pathetic police – I received an invitation to a private house on Belle-Alliance Square, where there would be a presentation on the current situation. Around forty writers, journalists etc. were there, most of them known to me, Jews. I remember little of the presentation and really only two things: the lovely cakes that were handed out, and my agitation and unease. They summarised the event, and asked what we, Jews like the victims, wanted to do. A fatal, but justified, question. I spoke twice, I could not keep quiet: first I protested that we were being enticed to adopt a quasi pure-Jewish existence in a homeland and community outside Germany; the pogrom was unambiguous and horrible, and we must put our pens to work to denounce the infamy, we must speak openly as Jews; but nevertheless and in the end here, and only here, is our home, Goethe, Kant, Nietzsche, Heine, Beethoven: these and only these are our stepfathers. What the gentlemen here are planning will end in an intolerable quaking of the ground beneath our feet. Most of those present liked this. Only – I did not. I sat there agitated and was not yet done with myself. The discussion continued, I paid little attention, I knew only that I had to intervene once more. And I did speak again and tried to make out I was amplifying what I had said before but in fact it was in palpable opposition to it. It was the old theme: whether one felt closer to the Eastern Jews there in the Grenadierstrasse than to the Germans next door, and I had to, yes had to say right out that I felt that these Eastern Jews were my people and I acknowledge solidarity with them. This second speech was surely very confused. Yet I was happy to have spoken out. People said afterwards that they weren't exactly sure what I had actually meant. I felt the same.

I recall that in the following weeks I pursued this theme with all and sundry, not so much to clarify my mind as to hide my uncertainty and weaken my sense of unease. I often went to the street of the pogrom, sat in the little Café Krakauer, observed people, spoke with this or that one. Finally it became clearer what I had to do and wanted to do: find out once and for all who they are, the Jews. I was sure my Berlin Jews were no Jews but a sort of smudgy bourgeois mishmash, Eastern Jews were – I wasn't clear what.

In one novel I journeyed in spirit to China, in another to the Thirty Years War, in a third to Greenland in a Utopian age. Now I wanted to make an actual journey to the land of my fathers.

To follow up that evening, representatives of the Zionist organisation came to me, they invited me to become a Zionist, perhaps I'd like to take a look at Palestine. But my plan was already firm: I was not yet ready to look at Palestine. First I just wanted to see some Jews. And I drafted a travel plan, presented it to my publisher and the *Vossische Zeitung*, they quickly provided funds, I would be able to spend some months in Poland, Ukraine, maybe Lithuania.

What I found there and how it all went afterwards I shall report at some other time.

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#### 4. SUMMER LOVE

*Published in 1933 in Unser Dasein (Our Existence), an extensive collection of ruminations on humans, nature, and politics; the book was promptly banned and burned, and was not republished until 1964.*

One more time:

*Only through the gate of the Ego does one bestride the world.*

Now silence fell. An utterly sweet enchantment lay over the room. The music sang, the trumpets sang, the people sang. They made moves, glided, pressed close, and the music went with them, knees flexed, the foot came forward, back, the body followed. The clarinet blew, bandleader up there with the saxophone, he looked down on the revolving half-moon. Silent revolving, silent gliding of shadows. Feet scraping, forwards, back, sweet children, her chin on his shoulder. And now jazz blaring.

Mop of curly black hair at the table, she stands, powder puff, glance in the mirror, the coffee cup is all by itself, handbag sits on the chair. She's dived into the flickering light, is sucked in by the half-moon, the piano jangles, arm on his shoulder, pulled along, rocked, the music sings, the trumpet sings. It ends, they separate, so soon, so soon, *a little bit of yearning, a tiny ray of sun.*

And already they sit again around the table, powder puff to nose, forehead. An older lady has bought overshoes at a sale, they unpack, discuss, turn them over. A comfortable gent reads the midday paper, hatstands with hats and coats line the walls, there's no music, all is dissolved, trickles apart. The coffee pots are fake silver. Light and tobacco smoke fill the air.

A tall young man with horn-rimmed glasses, he goes up to the table, he dips his head a little to the mop of black hair, her expression doesn't change, she stands, he walks behind her, careful of his footwork, then he asks no more questions, they're in the circle of happening, of revolving and scraping and stepping. Shades glide, revolve in silence. The music mutes, surges, commands, the drum booms, the notes rise and fall, long soulful notes, hand in hand, the hand's hot, you follow, you can feel the thigh, he supports you so nicely, no one can touch you, and everyone's just the same as you. There's the room with people drinking, they're looking at you, and you can close your eyes, close your little eyes, close your little eyes, foot forward, foot to the side, how the saxophone croons and croons.

And a man's enigmatic singing: *"Eine kleine Sehnsucht .... A little bit of yearning, a tiny ray of sun, a yearning, that never will come true."* The piano thumps, the drum rolls, now only the piano, and it's over. Hands are dropped, hot hands, heavy hands, alone, the faces totally impersonal. She returns to the table, their heads incline briefly, just once, she's so young, then she talks to the older woman again about the shoes. The cavaliers have settled the bill. The bandleader drinks beer. She leaves.

She has a little black hat, her thin little face smiles back at the door, they see her bright stockings, her curves, she carries a little square handbag. Where is she off to, those at the table wonder as they eye the menu.

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Chance is a remarkable thing. So this image of the room where they danced was still in my memory, the singing music, the singing trumpet, they made gliding motions, and then there it was, a mop of hair, she wore a little black hat, her thin little face smiled now and then across to my table, she danced, and powdered her face, eventually left with her little square handbag. I saw her today at the office. She was a witness. I knew her at once. And she knew me. A minor civil case, dispute about furniture damaged during a house move. She declared the dresser had been unscuffed, and was not falling apart. When I came out of the courtroom around three, she's standing downstairs by the big steps waiting, God knows what for. She smiled at me again, I didn't know if I should smile, but probably I did anyway. Then she came up and told me she'd already seen me, yesterday up at the dancing. Do you go there often? Yes, what can you do all alone in such a small provincial town, there's not many places to go. Then: See you!

Rain pouring down. Everything's grey, soaked. Seems to me I am like the rain. An emotion pours down over everything and everybody. This morning it was a desolate place and I felt dreadfully homesick. I thought: I shall go to pieces here. Now –.

It's a remarkable state for a serious man to be in. I can't deny it, I'm excited. There's an incredible tension in my limbs. Suddenly I walk with more bounce than usual. My landlady noticed. She's glad for me, really I feel more affectionate towards everyone. And why? I feel grateful to everyone, because I keep thinking of her and think how she's going among them all. I've completely lost the grey homesickness, it's like I'm drowning in a whole sea of excitement and joy and happiness. What do I do? My usual duties, but in the breaks I forget to eat, sit at my desk in the interview room and dream. It's really not a normal state at all, but it has its pleasing aspects, I shall take care not to let it go to my head.

I'm already in my mid-thirties, and have sworn never to marry, my mother herself gave me that advice, though I'm her only son, but there's too much misfortune and illness in the family. It's gradually driven me, I see it now, to develop hostility towards everything feminine, I've just kept out of their way. Now the fire has come licking after me. But it's a pleasant state. I've only been in love once in my life, I've loved someone only once in my life. That was her, Rosa, her name was Rosa, every time I see a rose I feel pain, even today. It's a horrible memory, I took her to meet my mother, and she said no. The fight lasted a whole week, but my mother was right, of course, and I know a man has duties and a man can't just blindly follow his emotions. It was a dreadful ending, a long dreadful year. I wasn't the same coming out of it as when I went in. You have to let it go. And now. It's a pleasant feeling. You shouldn't reject it. You shouldn't be too strict with yourself.

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I have different moods. Sometimes I can't stop laughing and saying what's up with me, sometimes I brood, sometimes I'm filled with longing, I dive yearningly into every face, every mouth makes my lips pucker for a kiss, sometimes I have to turn away I'm so overcome, I don't know why. Could this be the same as back then, that other time?

At first it was like being hemmed in by a wall, I had to avoid lots of streets and squares. Now it's quite different. I greet every girl and woman by name. They remind of her. I look at their shoes, yes, they too wear shoes, they walk along in stockings, like her. When she's in my room or I'm in hers, it's all very tense. I can't produce the right words, I've waited too long for her, she's puzzled by my cold fingers and my silence. Then I tell her I have to talk so much in court. And when she's gone I breathe, breathe out, stand up, walk about, think about what's happened,

and the dreams start up again, brooding about her, and I begin to whisper to her, and now the right words can pass my lips, I can say them when she's not there, only when she's not there.

I sometimes think it's a passion, a fervour that puts me in chains. Should I throw myself at her feet and let the fervour carry me quite away? I don't want to, don't want to. But how I enjoy swimming along with this force! Where is truth if not here. Where is life, what is life, if not here. Even if I'm doing wrong, it's still true. I burn, but she lit the flame. What has she done with me. What gave her the right to approach me and hurl fire at me. Now I think about it, I believe I've known for a long time who I am, and then she comes along and hurls fire, and lo and behold only now does it reveal who I am. She's just some little person, but my great teacher, the best teacher. Words can't teach it, and philosophy doesn't make me feel this way.

Know thyself, says the philosopher. I don't know how to go about it. And once I know myself, how does it help. But she sat up there at a table, there was already such enchantment in the room, the music blared, the trumpet sang, the people made gliding motions, and then there was the mop of hair, the little black hat, she smiled across to my table, danced with the young man with the horn-rimmed glasses. She saw me once, she hardly saw me, and I was allowed to look at her, guided not by my brain but by my nature. Oh, my brain is so wearied and used up, there's not much left there to fall apart, it's done what it could, and I see it was all in vain, nugatory, vacuous. After all those philosophers in the lecture halls and those great thinkers in their books have spoken to me, now this great little teacher comes across my path and she spoke in her own way for barely a quarter of a second. Oh what a penetrating sermon, my knees still tremble when I think of that quarter second. It took me hours to recover, and I have to come back again and again to what I've learnt, and I cannot grasp it.

Because I have seen you, everything in me must change direction. I'm much calmer already. During proceedings I think calmly of you, and you can hold your own when I think calmly of you. At first I thought it wouldn't work, you'd be exposed as a silly face of no interest to me.

And now too I can think about Rosa. I have a little bunch of roses here, I bought it this morning, it's on the desk in front of me still in its tissue paper, and I can look at the roses calmly and even affectionately. It was so long ago, Rosa was good, but gone, gone, who knows what's become of her, it should not have been. Now someone else harvests what she sowed. I am glad that what was uppermost in me was pressed down to the very lowest, and what was lowest has become the very uppermost. I've regained my composure. At first I was clueless about myself. I have thought – and it has sometimes woken me at night in a panic: I have lived as long as this, it's all been good, why must it come over me again, why can I not die in peace?

\*

I was with her today, her mother was out, she'd sent her away.

Two hours ago I held her in my arms. It was a joy that still echoes in my arms, my breast. When by the window, rosy-cheeked, young, she placed her lips to mine, and I held her by the hips – I cannot speak of it: heavenly, Heaven. And desire and the body? It was a ministration, and a yielding. What is a kiss, what is it if not a submerging. Not appropriating, no, a plea for permission, an expression of gratitude and at the same time a heedless diving and succumbing. But for her part, I believe, she had no consciousness of this, but maybe I do her injustice. To her it's just a marvellous game.

That's what's so strange about love: these gestures of the body, the big and special role the body plays. Nowhere else does it so greatly, so fully, so one hundred per cent stand in service to the mind. Like the physical becomes transparent. Like at other times you're a numb, isolated, frozen animal. Like you were hacked into pieces. You had your thoughts, your inclinations were elsewhere, you moved about elsewhere. You let all the little pieces run about on their own.

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I have had you in my arms again. You let me embrace you. Embrace: meaning that my arms, as I came into the room, were allowed to hug you. I could feel your slender, light, swaying body. And while I held you, inwardly I trembled and asked: who are you? Who is it here, who here wants something from me? Who am I good for here? I can't think about your family, for me you're just the slender-limbed maiden, a mop of hair with big eyes. For me you are the person that I lacked, the piece of me I don't have, the tender young woman. Nature, which is much closer to me than society.

And now I see: I, the lawyer, the articulated man, I am about to break the bounds of society and find Nature. It smacks a little of criminality, but things become more true to me.

Yes, more true, more transparent. Just now when I left her house I walked slowly down the street, and like a horned Siegfried I could understand – not the language of birds, but the language of everyone, of all the people walking there, men, women, and the children. Their clothes couldn't fool me. They ran around as beings of Nature. It was such a happy and delightful way of seeing.

I came to this because I met her. Keys to Nature lie all around. You only have to reach out a hand. But probably you need to be ready for it as well. Now I sit at home and think of her.

Many consider that being loved is a joy; maybe so. To love is, I believe, a much greater joy. Of course there must also be the even more beautiful state, the greater, the most invigorating, most life-giving: to love, and be allowed to believe that you are loved.

She gave me a little picture of herself, I carry it in my pocket. I am electrified by what's in my pocket. I have to transfer the picture to another pocket, it seems to me my arm is growing numb on this side. It's not unlikely I shall have to remove the picture entirely from my suit. For what streams out from the picture surrounds me like a fog. It's like stepping into swampy air, the tropically hot and steamy air of a different clime. That's the fog surrounding me. Yet I am still happy to carry her always with me now. The photograph is beside the point; her face on it looks neither clever nor soulful. The photograph cannot capture the tensions, the radiances that emanate from her and that only I can sense, precisely because I am so sensitive to her. Yes, she is a Nature-being of extraordinary love-appeal for me.

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I've just come from meeting her. Again she had been watching me in the courtroom, and took me over the way to a little café. The place had only just opened, there weren't any nice seats free, people sitting everywhere, the door was right in front of us, and people entering stared right in our faces. For the whole hour I couldn't find my voice. The mop of hair sat there blooming, with her cherry-red very full lips, on her head a hat with a veil, she kept her gloves on, now and then sipped her chocolate. She never noticed how I sat there and couldn't find my voice. As I sat I thought about her. What might she want from me. She was so tender, so

wonderfully sincere with me. In what way? In the café, among all those people, right by the door where every second someone came in and stared us in the face? Well, I'd never have been able to answer that question earlier. She was heartfelt and sincere just sitting there so blooming, with her cherry-red lips, her arm sometimes across the back of my chair, and once she let me pull the glove from her left hand. For the whole hour I had no need to speak, I had enough to do just looking at her, looking at the table where the chocolate stood and one of her gloves lay, looking at her little forehead-veil, knowing that she was sitting there for me. All the wonder, sincerity, tenderness was captured in this. She also mentioned she was out of a job, and told me about her previous employments.

How much have I already forgiven you, and how much more will there be to forgive. Hour after expectant hour, waiting, waiting, and I keep running to the window, the door, open it, listen for sounds in the stairwell, come to my senses, for why did I open the door, the landlady is in, you won't be coming. What you are doing, what you have been doing, I have no idea. And then when you do come a day or two later, I still can't fathom it out. Nothing was the matter, you had this to do and that to do, and you got to know someone and you all went dancing again together. Sometimes you tell fibs. I'm all over the place with joy when you're there but not available. Sometimes it takes me hours to recover from the ensuing torment, and then it doesn't last long and you have to go. I even grant you the other one, but just don't play around with me. Do you not see me at all? Ah, what a slave I've become.

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What I saw was this.

I saw her dark hair, her narrow face, her shining eyes. I saw how her hands rested on a man's knees. I heard her giggle, speak, turn her head. And the man was not me. He had his back turned to me. I was sitting really close to her, she didn't see me.

It was cheerful chatter back and forth. No endearments. If I were to write down what they said, there'd be nothing to it. Her voice was small, like an eager little girl's. But around them both, around the table, was a cloud. That's how they sat there. And now and then she lowered her voice and looked at the table, and he lowered his head too and held her fingers, and when she looked up, her eyes, glancing in my direction but not seeing me, had a heartfelt radiance.

Who was it at her side? A fresh young man. I might say: some quite ordinary young man. But for me, right now, it's already a huge solemn truth that I'd never known before: it has nothing to do with words or cleverness. There is a stronger power. There is a more heartfelt, more wonderful power. And such a power I am, or I was, a little bit to her. But I am also a supplicant, an outsider, a mere admirer, a worshipper, a believer, that too. And now the question is, which power and strength is bigger, mine, or that ordinary young man's.

I never felt even a twinge of envy, no jealousy. It was simply a blow. And then a different feeling swept over me: I saw her sitting there, she's in love, this is love, love is sitting there, and I'm a part of it. I empathised with that young man, sometimes I was that young man. I experienced his encounter with her.

Oh his laugh, his exploring hands that can't stay calmly on the table, tonguing like a flame towards her, and she lets him take her fingers, and I feel it too and even overhear a few words when he says: So, we have an understanding, and she laughs. She says, ah no, it's no good today, really. Oh, they're leaving.

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"I'm truly madly sorry, but it's not going anywhere, Rosa, it has no purpose."

That's what I told her, then. I've just thought of it. But really it has no purpose, it's not leading anywhere.

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I had two rotten days. I went to her. At first she wasn't in her room. I looked around to see if someone else was ruling the roost. I couldn't see anything. I know how naïve she is, how pathetic. She leaves pictures and postcards from former friends stuck to her wall. She only takes one down if she can't stand the person any more. It's the ancestral gallery of her friends. She has no picture of me, just postcards, they're still up there. Then she came back, I hadn't seen her for three days, there was some telephone chat, I'd told her I would come, she was delayed at work, then she couldn't again, so gloomy waiting and waiting, suffering in the end, totally seized up. And now I was going to see her. So in she came, nodded, quickly turned her back, leafed through a book, I called her name, she made some offhand response, didn't turn round, then she had a handful of little photographs, leafed a bit more through the book to see if anything was still there, for the book was one of mine. Maybe she wanted to be sure there was no letter from someone else, I could see.

And then I held her in my arms anyway, but it was all different now. I even kissed her, but already I knew, already I could feel: I was alone again. It had gone from me, and gone from her.

Ah, and then the day after she went away. I had a little picture of her in my wallet. I put my hand in the pocket and felt the wallet, she was there, so I hadn't lost her. Sometimes the little picture in the wallet radiated something, it was the right-hand pocket, it made my hand and arm hot and weak, sometimes my face flamed up on the right, I could see it in the mirror, I had to change pockets. That's how it went for many an hour, sometimes it was just as it had been earlier, and I was astonished, astonished. I was swept away by the feeling. Like a dog following its nose I had stepped into a puddle of yearning, and I had no way to resist. No, it has not gone from me, I have her in my blood.

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Why, when in the evening all the colours that were there by day disappear, all the panoply of colours, everything that guides our movements, why should we speak of something being "missing"? Daytime was there, positive daytime, and now comes positive night. Just now there was radiant sunshine, now comes radiant darkness. Both are lights, lights of different kinds. Now in the night the cramping tension fades. Here are none of the temptations and attractions with which the day sallies forth, which lie everywhere so horribly bright and profligate and we have to brace ourselves beneath them.

And you mustn't think sleep is only sleep, meaning: not being awake. How did you hit on the notion that for half our life we are not there? We simply shift to another existence. The muscle tension needed for the day has relaxed, the terribly aroused consciousness has dwindled, the wild captivation, the morbidly leaping desire, this evil desire fiery as the sun, has ceased now. The night sky is there, at last another star shines, and from wretched day-labourers, wage slaves of the day, for a few hours we become ourselves, more human than before, more Ego than when the sun shines.



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A young girl. These faces, I see now, are all created, shaped and formed for the love of men. That they touch me so, these faces, that even I can love them so, shows me: We men are one single brotherhood. And all women are one single beloved.

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She is gone. She is gone.

No, she is not gone, she can no longer be gone. She will never leave me. Now I go as usual to the office and speak the law in minor civil cases. That's how I met her that time. It's hard to believe what comes across a person's path and causes them aggravation and makes them feel insulted and damaged. Things of little value, three Mark or five Mark. But I learned something juridical from my beloved. I understand better what aggravates people. The world has become more transparent to me. I've been led closer to its blood. That is the gift of my summer love.

I shall make enquiries some time about Rosa's fate. Rosa. Since I had the mop of curly hair I've written only a couple of postcards to my mother. Letter writing is totally a thing of the past. She used to have two or three letters every week from me. Why do I no longer write to my mother. I feel bitter towards her. Why did she tell me about misfortune and illness. She obstructed me. Her talk of illnesses. You recover from an illness eventually, after all.

I was not able to have Rosa. The mop of curly hair is gone. I'm glad I found her. I'll get along in the world much, much better.

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## 5. LOST LETTERS

*At the centre of Chapter 6 below (Stauffer and the Women) is a topic very close to Alfred Döblin's heart: lost letters between lovers. To set the scene, here we delve into the real-life situation of Döblin's decades-long relationship with the photographer Yolla Niclas.*

*Respectable Döblin scholarship to this day downplays the significance of this relationship in Döblin's life and works. The grandchildren generation would still prefer that it not be mentioned in public, for two reasons: it blemishes their grandfather's image, and it insults the memory of their grandmother Erna Döblin.*

*I sympathise with the latter point. We rarely hear Erna in her own voice, only as reported by (often hostile) third parties; she undoubtedly played a crucial role as parent and manager of the household budget, and in exile put far more effort than Alfred into learning enough French and English to help the family survive in Paris and Los Angeles.*

*But to suppress the affair in order to protect Alfred's image would be to handicap research on an important writer's mental, emotional and spiritual life, and the evident impact of a female muse on his works from the 1920s to the 1940s.*

*Döblin and Yolla met at a Lenten ball in February 1922.<sup>5</sup> He was in his mid-40s, she in her early 20s. She showed interest in his writings (unlike Erna, who typed up Alfred's manuscripts but was apparently unable to appreciate their contents). They conversed until dawn, and met again a day or two later.*

*When Erna heard of this young female hanger-on, she insisted on inviting her to the Döblin family home. Yolla became a great favourite with the young children; she took many delightful photos. At first she may have been viewed as what a later generation would call "a groupie": infatuated youngster eager to be seen with famous writer. As late as 1925 Erna even welcomed her on a family canal-barge holiday, and Yolla attended several Christmas parties at the Döblins'. Otherwise, the liaison was kept discreetly concealed from friends and relatives.*

*But eventually the reality of the liaison became undeniable, and difficult scenes ensued. Yolla believed that Alfred would leave an unhappy family situation and marry her; but the traumatic calamity in Alfred's childhood weighed heavy, and he finally decided against repeating his absconding father's sin.<sup>6</sup> Erna became bitterly opposed to any further contact with Yolla – hence the "lost letters" theme.*

*In the 1930s the Döblins and Yolla all lived in Paris, but at opposite ends. She and Alfred managed to meet occasionally – sometimes by chance (which Yolla interpreted as Fate). Not until the end of the decade did Yolla (now nearing 40) accept that she would never marry Alfred; instead she married Rudi Sachs, a man of her own age who had proved helpful in her photographic studio.*

*When war was declared, Jewish refugees in Paris were at risk of being rounded up and held in makeshift camps as "enemy aliens". When Yolla was briefly taken in, her frightened mother in law decided to burn a box full of papers, including many letters from Alfred and copies of his books with handwritten dedications.*

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<sup>5</sup> Some sources say 1921, but this conflicts with the date when the ball's sponsor launched its activities.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2 above.

*By late 1940 the Döblins and Yolla had separately made it to New York, where she stayed while they moved west to Los Angeles. Despite several house moves, contact was assisted by the eldest Döblin son Peter, who was working as a book designer on the East Coast. But almost every letter from Yolla to Alfred was intercepted by Erna, and returned to the Dead Letter Office. Very rarely a telephone call came through.*

*In 1945, the day before Alfred and Erna were to take ship for Europe, a hasty visit to Yolla's New York address was arranged while Erna spent an afternoon shopping.*

*In the last decade of his life, Alfred still yearned for contact with Yolla. According to his friend and confidant Robert Minder, he was convinced that efforts would be made to scrub her from his life story.*

*Minder began to publish accounts of the Alfred-Yolla story in the early 1960s, a few years after Alfred's death. His revelations – obtained, he declared, during private confessional sessions with the bedridden writer – aroused the anger of third son Klaus/Claude, who in 1979 initiated a civil lawsuit claiming infringement of the family's right to privacy. Minder died before the case could be decided.*

*When a volume of Döblin's letters was being compiled in the late 1960s, Yolla offered three of the few surviving letters from Alfred to her. The editor (urged on by Klaus) refused to include them. (The expanded 2002 edition likewise excluded the letters.) This led to a controversy in the press: why was a person so intimately linked to Döblin over many decades being rendered invisible, thereby hampering a rounded appreciation of the writer and his works?*

*Döblin scholars still claim with a straight face that "there is no evidence Yolla Niclas was his muse." In fact there is strong evidence, not only in Döblin's despairing wish to meet her one last time before he died (so, she was not just "a bit on the side" back in the 1920s); but also in his depictions of women and man-woman relationships before and after 1922.*

*Even within Mountains Oceans Giants (much of it composed in the early stages of their relationship) we find two very different depictions: the unsavoury sado-masochistic and homoerotic nexus Marduk-Jonathan-La Balladeuse on the one hand (which I cut from my translation but made available [on my website](#)), and then the much more life-affirming character of Venaska towards the end of the novel. Even more evident is the character of Savitri in the next epic, Manas. Döblin could surely not have invented such a powerful, strongly female character without Yolla's presence. In the late 1930s in Paris, Döblin was still able to discuss his writing with Yolla (see the letter of 18 May 1943).*

*With the scene set, here now are letters from Alfred Döblin to Yolla Niclas that were spurned by the Döblin scholarly world, became caught up in legal action, and appeared first in 2017, when Eckhardt Köhn, a German historian of photography, compiled a beautifully illustrated and thorough book about Yolla and Alfred.<sup>7</sup>*

*The letters and commentary are excerpted from Yolla's Memoir, a copy of which she lodged with the Döblin Archive at Marbach, embargoed until 2005. The only other known copy, Yolla's own, was passed to me in 2021 by her great-nephew Jack Mautner, who had stored it for 30 years without realising its significance. I secured a permanent home for this copy at the Deutsche Exilarchiv of the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.*

*Interested readers can find Yolla's Encounter with Alfred Döblin [on my website](#).*

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<sup>7</sup> Yolla Niclas und Alfred Döblin. Fotofalle 3. ISBN 978-3-00-057707-9.

## Letters from Los Angeles and Hollywood

Despite my happy marriage and new life in this country, the old old longing re-emerged to get in touch with D again. He was living in Los Angeles with Erna and Stephan.

Rudi and I had so little money there was no question of going out there to visit. And anyway, how could I have dared to encounter Erna without knowing how she would take it out on D? But there was nothing for it, I had at least to write to him. Were we not living in the same country?

I knew D was having a hard time. No one here understood him. In his article „Abschied und Wiederkehr“ (Departure and Return) he wrote: “To flee from country to country, to lose all that one has learned, all that nourished one, to flee yet again and live year after year as a beggar while still vigorous , but living in exile ...”

Erna was implacable towards me, her slogan “No Mercy” she adhered to until her death. From now on she redirected my letters to the Dead Letter Office in Los Angeles. As a memento I still have an envelope here in my hand.

Probably by chance, D received maybe one of my letters in a year. Here is his first reply:

From Los Angeles, California

Oct 20, 1941

Ms Yolla Niclas  
230 West 101 Street  
New York City

Dear Little Sister,

First let me greet you after such a long time and on this soil: Good day! And if you ask why don't I write to you, you always know why: firstly, letter writing is not my thing, and secondly receiving a letter from you is as always a matter that does me no good at home. This is no novelty to you – but you always forget and think it might be otherwise. But it's not.

We have been in America for a year, a little more. At first, like more of us writers from France, I was employed in the film industry – then, as usual here, our contracts were not renewed and I am at home. One has to wait, and greatly cut down on expenses. Such is emigration.

Klaus remains in Marseilles<sup>8</sup>, Wolf is “disparu”<sup>9</sup>, the youngster is here with us. God knows how it will go on. I must start again slowly to write, but America is not the soil for me, no one here has a taste for my concerns, I'm too European, alas.

So you have made it over here, Little Sister, and your husband too. I wish you all the best. Stay vigorous and healthy. Maybe you can work in America: I believe so.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Klaus' brother Stephane (letter of 11.11.11 to Döblin's biographer Wilfried Schoeller), Klaus was devastated at being left behind in France when his parents emigrated; he thought they could at least have waited a few days for him to meet up (though this would have complicated already fraught visa matters). This may have a bearing on his somewhat intemperate action against Minder.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang, Erna's favourite son and a very gifted mathematician, committed suicide in the Vosges hills as German units advanced on his unit's position. The Döblins had no news of him until 1945; Erna never recovered from her grief. Both parents were laid to rest in a village churchyard beside Wolfgang. His biography is well told by Marc Petit: *L'équation de Kolmogoroff* (2003).

My thoughts have surely changed, as always, but not me. I shall write again after some time. Our address keeps changing, we have to move house. Dear Little Sister  
– Your P.

After my beloved father took his life during a period of depression, I received a second letter:

From Los Angeles, California  
Ms Yolla Niclas  
230 West 101 Street  
New York City

Febr 14, 1942

Dear Little Sister,

I don't need to describe my dismay after your little note. What can I say, Little Sister. We live in horrific times, and they're not yet ended. I last saw your dear father in New York soon after we arrived. I remember our meeting, it was at my hotel, October 1940. At that time I was in a state of collapse physically and mentally, could hardly speak, was barely present, but he made an impression

Shall I tell you what it was? He was so strangely cheerful, light-hearted, active, excited, told of himself, how he would sell linens, showed me his new business card, and then all the efforts he had made to bring you and your husband over here. He was full of hope – and afterwards I had the impression of something overdone, exaggerated in his liveliness and optimism. Dear Little Sister, I don't know the exact details of such a sad and painful end, but he was a man over 70, did he not suffer one of those depressions so common today? I met here the widow of the Berlin publisher S Fischer, the same age with the same depression, unhealthy notions of suicide, and these alternating with the cheerful excitement of a manic age. Maybe it was so, maybe.

Ah, what a life, Little Sister! I don't know what you're up to, I sit here with Erna and the youngster now our Film Rescue contract is over, draw unemployment benefit along with what comes from the Comités, own nothing, can earn nothing, well, main thing is we're still here. Peter helps as well. I'm not worried about material things: we shall never starve here, it was quite different and much worse in France, and we survived. Patience and faith, Little Sister – I say this to you too.

This is not the only one of all the worlds, and you can be sure of that. Even in this world one is never lost and forlorn, and despite everything it is not evil powers that rule the world. This I experienced in France, even though totally kaput and out of it. But if you put all your trust just in yourself – and who are you then? – you fall into a trap. Dear Little Sister, I squeeze your hand most sincerely. I feel for you, I wish you a speedy recovery!

– Your P.

Not until 1943, when I could no longer stand the cruel game of “undelivered letters”, did I phone D from New York, and as luck would have it Erna was not at home.

May 18, 1943  
1347 North Citrus Ave.  
Hollywood, Cal

Dear Little Sister,

what should I write to you? It was lovely and such a surprise to take your call – and a remarkable stroke of luck that Erna has been unwell and in a “rest home”, from where she will come back home tomorrow (though not recovered: she suffered for months from a digestive problem, stayed in hospital, then outside at the rest home she falls and breaks two bones in her mid-foot, and will be back in plaster and on crutches. Yes, we’re all beaten down, Little Sister.) Now I see that you have your trouble with your knee, or both knees? I am very much against operations, think it over for a good long time: if it’s arthritis, an operation’s out of the question; but I don’t know the diagnosis, it might be something else.

What else should I tell you about? Finally, finally, finally, I’ve completed *November 1918*. The first volume of course was *Citizens & Soldiers*, which came out over there. I came over here with two uncompleted volumes, I finished them and now have the fourth, the concluding volume under my belt, even if not yet faired. It goes into Heaven and Hell, Satan and angels appear among the “normal” people, and there are ghosts too – it was becoming too boring for me among all the 1918 figures – and I’ve locked them all in and there they are in black and white and can’t get up to any more tricks.

But Little Sister, you and your husband are doing tolerably well, externally, financially – you’re far ahead of me, I live on Comité handouts, I could do nothing either with publishers or the film industry (neither can Heinrich Mann, neither can L. Frank, and others; we are Europeans, another world, but this here is not the old world, it seems to me.) You say I’m never heard of. Yes, but what can one do? For America I don’t exist (and I can’t speak English), there’s still the connection to the emigration, but then there’s the Jewish emigration and the social-political. I toiled away at the Jewish question in Paris, I’m no longer interested in Jewish politics; political matters, among Jews as well, can be animated only by a fresh spirit, by ideas; the Nazis can and must be dealt with, but then what? Socialism is stale, yesterday’s stuff, the bigwigs in New York have often written to me, but I won’t go along with their old magic, they have nothing to say. And so because I’m not there, and not anywhere else, I’ve disappeared and no one in the land hears anything of me. But personally I’m still in contact here and in New York with my old acquaintances. It’s exile, Little Sister, that’s all.

You asked me about religious matters. As I recall we never saw properly eye to eye on these in Paris when I read you bits of my volume 2 [*of November 1918*]. I never had much sense of the Jewish religion; I always see it as a racial, tribal religion, but it’s to do with humanity; the prophets urge their case but no one listens. The Jewish religion was in a rut, fossilised as a folk phenomenon. It’s really Christianity that overturned all precepts and pressed ahead to all of humanity. Still, I know one can be good and pious in the Jewish faith, so let everyone therein preserve his piety. The history of Christianity is also bitter, but Little Sister, it’s a huge chapter and much too broad a field to write about.

Yollachen, your picture is very lovely. You don’t seem in the least changed. My hair is not yet white, but I’m still going grey.

Now promise me on your heart not to write me any more letters. We live here so isolated and we're beaten down enough and not in good health. – You surely don't want me to suffer the reawakening of Erna's old memories and be dragged along by them. Klaus too has disappeared somewhere, he couldn't get his exit visa, Peter is with the military.

Dear Little Sister, stay in good health! In all our old cordiality, your P.

We meet again. 8 October 1945

“and thy truth reacheth unto the clouds.”

In November 1945 D was to take up his appointment as section leader in the French cultural station in Baden-Baden, so he decided to return to Europe with Erna and Stephan.

On 8 October, around noon, Rudi and I were living in a really small apartment in Jackson Heights, the telephone rang. An agitated voice said: “Little Sister, is that you – my little Yolla! I really must see you, and right away. We're in New York for a very short while, and Erna has gone off shopping on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.”

“Little Brother, I can't walk at all, not one step,” I said, “I've just had a major knee operation.”

“But that's terrible,” he said, “tell you what, I'll come right away to see you. Peter knows your address, he'll help me find you.”

Since I had only recently returned home after three weeks in hospital, I had a woman to look after me. I let her go for a couple of hours, as soon as she had opened the door.

We sat facing each other, and I heard the beloved voice.

“Oh, our unlived life...” he said, and the angels again began to sing as at our first encounter – albeit with different voices. I can't remember everything we talked about, it was good that Peter was there too, so our eyes could say the most.

D's full head of hair with the parting at the side was turning grey at the temples, otherwise there was no essential change in his previous appearance.

When we spoke of my lost copy of *Mountains* with the page-long personal dedication and I told him I had at least been able to find another copy here in New York, he stood up to take it down from the shelf. “Now no more regrets, Little Sister, I shall quickly write out something else.” A pen was already in his hand.

“The world is not lost. – We have no need to wait for salvation!”

Dear Little Sister, today I see you again – and we shall often see one another again, be sure of it!”

Early October 1945, New York

Your P.

[...]

“Little Yolla,” he said at the very end, “there's one thing I've learned: one should never enter a marriage that is not made in Heaven.” We embraced “with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength” for the last time. Next day, 9 October, he wrote to me, enclosing two four-leaf clovers.

Sunday 9 October 1945, still in New York

My dear little sister, little Yolla, today is Sunday, I'm sitting in the hotel, everything is not just packed but already fetched away, tomorrow morning we're off to Europe. At least I have seen my little sister once again and spoken with her and found her as good as I always knew her, and maybe she saw in me the old unchanged friend (though a little aged). Little sister, when and where shall I see you again? Ah, what will become of me over there? I'm going into it so cheerfully – and maybe cluelessly. Think of me, help me with your thoughts, and if you can, your prayers.

It will not be simple or easy over there, and I'm no longer young. We can stay in contact across the ocean, by letter. You will hear from me soon, little Yolla.

I had stupid disturbed harassed days here, not my fault, so lucky that I was able to steal that hour with you. How is your knee? You'll soon need massages, but all in all it'll soon be fine and *allright*.

For my work I found no understanding in America, but there were several friendly and helpful people here, certainly more than I ever found in France. – Now, live well, really well, my dear little sister. You will never forget me, nor I you! Your P.

### Spring in Baden-Baden

The magazine *Das goldene Tor* reached me fairly regularly. The letter below speaks for itself:

23.IV.46

Baden-Baden

Porte aux Armes

GMFZ (Edn) 50403

Dear Little Sister,

Your letter has just arrived, dated 12 April, today is the 23<sup>rd</sup> – wasn't that quick. I'm replying at once from my office, which is now a big bright hotel room with a thick carpet (Villa Stephanie, formerly a luxury hotel), I also have a secretary now, previously Senior Lieutenant, superb typist, stenographer. – I have endless MSS to read and provide with an "avis" (is it publishable or not), read manuscripts sent in for the magazine (hardly anything from America). The bigwigs are not interested, but it goes along without them; here the world is ten times more lively and real than the one in which they vegetate over there. The magazine – I shall call it *Das goldene Tor* [The Golden Gate] meaning where something lovely steps in, and because it reminds of San Francisco and the Peace Conference – will launch its first issue probably at the end of May. You'll have a copy, I shall send it over. I've also taken on a youngster as editor, to relieve my burden. My day is: 9 o'clock in the office, 12.30 lunch, 2.30 office, 6.30 back home. After that all one can do is sit at home, a dead place, 23,000 French, 30,000 Germans, I dwell in a miniature studio.

You ask, Little Sister, whether speaking puts a strain on me. Oh, it's not so bad. It's the eyes that are bad, but you must say nothing to Peter. My shortsightedness has progressed over the past five years, and now so-called myopic glaucomas are forming, lenses are no use I have to wait until they can be operated on. It's a curious general deterioration of the eyesight. Because I'm completely exhausted after a day in the office, being totally unused to it, and the pace, I get up around 6.30 and do my own work until 8.30 or 9.00, my novel which is around two-thirds



done, set in post-War times but not in a German context, England; a torpedoed returnee slowly torpedoed his own family – a particular method of representation, a frame-narrative, hard to describe in a few words; slowly he uncovers in a psycho-analytical way the secret of his family and in so doing changes himself and them, destroys and saves them, sets them up on a new basis, very exciting<sup>10</sup> – at least as I write and find out things about me. – The mornings refresh me.

Ah, Little Sister, it's all so difficult over in Paris. Erna can't find a room, she sits in the wretched Hotel Avenue d'Orléans, up till now sharing one room with Etienne, but now he has been admitted as a student in the cité universitaire (an American building), and so they now live separately in Paris. I've invited Erna to join me here and look around for herself. Maybe she will. Many formalities have to be gone through, even for French citizens, to enter the occupation zone.

– A new edition of the *Wang Lun* is being printed, and a completely new MS *Der unsterbliche Mensch* [The Immortal Human], a religious dialogue that I wrote in Hollywood. Both should be out in a few months. I could publish everything I have, publishers are falling over themselves (it's not like the USA where one was dead and vanished, I receive so many nice letters, many of them from complete strangers) but the currency, the "Mark" – what can you do with it? So I wait. I've even been confirmed again as a member of the Academy – Quelle vie!

– Is your knee problem making such slow progress? Yes, the climate is miserable. Here in Baden-Baden is lovely just now, trees full of white blossom, chestnuts with glorious candles, and these broad meadows, everything green, and the Black Forest – it's a real country, Little Sister. But, alas, the food, - and if only the people were a bit more sensible; they are wretched and harassed and feel persecuted and unjustly treated, it's like a spiritual malaise. – So you have a lot of contact with old Stieglitz?<sup>11</sup> And what else? It's so nice of you, Little Sister, to concern yourself about Petrus [*Peter*]; has he finally written off the lovely Lilly?

So, dear Little Sister, with this I've given you a full report, I kiss you sincerely on your lovely lips, and am as always, Your P.

### The final letter

After Erna and D moved to Paris, Peter, who visited his parents there, undertook to deliver my greetings to D. When he returned, he brought me the reply, the final letter to reach my hands, written in greatest secrecy.

A later letter from D from a further visit was declared by Peter to have gone missing. He told me (having read it himself) that there was much in it about – love.

Pour Y. N. S.

Paris, 24 December 1948

Dear Little Sister,

Peter brought me your letter, it made me very happy, thank you! He also told me about you and your work; indeed, Little Sister, life is not easy. – I've now really

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<sup>10</sup> *Tales of a Long Night*, Döblin's last major novel, was rejected by publishers in West Germany, and appeared in East Berlin a few months before his death in 1957.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946): US-German photographer; introduced European avant-garde into the USA.

become an *old man*, my eyesight has been really bad for a long time, and recently I'm unsteady on my feet and have all sorts of complaints, arthritic and neuralgic, there's not much one can do about it. – *C'est le sort humain, on ne peut pas s'y plaindre* [It's human fate, no point complaining]. In two days I travel back to Baden-Baden for work, now mainly the journal. I shan't do it much longer. It's not very nice over there, the poverty, the destruction, the uneducable and embittered people, a lot of anti-Semitism even though very few Jews are still there. I would not advise any to return. In the last three years I had little time to do my own writing, maybe I'll have more time now, but really I'm old enough to quieten down. Incomprehensible, a life, life in general, does one really want it? I don't know. You are in full bloom and strength, Little Sister – rejoice in it, and take your own path. Have a long healthy active life! If I have the right to bless you, then I do bless you. Sincere as always, I a little white cloud in the sky.<sup>12</sup> . Your P.

#### POSTSCRIPT: Alfred and Erna – three letters

*Just three letters are known from within the Alfred-Erna relationship. The first is an incomplete handwritten letter from Alfred to Erna around 1930 [Briefe II 61]; the second a Christmas thank-you note from Alfred to Erne (French spelling!), written mostly in French [Briefe 467-8]; the third a reply from Erna to condolences dated between Alfred's death on 26 June 1957 and her own suicide on 15 September. (Fr and Fre are Alfred, of course.) [Briefe 500-501] The latter is, I believe, the most substantial example we have of Erna's own voice.*

To Erna Döblin, around 1930

My dear, dear Ernamann,

You write that I'm a silly ass, because I won't write the line or two you'd love to read. So I have to clear the air from this rebuke. And what shall I write to you? The simplest of all simple things, and at the same time the truest of all the true, and in all honesty to myself – my pen never errs: I am yours, totally and completely, so completely that I don't know what it means that I might be separate from you. That's why the little words 'I love you, I like you' trip with such difficulty from my tongue. I feel towards you much more than married. Otherwise would I ever become so agitated by everything? There's an unforgettable fact in my memory: when once I left home around the time I got to know Yolla – those were such dreadful days, and so unbearable for me, that I never slept a wink I was so tormented – when I came home, the very first night I slept soundly, you were there, I was home again; it was a verdict on the whole affair.

You were and are a piece of my own self – sometimes, too often, we've quarrelled – what is that against the fact that I feel for you far more than a 'mere' liking: love, togetherness, belonging to me. For sure I have often felt that I too seldom say Love and nice words to you, that I don't speak or show tenderesses, but don't hold it against me, I do feel it all, and will do a lot better because I can see what it means

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<sup>12</sup> Possible allusion to a passage in Kierkegaard: "Autumn is the time of clouds". In autumn, "the clouds scurry past one another, bump into each other, separate, yearn for one another, intermingle their colours (as friends their blood), become one, even while the individuality of each shines through."

to you, I come from such an uncommunicative family. I will be more tender and loving, outwardly too, with words to you too, Erni – (and don't forget my stupid agitation, I can't do anything about that). I was yours from the first time we met, and will ever remain so, and you are mine. [*Manuscript breaks off.*]

To Erne Döblin, Christmas 1953

Liebe Erne,

dies ist a thank-you letter, first in the presence of your Xmas gifts to me! And then a letter telling you of my gratitude and my friendship. Our quarrels are ephemeral, but my love for you is unchanging, stable, even though – alas! – sometimes concealed (it's my character). I was almost always something of a burden to you, but now at this time of my sickness I weigh heavy as a rock, and you carry it. It is not I who can thank you sufficiently. I can only assure you of my gratitude and believe me that I love you, Erne, and I always loved you.

Your Fr.

*From Erne Döblin to Sascha and Ludwig Marcuse*

University Clinic, Freiburg im Breisgau

23 July 1957

Dear Friends,

Your letter to Emmendingen followed me here, and yesterday your letter to Paris also arrived, with the *Aufbau*. I thank you from my heart, it is so good that a few people can still share human experiences and keep in touch. I would so much like to have spoken with you and reported. Now I have fled here – you won't even be able to decipher my writing – I am in bed, can't type. Soon I'll set off in a car of the Herder Verlag to my graves (on Fr.'s birthday), and try to find peace.

Fre suffered horribly these last few years, despite ever and again – when the torments receded – finding joy in life, interest in goings-on in the world, and in little things around him. In the end the heart gave up, dreadful cystitis, then attacks of pneumonia. He went to sleep, became very young in death, there was a gentle smile on his lips, blessed peace. He went on Wednesday, the Sunday before he had said the most loving words to me, I keep repeating them to myself.

After 10 August [Döblin's birthday] when I find time and leisure, I shall type another letter. There's a huge mass of literary papers (unpublished things), works of his youth and his old age. Dear Marcuse, don't be offended, you are very dear to me and I know your close relationship with Fre. But you have the wrong end of the stick on so much, otherwise you'd never talk of "Sunday tracts". Ever since earliest childhood he sought through fabulation to find religious insight, in the very first notebook – he was around 7 years old – he wrote "What is God?" You know of his later works ... He tried through philosophy, through various religions, his whole life was a preparation for finding his way to Christ (which you mustn't confuse with the Church) – you can read of this even in his "Polish Journey" (1926!). He'd spend hours every day for years reading Thomas Aquinas, even the Evangelists. He left behind a wonderful book, a sequel to *The Immortal Human*, called *Struggle with the Angel: a stroll through the Bible*. Magnificent visions – but Herder was

worried he wouldn't obtain a licence, so didn't print it.<sup>13</sup> *The Pilgrim Aetheria*, a book of grace, Fre's favourite of all his works, remained unpublished etc, etc.<sup>14</sup> But what am I writing here – and you can't read it, my stupid handwriting.

Maybe we shall meet again sometime. I greet you both, and hold you dear.

Your Erne Döblin

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<sup>13</sup> It was first published in 1980, from MSS found in the archive and in Nice (where his son Klaus lived).

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 8 below.

## 6. STAUFFER AND THE WOMEN

*In 1938, immediately after completing his superb South American trilogy Land without Death, Döblin began work on November 1918 – A German Revolution, his enormous epic of the First World War's end. The first volume of the projected trilogy (Citizens & Soldiers) was published in Amsterdam and Stockholm just as war broke out, and so had almost no chance to circulate. In 1940 Döblin lugged the manuscript of his work-in-progress across chaotic, refugee-flooded France, and worked on it for three more years in Los Angeles.*

*On his return to Germany in 1945, Döblin struggled to find a publisher. November 1918 eventually appeared as three separate books in 1948, 1949 and 1950, all with small print runs. The first volume was missing: vetoed by the French Occupation Authority for fear it would stir up resentment in Alsace-Lorraine, which had been occupied by Germany 1871-1919, and 1940-45.*

*The English translation of November 1918 published in 1983 was based on that incomplete first German edition. Apart from the missing first volume, substantial other cuts were made, notably a novella-length storyline about the failing writer Erwin Stauffer, a character introduced almost in passing towards the end of Citizens & Soldiers. Scenes were scattered somewhat haphazardly throughout the later volumes.*

*The whimsical, somewhat burlesque tone conceals deeply felt events in Döblin's own life: a writer, once successful, now out of touch with changing times; and intercepted love letters. (See Chapter 5 above.) The 'Nocturne' episode was privately printed by Döblin while still in the USA.*

*Locations of the passages in the German text, and the cuts in the 1983 English translation by John E Woods, are indicated by the following abbreviations:*

|     |                           |      |                     |
|-----|---------------------------|------|---------------------|
| V V | Verratenes Volk.          | APB  | A People Betrayed   |
| HdF | Heimkehr der Fronttruppen | “    | “                   |
| K&R | Karl und Rosa             | WK&R | Woods Karl and Rosa |

*The format of episode and section titles (capitalised and uncapitalised) follows Döblin's usage.*

*The title is my invention (with a nod to Kingsley Amis).*

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## PROLOGUE

### The Intellectuals' Congress

After fist-shaking exchanges of insults, the manifesto was endorsed by a barely visible majority, which opponents at once rejected as an artefact of chance. It ended with a lengthy debate on procedural rules and statutes; proposals for amending the statutes continued late into the night.

As it grew late, towards midnight, and the session continued with only a few still in attendance, there appeared in the overheated room among the disordered chairs the dramatist Stauffer, an elderly amiable gentleman, small, with a soft dark moustache. Stauffer had been spotted now and then at the congress, always keeping silent. He wrote novellas and well-received plays, mostly set in the Middle Ages, some allegorical, finely chiselled works in rhyme. He was very retiring. Now he sat down next to a tall young lyricist, a lively man with a big dark Woolly head, one of those new poets of humanity. They chatted. Head against the windowsill, the very elegant Stauffer, who already inclined to a certain stoutness, listened with mild weariness to the silver-tongued poet, a true apostle of new things. As he listened he became invigorated. He followed attentively, anxiously even, the words that flowed so effortlessly from the lips of the man opposite. Clearly he was learning something. The tall hymnodist was complimenting his older colleague for having taken the trouble to descend from his lofty belvedere. "Spoken without the least irony. I am a true admirer of yours. I have paid close attention to all your writings."

Stauffer: "You say lofty belvedere. You mean ivory tower." He thanked the younger man for the proffered cigarette. "Of course, what else can you mean. And you are not far wrong, in some respects. I feel it myself."

"And that is why you are especially welcome here."

With a great cry of joy and a hearty laugh, a sturdy athletic man approached from the front, much younger than the quiet dramatist. His face was flushed, his light brown hair hung untidily over his forehead and ears, his little eyes look out with a cunning shrewdness. It was the much-read and very active novelist Wilhelm Morgen. "What! Stauffer in the lion's den?" And he actually hugged the shy visitor, who had stood up with an embarrassed smile. Morgen gushed: "A stroke of genius, your coming here. Stauffer, what if we were all to stand in the corner sulking and not taking part! Wonderful, wonderful. Do you come here often?"

Stauffer replied bashfully that he had turned up a couple of times. Morgen threw up his hands in horror: "And you never made contact with us and never put your name on the attendance list and never came forward to the committee table where you'd have been welcomed with open arms?" And in a quiet but furious voice he related, one arm on the lyricist's shoulder, the other on Stauffer, how things had gone with him and how he'd come through. Had he not been typecast as a conservative, a patriot? "And I make no apology. We've all made mistakes. And I still have certain old predilections. A man can't change just like that. But for that very reason, full speed ahead! Don't keep to the sidelines. People need us."

"Quite right!" the lyricist applauded.

Morgen: "I began as a monarchist. How many of us did not. Does it make sense to be a monarchist today? Play a Cinderella role, like the Carlists in Spain, or the supporters of Mary

Stuart in England? Ridiculous, ridiculous. Go along with it, that's the watchword, and the right one, honestly."

"Exactly what I think," the tall lyricist added, tapping Morgen on the arm. "Naturally, I had no need to change course first." Morgen crowed with delight. He let go of them both: "That's why you are also our flag-bearers, our flame, the pillar of fire in the desert, no anti-Semitic allusion intended. For you ought to know, Stauffer, what he wrote recently, I know it by heart: 'Arouse thyself, man from the masses. Come away from the doltish, the desiccated. Abandon the sad heaps, leave the past behind. Come to me, brother!'" The lyricist gave a smug smile. "You've remembered it perfectly. It begins: 'I see thee that mournest in thy lonely room.'"

Stocky Morgen suddenly offered Stauffer his short firm hand in a sober and businesslike manner: "Anyway, Stauffer, it was a splendid idea for you to come here." He had noticed that a vote was being taken up front, and dashed off. The young lyricist gave a knowing nod at his back: "That man went with one bound from monarchist to confirmed democrat."

Stauffer: "A whirlwind. Such vigour."

The lyricist: "Of course there are opportunists too."

They stood silent, side by side. The lyricist waited for the famous visitor to make some kind of statement. Then he forced a smile, excused himself and left. Stauffer bowed politely. Left alone he gazed across rows of empty chairs to the front, where a small crowd was arguing. He drew back the curtain, looked out on the dark Tiergarten.

No one noticed him leave.

## Ep. 1: OLD LETTERS

It was already deep in the night when the dramatist and novelist Stauffer started awake. Still fully dressed, among a disorder of books, he had fallen asleep in the armchair. The three flames in the ceiling light dazzled him. He pulled out his watch, half past two. Bitter taste, mouth gummed up. Tall packing chests over by the chaise longue. He planned to move out on 1<sup>st</sup> December, away from the Bavarian quarter of Berlin, out and away. Damn the revolution, every evening the neighbourhood, Spichernstrasse, was in uproar. He'd had enough.

He sits so stiffly, stout man in his armchair massaging his left arm; it's gone to sleep. The desk is within reach. His eye falls on the big open packet under the table lamp. It came into his hands towards midnight, seemed to be just letters, then he succumbed to weariness, and slept.

He shifts closer to the desk, pulls a sheet from the packet, reads. He has no idea who wrote it. Addressed by his first name, Erwin, at the sign-off he's embraced and kissed. It ends with a big flourishing K. He doesn't know who sent it. He yawns.

Another sheet, different handwriting. Strange occupation, shuffling through papers at three in the morning. But he wants this. He stretches an arm over the abyss, wants to be down there. Cheap little sheets, regular schoolchild script. Who is it? She calls me "My own Erwin", "Your Elsa". I don't know, I do not know, who it is, must have been around at some point, our paths must have crossed. But I know nothing.

His arm drops slack to his knee. Is he falling asleep again? His head turns to the side. That's me. I just don't know.



Standing clearly before his eyes, his former wife, Klara, daughter of an industrialist. At the start of his fame they lived together, she's been back in her Hamburg a long while now. Mother with her daughter, gone our separate ways with no fuss at all. She I do remember, we earned my first laurels together. I never loved Klara, she never loved me. Strange notion, we paired up just like that, and there's my living daughter.

He squinted sideways at the packet, had to reach out again. The arm stayed stretched, hand stuck among rustling paper, fingers crumpling pages. I've grown old. I'm useless now. My plays are still staged, but not in Berlin. They no longer resonate. I've noticed for a while now. A few weeks ago, the first act of my play in Dresden, I had to run out to the street, find a little bar, sit with a glass of beer, stunned, so it was true what I'd noticed for months: they no longer resonate, the plays are the same but the people have changed, the times too, and me. Slumped there with a beer. I'm losing my marbles, I'm a war victim, severely wounded.

And so turn about, head in the sand, oh yes.

His hand pulled out a letter. At random. Who's this writing to me? Hearken, people, let's see now to what you wrote me, for sure I barely read it. Postmark 12 March 1899. Right, Florence, to me, from 1899, a year after the child was born, Klara's parents wanted a child, we didn't.

A letter to me from 1899. This demands a formal toast, to think it's actually found me. And he climbs to his feet, stuffs the letter in his jacket pocket and stumbles from the cluttered library to the next room, it's dark. He clicks the light switch, damn, bulbs must've gone. Feels his way along the wall of the dining room until he meets the well-turned legs of the sideboard, bends down, tugs at a door, feels for a bottle. And without looking he carries it back to the lighted room, sits in the armchair by the desk, strokes the bushy grey moustache back from his lips and takes two deep swigs, tipping back the head and its sweat-clammy hair. He gasps at the second swig, it's neat rum, the bottle drops to the floor between his knees. He gasps, rubs his eyes, snorts, phew, that burns. Does me no good, toasting these old letters. The burning in his throat and stomach fades. Maybe I'm woozy. His hand feels in his pocket.

*I salute you, phial of rare potion, I lift you down, with devotion!* Florence, 1899. He picks up a paperknife and runs it slowly down the edge of the envelope. So, now you've arrived. We hear of Pharaohs' tombs in the Pyramids, opened later there were miasmas, people died.

It must be an actress, I don't know the handwriting, easy, rhythmic, I see a small brunette, a heart – when she's older she'll be good for a mother-role. And now, good Lord, she pays me a visit. He unfolded the letter on the desk, three sheets, it'll start "Dear Erwin, my dear Erwin" or "Beloved Erwin". He reads: "My heaven, my joy, my one and only, the only one I love on this Earth."

What is this? Who? To me? Where's the envelope? Yes, addressed to me. He turns the page over: "Lucie". That was the female lead in my, what was my play called? *The First Snow*. She's taken the name from that.

"My heaven, my joy, my one and only, the only person I love on this Earth. I don't know when I'll be able to reach you with this letter, for you said you'll be travelling, or are already on the road. Erwin, if there is such a thing as Truth, before myself, before you, before God in whom I believe, then I tell you: I did not want this. I did not flinch from Fate when I met you in the Director's office, for the audition. To my – to our – joy. It was the first time I became aware of an inexpressible feeling: there you are, there you stand, there you speak – you, mine, me, more

than me. When I saw you that first time, I no longer felt myself as me. It was over with me, now it was only 'us'. And now it has taken this path. This wretched path I never meant to take. Who am I now, Erwin, after you have said 'yes' to me once, twice? After I have lost myself to you."

His fingers drummed on the desktop. Who's the subject here, no one's ever spoken to me like this, ever. He raised his head and stared at the open packet, this Pandora's Box. He tugged at the thick wrapping paper, and the first thing that fell out when he bent back the stiff edge was a bundle of letters tied with thick lilac tape. He scattered the pile, maybe there are more bundles, no. This letter had come from the bundle, the tape was loose.

Unusual tape. Such a smell, an intense fragrance. I know the colour: Klara's night-gown, when she had the child, way back then. But how did the tape attach itself to these letters? He fastened the tape, flung the bundle gloomily down on the desk. As if I'm paralytic, I have no memory, I remember the tape, but not that she gave it me, no.

Bemusement, profound consternation: so many unopened letters, six, eight, eleven, fifteen, same handwriting, sent to our Berlin address. And I never opened any? Was I travelling, too busy, sick? Impossible. I was in good health, then.

Why were the letters unopened.

"You must not misunderstand me, it should cause you no grief that I desired you. Did you not say to me once that you desired me too, and you added – it made me laugh and I really knew you – that you were a puzzle to yourself, and had never known yourself like this – like a young girl in love for the first time.

"But I was already terribly ahead of you, Erwin. I saw and knew at once that it was not about your wife – to her you were merely an ornament – but about your fame, your many many women (forgive me), your plays. I was delighted to play your 'Lucie'. Every one of your words revealed you, I knew at once who you are, better than you yourself. And you took me on, as was your duty towards yourself, and then, now –

"The bond, Erwin, established between you and me is no whim. It is not one that can be broken by any act of yours or mine. It was imposed on you and me by laws natural and supernatural. And so it remains to this day, to this moment when you are still here. And you?

"All I can do now is make a note for the record. You said my voice is like yours, and is for you. But you permitted me no more than to lift it up to you. You stroked my hand not four weeks ago, you were so full of cares – and left. And then the pain entered into me.

"I saw you dozens of times. I asked myself: what has happened? I avoided following you. The fame, the many, many women – your plays, or what is it? It must be, Erwin, that you are already so lost in it all that you can nevermore come free of it.

"My arms always yearned for you, yet you shied from my touch. But the bond between you and me, Erwin, was and remains firm, let me repeat this. I complain, but it won't happen again. The pain is a poison, and should not extend to you. My loving friend, who dare not come into your own life. My love for you is endless, endless. I am holding a picture of you on my knee. I know you as well as your own mother, know who you are and that you belong to me.

"The pain in me is cruel. Help me, when you come back again. Be kind to me. I am distraught. Erwin. Death is at my door. Forgive me for not holding myself back."

He read, read again, again. And then: "Lucie". A slim blonde beginner, who was swiftly given the part. A passionate creature, I really know nothing more of her, not even her surname.

But why then did I open none of these fifteen letters? That's not like me.

No, I'm not to blame. I'm no such common beast. The letters were kept from me. I was obstructed, I was ...

What's this now (he pulls out another letter), a picture postcard from Milan, Teatro alla Scala, her writing. "I do not want to go on alone, not one more step."

Unread, held back, deception, murder. Murder... No one ever spoke like that to me.

He leans over the packet, pulls out another. In pencil: "Just don't think about it, or tears come. I am nearby, in a hotel. Loud voices outside my door, singing from the next room. I have become a dog, chasing after you. I am afraid of the worst, of dying. Maybe I did not try hard enough to tell you what you are to me – that is not your problem. But there is one thing I must say to you:

"Erwin, you live in direst poverty and do not realise. From you come such abundance and music, but how are they to thrive in the long term? Who will add to them? How do you think to grow – without me? Acknowledge what it is that you hang over yourself. Do not do this, I warn you. I love, love you endlessly. In loving you I have my bliss. And I call to you, do not deny us, recall your words whispered to me as we sat side by side, whispered to my throat. I cannot conceive, cannot conceive what has become of me in just three days, ever since you would not let go my hand after the audition. Yes, Erwin, it was I who held you tight. I am proud of it."

He slumped over the desk. His head knocked the lamp. The fat packet scratched his chin. He groaned, his gaze drifted down. This is too much. Then – he noticed in the middle of the packet a letter in very large format. His name stabbed him in the eye. No stamps. An envelope of Klara's, her handwriting.

A forgotten letter? It too is unopened.

A chill falls over him. The tape too was Klara's.

He puts the letter down.

What's going on here? What do they want of me? He climbs to his feet. He steps away to protect himself, stands in the middle of the room.

I should leave. This is a Pharaoh's tomb. I was about to undress. Someone put it there among my papers.

What does Klara have to do with it. I've been carrying the letters around with me all the time, among my papers, without knowing.

I'll have another swig before I get to grips with it, that pile of letters from her. I shall wear fur gloves – or I'll smash the whole packet with a hammer.

His teeth chattered. He paced up and down, shivering. Rum, yes, a rum. He picked up the bottle. There'll be a drop left at the bottom. He flung the empty bottle at the chair and began to curse softly, fists at his face. Monster, monster, just wait till I catch you, monster, you do not know me, you do not know what I have in me.

Once more to the phial of potion.

Klara's elegant, regular script, look at it: "Dear Erwin". You can keep the "dear", you iceberg from the northern coast.

"It will a special surprise for you one day to find my letters among your papers, after we exchanged all our correspondence yesterday. But this letter is new, and then one day, one very distant day you, or maybe someone else – for you too will die – your executor, your heir, will read it. For I do not want the words buried in my breast under the rubric 'Erwin', to remain there and maybe all at once disappear along with me. Whether this letter reaches you who will leave our shared house tomorrow, or someone else, it will have its effect.

"And that is what I want. Yes, Erwin, what a shock: Klara wants it too. One day Klara will want it. But I would prefer that it reach you while you are still alive. I shall tuck this letter along with certain others in the trunk where you keep your letters. The letters with which mine belong I shall bundle with tape from the nightgown I wore before our daughter came along, she who now has no father.

"We married almost ten years ago. At least, we lived together for ten years. I came to know you better than you know me, better than you realised. You never looked at me, not really. I was never a beauty, and during those ten years under your influence I certainly grew no uglier. I did everything to please you. I – Erwin, don't be startled that now a word comes between us that I never uttered – I loved you. Even now it is with inexpressible pain that I let you go.

"But I shrank back in the face of your silent assurance, your shameful determination to treat me as your wife, your housewife, your representative to the world. Honourably, to be sure, most honourably, but a stony-hearted honour.

"This left poor me, forbidden to speak and conscious of nothing but shame, with no recourse but to freeze into myself. In this you did me dreadful wrong. I could have forgiven you all your women, most of whom I knew, and could have led you, the artist not to be measured by normal standards, to others yet prettier and more refined. But there I still was. Even if only as Klara, your wife.

"It was four weeks ago, in this room where I now write, that you broached, off the cuff, the idea that we should separate. You saw no need to offer particular reasons. When I said nothing, for you it was all nicely settled.

"During these weeks I have despised you, and wrestle even now with my feelings of contempt for the man at whose side I spent ten years, who shows no respect for his little daughter, his family – and leaves.

"I have taken my revenge, Erwin. I see you smile: Klara taking revenge.

"You find my letter among a dozen others.

"I have seen 'her', and twice, in your absence, have spoken briefly with her, in the entrance hall. A single glance showed me who it was standing there, young, upright, resolved, not especially pretty.

"Who? I myself. Someone who loved you, and wanted to obtain her life from you.

"But Lucie – she really was called Lucie, you presaged her name and her fate in your play – her eyes and voice took all hope from me. I had no such unselfconscious strength.

“After the second meeting my resolve hardened. For I could also see how you behaved, and what was playing out in you. You were not torn between me and her – I came as little into consideration as any other member of my family, or yours. Your struggle was between her – and your whole life so far. Even your art was at stake. She had plunged you into a crisis. She was that strong. For sure she had attained her goal – my goal.

“So I set to. I admit that in doing so I did not love you. The slave to which you had reduced me wanted revenge. The slave wanted to act on her own behalf. It was your curse upon me that made nothing else possible.

“She came several times to our house. She was adamant, shameless towards me, knowing me to be your wife. I received her, or told her from you that you were working. She telephoned; I took the call. I did housemaid’s duty with the apparatus, and failed to pass on messages. Letters from her arrived. I opened them, read them, tore them up. I confess it. Then I no longer bothered to open them. Here they are. You heard nothing more from her. You wavered, vaguely wondered, and then forgot.

“After Florence she fell silent. She never showed up again in the theatre. I have no idea if she is still alive. Even if – as I often ask myself – she died somehow because of how I treated her: Erwin, I take full responsibility. It was life against life. And I proved the stronger.

“This I say to you through this letter. Now you no longer see me as a stupid servant, an insignificant member of the family. I hope that in future the name I now sign with will sound differently in your ears.

“On this unhappy day, weeping for herself and her little daughter. Klara.”

Mouth agape, beset by cold shudders, he read this.

He stood up from the desk, panting, he groaned, fingers clawed. The monster. She stole my life. He groaned out loud, growled: “Murderess, ice-cold Kriemhilde.” He stamped his feet, trampled her with every step: Homicidal monster, monster. He began to tremble, there in the middle of the room, to shake like those war wounded out in the street. His voice grew louder, became a bestial bellow.

The porter downstairs had long since been wakened by the noises overhead, and imagined one of the house-raids so common just then. Now that it had come to loud voices, crashing objects, he pulled on some clothes and ran upstairs, listened. He heard glass break, ran back down and alerted a police patrol from nearby Speichern Strasse, two men on bicycles. He opened up for them.

They were greeted by a horrible scream. The man screamed “Help, help.” He hid behind the chaise longue. There was a smell of rum. The tenant was clearly drunk, there were no strangers in the apartment. The porter took the initiative to fetch the doctor from the second floor. He knew the gentleman, the famous dramatist. Stauffer was wheezing on the chaise longue, pointing to the desk. “There. My wife has murdered me. I’m done for. It’s all over with me.”

The doctor nodded, smiled, and led him to the bed. As he helped him undress he prepared an injection. Fifteen minutes later the famous man was fast asleep.

As he left he whispered to the porter: “The revolution. Sensitive man. Nerves.”

The porter: “That’s how he draws the crowds.”

## Ep. 2: FRUITLESS JOURNEY

*A dramatist snores. Intellectual workers represent public interests and eat tarts.  
A chap wakes up, travels to Hamburg and is surprised by his cool reception.*

### Prologue

They hear snoring, regular, sometimes soft, sometimes loud, sometimes vibrant enough to make the walls tremble.

It is the dramatist Stauffer, that refined man, on whom his body plays this trick. But now, in the afternoon, he is still under the influence of the injection administered last night by the doctor on the second floor.

The apartment is as disordered as it was last night. The empty rum bottle stands on the desk beside the gaping packet from which letters spill. "Dear Erwin". "Ever yours, Grete".

A whole line of letters stretches away between the boxes, like a trail of blood.

"My Heaven, my whole life, my joy".<sup>15</sup>

### Stauffer on the Warpath

That night, while much went on in the world that troubled his sleep not at all, our gloomy dramatist Stauffer awoke and found himself in bed in the company of all the old miseries. But things that can never be predicted or properly pinned down (internal glands? Rays from certain stars?) had the effect of lifting from Stauffer all the sorrows he had wallowed in so intensely for months, especially yesterday. Those letters in the night had delivered a decisive jolt. He was raging, savage, active, hauled out of the basest miseries.

He dressed, swiftly consigned to the trunk all manuscripts and letters he could find without regard to persons, piled heavy books over them and topped the whole thing with an irrevocable lid. For he had made his decision: open the window, go to the telephone, and travel by the next train to Hamburg. The train, according to the travel agent, would leave in one hour. The dramatist, never for a second wondering how and why he had so suddenly adopted this course of action (mere vexation, after-effect of the morphine jab, the stars, internal secretions?), had already picked up hat and coat and crammed essential items haphazardly into a suitcase. Downstairs he shook the porter's hand most heartily and thanked him for his help in the night, nervous state, nerves, all the turmoil these days. He asked him to convey thanks to the doctor, and pressed a three Mark coin into his hand: "If the apartment hasn't already been rented out (it hasn't) I'll stay one more month. I must make an urgent trip, be back in a week."

And he rides courageously through the city of Berlin which has suddenly become once again interesting, to Lehrter Station, to sort out this nocturnal business of Klara's. It really was beyond the limit.

The good fellow forgets a great deal in his haste, setting out so furiously and soon rushing through the dark on the train: for example that he had a date for nine this evening with an

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<sup>15</sup> Stauffer's name is edited out of the following 'Intellectual Workers...' section in Woods. The Episode 2 deletion resumes at APB 186]

actress from Dresden by the name of Bella, who was coming to Berlin especially for that purpose, and what's more he hadn't informed his forwarding agent of the change of location. But he's not bothered. At least he's on his way. He seems to himself ten years younger, twenty even, and so completely that it seems he left the marital home in Hamburg only yesterday, the home inherited by Klara from her parents. He will tackle her about all this.

### Ep. 3: VENGEFUL MAN IN HAMBURG

And now Stauffer in his wide fleece coat alights from the train in Hamburg, picks up his little suitcase and before setting off to find a hotel– it's late evening – sits across from the station in a crowded music restaurant, seething with an unfamiliar din of human voices of a kind he has long shunned, and the booming of a band. It's hard to find a seat, he lays his coat across a stool and puts down his suitcase, and as he stands at the counter to buy cigars, keeping an eye on the coat, sees his handkerchief poking out suspiciously, and a glove has fallen to the floor. He feels in the pocket, and was not mistaken: his wallet has gone.

He stares around in alarm, and sits down.

A waiter says: "There's no thieving here." The manager appears, points accusingly to a sign announcing the management's lack of responsibility for garments unless deposited in the cloakroom. Every eventuality allowed for and foreseen. Stauffer resigns himself even to this. He shrinks. Something – fate or a demon – is exercising its mischief on him.

He heads for the nearby modern hotel, and allows himself – it's coming up to midnight, so long since he was in Hamburg! – allows himself to be pulled along by the stream of humanity around the station into the brightly lit main street. He is moving into cold clear night. Such a fresh world, life so lively as to be a miracle, red flags on several rooftops stand out alongside others black-white-red, the lights from below glare eerily harsh, they pulse and blink. The big clock in a store is lit from within, it shows midnight. And as the clock with its internal illumination and the hands point ominously to the turn of the day, just so do the people and the buildings, silhouetted by fire, the way they move, seem to be a kind of idea, a legible script that speaks to the eyes but avoids speech.

Who has done this to us, Stauffer ask himself. A happy terror twitches in him. The phrase "stung by a divine bee" comes to mind. He strides jauntily along, he is bright, young, transformed. And he inhales a strong spice, a most pungent lure draws him on. And he is a magnet, and soon no longer walks alone, on each side there's a woman, they cling to him and he doesn't shake them off. He thinks: Bella's waiting for me back in Berlin, but what of Bella, this is something else, I'm in a boat, holding the tiller.

He finds the small brunette, the quieter one, most appealing, follows her into his room. How many years since a woman, any woman, captivated him so violently, so irresistibly. Marriage, a wedding with a seething life that had already abandoned him. Let it be, even unto my death.

He slept in the hotel until midday. And as he dressed he remembered: I came to Hamburg to pay Klara a visit.

She brought all this on me.

He dressed slowly, checking to see what he had in him. He meant the visit to be a kind of revenge and punishment. But did it still make sense?

He would have to ride out to Eimsbüttel. I shall go down to the street and see how things are. Outside, cars tooted in the bright daylight, tram bells clanged, people went about their business, flags red and black-white-red still flapped in the breeze, but weren't lit up like last night, secrets no longer dared step forth. Still, it was good to stroll along here. Finally he called a cab and rode on out.

He knew the big yellow villa on a street corner that she inherited from her parents, an extensive property with a pond. Who knows, she may not even live here now. The thought came to him as he rang the bell and no one answered. What am I doing here, actually – but now feet come pattering, a dog barks, the door opens.

First to appear was a black onrushing dog held back by a lead. Then a merry young lady, elegantly dressed with untidy dark blonde hair, poked her little nose out, still laughing from some conversation; she ordered the dog Mirza to heel. Only then did she deign to look up to the man standing there and ask, as she clamped the dog between her knees: "Yes?"

Stauffer lifted his hat and asked for the lady of the house. She shook her head: "Mama's not here. The best place to look for Mama at this time of day is at the hotel."

"Hotel? Doesn't she live here?"

The girl laughed: "Of course she does, but in the mornings she's at our hotel."

"Which one is that?"

"Excelsior! Near the station."

Ah, the same one he was staying at, he'd just come from there.

Stauffer stammered in confusion: "I wish to speak privately with the lady."

The young woman, quite natural, in no way interested in him, still clutching the dog, suggested pleasantly: "If it's urgent you can wait here, I'll telephone. Mama would be back soon anyway."

The dog whined horribly, she let go, it rushed at Stauffer, who stepped back. She laughed out loud at the scene. He asked, putting his hat back on, if he might approach.

A myriad thoughts rushed through his head. This exuberant creature must be his daughter. She didn't recognise him, of course he didn't know her. She might be adopted. No, she was Laura's age. So, her mother Klara owned a hotel. It took the wind out of his sails.

She let him step past into a small unheated room off the entrance lobby, a kind of boot room of which he had no memory. She soon reappeared, still with the big dog tugging ahead. She had a pert ingenuous manner: "So I phoned, and Mama has left the hotel. I hope she isn't going shopping. How do you know Mama, actually? From the theatre?"

Droll creature. What fun having a daughter like her.

"But your good lady mother was never in the theatre."

"You think. Of course. So you don't know her at all."

She was already stepping away, pulling the dog behind her. Her face hardened: "Actually I didn't catch your name. What is it you want?"



He wagged a menacing finger and smiled: "Look here, you really shouldn't let just anyone in. I might be a Spartacist."

"Who are you?"

"My dear young lady, I used to know you, yes, you, when you were very small. Let me provide proof, as in an old fairytale. If you go down this passage you come first to a dark room with antlers. Past the antler room, which serves, or used to, as a breakfast room, you go through a door, which back then was hung with a curtain, into a dining room. That leads to the garden, it has a stucco ceiling with little boxes, and in each box is an electric bulb."

Her eyes widened. She came closer, sat. She said softly: "That fits. So – do you know me?" He shook his head: "I believe the little girl who was pointed out to me back then as she was led by the hand around the garden – was you."

She lifted her head: "It will have been me. But that was ages ago. So you must know my father as well." Her face had narrowed, the frizzy head no longer matched the grave tense expression.

He: "I saw your father only once. He was always very busy, and distracted."

She, quickly: "My father is the dramatist Stauffer."

He nodded dismissively: "I know."

She, sly: "He doesn't live here. You know him? Well?"

He: "Only what I read about him in the papers."

She nodded: "He's famous." She waited for him to say something, then ran to the door: "I'll show you a picture." In a moment she was back, this time leaving the dog in the lobby. She was holding a framed picture. "This is him. Do you recognise him?" She looked lovingly at the photo: "He looks overwhelmed with sadness. I do regret I was so little back then, and never knew him."

"You know his plays?"

She sighed: "All of them. All. They're so difficult. But lovely, really lovely. I have a girlfriend, she's mad about his plays. And I like his poetry."

"Do you work, my dear young lady?"

"I've had acting lessons, I really wanted to be an actress but I lack the patience, and I can't think my way into artificial roles. But it's cold in here, come to the breakfast room."

As he followed her down the passage, his heart was thumping so in amazement, excitement and expectation that he had to hold on to the wall. She opened the door: "Here we are. Do you know the room?"

He pulled himself together. She pointed to the antlers.

Then the doorbell rang three times. "Mama."

A pity, he thought. The dog barked furiously and rushed ahead, she following. The chain clinked, the pin dropped into place.

And now there was a tremendous familiar commotion in the passage. Four voices could be made out, first the deep bass of a man who laughed like a hurricane, beginning with a cannon-

shot (clearly the merriment in him was held in under enormous pressure), then the giggling soothing voice of a woman that could make no headway against the man's laughter and had to extricate itself from the confusion; and then the protesting voice of the young lady, but she was helpless against the two adults whose tumult preceded them in from the street. And finally the dog, barking from its own joy or sympathy with the others' joy or in protest because it had no clue, but deafening in any case. The tumult lingered some minutes at the front door (they must be taking coats off outside), then rumbled like a machine of war down the passage and very quickly reached the antler room where Stauffer sat, completely still, rather nervous and ashamed. Now the young lady's voice prevailed. Stauffer heard her cry: "My God, there's a gentleman here waiting to see you, mama."

"Well then, we'd best be off, Laura!" the amiable bass voice threatened.

And there they were at the threshold, the source of the voices, and now all four – man, woman, young lady, dog – stepped into the room where Stauffer stood hat in hand, awkwardly, like a travelling salesman. The bearded elemental force greeted him with a jovial look, a collegial wave of the hand, a wink (ah, he thinks I'm a commercial rep), then the man kissed the woman: "You can probably manage without me now."

"Of course. Be off, you old monster!" the woman laughed, and clapped him on the back as he strolled out.

Then they were three – or four if you counted the dog.

The woman, a large figure wearing an imposing black dress trimmed with fur, brooch flashing at her breast, strong hands with many rings, several bracelets tinkling on her right arm, now stepped towards him with an obliging smile. She had a healthy energetic face, not old, the eyes blue, around her mouth traces of merriment from her conversation with the man.

At first there was only the daughter's voice, as she swept past her mother: "I'll just retrieve the picture, mama."

"What picture?"

Stauffer stands facing the sturdy woman, makes a bow.

The woman's hand clutches her throat. Her full face, reddened by the cold, turns a shade paler, her mouth opens as if she can't breathe, she drops into the chair where her daughter had sat, says not a word. Stauffer too keeps silent. Then, eyes still on the hat in his hands, he too sinks slowly back onto his chair.

The daughter lays an arm over the mother's shoulder, looks bewildered from one to the other, whispers: "What is it, mother, what's going on?"

As Stauffer sits head drooping like a poor penitent and the woman stares at him as if at a ghost, the daughter removes her arm from her mother, kicks the dog aside; it howls and creeps to the door. She stands between her mother and Stauffer, frowning.

The woman has regained her faculties, sits upright and says in a hard tone: "Go, Laura. Leave me alone with the gentleman." The daughter, hesitant: "Can I not stay, mother?" The woman: "Please, leave us." So the daughter steps slowly to the door, picks up the dog's lead, looks over her shoulder with a grim hostile glare at the man, this old acquaintance of her mother's she was just chatting with, runs back to the table, retrieves the photo, and she and the dog are gone.

Laying her right arm across the table like a weapon, the hand pressed flat, the woman asks in a hard voice: "What do you want?"

He doesn't know this woman. No trace of Klara, except perhaps the general shape of the face. He replies: "I'm in Hamburg for a few days, and thought I'd pay you a visit."

She is silent. Then, with the same free open expression she had when they entered the room, she said: "You are either ill, or mad." He (how to come out of this, I'm in a totally false position, she'll soon be asking what I need): "I do beg your pardon. It was just an idea. I didn't mean to intrude."

"Didn't mean to intrude? You turn up here after nineteen years, unannounced, sit yourself down with the girl, and tell me you don't mean to intrude? What are you up to? To what purpose have you done this? Have you lost your mind?"

He is already on his feet. She too stands. She is fizzing with anger.

He tells the strange lady: "Once again, I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to intrude." He goes to the door, makes a formal bow to her back.

The girl is standing by the wall in the passage, head proudly high, arms crossed over her breast. She lets him go by without raising her eyes. He can't open the lock, fiddles helplessly. She comes up, opens it with a flick, cold air pours in. He stares at her, enchanted, unable to move from the spot.

Shattered, he says softly: "Adieu, Laura."

In the quiet street of villas he looks around to see if he is followed.

But no one comes.

#### Ep. 4: Death's Siren Song

After his conversation with Klara, Stauffer checked out of the hotel into which he had innocently booked. He transferred to another a long way from the station. He could have travelled home, his presence there was urgent, but Hamburg held him in thrall.

The meeting with Klara had thrown him into a confusion like that occasioned by his leafing through the old letters. So it was true what he suspected that night: Fate has set him a trap, he's landed in a diabolical ambush. Somehow he had been made to find the letters, then he was impelled to make this Hamburg trip, in order to – see this woman, this family, in order to make him see for a moment what he had lost, his Paradise Lost. They mocked him with their laughter.

They were sitting outside his door.

For whole minutes he was choked by a feeling quite alien to him: envy, self-disgust, abasement to an outrageous degree. But he grasped the unworthy sentiment by the throat and hurled it aside. He was once again on the vengeful warpath, like that afternoon when he emerged from sleep and decided to go to Hamburg. Long hours would now be devoted to planning revenge.

Next morning he reviewed the situation. He was overwhelmed by awareness of his utter impotence. He looked on his fate like a detective who has cornered a cunning criminal and

finally secured a confession. There he stood fettered, hands behind his back, head lowered, awaiting the fatal blow.

Then he marched up and down the room and bewailed his fate. He implored the powers that stand over our existence to be merciful and just, more than just. He conducted a silent dialogue of defence and prayer.

And so it came that he sat at the window in the sitting room filled with the light of a new day, pad of paper on his knees, and pulled the pen (that old weapon) from his waistcoat pocket and settled into a posture where he knew himself to be master, namely that of a writer.

Torment still gnawed away inside and acted like an all-powerful mistress over him, she disported in the liveliest fashion, whirled (so it seemed) around him like a bat. But her dominion would soon be at an end. He raised his magic wand, his pen, and on the blank paper drew her contours, her ugly wings. He revealed the ugliness of her body, she had no defence, he held her in thrall. Thus Stauffer's thoughts, and he set to.

A wild torrent of writing flowed from his pen. He set to, and drew this picture:

*Death's Siren Song*

They come back from the War  
And stream down every street.  
You see in them the joy  
At their escape:  
    Escape from what?  
And the joy of wives and loved ones  
To have them back again:  
    For how long?  
Oh gloomy veil  
That hangs before their eyes,  
Oh the rapture flowing in their limbs,  
And deadening the brain:  
Of these bright beings it is  
The driver.  
But they –  
However loud their stepping,  
Their stamping and clacking,  
They are but misty shapes  
Harried by the wind,  
And do not know it.  
In the corner of a narrow room  
I lay and slept  
And slept.  
And when I awoke,  
To the barred window I went  
And shook the bars  
And wanted to leave  
But could not.  
But you kept walking by outside,  
And sometimes I knew you  
As I know you now.

I heard your gentle swirling music,  
The light tread of your dancers,  
The scrape and scuffle of their flags.  
And in your silken garb  
You went by outside,  
You monarch, royal majesty:  
Death.  
It is a weed,  
This thing called "I".  
It grew up in this world.  
And from the world to clear  
Every stump and stem,  
Every root and shoot,  
Is my fealty and my fear,  
No venture dearer  
That I may enter on.  
O Death, we shall know right soon  
Who you are, who we are not.  
We windblown mist-shapes,  
We drunken braggarts,  
Empty vessels,  
We are not life,  
And you are not Death.  
From a hand by us unknown,  
We drift into this place.  
With what wild rage it burns,  
This "I" that I have "graced".  
Now lay hold of me and take me up,  
And lead me one small step  
To you, back to wholesomeness.  
The poison has now burned enough.  
To light and shade, the bloom of flowers  
Will I open up and make avowal.  
I will exchange the spasms of the "I"  
For music, dance, flags flying high.  
Take me, Death, raise me up to Thee,  
One call, O Death, and I am with Thee.

Writing this has calmed him. He gives his pen a grateful look and places it carefully back into his pocket. He regards the paper with the lines attentively, takes it to the fireplace, it catches fire and he watches it go up in flames. Then he sleeps, quite calmed.

In the afternoon, before he is ready to go down for tea, a visit from a lady is announced. He asks the name, doesn't recognise it. He declares he's just about to come down. Let the lady wait in the lobby.

But when he puts on his hat and takes the key from the lock, there comes a brief energetic knocking. It had already seemed that someone was trying the door. He calls out: "Enter."

Quickly, even hastily, a young person holding a pair of ice skates, boots and all, sweeps in and at once places herself with her back to the door-curtain.

It takes him two seconds to recognise Laura, his daughter.

His left hand automatically drops the key into his pocket, his right hand removes his hat. So surprised is he to see the girl in his company, a scene he has now and then pondered with pride, but superficially.

She remains glued to the door. The skates scrape the floorboards.

He: "Laura. Please, I beg your pardon, I'm sorry, I was just coming down to the lobby."

She wore a little green hat with fur trimmings. Her jacket and skirt too were green. The jacket collar and sleeves were hemmed with fur. She stood there defiant and wild, stared directly into his eyes. Those blue-green eyes – they were his, the mouth too maybe, but his was not so tight-pressed. She said not a word.

"Would you like to sit down?" he offered, "I'll just take off my coat." She steps away from the door and sits stiffly on a chair at the table. He asks: "May I take the skates?"

Her first words, toneless: "Thanks, I'll hold on to them."

"You'll catch cold."

"It's OK."

He has no idea why she's sitting there. Was she sent by her mother. He sat down opposite at the little square hotel table covered in newspapers and books, and swept the papers aside. "I'm really glad you've given me the pleasure of this visit."

She dropped the skates and boots, put an elbow on the table, rested her chin on her hand. Her wild look reminded him of Ibsen's Wild Duck, parents quarrelling, they don't think of the child, and here we are. I've always depicted individual fates, but I was on the outside. How vehemently it now assails me, leaves me no peace in my room, sits at my table.

She said: "You came to us yesterday. Why didn't you tell me who you are? You let me show you a photo. You tricked me."

"That – your mother must have said that."

"So anyway, why did you come to see us? I've never had a chance to meet you. Mother's told me about you."

"What has she told you?"

"You abandoned her when I was a baby. And never troubled yourself about us."

"I knew things weren't going badly for you two. Otherwise I'd have shown up."

Her hand dropped to the table: "Mama had no use for you, thank God. But I was there too."

There was a high wall around his heart. Things had always gone well for him. Only for a vicarious experience did he climb often to the crest of this wall, and describe what he saw. Now he trembled when she said: "I was there too." He couldn't tell her he'd never once thought of her. Laura: squalling infant in a pram, a bleating thing. All the past is ganging up on me. My life will have a kind of Day of Judgement.

“What was I supposed to do?” he acted disingenuous. “Trouble myself? You saw how your mother reacted when I turned up.”

“Nonsense.” She transformed herself into a miniature Fury “Mama was outraged to see you turn up like that now. After nineteen years. Suddenly you have a notion to come along, just on a whim. But never in those nineteen years.”

“Did your mother miss me?”

“I don’t know. I only found out about you after I started school. And I didn’t understand anything until I was twelve.”

“What did you understand?”

A child’s soul. Women have busied themselves so much with me. I pleased them, or caused them worries. They love you and curse you. But a child. Remarkable to have an effect on a child, to grow into its soul.

The girl took off her fur cap. She put it down, toyed with it. She seems serious, a proper person. A wave of joy swept over Stauffer. Won’t she take off the heavy jacket?

She: “You know about the Indians in North America? Whites, English and American, came along. They took all their land, the Indians became homeless. I’ve seen Indians, at the circus, and at the Berlin Ethnological Park. Those Indians remind me of me. When I was small I wanted for nothing. I never noticed anything. Later, at school. When I was twelve I began to grieve. Mama noticed. I couldn’t explain to her. She put it down to my age. I collected pictures of you from newspapers, and made an album with the reviews. I never missed a single one of your plays in Hamburg. Mama thought I was at the cinema. And I wrote to you.”

“What?”

“You replied. You were very friendly. I used a different name.”

“And you came to see me here under a different name.”

“I used Karla Schröter, from one of your novellas.”

The name Lucie came to mind. The mysterious Lucie had done likewise.

He heaved a sigh and asked: “Won’t you take off your jacket? It’s warm in here.”

She made no objection, stood up, took the jacket off and hung it up. He stood too: “Shall I take your hat?” And he hung it on the stand.

Now he was behind the girl and sat beside her on the sofa. They both looked at the window. It had begun to snow, the room had brightened considerably. He thought in amazement: I’m sitting with my daughter in a hotel room in Hamburg – and was unable to press through to a clear feeling.

She said nothing, He too. To his surprise her face when it turned to him was hard: “What happens now?” He made no reply, not understanding the question. “Will you go away again, or ...?”

He: “I’m glad to be here. I’m glad of your visit. You could have come to see me before, instead of writing. I knew nothing of you. If I’d known of your torment, I’d have found some way to meet you.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. She made no attempt to conceal them. "And you say this now. And never lifted a finger to do it. I'm your daughter. You had plenty of time for others. No birthday with any sign from you. Like a button gone missing. Mother forbade me to ask about you. You weren't worth it."

"That's what she said."

"Yes. And she was right."

"Listen. You're a grown woman. Your mother and I were not suited to one another. So we had to separate. I never wronged her. What God sunders, let no man force together. You understand?"

She toneless, the tears drying: "Yes." Then she spread her arms on the table and wept out loud: "I knew it."

He was agitated: "Then you'll also know why I never showed myself. I knew what opinion your mother had of me."

Her head lifted. She kept sobbing: "And I knew it. But now you show up. Now you're here." Huge bewilderment in him, she smiled between the tears: "And now you're here. And you really are my father."

Then – was she fainting – she sank to the carpet, and lay with her head at his feet. He grasped her by the shoulders. Her eyes were closed. Her teeth chattered. Her whole body twitched and shuddered. She was too heavy for him, he couldn't get a grip. So he left her on the carpet, pushed a cushion under her head, and knelt at her side.

Such scenes were no novelty to the dramatist. But what she sought from him – she, his daughter – moved, delighted, enlivened him. She's a young woman, it starts early.

And as he usually did in such cases, he paced up and down, sure of victory and its happy sequel. He had to kneel beside her, a tricky matter at his age. He lifted her head, and as in all such cases she opened her eyes. But what happened next had never happened with other female breakdowns: the young face that avoided his and pressed itself to his breast was unhappy, she sobbed and clutched at his cravat. He risked over-balancing. He knew this posture from the stage, and knew that in general it's one of the most comfortable: you lift the affected person – at least if you're a younger man – from the side onto the adjacent chaise longue. But now she clawed at his waistcoat, it was becoming perilous. He thought he'd better approach her from above, from the head end, then she couldn't do anything with her hands, she'd have to stand in order to follow him. Now she was nicely settled on the carpet. He was about to fall over, and couldn't anyway kneel for much longer.

So he said, as tenderly as he could: "Laura, do you feel unwell?" She made no answer. She tugged harder at his waistcoat. He really couldn't stay kneeling, and the alternative – to actually lie down beside her – would be just too ridiculous.

"Stand up, Laura. It's not good to lie like this, the blood goes to your head."

She kept crying, and now his tie and clean shirt came adrift. Every fatherly feeling had now evaporated. He swore that if the affair went on for a minute longer he would exercise his newly-acquired paternal rights by roaring furiously at her.



But as if she noticed something, she let go and like a recalcitrant child turned on her side, both hands over her face. He climbed painfully to his feet and rubbed his knees. If she wants to lie there, it's her business. I shan't kneel again.

He paced up and down. Each case has its own characteristics, this one is longer drawn out than most. Then she sprang to her feet, put the cushion neatly back in its place. He was by the wash basin, went towards her. She ran to him. He was afraid she would embrace him. She flung her arms about him, face glowing, said: "Father, Father."

The expression and the feeling came as a complete surprise, all he could think was: what's this with the 'Father', so now I'm her 'Father', what's it to her? He thought, when she lifted her head from the tie and shirt so liberally dampened with her tears: human emotions are not easy to fathom, as I know all too well, so now I'm Father to this pretty young thing and must learn to enjoy her stormy reverence.

What happened. She let go, and squealed. She danced across the room. Then she came at him again, kissed him on both cheeks and was quite another person. He knew at once the girl who'd opened the door and struggled with the dog. Now she had him.

She sat him on the sofa. She crouched before him and stroked his jacket as if he was a doll and said half a dozen times: "Father, Father, do you know why I say it: because I said it at home a thousand times, in secret, looking at your picture, sitting over my book, you really are my father. And here you are. I can't believe it."

And her head lay again at his breast. He was defenceless against this. A couple of times it was on his lips to ask: Your father, yes, what does it mean to you?

But he was afraid to disturb the mood.

Then she hit on the clever idea of sitting at his side. It didn't last long. He had to march up and down the room arm in arm, and yield to her outbursts. He sensed: I can't be her father for much longer. Nothing for it, I must go back to Berlin.

Let us treat ourselves to some notes on their muddled conversation.

Fact is, that during this peaceful and friendly sitting side by side, and with the unfamiliar tenderness shown him by this daughter fallen from Heaven, Stauffer felt curiously well, reconciled with the world. A passage from *Zarathustra* occurred to him, where Zarathustra or the Soothsayer were in a similar situation. However, the phrase from *Zarathustra* that occurred to Stauffer – *But all joy wants eternity* – caused him to doubt. For though this situation was nice and almost perfect, others were just as nice.

Laura asked quietly, not moving from his side, she didn't want to be indiscreet, but, had he remarried?

Having carefully chewed it over, he replied to this very sensible question: "No, actually. But I have friendships here and there."

She: "I'd like to get to know them all, Father."

"Come now, Laura! All! You think I have a harem?"

She giggled: "Father's a humbug. Doesn't want me to meet them."

He thought: not a bad idea. I'll bring her to Berlin and show her Bella. That'll set the cat among the pigeons. He was glad when she looked at her watch and gave him a hug. It seemed she was leaving – for today. Any experience is worth having – once.

She said: "Adieu, Father. But why did you never come to see us? So many years without you. I did so long for you." She wept, head on his chest. He was strangely moved to feel her on his arm. Such an unusual feeling, holding a young trembling daughter to one's breast – something close that needs protecting, has a claim on my protection.

She drew slowly away from him, tidied herself at the mirror. "You know, Father, today a segment of my life has come to an end. Without you I was so deprived."

He left Hamburg the same day, troubled, captivated. He had an irresistible urge to distance himself, shut himself away, evade a too-strong excitement. Then his insides soothed him, and off he went blissfully with his loot: Laura his daughter, his daughter.

He recalled the night of his arrival, the restaurant with the stolen wallet, red flags on the roofs. And then the delightful scene with Laura in his room; he was filled with a great joy that warmed him. I was ready to hit her, I'm her father. Some change must have occurred in me. And the pitiless figure of her mother, Klara, Hecuba fleeing burning Troy. She'll think I'm robbing her of her daughter.

So much going on in the world. And I owe it all to the move, and those packing chests. God knows what else is rising from the grave to confront me.

Stretched out in the empty compartment, in his mind's eye he saw a spider's web. The spider was at work, ran to a corner, pulled on a thread, the web quivered, she wove another circuit, all so regular, tidy, a mysterious image that he observed in loving awe, until he slept.

## Ep. 5: ON THE TRAIL OF A FADED ROSE PETAL

### *Fairytale journey of the dramatist Stauffer to the land of his youth*

On he ran, the dramatist Stauffer, in pursuit of his faded rose petal.

He wouldn't have been himself if, returning from Hamburg to his new disordered apartment, he hadn't begun to bicker with himself. Here, out by Schlachtensee lake, were no noisy demonstrations. No newspaper criers. The building occupied a large plot, he could look out on an empty expanse, a wintry lawn surrounded by bare trees.

He stood dreaming at the window. The house move has done me good, exposing Klara, finding Laura. She's already phoned from Hamburg. She really wants to visit. She feels like a daughter, makes demands. How amazing to have brought such a thing into the world. It should fill my thoughts, make me proud and happy. But it doesn't. It doesn't help... But help how? I've moved, here I sit in the new apartment, but it's all become worse. Such emptiness. At night sleeping draughts come to the rescue. But the days. If only I could write again. Cocoon myself in writing. I cannot.

He went into the lounge and stood at the sideboard. Unopened boxes lay around. And Suddenly once again his hatred for Klara, enthroned triumphant there in Hamburg, resolute creature with the jovial consort, and me she's consigned to nothingness. His thoughts began to

whirl. Avenge myself? I could confront her, show her the letters, hers as well. To what effect? An Italian would knock her to the ground.

But like a white cloud in an endless sky, there floated over him – thoughts of Lucie.

As he stood there eyeing the boxes, calm flowed over him and an image arose in his mind, one that often haunted him these days. A river breaking out from a forest and rolling gently along, reeds along the banks, reeds in the middle too, and he, Stauffer, stood under a tree and threw threads into the water, threads, yarn, no doubt for fishing, angling or whatever. When this image came, he felt brave.

Was Lucie still alive? Did she suffer like him? Was the discovery of the letters a call from her, a cry for help, uttered from who knows where to set chance events in motion?

What does it mean: dead, bygone? For what sort of creature does Time exist, for which not?

It was on 8<sup>th</sup> December that he travelled into the city, and embarked on his search for the young actress who twenty years before had played the role of Lucie in *When the First Snow Falls*. He was braced for a mountain of obstacles. But already at the theatre office and from a couple of agents he learned something. She had actually abandoned the stage early on, and then made a great leap up the social scale through marriage. There was talk of several divorces. Her life, according to reports, was entirely that of an adventuress. He was told with complete certainty that this interesting person was still alive, probably in Italy.

But the theatre manager called on the evening of the second day of his search: he can't supply Stauffer with the address of this Lucie, but another rather older actress to whom he has mentioned Stauffer's interest in Lucie's fate has reliably informed him that she's alive and in good circumstances, not in Italy but mostly in America and southern Switzerland. She often stays with Countess X at her villa near Locarno. This Countess, a patron of the arts, to whom the name Stauffer is of course well known, will supply him promptly with full information concerning Lucie's current whereabouts.

The rose petal fluttered before Stauffer's eyes. As Schiller said: *If you're loath to set your life at stake, no life at all is yours to make*. He set off that same night.

The trip to Hamburg loomed before his mind, the pitiless figure of Hecuba who survived the burning of Troy, the chance events on his arrival, the magically illuminated clock, red flags waving. He lay in his sleeping car bunk in a chimerical joy and let it carry him away, once again in a state that vaulted over Time and Space. A mysterious dream worked its way in: a profound, an enormous anguish groaned through him, as if a strong arm had grabbed hold of a cliff and sent it tumbling onto him.

In the morning he stopped in Basel. Late that afternoon he entered a new landscape. Profound silence. White snow shoe-deep. Most hotels closed. At his hotel he enquired at once about the Countess's villa. They pointed out the way, and offered to send a member of staff with him. Several other guests were heading for the Countess's celebrations. To conceal his surprise he asked about the theme this time. This time, the receptionist said, it would raise the roof.

It was the Countess's name-day, there'd been tremendous preparations, an opening event was taking place this evening.

Stauffer thanked him. He would stay behind this evening, after his long journey.

When he looked out next morning it was snowing. Whole clouds of snow were falling. Stauffer strolled off towards the Countess's residence.

He'd expected to find an elegant villa, and stood before a big fenced property where behind snow-covered firs a chateau loomed. It had a tower with a weathervane shaped like a halberd.

The entrance to the park was wide open. In the snow were fresh human footprints. Stauffer wondered who might be visiting now. He could have himself announced and simply state what was on his mind. But that bourgeois approach had no appeal, and he strolled back to the vicinity of his hotel, where he'd noticed a nursery with a greenhouse. He bought a bouquet of gorgeous flowers and had it sent to the Countess at her chateau. When the nurseryman asked for a name card to attach to the bouquet, he looked in his wallet, hesitated to bring out the first card he found – his own – but handed over another that happened to be there: Laura's stepfather, Klara's second husband. Laura had brought it with her, to provide him with her own address. It would do. He would attend today's festivities.

That evening when he noticed other hotel guests setting off, he put on his coat and headed up the snowy valley towards the chateau.

Suppose I meet someone I've met before, but fail to recognise them. Then I'll be enacting the fable of my play, presaged and foretold by the inner me. What lay in me as a dream shall befall me as Fate. Monstrous times, that make the improbable come true. They hurl war and revolution upon us, and open up new paths.

How to understand what's happening to me? Am I too weak to remain alive in the present, or so strong that I can follow my own path wherever it leads, and must drag my will, even if it's a hidden secret will, into my life? He smiled to himself. Revolution? Wandering here through a snowy Swiss valley, borne on a magic carpet, is an elderly rather useless fellow from Berlin.

Mountain peaks rose magically snowdraped into dark sky. His heart swelled: Wouldn't it be something to have Laura at my side now. And he stood by a bench deep in thoughts of his daughter; snow fell on his hat, he felt blissful. He felt longing and joy. He sniffed. I've grown sentimental.

No one else was on the path. He looked around for his own footprints, he was like a wild creature. The path led higher, and he looked down from his lofty position onto the valley where lights twinkled. He felt blessed. What more do you want? You can see all that is to come. The best to be hoped for is no disappointments.

But the urge was too strong. He still had ten minutes. He could slide over the edge and be dashed to pieces. But on he went. When I write the story of this journey I must begin with Sleeping Beauty, how she was pricked by the spindle and lay there until the Prince awakened her. I must begin it there. For she has not remained the same. She stares at the unknown Prince. Her situation's incomprehensible. After a while she thinks it would be better if the Prince had left her sleeping.

### The Countess's Ball

He stands outside the chateau. A garland of lights streams out above the entrance. A line of cars has halted. Stauffer waits until a man on foot turns into the park, and follows him. He can already hear music. A concert is in progress. Someone holds out a guest book. He writes any old

name and stands at the open door to the low saloon-like space; it's half dark. Up on the podium a quartet is playing Beethoven.

When the recital ends, people spread out through rooms filled with costly artworks. There's time to study the pieces. Meanwhile a proud very gracious lady in a rustling light grey dress of atlas-silk with a long train approaches the crowd: the Countess.

She stands before Stauffer as well. He whispers something that might be a name, bends low to kiss her hand. She says he must have arrived during the concert. The room is readied for the performance. Responding to Stauffer's query she names the author, a young Swiss man, and invites Stauffer to sit beside her. Courtesy keeps the throng behind them, and ahead the chairs are free.

So Stauffer, when the bell tinkles and the Countess looks round at him, has no choice but to offer her his arm.

The piece was a kind of ballet, clearly inspired by the War. Ghosts of the fallen, stepping out to music of Gluck-style formality. Driven too early from the Earth, the ghosts thirst for their life, which they depict with yearning, in exaggerated words. But already one of them remarks that actually all was not so lovely on Earth. The War goes on, people might be starving. And if Peace is to come, what will that peace look like?

Then everything in this infamous underworld presents itself in a quite unexpected guise. First, there's no Hound of Hell, Cerberus. A friendly doorman sits at the entrance, he's supposed to ask each visitor his name and nature. But he's drunk, and asleep. And when they cross the threshold there are catacomb-like spaces, moderately lit, everywhere peopled like a garden colony. It's all thrown together in rough and ready fashion, as circumstances allow. They exchange puzzled looks. As they head farther in, they see in the background people who in the course of time have built whole villages and towns, have renounced the official welfare regime practised here, and plant their own cabbages and wheat. Of course it takes more years of wandering to reach them.

And now you realise that down here it all proceeds as it does above, only more peacefully, because you're made of air and there's less pressure than up above.

The piece was titled *Achilles Debunked*. There was an ironic Prologue on those verses from the *Odyssey* where Achilles bemoans his tormented monotonous sojourn in the underworld. Strange piece, seeming to preach an elegiac stance of consoling pessimism, and then suddenly over.

Afterwards there were refreshments, and people danced.

Stauffer gazed around at the guests. Many foreigners; he looked into the faces of several younger and older ladies, danced in the comfortable modern style with this and that one, to see if Lucie might perhaps be among the guests. But without success.

Later he bumps into the Countess again. They dance, she asks his opinion of the play. She keeps firm hold of him. He really doesn't want to delve into the topic. He pleads ignorance. She laughs out loud into his face. "But since when did you start making jokes, Herr Stauffer?"

He is flabbergasted, stammers: "How did you come upon that name? Is he here?" Then, as he can't maintain the ruse and she keeps laughing, he gives in and provides an improbable explanation about a rest cure, escape from the turmoil of Berlin, moving down here and so on.

At last, because they're chatting in such a cosy and almost friendly way, he confides in her, and after a few devious moves explains what has brought him here.

## NOCTURNE

*A man elevates the moth to his armorial beast. Doors open and close. Someone sleeps and eavesdrops on himself. In the morning he laughs.*

Three o'clock in the morning

Meanwhile, night has fallen.

When Stauffer paused in his confession, the Countess – she had confirmed that the former actress Lucie was a friend of hers, and spent whole months at the chateau – made her apologies: she must attend to the guests now trickling away. Then she came back to Stauffer. She looked at her wrist watch and asked Stauffer if he realised it was already Sunday, almost three in the morning. If it had been summer, she would have invited him to continue their chat for an hour in the open air and await the sunrise with him. All she could do today was ask him, since he had no car and her chauffeur was already asleep, whether he would spare himself the long walk back to the hotel by passing what remained of the night at the villa.

He hesitated. But the Countess was already gliding ahead to open a door, covered by a heavy curtain, in a wide side-passage on the first floor. She clicked on a light, pulled the curtain closed again, and invited Stauffer to approach: "You'll find all you need. The room is always awaiting its guest. It's all for your pleasure."

She mis-spoke, she'd said "for my pleasure."

They both laughed. If they were younger they'd be blushing.

"You could even," she said, opening a wardrobe, "dress up as a woman. Alas, apart from a few neutral pyjamas I have no men's clothes." She nodded as he bowed in acknowledgement, held out a hand for a goodnight kiss, and left.

He looked around the room. He tested the bed, the mattress. It's late. I'll sleep well. Three o'clock exactly, just like that night in Berlin when I rifled through the boxes and those letters appeared that started me on this adventure.

I wonder what sort of clothes she wears, this lady, he asked himself facing the wide wardrobe; a key was in the lock. I'm not being indiscreet, she invited me to look.

The door opened without a squeak. He was met with a strong smell. He detected camphor.

So, there are moths here as well. A consoling thought. They're everywhere. They turn the exotic back into the ordinary. They chew away regardless at proletarian rags, an elegant lady's silver fox fur, the ermine on the king's cloak, assuming such a thing still exists. Moths bring every excess and lunacy back into line. Such earnest healthy creatures. And if I ever have to choose my coat of arms in our new German Republic, the moth shall be my armorial beast.

Dozens of dresses hung side by side in the wardrobe.

He couldn't see clearly, so he lifted the table lamp with its shade of animal pictures. Everything became brighter and colder. He wasn't enjoying this, but he had to make sense of these clothes.

He pulled at several coat hangers, looked at hats on the shelf above, gloves at the side, all seemed so unfamiliar, he understood them not at all, this strange way of concocting a hat – until it occurred to him: they look just like a theatre wardrobe.

And this thought at once delivered such a jolt that he retreated to the middle of the room, and from afar, from the armchair into which he sank, he gazed into this abyss, this gaping maw, this wardrobe smelling of camphor and perfume. Here and there a hat or a skirt flashed silver, gold, colourful stones. Theatre costumes, of course.

Pharaoh's tomb. Three o'clock. My ghost-hour.

It's true. I'm on the right track. She's harbouring Lucie, or has harboured her. I'm in her room. She's moved about in here. She has slept in this bed, and now here I am. Already there's something uncanny about the situation.

But this is why I came. How remarkably different it all seems, imagining versus a real encounter. I can hardly bear to sit.

He keeps to the armchair, intimidated. The lady of the house could have found no better way to sober me up or scare me to death, than to allow me into this domain.

He jumps up and closes the wardrobe. He goes along the walls and looks at the pictures, landscapes. And he is so far recovered that it came as no surprise to see, to the right of the big oval wall mirror, a photo of himself, but very young, fresh, bold, untroubled – and a little cold.

She has lived here, he knows it for certain. He stands transfixed. He glances at the mirror, unintentionally, and sees – a gentleman with a thin grey moustache, furrowed brow, small mistrustful anxious eyes. He has caught himself unawares. He gives a start, and looks away. And to the left is confirmation: a small picture, a girl's head. It's a painting. It's Lucie, he knows it, proud young face, a heroine, the face of a born princess. Suddenly he realises: he knows her. She's alive. What does she look like now?

And once more, unintentionally, he has to glance in the mirror and start back from his reflection. He brandishes his fist at that grimace. It responds. He turns his back and lowers the lampshade. The room settles into a cosy half-dark, an inviting calm. Playful gazelles shine down from the shade.

He gets into bed and thinks: cover it all up. Don't touch a thing in this room. I don't know what secrets lie hidden here, against me.

And everywhere the room is creaking. He is hyper-alert. After half an hour he has to get up and turn on the light, open the wardrobe door, stare at the sparkling clothes. Then he sits pensively at the writing desk, his heart pounds, he pulls open the middle drawer, and – nothing surprises him now – sees letters, lots of letters, in her handwriting! The big "Erwin" with an exclamation mark jumps out. His hand drops into the drawer. Nothing for it, he must read them.

The letters are like a novel. In the form of a diary, and it all revolves around him.

Lucie complains. She tells of her travels over several years, of other men. She mentions Stauffer's plays. She has attended many premieres. It's as if secretly, without wanting to step forward, she has always been in the background of his life. She married. She keeps writing to him, but doesn't post the letters. He occupies a constant place at her side, but not always the same place. In the end there's no more complaining. The stormy assaults cease. It seems he has

traversed every station of her inner being. Now, like a sailor to the wife back in port, he is the always absent one, the voyager, to whom she gives account and tells what's happening at home.

Stauffer pursues the unfolding plot without settling on any clear feeling. He is moved, calmed, soothed, more than for years now. And so he's able to close the drawer and go back to bed. He likes the gazelles on the lampshade. He keeps the light on. And so he nods off. And sleeps soundly.

By the light of a candle that she at once snuffs out, Lucie creeps in and sees him lying there.

She settles cautiously on the wicker chair beside the bed, and watches him.

She stands, turns out the light, and vanishes.

### Blissful departure

In the morning, at breakfast, Stauffer learns from the servant that the Countess went out early and will be away all day. She will be pleased to receive him any time tomorrow. This turn of events suits Stauffer well. He would not like to be sitting across from her just now.

Tomorrow then. He is to come face to face with her tomorrow, she who is no fantasy but a reality. Once again a rescue line will be thrown to him, swimmer in the seething current of Time. "You want this?" he asks himself. "I do," he replies.

He goes out into the snow that shines so wonderfully from every height. He returns to his hotel. Sometimes he sees himself as one consecrated to Death. Sometimes as a bridegroom. Sometimes like a page, kneeling before the loveliest of all mistresses, so that she can place the golden chain around his neck.

In the end he struts along like a boy sucking on a sweet.

### A revelation

While Stauffer was still asleep, floating on lovely clouds towards the sunrise, the Countess entered the breakfast room and was surprised to see the American woman already eating. She wondered at her friend's high spirits. But you never knew, with Daisy.

After breakfast the Countess had to ask, as Daisy sat smoking in a rocking chair humming contentedly: "What are you up to now? Your admirer's still asleep in his room. But he can show himself any moment. Please Daisy, he is someone, after all. Don't embarrass me."

Daisy laughed: "The great man won't come in here. He'll be served in the small dining room. I arranged it over your head."

"But for God's sake, why?"

"Today belongs to me. He is my 'Descent to Earth', after I've spent so long playing 'Hanele's Ascent to Heaven'. Today belongs to us both, Betty. And you should gift it to me, and no one shall come between us. I found yesterday a bit much. But I had fun last night."

She explained how she couldn't sleep after the party, the few words the Countess had spoken about Stauffer's confession were to blame, especially the fact that he was here and looking for



her. "This tale of the lover who comes hunting for his lady after a quarter of a century made a crazy European impression on me. The War has turned people here totally nuts."

The Countess: "Putting him up in your room, Daisy, has, forgive me, a touch of the macabre about it. And changing the décor, hanging up your old picture."

"It amuses me. In some respects it was a reunion. I was playing a stage ghost. And later, in the night, I went to him." The Countess was shocked. Lucie soothed her:

"Nothing happened, Betty. Listen, I'll tell you. It was on the stroke of four. I stood in the passage outside his room. I waited a while. I knew the door, it wouldn't creak. I heard him get into bed. There was a chance he might have locked it. But he hadn't."

The Countess was appalled, propped her head in her hands.

"So I dared to go in. There I was in the room. If I'd been anyone else I could have done whatever I wanted with him. He was asleep. He'd left the light on. I could have strangled him, or shot him. I know where the revolver is kept. But he was asleep, the good fellow. Sleeping the sleep of the righteous."

The Countess whispered: "What did you do?"

"Nothing. Just enjoyed the comedy of the situation. Betty, you can't imagine how it is to be so to speak at the goal after so much struggle. There in his cot is the man, the idol, for whom I've spent my life yearning, around whom so to speak my whole life has revolved, a planet orbiting at the proper distance. There sleeping is my pole star, snoring a little. I confess that nothing stirred in me. He meant nothing, already in the evening he'd meant nothing to me. Any emotion would have made me ridiculous in my own eyes. My crush has something mad and pathetic about it, sure, but" (she shrugged, blew smoke rings) "I renounce it. I told myself: you're always doing something stupid, Daisy, something experimental. You may not have put on so much weight, but still, thirty-eight years old. And having made sure of that I withdrew quite satisfied, and even waved a little bye-bye in the dark."

The Countess stared: "Your idol? I never knew he played such a part in your life."

Daisy glanced up: "Inwardly, a thought-game. The man needs dolls, to amuse him in his lonely hours. I wrote him even later on. I couldn't leave off. It became a favourite habit. I had it out with him in all possible situations."

The Countess: "You're a secret novelist, Daisy."

"Novelist, Betty? Only insofar as I never posted the letters."

The Countess: "But I still don't understand why you kept writing, never stopped, and in the form of letters?"

Daisy, cigarette between the fingers of her right hand, placed her left hand over her eyes.

"At first it continued on from the earlier letters. Then it was self-deception. And then it was meant to cure me. But it didn't. Back then I was dealt a dreadful blow. He treated me barbarously, this aesthete, this 'cultivated' writer. I was a tender young thing. I could never recover. The play of his I debuted in was called *When the First Snow Falls*. It fell as hoarfrost on a spring night. When my letters back then never reached him, when, for unknown reasons I never found out, he didn't once deign to reply, when he built a Chinese wall around himself, at

first of course I refused to accept it. He was after all a man, and had to have human feelings. And we'd never quarrelled, nothing happened between us. So I hammered away at the wall with my letters. I wanted to – I had to – tear the wall down. But I couldn't. I changed from a real person to a writer of letters. At first they were written in despair, then more and more listlessly. Then the game changed and at the end it was only a pretend struggle."

"I never knew this, Daisy. You've told me so much about yourself, here and in America, but this you kept to yourself."

"It's just a little bit comical. As you can see from how it's ending."

The Countess: "Last night I could only chat briefly with you. He told me a long, long story. I was so exhausted, you know, from rehearsals for the play, and confess that for part of his story I dozed off a little. But then something strange happened, this'll interest you. I just remembered. He told me how he came to make this fantastic trip. I'm glad I didn't happen to mention this part yesterday. It would be a shame if it fell flat. So listen to the grisly ballad with which our writer introduced his great adventure. Please hold back your laughter till the end. It began with a mundane matter: he was moving house. He was sitting somewhere in Berlin among packing cases, in the night. Then in some eerie manner a box shoved itself at him, and letters fell out. He grabbed at one. It was unopened. He was puzzled, he opened it. It was from you. And another, and another, more than twenty. And among them, and this is the point, was a letter from the wife he'd divorced twenty years before."

"Among my letters?"

"Among your letters, which – mark it well – were all unopened. Around two dozen. And his ex-wife writes that she confiscated the whole pile in order to – how should I say, I've forgotten how he put it – to nip in the bud the love germinating in you both. She did it, she tells him, out of hatred, envy and jealousy, to avenge herself, because she was the one who loved him." The Countess smiled, searched Daisy's face: "Of course it's all his own invention and fantasy."

Now the Countess' smile froze. The woman in the rocking chair had dropped her cigarette on the carpet and made no move to pick it up.

The Countess: "Daisy, your cigarette." She had to jump up and retrieve it herself. Daisy had collapsed strangely into herself. Not moving. Staring into empty air.

She whispered: "No, no, no."

The Countess bent down and took her hands: "But Daisy, it's all imaginings. The man cooks it up to make himself interesting. Like presenting a fake visiting card. Giving a fake name in the visitor's book. Please don't be upset. Oh God, what is happening."

Daisy's head sank to her breast. Her body swayed. She slumped over the chair arm, tumbled to the floor. Servants carried her to her room. The Countess stayed at her side.

This was the hour when Stauffer left the chateau to stride cheerfully down the snow-covered hill like a small boy sucking on his sweet.

The whole long day, which Daisy had set aside for a walk with the Countess to celebrate her 'Descent to Earth', she kept to her bed, silent, her face pale and empty.

Late in the afternoon came fits of screaming. A doctor was summoned.

## Ep. 6: SNOW, EARLY AND LATE

*Stauffer in the snowy mountains of Switzerland. Searching.*

*And what does he find?*

Early in the morning, the dramatist Stauffer set off on his pilgrimage through the snowy landscape, to collect his Christmas present. He was deeply moved. How graciously Fate had steered everything. He'd been going to pot, and then these letters appeared. It seemed to be Klara taking revenge, but then it became clear that Lucie was calling out, that she'd been preserved for this moment.

He was brimming with sincere gratitude. He sent blessings on ahead as he approached the now familiar chateau. So here's where she's holed up, in this castle draped in an ermine cloak of snow. In his arms Stauffer bore the huge bouquet he ordered yesterday from the nursery, red and yellow roses.

He went in, let the servant take his coat and hat. He was taken to the little salon where he'd sat with the Countess on the concert evening and made his confession.

He bowed as he entered, bouquet in his left hand. A lady was sitting there, he recognised her from the concert, one of the Countess' staff, she'd accompanied him as he admired the artworks. They exchanged mundane phrases. Then the lady leafed through a garishly illustrated magazine. He held the roses on his knees, now and then allowed the bouquet to dangle between his shins. He waited patiently. The room was pleasantly warm.

Now the housekeeper person lowered the magazine and gazed out of the window. He followed her gaze, and they agreed on a topic: the wonderful weather, wonderful snow. She asked about the delectable roses. She knew the nursery. Does Sir love flowers.

He said: "To tell the truth – not excessively." Now and then he'll arrange a few, or someone will bring him some, and he'll smell them and enjoy the bright colours, but he'll soon forget about them in the day's rush, and when he remembers they'll be faded, or already thrown away.

What a shame, she suggested. "Many flowers retain their beauty a long while, some in fact show their best colours only as they fade."

"Could be. But they remind one too much of transience, and in one's own room. On the other hand it's brutal to clear them away, picture them being thrown in the rubbish. No, I'd rather not."

The lady smiled. "Strange. That your thoughts take you so far. May I see your roses?" He passed them across. She plunged her face among the blooms and laid the bouquet in her lap the better to see, gazing down at the noble yellows and the radiant reds. "The Countess will be delighted."

He nodded, without betraying himself. But was the Countess not at home? Had he been announced? Here he was, sitting and making conversation. The lady handed back the bouquet, neither spoke, he didn't want to spoil the mood with some banality. At last the door opened. The door-curtain was pulled back. Stauffer stood, the Countess entered in a heavy brown fur coat, fur hat, big, her face fresh, eyebrows raised. She hastened to him, squeezed his hands: "Now, I shall leave the entire chateau to you until evening. I'm unlikely to be back before seven."

His face showed puzzlement.

"Well?" she asked as he came upright from kissing her hand. She gave him a penetrating look, and when clearly he didn't understand she called to the housekeeper person: "Excuse us," and pulled him into the hall.

Erwin, softly: "Countess, you know why I'm here."

"Absolutely," she replied, and looked at him from the mirror where she was giving her forehead a quick dab with a powder-puff.

"So here I am."

"Without a doubt, Herr Stauffer."

His heart gave a twitch. He bowed: "Then – then might I request that you lead me to her?" But she reinforced his uncertainty by making no move to lead him anywhere, she just – stared at him. She turned to face him, put the powder-case back in her handbag, and stepped closer. "You didn't introduce yourself? Surely I introduced you last evening?"

He was perplexed: "Who? Whom?"

"I'm sure I remember introducing you to Mrs Brown?"

"Mrs Brown? I was chatting with her. She's in the salon."

"And...?" They faced one another, uncomprehending. Suddenly the Countess opened her eyes wide, whispered: "You didn't know – Mrs Brown is Lucie?" She repeated: "You didn't know?"

The floor beneath his feet gave way. Paying no attention to his reaction she pushed her arm under his and pulled him to the salon door. "Well, now you must go in. I'm in a dreadful rush. Till this evening." She opened the door, pulled back the curtain. From behind she called into the room: "Bye, Daisy."

Mrs Brown was still sitting at the bow window, garish magazine in her lap. When Stauffer remained standing in the doorway where the Countess had left him, for his legs wouldn't move, she cried in a friendly tone: "Please, Herr Stauffer, come a little closer."

He couldn't. She became attentive. She hastened to him. He couldn't lift his eyes from the floor. He was in a state of utter consternation. So she pulled a leather chair across and sat him in it. He clutched the bouquet tight in his left hand as if fearing she might snatch it away. His face was drained of blood, his lips quivered, but he was still conscious. He turned to her and said quietly: "Thank you, thank you, please don't trouble yourself."

She went to the door and rang. He slowly drained the glass of water they brought him. His expression became livelier, he sat upright in the armchair. He freed himself of the roses by laying them on the little marble-topped table beside him, and now sat calm, almost himself again.

Lucie, having settled in a corner of the sofa and pulled the heavy rug over her knees, said: "Good day, Herr Stauffer," and held out her hand. He turned to her, touched her fingertips and inclined his head, all very formally, but made no response. He was frowning. He recalled Klara as she sat facing him in Hamburg, the unknown wife of a common hotelier.

"You don't answer, Herr Stauffer?" She held an arm over her face. Quickly he went to her. With sociable neutrality she turned to him: "The Countess tells me you were looking for me. You are horrified to find me."

“Oh no, no, please.”

“A quarter of a century is an age, unless you’re made of stone. I’ve often seen you, so I’m spared a real surprise. It must be instructive for you to look at me, reflecting a quarter of a century. Am I a Gorgon, Herr Stauffer? We had a nice chat. You remember? And for whom did you bring those roses? You meant to give them to the Countess. I’ll put them in a vase, if you don’t mind.”

“Please.” He was no longer as drained as before. He watched the lady with the English accent busy herself with the vase. Appalling to think this was Lucie, the Lucie of the letters – “my joy, my whole life”. Softly, as she was about to go out to find a bigger vase, he said: “You needn’t bother. The flowers were for you.”

She turned to him: “For me? But why?”

“I meant them for you. Please, keep them.”

She held the heavy bouquet in her arms. “For me? I rather think they were meant for Lucie. And now you give them to me.” Then she sat down with the roses in the corner of the sofa.

For quite a while neither said anything. Below they could hear the Countess’ car crunching, her voice. The car door banged shut, the motor wheezed into action, the noise faded into the distance.

Stauffer looked up. What was I thinking, twenty years have passed, I must pull myself together or else appear a complete idiot. But his heart tensed within him.

The bouquet lay like a baby in her arms. She gazed at it, pensive and grave. Now he recalled the sleek hair, greying at the sides, parted in the middle, the strong almost square face with the powerful cheek muscles, the tall smooth forehead with waves of hair spilling over, the short nose with the narrow nostrils, the full wide mouth. To think that this was Lucie, she who would bear him away on her youthful wings. Did she know how it had all turned out? Their eyes met.

The woman: “It was kind of you to bring fresh roses for Lucie. And even kinder to give them to me.”

And all of a sudden, as her voice was so gentle, the desire arose in him to tell her how it had all come about, to justify himself to her.

“I gave the Countess,” he whispered, “after the concert, a brief account of the events that led me here. It began with a dreadful discovery, made by chance as I prepared to move house. You know I found letters from you that had been withheld from me. A letter from my ex-wife explained it all. Out of jealousy, for vengeance, she hid the letters. She made sure that I never heard anything more from you.”

She spoke away over the roses. “The Countess told me. Is your ex-wife still alive?”

“In Hamburg. I went looking for her, as soon as I discovered the letters.”

“And how are things with her? How did you find her?”

He, surprised: “She’s in very good circumstances. She’s remarried, manages a hotel.”

“And your daughter? You had just become a father, back then.”

“My daughter” (what curious questions) “lives with her.”

“She must be grown up now, twenty or more. Are you pleased with her?”

“I met her for the first time when I went to find her mother.”

“Just imagine! And for all those years you never felt a desire to see your child? You must have been in Hamburg often.”

“My wife was given custody of the child, I didn’t want to interfere.”

The woman put the roses down beside her. “Once you discovered the letters you dashed off pell-mell to Hamburg to confront your ex-wife?”

“That night when I found the letters I’d have killed her if she’d been near.”

The woman smiled: “You wouldn’t kill anyone.”

“No, I’m not a murderer.”

“And the wife politely showed you the door when you explained the reason for your visit.”

He: “It – didn’t come to that. I sat with my daughter, who didn’t recognise me, and waited. The woman was – hard, cold, just as I remembered her. There was no point trying to make her feel guilty.”

“Your daughter?”

“Why are you so interested?”

“I’m interested in people. I’m sure your daughter didn’t simply throw you into the street, once she knew who you were.”

“She came to me in my hotel two days later. Under a false name.”

“Why under a false name?”

“She was afraid I wouldn’t see her if she gave her real name.”

The woman’s eyes grew wide: “Ah. You see, a human being. She knows you. And then she demanded an explanation? But she was happy to have her father at last.”

“Just so.”

The woman: “Amazing. Really amazing. Now you come to me. You’re on a real old rampage through the past, Herr Stauffer.”

He felt much better now. The conversation was a relief. He was chatting with a sympathetic woman interested in his fate.

“It wouldn’t let me rest. First I had to go to Hamburg, confront the woman with her guilt.”

“You found your delightful daughter, who had accounts to settle with you.”

“Then I had to – go searching for Lucie, around whom all this revolved.”

“And instead of Lucie you find me. Can one talk to you now?”

Stauffer, ashamed: “Please forgive me.”

“But it was all so natural! Now you sit face to face with the one who wrote to you. She remembers you. She has wandered through the past carrying your memory, like one caught in a fire who bears lifelong scars.” (She paused.) “That image is wrong. As if a priestess of the fire,

a Vestal, steals a flame from the sacred hearth and flees with it into the wilderness, has to flee, and now worships the flame all by herself and warms herself at it and stays alive, it's her flame, hers alone. Now you come to me. I know why. You want to retrieve the flame for your altar. I've guarded the flame as best I could, as God is my witness. I guarded it in a way you never could. Don't speak, I know it. But what now?"

She leaned forward, elbow on the table, and rested her head in her hand. Her smile was mocking: "I can't wait for you, not with your charming daughter. I'm afraid this visit will turn out just as fruitless as the other one."

He mumbled: "Why, why."

She: "I'm not cruelly spurning you. We're chatting, as cultivated people do. But please regard me the same way you did before. That was good and true. So why not fruitless?"

He had been looking deep into her face. It seemed as if an old image surfaced in him, the way she held her head so proudly and pressed back into the sofa, arms crossed, with a glance, no, a lightning-flash, down at the bouquet of roses.

Sheepishly he begged: "Don't hold it against me, please, my behaviour earlier."

"Oh, it was good. I knew you – and myself, when I saw you standing there. I saw you hadn't forgotten me. If you hadn't been so shocked I'd have long since said: your visit is pointless."

"And now?" He sensed menace in the air. He was afraid. He wished for a better ending than his visit with Klara. He pleaded: "I know what I know of you from the letters I found, and from things in the guest bedroom. I hope you're not angry with me for looking. They were aimed at me. A dreadful wicked deed, a murder, sundered me from you. Please tell me about yourself. Let me hear about your life. What have you – been doing? Give me a guiding thread."

Suddenly she looked pale and shrunken. Her nostrils quivered: "You said dreadful and wicked. I've been thinking about this crime, the possibility of such a deed." She glared at him, eyes glowing. He felt uneasy. But she gave a little dismissive wave of the hand and resumed her conversational tone: "What I've been doing in the meantime. In the meantime. A life has gone by. You talk as if we're just back from holiday."

He: "I never said 'in the meantime'."

She: "I have occupied my time, though I can't say, like Faust: 'First powerful and great, But now at pace more prudent, more sedate.' I spent a long time in America, before that in Italy. Then I married. My first husband died early. I settled here and came to know the Countess. The Count, later on Betty's husband, was still alive then. He wooed me. But I liked Betty more than him. Then I went to America. I came into an inheritance. I married again over there. Over there you can't live alone, at least at the beginning, you'd die of loneliness. I worked in museums, my second husband was a museum director in a southern state. He's the same age as me. He didn't object to my coming back to Europe every year or two, to see my old friends. Betty, the Countess, came over to see us as well."

She took the bouquet and flung it down on the sofa. "What does it have to do with you? What does my life have to do with you? Why do you sit here and interrogate me about my life? I know the journey wasn't entirely fruitless – you will turn it into a play!"

Stauffer: "I found out only a few days ago what happened twenty years ago. My demeanour cannot have given you the impression that I'm interrogating you."

"So what are you doing? You went out into the world to get to the bottom of the business. But – I might have been long dead already."

(She's attacking me, just like Laura.) He mumbled: "Seems Fate has other ideas. One should examine the basis of one's existence." He was about to gather his thoughts to tell her more of himself when the door downstairs opened, a car drove up. Soon there came a knock, the Countess' chauffeur reported: He is to pick the Countess up in late afternoon, meanwhile the car is at the guests' disposal.

Behind the chauffeur a maid appeared to tell them breakfast was ready. The American lady thought it splendid, she gaily gathered up the bouquet, and Stauffer, distraught as he was, had to stand too. She offered him her arm with sociable courtesy. They went down the long corridor to the breakfast room. The chauffeur was ordered for eleven o'clock. Lunch, the American lady declared, would be taken at Bignasco.

## Ep. 7: ERWIN AND LUCIE

*The encounter in Switzerland takes a decisive turn*

### The outing to Bignasco

The car drove slowly down towards Locarno and the lake. It was wonderful to see fig, olive and pomegranate trees under their blanket of snow, indistinguishably merged into a general tree-nature. Buried myrtles in the gardens bent low.

They crossed the pretty marketplace. Their gaze skimmed the ancient arcade passages. Stauffer got out at his hotel, he wanted to fetch his fur coat for the trip.

He didn't go back down at once. He sank into an armchair. So this was his room again. It was over-bright with its two windows. He'd enjoyed a lovely sleep last night. He'd set out happily on his quest. And – now? Should he go back down? Why? Why make this excursion with the American woman? Because she says she's the Lucie of old times? Should I go down or not? If I want I can pay my bill, pack, and leave the hotel at once via the garden. That would be best, he told himself as he stood up. I shall get ready to leave. My affairs have taken a diabolical turn.

But as he opened the wardrobe to take out his suitcase, he reconsidered. The word "final" ran through his mind. Then it would finally be at an end. Then you'll revert to your old life, with no way out. Slowly he pushed the wardrobe door shut. And now a troubled elderly man stared back at him from the mirror. The man seemed distraught. He gave a sad smile. "What shall we do?" Stauffer asked his reflection. "Shall we head out, or go back down to her? What do you think?"

It was unclear what the reflection thought. "Two possibilities," Stauffer repeated. "We can pack up. Which one do you choose?" The reflection gazed mournfully back, and Stauffer understood.

"We've used up our chances, you mean. We should pack up and make no more great leaps. She's not Lucie. Lucie is lost, stolen, robbed away for all eternity. So, I should go back down to her? To that – lady? She's not unlikeable."



The mirror said: "Don't make such a big deal of it. She's not Lucie. But who is Lucie, anyway? You don't have even the slightest accurate memory of her. The woman here is real. And don't grumble because she doesn't look how you imagined. Turn around. See how your hair's falling out. Anyone would think you're an overworked clerk. Hasn't it occurred to you that that's why she doesn't reproach you? And she still remembers the young Stauffer."

And since the reflection conveyed all this so honestly and convincingly, Stauffer leaned his forehead against the friendly glass, and agreed. He nodded a greeting to his doppelganger, opened the wardrobe and lifted his fur coat from its hanger. Wrapped up warmly, fur hat on his head, he went from the room with a certain resignation and descended the carpeted stairs. I go down in silence, he thought, and smiled sadly to himself, down to my enchanted princess. *If you're loath to set your life at stake, no life at all is yours to make.*

And with utmost cordiality, our hero extended a hand to her as she opened the car door, and apologised for taking so long. Lucie admired his winter outfit: "You were only a few minutes – and we've both grown used to waiting."

This playful handling of the scene pleased him. Now he felt at ease with the situation he'd run headfirst into. He sat beside her and stretched out comfortably, proudly, in his seat.

They drove up the valley of the Maggia, saw Solduno, the Piedmont landscape. The Maggia foamed beneath an ancient bridge. Everything was white, the peaks above the valley, the little villages, churches. They drove through one single element of Nature, snow, wherein with no hint of grief all human creation lay. The snow was a gigantic beast letting birds play amicably around it. The way to Bignasco was slow.

The American lady knew the big Glacier Hotel. They ate in the sparsely occupied dining room. They had coffee served in a small completely empty room.

Now they were alone again, their conversation could resume its course.

What is a conversation? With looks, gestures, words one entices the other to reveal invisibly, inaudibly, whatever one is able to reveal. Lucie smoked her cigarette. She said: "Now you are in my hands. I'd given up expecting this. You notice, Herr Stauffer, the difference between Madam Klara and myself: she drives you off, I hold you close."

She fiddled with the ashtray. Her tone changed:

"I insist on accountability, on justification. You throw all the guilt on Klara. You know the line from Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*: 'You have killed the love-life within me'."

"Not wittingly, Lucie." He actually said Lucie, he'd tried it, dared. Her face flamed.

She: "But wilfully. You lacked confidence in the path I took."

"What path?"

"Look at me. I walked alone. All around me was life, open spaces, people and countries. People and countries await us, they all need us, and we exist only when we take them into ourselves. The world is a wonder, Erwin, but hungry for us. You don't believe how dry this ground is, the earth, the countries, and the people in them, and how right, how good it is when you approach them. By this circuitous route I understood what it means: God formed man of dust, and breathed into him the breath of life. You know Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel, where Adam crouches dull and lifeless on the ground, a troglodyte, and God approaches

from afar, out of a cloud, and lets a spark leap across from his outstretched finger. How having a soul changes a person. Only now do they arise; before they were just pre-births. Out there, Erwin, are some who owe me their second, their real, life.”

She turned to face him: “I could have done even more, if I – had been more. I used you. You were my consummation, and you too could have become more. How I wept about it, back then. I was a tree, you literally shattered my trunk. It still grew, kinked, and how. – You did it wilfully, Klara was right. Your good fortune ruined you. You were too much honoured, famed, loved. You enjoyed your work. You wanted nothing more. But the way you drew back into such a tight little nook, this you never noticed. I was horrified whenever I happened to see you. I was embarrassed for you. The world could be smashed to pieces around you, it wouldn’t matter how, you’d take no notice.”

She stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray. “You were like so many others in Germany. You became abettors and accomplices in crimes. How, why? Out of inertia, only half-knowing, half-endorsing. Just so it never takes you by the scruff.” She tapped his knee. “So, Erwin. What is your problem?”

He took her hand: “So it really is you.”

“What is your problem?”

It was a while before he could open his mouth. “I shall tell you. But none of it is entirely true any longer. There’s the emptiness, the vast emptiness. You have to live in it. Nothing resonates, and nothing gets close to you. Things that parade before you have nothing to say. Music has lost its melody. Out there in the world wolves eat lambs, that’s a fact – no one gets worked up about it. We’re surrounded by facts and note them down, such a stupid occupation. Change the world – in what direction? There’s no stimulus there either. It is what it is, but exhausting. You’d have to be a child to find enjoyment in it.”

After a pause he continued: “You hear of problems that others busy themselves with, social problems, revolution, the need for a new kind of state. You experience this. But the questions make no impact on you. What does actually make an impact? No one even despairs about it, or only a little bit, and that little bit of despair is the only positive thing the world offers. Life is a thick pile carpet worn down to its base, revealing the bare mesh backing.”

“And writing? You no longer work?”

“Rarely. But I can’t say I have no ideas. I’m often astonished to find notes among my papers of which I have no memory at all, all discarded, torn up, nothing made of them. Sometimes I’m besieged by ideas, but then you think: what’s the point. I might tell myself I’m lazy, or simply fed up with Art. But will I at least try to meet what the public demands one these days, politics and action? Seems not. Something sets a fog over my thoughts. I keep busy for hours, but can’t tell you what about.”

“Go on.”

“I can no longer watch my early plays. They were written by someone else. That’s why your letters fell on me like fire. There was no concealing it. I saw how matters stood with me. You foretold it.”

“What was the outcome?” She rose to her feet and moved away. She stood at the window with her back turned, and said before he could answer: “I will try to help you. You don’t know

what steps to take. You get on a train and go to Hamburg. You think you'll give your ex-wife a piece of your mind. It backfires." The woman laughed. Stauffer gave a start. He had no idea how to react. Every elegiac and romantic feeling fell from him at this sudden coarse laughter.

"Your wife Klara was so convenient for you. You can put all the blame on her. But with me," (she laughed again) "how do things stand with me? Poor Peter thinks all he has to do is chase after his lost youth. But that's not how it works." She sat down at his side. He shifted away. It was an outrage – and unsettling, she laughed, she laughed. She dared to take his hand. She was treating him like a silly boy.

"Bad, Erwin, isn't it, how everything goes off the rails. If you could have your way now you'd stand up and leave, yet again. No doubt this trip, once you're back in Berlin, would result in your angrily tearing up all the letters you can get your hands on, and swearing never again to even touch a letter. A radical solution. But as matters stand, my dear friend, you can't have it all your own way. I too am here."

"I'm glad of it." (What is the woman up to?)

"I could, for example, decide to take my revenge. And you wouldn't escape lightly." (See, the reverse of the medal.) "I mulled it over the whole night. When you went into the hotel and left me waiting downstairs, I knew you had a notion to run away. You came back to the car. But next time you won't come back."

He shrank into his chair. He mumbled fearful, cowardly words: "I'm at your disposal. I've not much else going on."

"You bought me for a few pieces of silver. I felt defiled all my life, by you who inflicted it on me. And you're trying basically the same manoeuvre now." She thrust her menacing face closer to his. "Say yes."

"How will you take revenge?"

"See, now you're afraid."

"No Lucie, not at all, not in the least." (He wouldn't look at her.) "I'd like you to take revenge. You'd be doing it for me. I just realised, Lucie, that I was expecting this of you. It's the reason I made this journey." (He wasn't lying. He'd had enough of himself. And now even this ploy was failing! Such anger, shame, self-disgust.)

"The death-potion! Isolde's death-potion. And you, the old epicure, perhaps you think you'll prove to be the death-potion."

"Say what you like. I shall sit here."

"And wait and have nothing to say. Criminal."

She actually flung herself at him. She threw him back in the chair and held him by the shoulders like a wooden doll. His face had a pitiful expression, which she noticed only after some moments. She released him, he sprawled there unhappily, she observed him and shook with laughter: "If only Betty could see this." Then she crossed to the window, and wept.

As he pulled himself together after the assault, he felt, as with the Laura incident, that he was a man. With women you never can tell. She's sobbing by the window. A sign. But already she blows her nose and comes tripping, wiping her eyes, back to him. She has adopted a friendly,

slightly mournful smile: "Let's get some fresh air, Erwin. It'll be better outside. Two people should hide away only for kissing."

He was happy to stand up. So she does have some sense. He has come off lightly.

She led the way out, past the car. She pointed to the towering snow-covered landscape, stood enchanted (how quickly her mood changes), and said softly: "There, Erwin, the orchestra to our duet." He had no idea how to respond to such grandiosity. He gave her hand a squeeze. (Got off lightly there.) She seemed not to notice his self-consciousness. She stood large as life. When the moment had lasted a great many moments, he cleared his throat (he was freezing, they'd left the furs in the car), she came down to earth and saw he was cold. At once she dived into the car, which was heated.

There they sat, and drove along, he at her side. He was glad it had all gone so smoothly. He was ashamed of his good mood and called himself a rogue and (smugly) an incorrigible sinner. The atmosphere in the car was excellent.

As they approached Gordievo, she put an arm on his shoulder. "You shan't go back to the hotel, Erwin. You're coming with me." The tone in which she said this exceeded all expectation. He was gentle, compliant, sweet. ("My one and only, my whole life.") So she was Lucie. – His ears pricked up. She was saying more, in the same tone.

He was enchanted. What an experience. Everything in him fell apart. If they weren't in a car, he'd have fallen on his knees before her. He felt dizzy. So the goal was reached, after all!

The sun came to his aid. The light faded, dusk fell. She whispered in his ear (she did!): "My one and only, Erwin, my whole life."

The miracle had happened. The dusk enabled him to see beside him a divine young face, proud, stern, enticing.

Until the outskirts of Locarno they were locked in an embrace. Suddenly she lifted her arms, stamped her feet, screamed, laughed, and her outburst caused the chauffeur to stop the car.

"It's nothing," Stauffer whispered, ashamed. The chauffeur drove discreetly on.

## MASQUERADES AND DANCES

*In Switzerland. A different, very solid and appetising spiritual banquet is spread for a delighted gentleman. Friendship reaches the stage of a mood for marriage.*

After they returned from the Maggia valley, Stauffer stayed in his hotel. Lucie had put him on the spot: either move into the guest room at the chateau, or stay in the hotel. As she expected, he chose the hotel.

He felt not quite comfortable in his skin. He couldn't trust himself. He'd manoeuvred himself into an almost unbearable, phantastical situation. I have to retreat, he told himself, Erwin, what are you doing, you're no fraud, flee!

But then she picked him up at the hotel. He found she had designs on him. At the chateau they sat in the same little room where they had first conversed. There, without preliminaries, she asked him above all to be honest. Above all, they must be honest and sincere with one another. Only then could she be to him what she had to be and wanted to be.

He agreed at once, and his heart sank: for what must she – would she – be to him? He really wanted to know but dared not ask. To signal his sincerity, he mentioned a certain inclination for the Countess, maybe it'll make her a little jealous and even in time make her despise him. She received it nobly, he thanked her gloomily. She said: "It's an exchange of courtesies. Betty asked me to convey her greeting. Erwin, you well know the new life we are stepping into. I haven't pulled wool over your eyes. You were free, and are free. We shall arrive at more and more truth. Otherwise we'll simply be adventurers and frauds to one another."

Her smile was proud: "We shall not allow misunderstandings to arise, Erwin. I shall not join your long line of lovers. Nature has allotted powers differently between men and women. I need your strength. But I cannot wish for you to lose yours. I don't want to make you poorer. You still don't understand. You're still stuck in your little nook. I see who you've gone around with and what they've made of you. Let me be clear, you came within an inch of having nothing. And you would not have come looking for me. Now give your bouquet to Betty."

He accepted the admonition. A servant came along, he handed the flowers over for the Countess. As he sat alone, a mysterious feeling came over him: this Lucie, this real Lucie with greying hair and the proud face, she is my guide. She's saving me. Don't deny your destiny, Erwin. Then the servant came back and invited him to the big salon.

And as he entered that great space, his feet came to a stop. The salon lay in semi-darkness, the entire rear portion of the long room was invisible. He couldn't get his bearings. For the rear portion had pillars, the little orchestra had sat between them. And he had stood by a pillar when the Countess first came across to him. Now he could see neither pillars nor stage. His eyes adapted gradually to the dark, and he saw: what he had taken to be the rear wall of the room was a dark blue curtain stretched between the pillars. He stepped on down.

In the middle was a splendid ornately decorated dinner table with three place settings. The chairs were wreathed in garlands. The entire table was strewn with petals. Now Stauffer saw wreaths on the door he had just stepped through. The statues along the wall were decked with wreaths. Stauffer, uneasy, was seized by profound excitement. He sank onto a chair beneath the bust of a faun. They're giving me a reception. But how do I deserve it? Me, why me, who am I? How many go to the grave not suspecting even a little bit who they are, how many fade without seeing even a trace of their dreams fulfilled. And I, after a wasted life, a fraud ...

The door behind him sprang open. Light filled the room. The candelabra too lit up. From the doorway, as old-fashioned music played behind the curtain, a masquerade stepped into the room. Stauffer by his pillar stood up.

At the head came two white-haired white-bearded men. Each wore a golden crown. Long sword at the side. They halted before Stauffer, crossed arms over their chest, inclined their white heads a little, and gave their names.

A shiver ran through Stauffer. These are characters from his plays! Women and pages came. Their greetings moved him, he thanked them. Lucie set this up. So she is Lucie. But I ...

Now they took up position before the dark blue curtain. One after another they quoted Stauffer's lines, melancholy, tragic, comical lines. Then set off again around the room, to the steps where two women had meanwhile appeared, and who now came down into the room. Stauffer thought they too must be characters from his plays. He looked on with a mixture of pleasure and shock. The one in front, slender, showed off her shiny clinging snakelike black silk

dress. She gathered up the train. Only when she drew near did Stauffer, entranced, realise it was Lucie. Sleek shining chestnut hair fell in heavy waves about her neck. Her grave proud face, the wide brow, the straight nose, firm mouth, strong chin. It is her, me myself, an extension of me. She held out both hands. He didn't understand what she was saying, it sounded like a proclamation.

Hardly had this creature released his hands when the other stepped forth, a stunning beauty. She wore blue and white, with little delicate embroidered flowers. She was taller and stouter than the other. No words could describe the divine beauty of this person. Her gaze, it seemed to him, was sweetness itself. Her bosom swelled white from the calyx of her dress. A girdle of silver enclosed her hips. She tripped along in white shoes, and the motion caused the loose fabric, slit at the sides, to lift away and reveal the knee and the full pink legs.

So Stauffer, the doubting Thomas, now stood between Lucie and the Countess, and had to show some reaction. When Lucie embraced him he was unsure where best to kiss her, it had to be the mouth. In the case of the Countess no great deliberation was needed, her lips came to him like a flower on which the bee alights. He had kissed the Countess, the Countess had offered him her lips – what a crazy situation, you could lose your mind.

Lucie on his right arm, Countess on the left, he approached the table, and now the Countess, this frisky miracle, spoke: "You must not think, Stauffer, that we would allow to pass unsung, in silence, your return to the world of truth after a lifetime of false living. I don't know about Odysseus, when he returned home from the Trojan War after ten years of wandering, whether his wife Penelope organised a big welcome party. But he deserved one."

Stauffer: "First he had to drive off Penelope's suitors."

"And you, lucky man, don't even have to do that much. Allow me two sentences. You have been wandering for twenty years. That's no trivial matter. So I beg you to please accept this celebration and its elaborate prelude."

As they reached the table and Lucie freed his arm, she said: "This will be a pleasant first step for you to enjoy with us spirits. Now we shall feast together." She turned, and said half to Stauffer and half to the servant: "No, we are not yet quite ready to begin. Stauffer, you would surely wish to bestow on the other spirits your thanks for their consideration, before they fade back into their secret world." The servant withdrew, and as they stood there the old men with the crowns, the women, the knights and pages all came down once more into the salon.

"What do you mean by this, actually?" Stauffer asked. "What kind of celebration is this? Is it for my seventieth?"

The kings advanced. How often had Stauffer faced such characters in rehearsals. Though he had already seen them once, now as they stood close, face to face at mirror-distance, he was overcome with physical terror. It was himself, his real truth, and not his miserable shabby lived past. He clung tight to his chair. Lucie, seeing his face collapse, put her hand on his. He asked: "What should I say to them?"

"Whatever you like, Erwin." But he said nothing, his powers of speech had fled.

The kings extended a hand, he mumbled thanks. The noble ladies curtsied, the pages bowed. And now they could take their seats.

Stauffer tugged at his collar, said how embarrassed he was to be wearing ordinary 1918 clothes in front of these gentlemen, and was even more embarrassed to be sitting between the two ladies. Food was served, toasts were exchanged, a small orchestra played. It was the strangest meal he had ever attended. It was like a baptism. Between courses they stood up and danced, Stauffer first with Lucie. They swayed slowly in each other's arms. He was no longer rebelling. The enchantment was complete. Then the two ladies danced together. When he asked the Countess for a dance, she offered him her arm, and it was only a solemn promenade through the salon.

When the ladies withdrew after coffee and Stauffer went to his room, he found a big bouquet of roses in a vase with a note attached. It contained a shiny gold ring with the name Lucie. He put it on. It sat on his finger. It could be considered an engagement ring, he thought. I've been ambushed. I must flee. Do I want to? Do I want – a new life? A true life? Is it the true life? His heart pounded, he was afraid again. He recalled the night when he found the letters, and now here are the consequences.

### Pharaoh's Tomb

The Countess came to fetch him. She wore the same formal dress from the theatre evening, the spirit atmosphere had wafted clear. She accepted his thanks for the celebration, and looked at his hand with the ring. "You want to wear it, Stauffer?"

"With all my heart." (Fate, I'm done for, I won't defend myself.)

"Then perhaps you'd like to see another ring?"

They met Lucie at the doorway to the salon. At the top of the steps Stauffer showed her his ring, and slipped onto her finger another that the Countess had handed to him. It was too much for Lucie's nerves. She fainted, as during that first conversation with the Countess. But she didn't cry out. "She'll come round soon enough," the Countess pulled Stauffer down the steps. "Don't be surprised by her agitation. Apart from anything else, she's married."

"My God." Stauffer was rooted to the spot.

"It means a lot less than you think. There's no obstacle on Lucie's part." She told him of Lucie's husband in America, she knows him well. He'll act up a little when Lucie, who's spent half the marriage away roving the world, asks for a divorce. "Lucie is well off, from her first husband. He was killed in a car crash. If it comes to it she can bear the fury of her current husband. But she's incredibly clever. You'll find out."

He already had.

### TRAVEL PLANS

*Of foreign parts, and the things that happen on one's travels.*

*Fantasies arise, but one has secret reservations.*

Stauffer paced back and forth in the chateau's guest bedroom, laughing, unable to believe his luck. After the festive luncheon Lucie had come to him in the hotel to drive him back to the chateau. Now he mused over his suitcase in disbelief. He saw his fur coat, his briefcase lying on chairs and asked: "Now I'm actually to live here? Is it final? What's dream, fantasy, what is real?"

And now Lucie stepped in, and though she was not the apparition of yesterday's theatrics, she seemed nonetheless very similar, younger even, and more in line with his dream picture. I'm oscillating between two worlds. The ladies have conjured away my identity. I shall have to change my name.

Lucie was tender to him. Both were drifting in a curiously nostalgic emotional state. The spirit-play had not yet released her. And so they embraced. Swiftly, surprisingly for him, Lucie became a happy little female. She gave herself to him. It happened so suddenly and was so unexpected and extraordinary that afterwards, when she'd left, he sat there, felt himself all over, groaned softly and tore his hair.

It's all nonsense, he rebelled, nonsense, and impossible. I can't take any of it seriously. All I did was cave in. I really must pull myself together. It's imperative I take a different direction. But what direction? He sighed. But it wasn't quite genuine. What else, when you think it over, could he do. Some quotations came to mind: *The Eternal Feminine draws us on high*. And: *There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy*. Thus did he seek to justify himself to himself, and cast a pall over memories of this day.

Evening came, lamps were lit; he encountered Lucie in the small salon with the Countess. But the Countess at once left the room, would not be detained. Now he learned what Lucie had in store for him. She showed herself the more practical and concrete of the pair. As he marvelled at the assurance with which she spoke (and arranged his life) she shook the serious head that he observed with joy and astonishment – he was making discoveries, she was conquering him.

She said: "There's nothing to marvel at, Erwin, when you consider how many years I've had to prepare for this moment. I shall fetch you away from Germany. I shall take you out into the world. You will see other continents. We shall not storm through Heaven and Hell. You shall learn that there are oceans, and America, and South Sea islands and China, and the Congo, Egypt, and the Ganges and Shanghai. It's quite something, a long sea voyage. If you don't hide yourself away in the entertainment rooms and listen to the same old jazz band and dance the same old tango with people you already saw in Zurich, Munich and Berlin and will see again in New York and Chicago – then you can already catch a sense of the elements, of nature, real life. You'll see youngsters playing tennis on deck, and fog will envelope us, and the ship senses what's happening and every minute the ship emits a hollow blast of the siren. It's a warning, but she's also afraid. And down in the bowels of the vessel the mighty engines toil away, and you're glad to hear their plucky thumping and stamping. I've done lots of travelling. I'd like to go into the polar night one day, see the Northern Lights, Eskimos, huskies. But I don't trust myself, I always want to go but I too easily feel the cold. So that's the first part, Erwin, travelling. And then I'll have to go back to America, deal with various matters. Some won't be pleasant. And over there – I shall marry you. It's unimaginable: we shall get married."

Tears sprang into her eyes. He felt hugely guilty and thought he should comfort her. But she was ahead of him: "Travel, yes. I shall do all I can to help you discover yourself. When you discover foreign lands you also discover something of yourself. No man is an island. No. And you can't find yourself when you're stuck in a little nook. Among these vast experiences your mind will expand, feelings will become stronger, truer, more natural."

She whispered: "You know, Erwin, cities actually turn us all into empty vessels. They're all one and the same, with their music, the theatre, their literature. And all you men are so eager for experiment, for politics and world history, and that's what makes your society. And in this



confusion left behind by earlier generations, we who come later are supposed to find our feet. Hah, before you realise it's all chaos, you've already worked yourself to exhaustion."

He listened attentively. She remained grave and assured: "The patient does not know his suffering. But he protests in his own way, and feels dysfunctional."

"I am all ears, dottoressa."

"So, we'll be in America and shall stay a while. And then the second part begins: you will embark on something. You and I both stem from a nation that calls itself a people of poets and thinkers. Over there you'll find it quite different. Already when a handful of English people decided not to practise their dissenting religion in their own country, but rather embark on an undertaking, that was something. I don't yet know, Erwin, what you will do, later, much later. You will not let your talent tyrannise you. Maybe another side of you will show. Among other people you will learn who you are. You can only learn this among others, with others, Erwin. The writer's study is the worst of evils. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not urging you towards politics, though I won't hold you back if that's what attracts you. But there's nothing like actually taking part in person. You can't avoid exposure. You have to throw yourself into it. I've had a few successes, and if they weren't more, Erwin, it's because you weren't with me. Powers will flow to you when you engage with others. Calls and questions all around, and you're right in among the choir. When does life begin to become interesting? Do you know? When resistance begins! I've learned a lot from this. How was I able to bear my fate? You know I wrote letters to you. I did, to hold myself together. But I had to do more. The Countess even asked me again yesterday, once she knew the whole story, how I managed to persevere after the 'disappointment' back then. The 'disappointment' for me meant almost annihilation. It was other people who helped me get over it, not with words but with deeds. And it largely faded into the background. I had to struggle and not die."

She had meant to fascinate Stauffer, and ended in gloom. He tried to distract her, but the attempt failed. And when he went to bed late that evening after a silent supper with the Countess and Lucie, he admitted to himself: how could the day have ended otherwise than subdued, with so much of the past and a bitter glimpse into the future.

Just before he fell asleep his mood changed; he sank into the gentle foolish joy he'd felt on the first visit, when he tramped through snow towards an enchanted princess. He rocked himself in his sleep, the old fantasist, with the words: a triumphant Babylonian death, in ecstasy.

Of course he meant no such thing.

#### Ep. 10: DANCE AROUND THE MAGIC LETTER-CHEST

*A daughter fights for a place in her father's life. Various Poets and Thinkers drown their sorrows in alcohol. Old love grows not stale, and heads for America.*

Furniture makyth Man

Stauffer, the dramatist, found himself back in Berlin late in the afternoon. At Anhalter Station he looked out onto the city. Now it had happened, a life turned upside down, and he strove to view the world through new eyes. He made an effort. Incredulous, he felt the smooth gold band on his finger. Incredulous, and proud. What an adventure. What a grand, real adventure. His own personal revolution.

He strolled on towards Potsdamer Platz. It seethed with people. He knew from the papers that frontline troops had returned, there had been no incidents, a certain nervousness had lifted from the city. He observed nothing of it directly, everyone seemed strangely grey and insubstantial. It must be an after-effect of the tremendous experiences he'd just undergone. At Potsdamer Platz the number of streetwalkers doubled. He fled, headed for his suburban train.

And now to the apartment. It looked desolate. The old porter's wife from the previous apartment had made a rough and ready job of tidying up. That evening he sat in his room under a wax candle and sought to enter into some relationship with his furniture. He couldn't. Why did he drag all this stuff around with him. Why does he need four rooms. And so much junk, a museum, a rubbish dump.

Only the still unopened boxes of books drew him – among them the box with the letters, the magic box, Pharaoh's sarcophagus. Pharaoh's sarcophagus? Now it all seems so different. Thus might the dead, if they prevailed over Death, have another perspective on our life.

But it was still eerie, squatting among all this junk as if in a cellar, by the light of a single candle. Nothing for it but to go to bed. In the dark and his distracted condition, he forgot to halve his sleeping tablet, swallowed it whole and was still fast asleep when the bell of the newly installed telephone rang and rang. He lay listening to the ringing, fire engine, church, ringing on and on, must be the doorbell, it's quite nearby, he lifted his head, but he couldn't tell who or what was ringing (the apparatus was new, had an unfamiliar tone). He sat up: what's ringing, where the devil is it? At last it was clear the ringing came from under the bed. Yes, the telephone was under the bed. In his stupor he bent down to seize the noisy creature and haul it out. It didn't cease its din until he lifted the earpiece. He gave it another shove in his annoyance. And now the earpiece was at his ear and he understood nothing. He stared around the room: what kind of a stupid room is this? And who's talking there, actually? He lay down, until lightning flashed through his brain, through clouds of stupefaction. He understood something, his name repeated several times, someone laughing.

He became more awake, felt his heavy dull head and for the fifth time gave his name. Now he heard: it was Lucie.

She told him she'd arrived and was at a hotel in the city. He apologised, said he couldn't hear clearly, he was still in a stupor, the sleeping pill worked really well this time. She advised him to go back to sleep, she was in no hurry, she'd call again in the afternoon. He replaced the earpiece and did indeed go back to sleep.

Two hours later, as sunlight streamed into the room, he awoke, his head was clearer, he got out of bed and made a desultory effort to bring order to the place before Lucie arrived. He pushed at furniture, to no avail. Then he left the house meaning to intercept Lucie outside.

He found a flower shop, armed himself with a huge assortment of flowers, and arranged them in vases in the apartment. Then he carried all the vases into one room, his horrible study, and of course was interrupted there by her arrival.

She kept her coat on. In the study, before those unhappy vases – in his haste he had placed one on the floor and knocked it over when he went to answer the door – she embraced him. He tried to extricate his face, which he hadn't yet shaved. But she wouldn't let him. She threw her fur coat onto the desk chair, and he, prey to so many emotions unpleasant and pleasant, finally

allowed her joy to infect him. All his tiredness and dull thoughts sank away – until she released him: “Enough now. It’s tearing my whole soul away.” The same style as her letters.

Then, despite his embarrassment and his attempts to prevent her, she inspected the whole apartment. She went through every room with a keen eye, looked at everything but touched nothing. She was trying to get her bearings, and clearly failing. He had to ask her not to form judgements about the furniture, it’s not the furniture’s fault, furniture is really of no importance.

“Why not, Erwin? You’re not rejecting your old life. One remains what one is. No?”

“One remains what one is. That sounds dangerous.”

She looked around at the boxes. There were enough of them. She sat on a low box. He sat facing her. Lucie: “Why, Erwin? I insist that you remain what you are. And you won’t be able to change me, either.”

He, reflectively: “I caught myself out just now, when I flinched at your saying: one remains what one is. There’s something in that. I’ve been hauling this furniture around for decades, and that, it now occurs to me, is not merely an external matter. When I look at this furniture, it’s part of a set that includes the box of papers your letters fell out of. The letters lay in there for decades, the box preserved them, it had swallowed something of mine, I had no idea and never noticed until one day, late one night, the box sprang open and yielded them up.”

She pressed: “Then what, Erwin? What will you hold on to, what will you give up?”

“You see, I always had a theory about milieu and people. You know what Taine and others taught: it’s the milieu that shapes the person. Show me your environment, tell me where you grew up, and I will tell you who you are. Contrary to this I assert, more for myself than for the outside world: it is the person who shapes the environment. Were it otherwise we could not exist, and would ourselves be nothing more than environment. We shape our milieu, tune it to ourselves, at the very least we make it chime with us. So, for example, I proudly lay out myself and my furniture and pursue my way of life. I don’t allow myself to be changed, and no one imposes on me. Now – I see it differently. I haul this old junk around to barricade myself behind it. Yes, that’s how I regard this furniture now. Actually it’s strange, it seems to me that through all this I’ve never really looked at the furniture. It’s simply followed me around. But others will have seen it.”

“And what story do you tell yourself, Erwin?”

He searched his memory: “From childhood I was kept isolated. I became used to solitude early on. Apparently I was often ill as a child. I had no siblings. I was coddled. My parents kept me for themselves. They had little else. I recall that they seldom let me play with others, they were afraid of something. Then came reading, and dreams. A frenzy of reading. And if you’re a solitary child, reading makes you even more so. There I was already, life size. At the time I was twelve or fifteen years old. Then the writing started, quite early. At first I was puzzled that other people found something in my scribbles, my versifying – and not only my parents, who already regarded me as their miracle child. I wanted to know what I was writing, did it have some contact with reality. Probably it had none. But through writing I began to come into contact with people, right at the start with certain circles, people from the newspaper world, critics, later on the theatre. Then I experienced the strangest thing: others started calling me their ‘colleague’. Of course nobody acquires colleagues that way. I say this not out of jealousy.”

“Meanwhile you came to know women.”

He lifted his hands with a laugh: “Sorry! Yes, that too. Or differently expressed: they came to know me. I was happy enough to tend this or that ‘flame’. But it was not meant to be, was not allowed, not tolerated.” He hesitated, looked across to the desk: “So I got married, and that was the start of this study, my writing room. My mother insisted I get married. She thought I was going to seed.”

“You came across Klara.”

“She took me as I was, a rare bird she could domesticate – till it flew away. So I was alone again, was what I was – and sank ever deeper into a life my mother called dissolute. It became fixed. I placed the furniture around me, pulled the cage close about me. I felt safe in it. Furniture is battlements one builds around oneself. You know the rest. Decades, a whole row of them. My furniture, horror of horrors, is me.”

Lucie sat on her box, bent forward, hands in her lap. “It must be a horror for you to feel that way. But you can be very rich and have a garden full of flowers and know nothing of it. You can let the garden become overgrown by a single species – it needn’t be a weed. This plant can suck the ground dry, leach it, so that in the end it can produce nothing more, and even the plant dies. How to save yourself? Dig elsewhere, plant other things.”

He took a deep breath: “Good advice.”

She: “Let me tell you something zoological. We too are a mix of animals, noble and base, big and small. I think that must be why we enjoy visiting zoos and watching the animals: we already have dogs and cats and birds inside us. But then we’re frightened: there are lions and eagles there too, stags and elephants and vipers.”

As she spoke, there were noises at the door, someone trying to ring the bell. And then a knock. Stauffer stood: “The bell doesn’t work.” The woman smiled: “Yes, I had to knock.”

He came back quickly, said nothing. She: “Well?”

“There’s – a visitor for me.”

She: “So? Let me see who it is.” – “Please don’t.”

“Is it a lady?” – “Yes.”

She swept to the door. As she passed she whispered: “The serpent, Erwin. If you don’t mind, I’ll fetch her myself.”

The porter in the hallway explained that a lady was waiting in his lodge; was it convenient? Because he knew, the mischievous fellow, that the gentleman already had company, so he thought it best to ask first.

In the porter’s lodge Lucie found a lady who had acquired ink, pen and paper and was busy writing. When the porter bowed to Lucie at his door (this’ll be a lark!), pointed to the lady and withdrew discreetly, Lucie approached the desk. The writer looked up. Lucie: “Excuse me, are you the lady who wishes to speak to Herr Stauffer?”

The young person’s face flushed deep red: “Yes.” She leaned back, and they stared at each other. Lucie had a friendly smile: “Herr Stauffer misunderstood the message. He asks you to come up, and apologises for making you wait.”

The young lady grabbed her fur coat from the desk, left her unfinished letter lying. The porter, quickly reappearing on the scene, handed it to her on the way out, she stuffed it in her handbag, then thought of a tip and pressed something into his hand, whereupon he stood cringing at the door, which was already open, and let the two ladies with their serious faces pass.

He hastened eagerly to the kitchen to tell his wife what had just happened, the new tenant, that famous Herr Stauffer, and what a rigmarole there'll be upstairs now. "The first one, the older lady, knows what the younger one's up to, they're both up there. The two of them, together! They'll scratch out his eyes."

Stauffer paced uneasily among his boxes and cursed his luck. This Bella, a total ball and chain. She'll make a scene, a big scene, one of her tremendous scenes, and put me on the spot. And why on earth did Lucie go downstairs. So annoying!

"Put it down anywhere," said Lucie in the corridor, "wherever you like." She opened the door and entered the room where Stauffer was pacing up and down.

Lucie: "The lady says she's your daughter." He went rigid. But already she was at the door, and was undoubtedly Laura. She flew at him with a little cry, flung her arms around his neck and wept. He mumbled: "But Laura."

Some time passed (he knew it would) before she released him, but only to rush out and fetch her bag with the hankie, then back to him, this time only the left arm on his shoulder (the right held the hankie to her nose), pressed to his chest and sobbing.

"Now Laura, tell me, what are you doing in Berlin? Has something happened at home?" The dreadful thought came: perhaps she's run away and wants to stay with me.

But it wasn't that bad. She wept only because she'd already been two whole days in Berlin where she knew no one and had just sat in that lodge with the horrid porter and his wife waiting for Stauffer. She'd told the porter right away she was Stauffer's daughter. But the shameless pair just grinned and didn't believe her. And the wife had said out loud from the kitchen so she could hear: it's a scandal what tricks the young girls play, and that such a little goose should come so brazenly to a gentleman's apartment.

So now there was an abundance of consoling, to which Lucie contributed. Stauffer promised to go to the porter couple and restore Laura's honour. She insisted he go at once: "Else I'll never be able to go downstairs." So Stauffer swore he'd go with her when she went down, clear the matter up, and Laura would be his witness. The young lady was content with this, and from that moment on she stole the show.

First she delighted hugely in her father, and explained she had extended her Christmas vacation because she wanted to go skiing with her parents (I mean Mama and my stepfather) in the Riesengebirge: "And where have you been, Father? No one had your address. Two days ago there was another lady sitting with me in the porter's lodge, very pretty, she knew you well, she said, she'd come from Dresden, an actress. I really liked her. She had a teeny black miniature pinscher in her arms."

"Did you tell her who you are?"

"Of course. But she laughed and laughed, it was so silly, but I had to laugh too, she didn't believe me either. She gave me her card. If I'm ever in Dresden I'm to visit her."

He looked at the card. It was Bella.

Lucie sat on her box, legs drawn up, enjoying herself immensely. Now Laura cast an embarrassed glance at the unknown lady and whispered to her father: "Won't you introduce us? She's been very nice to me."

Stauffer: "I'm sure she has. So, this is Laura, really and truly my daughter. And this is Lucie, my – wife."

Laura stood dumbfounded. She stared in disbelief from one to the other. Lucie smiled down from her box-throne.

"Your wife? You never said a word to me about being married."

"It happened while I was travelling."

"So that's why you went away. That's why. And left no address. And moved to a new apartment."

"You assume too much. Anyway, you're the first to be introduced to my wife."

Lucie leaped down from her box, smacked his cheek and took both the embarrassed girl's hands in hers: "He's fibbing, as usual. Your father is a professional fibber. It's true we've exchanged rings, but we haven't yet registered."

Laura: "Not been to the Registry Office yet?"

"Not yet, Laura. Isn't it awful?" Laura: "But you're going to marry Father?"

Lucie: "Let's be friends. Once I marry your father, you'll be my stepdaughter. So then you'll have a stepfather and a stepmother."

Laura relented, and they hugged. Lucie kissed the girl on both cheeks. Laura, embarrassed, let herself enjoy it, she looked blooming and radiated joy like happiness personified. She flew from one to the other: "And I didn't bring any flowers."

Then they became more serious. Laura asked if she could help sort out the apartment during her two days still in Berlin. Stauffer said: "That's up to you, Lucie."

And Lucie said: "And up to you. And then it depends on the ship."

Laura: "What ship?"

Lucie: "You live in Hamburg, we shall meet again in Hamburg. I live in America, and must go back as soon as I can."

Laura kept silent, then turned to her father: "And you'll go with her?"

He could see what was coming. But something else happened. As he stood close to her and said yes, she kept silent and took several steps back. She knocked over a little chair with blankets heaped on it. She bent down, picked up the blankets, and laid them on a chest. She sat tight-lipped, back half turned to the others, on the chair.

Stauffer, pleading: "What's the matter?" But she turned her back. He saw that she was not actually sad, rather grim and angry.

Lucie stepped close and placed a hand on her shoulder from behind. Laura twitched irritably. Lucie took her hand back: "So what's the matter?" The young lady hissed: "I'm sure you

can work it out for yourself.” Very formal, all tenderness forgotten. Lucie: “I don’t understand.” Young lady, haughty: “I’m sorry for that.”

And stood, looked for her bag and her stole, and said as she buttoned her jacket, quite rudely: “I should have spared myself this visit.”

Stauffer held her hands tight and said with some vigour: “Pull yourself together, Laura. Tell us what you want.”

“I want nothing. Certainly not from you. Just like you, scooting off to America.”

“Not a nice tone, Laura. You heard, we have an urgent journey ahead of us.” (He had to defend himself from her, how strange.)

“You’ve had journeys ahead of you your whole life. You’re never here. Who do you care about, actually? You’ve never cared about me. And when you do come and at last you’re here, you go off with this lady on a trip to America.”

“She is my wife, Laura.”

The girl replied sniffily: “Not yet she isn’t. I won’t stand in your way. That’s not why I came. Whyever did you come to Hamburg? I’ve asked Mama a dozen times, she has no idea. I thought it was because of me, because at long last you realised what was the right thing to do.”

Lucie approached them both: “Erwin, pay close attention. She’s hauling you over the coals. Wherever you go they haul you over the coals.” She pushed her arm under his and tried to catch Laura’s gaze, but the girl would not react. Lucie said: “I have exactly the same problem with him, Laura. He never cared about me his whole life. You’re quite right to scold him. I too have given him a good piece of my mind.”

Laura couldn’t care less what the lady said, she flung herself angrily at her father: “Mama had no idea why you came. She says it was one of your crazy notions. But you should have left it alone, instead of ... me ...” She couldn’t go on, her mouth twitched, her face contorted, flushed flame-red, and she wept miserably into both hands. When Stauffer put an arm around her she pushed him away.

Stauffer: “Laura, of course you can’t come with us.”

She blubbered: “At least you might have asked me.”

Lucie nodded to Stauffer. She maintained a profoundly grave face. Stauffer: “Then I really must apologise, Laura. Please don’t hold it too much against me. We’d only started discussing America just before you arrived. You see, it’s like this: we, Lucie and I, plan to travel in two or three weeks, even one week if we can find a ship, to America. How long we’ll be away is still not certain, our plans are not yet fixed.”

Laura interrupted, she had suddenly stopped crying and said almost mocking: “Perhaps your marriage isn’t yet fixed.” Stauffer made a soothing gesture to Lucie, who was frowning, and said: “No, that is fixed. That’s exactly why we’re making the trip.”

Lucie laid a hand on Laura’s fur stole: “So you’re my little enemy? Look at these grey hairs, Laura. That’s how long I waited for your father. Much much longer than you’ve been waiting.”

“But you’ve only known each other a week.”

Lucie closed her eyes: “Ask your mother about that, please.”

“You know my mother?”

“A friendlier tone wouldn’t hurt. Yes, your mother knows me.” Laura’s shoulders relaxed, her tears dried. The petulant expression was gone: “Now I really don’t know what’s happening.”

Stauffer: “You don’t have to, child, not this moment. It was my intention to remedy all I’d left undone. If you want to, if you’re allowed to, you’re welcome to join us.”

Laura: “You’ve known Father so long? As long as I’ve been alive? So – maybe it was because of you he separated from Mama?”

Lucie: “Is that the little enemy talking, Laura? You really don’t need to be cross with me. Your father did not separate from your mother because of me. He abandoned me for twenty years in the same way he abandoned you. I was in America without him.”

Laura, ever more astonished: “And you only found each other again just now? After twenty years?” She was lost for words. And suddenly, as she studied them both, Lucie and her father, she was so taken with the situation – at first she had no idea how or why – that she flung her arms around Lucie: “But that’s so fantastic. It’s heavenly, heavenly.”

Stauffer stepped to the window. He waited quite a while. The ladies wept.

When he heard noses being blown he turned around. The girl ran up beaming and hugged him, congratulated him, apologised. She was excited, cock-a-hoop. It’s so incredible, like something in the movies. She’s terrifically glad to be part of it, personally involved in such a situation. But no one will believe it when she tells them. Then she became fully sensible again and declared that a celebration was absolutely called for.

Neither Stauffer nor Lucie, carried along by the unruly girl, had any counter-argument. Laura also declared suddenly: “Have a nice trip to America, and get yourselves properly married. I’ll come later. I can’t just yet. First, I don’t know if Mama will let me, and then my course doesn’t finish until April.”

So, because they planned to have a celebration dinner in Berlin and had to sort themselves out first, she skipped off blissfully happy, excited as a whirlwind, and even forgot about her besmirched honour, so Stauffer was spared the need to accompany her to the porter’s lodge.

### Politics calls – in vain

Before Stauffer accompanied Lucie back to her hotel – he planned to spend not one more night in his desolate apartment – he received another curious visitor: the tall dark-maned lyricist from the Congress of Intellectual Workers.

You could tell by looking what hard days the somewhat jaunty lyricist had behind him. For him too it had in the end not been easy to find his way out of the situation.

After the final debates they dispersed with such enthusiasm. But next morning when the lyricist phoned the chairman who had spoken so powerfully, he was faced with the strangest conundrum. The man at the other end of the line turned out suddenly to be unapproachable. He said: everything had been laid out clearly the previous day and he had nothing to add. – The outcome was fantastic, so encouraging, the lyricist said. – Devastating, devastating, the chairman roared, and if you have no ears to understand that, you should hear it now.



Incomprehensible. When the lyricist wailed for heaven's sake, what's happened all of a sudden, the man at the other end became insulting, choked, coughed and roared: damn and blast it, you should all leave me in peace for once, take a running jump the lot of you. And waking him up so early just for this. He harrumphed a bit more, then hung up.

The lyricist, standing dumbfounded, at first thought the man was choking on something, then came the closely allied thought that the novelist had clearly drunk too much the night before. Whatever, that too was an act of outrageous irresponsibility given the situation in the Reich. The Right Putsch had fizzled out, now there was the threat of a Left Putsch, and where did the intellectuals stand? Where was the Intellectual Putsch?

So the perturbed lyricist had got to his feet and headed for the hotel where the famous visitor from Munich was staying. He wasn't in his room, but was apparently still in the hotel. After hunting around the lyricist found him in the bar with a cocktail, in the company of an old complacent banker and his straw-blond girlfriend.

The three were in a most boisterous mood. They greeted the lyricist with hearty hellos, pulled him into their circle, and the conversation resumed. It was, the lyricist discovered, not really a conversation but a succession of smutty witticisms and barrack-room jokes. The trio wallowed in indecent stories. The Berliner sat clueless opposite his revered master, the great man from Munich, eyes and ears agog. It really was the famous master. Laughing, giggling, yes, he giggled and purred. The whole face, the mouth and eyes, acquired new traits that reminded the lyricist of the companions of Odysseus, when on their travels they came upon the goddess Circe and with a touch of her staff she turned them into swine.

In shocked disbelief the lyricist studied the normally grave face of the man from Munich. He was flushed, mercurial, full of bounce. (The hormone treatment the Master was undergoing was the tops, a triumph of science.) When a pause gave the lyricist an opportunity to insert his nebulous concerns into the conversation, the man from Munich interrupted him at once. He clapped him on the shoulder and exhorted him to drink up and leave all the rest of it at home. "The Congress of Intellectuals. Hand on heart, it was sometimes quite nice there, you met other people, but in the end a chap had enough of it, and all in all it was an abortion. And with that, my dear friend, we leave our Congress in peace."

And they all, the Master from Munich, baldheaded banker, straw-blond lady and the tall black-maned lyricist drank a toast to the quietly expired Congress.

The lyricist had to waste half the day there. His head throbbed from whisky.

That evening he sat alone and forlorn in the Café des Westens on Kurfürstendamm hoping to bump into people he knew. A few turned up now and then, none with the slightest interest in politics. And the Congress of Intellectuals drew no more than a grin. How long did the lyricist sit there, watching the revolving door turn and turn. Now, he thinks, someone will enter who'll bring salvation. Because Berlin is at stake, Germany. The intellectuals cannot possibly fall short. But no one came. When the propositioning became too bothersome, he went sadly on his way. And there on Kurfürstendamm he suddenly thought of silent Stauffer. Ah, there's a serious man. I'll head off and find him. Next morning it was no easy task to find his new address.

But now here he is. He finds Stauffer in the middle of moving, with a pleasant serious lady who seems very clever and energetic, must be a relative helping to sort out the apartment. In the presence of this woman, amid furniture and boxes, the lyricist broached his concern to

Stauffer, lamented the utter disorganisation of the Congress of Intellectuals, the lack of interest, flattered Stauffer as one of the few greats of German literature who had found their way to politics, and surely Stauffer will now come and help. A special session should be called for tomorrow in the Reichstag. An SOS call.

Because Stauffer and the energetic lady listened with polite attention, to entice Stauffer the lyricist made a further remark that had occurred to him on his way there. The papers were reporting on President Wilson's arrival in Paris, all ready to begin work on the Peace Conference, to bring about a new peace, Wilson, one of their own, an intellectual, a man of the mind. And over there in Russia a revolution had been brought about by another intellectual, by Lenin. So he asked himself, the lyricist did, where that left Germany, which so loved to call itself the land of poets and thinkers. Surely they won't let foreigners point the finger of scorn.

Stauffer showed interest: "So that's how you see those two, Wilson and Lenin. But they're such opposites."

The lyricist: "First and foremost they're intellectuals like us. Both want Reason to triumph, rationality, one via the League of Nations, the other – in another way. Both are making plans."

Stauffer, quietly: "In that respect they're both Americans." The lyricist: "Rationality isn't only American. Anyway, both are our brothers in spirit. Where does it leave us?"

Stauffer, pensive: "Brothers in spirit. Strange to think of it like that. What are we up to, actually, show me the whole picture. What are we planning, who's planning with us? Actually, it's only – don't laugh – the General Staff. That's a fact. If I wanted to wax paradoxical, I'd say that over there they have their Wilson and Lenin, while we have old Hindenburg." The lyricist: "That's no joke. Hindenburg is the polar opposite, the nationalism that leads to war."

Stauffer indicated that he might appear next morning, and enquired about the topic for the coming session. The lyricist lied, said Stauffer would in due course be offered the honorary chair of the Congress; for the rest, they wanted to decide the old question: should revolution guide the Spirit, or should Spirit guide the revolution?

Stauffer's head drooped. Lucie wondered if there was still very much revolution in Berlin. She herself, during her strolls through the city, had found everything calm and orderly. The lyricist nodded mournfully; that was the worst of it, you needed a lantern to seek out revolution in Berlin. But it was there, potentially, in the mood. There'd soon be a big Reich Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, the intellectuals would be represented, their words thrown into the balance. The counter-revolution was strong. Frankly speaking, he personally included under 'counter-revolution' both the generals and the workers.

Stauffer, mild as ever: all in all everything is in the same place as two weeks ago. But to bring an end to the conversation he fished out his pocket diary and in full view of his mollified visitor made an entry. Once the lyricist had left, Stauffer showed Lucie the entry for tomorrow: 'Congress of Intellectuals session: caution'.

Lucie said: "I find the whole thing frightening. Whatever is their state of mind?"

Stauffer: "They're drawn on, like me, by a light, by the light of actual true events."

"You will not go to them again."

But the conversation must have stirred him, for he gave a sad smile: "I'm sorry for the boy. Yes, what am I doing, Lucie? I'm slithering away from it. I'm leaving them to it. It's what they call desertion. When it comes down to it, I grew up on the same dungheap. Lenin and Wilson, our spiritual brothers. And sometimes I thought to make contact with the people, the masses."

Lucie shook her head: "The masses, the people. When you write, when you're at work the way you do, you are the people, are in the right kind of contact with the people. There's no need for you to seek out extra masses. That way you'll find not a people, but only rallies, congresses."

"Is that what they think in America?"

Lucie: "I'm no American. But it seems to me that over there they're not as crazy as here. It really is good that I'm leaving. You came to me at the last moment on this mad continent, I could never live in this European lunacy. Now they glorify some individual, now they deify some nation, and the masses follow. How are the masses better than the myriad individuals that constitute them? Over there, our life is – more realistic, colder, but also less quixotic. Seems to me your Europe no longer has a proper religion, finds it indigestible. So they mess around with every possible religion like an abandoned lover throwing himself at loose women. Over there we work hard, competition is fierce, fiercer than here, but people know where their interests lie and pursue them in coordination with others. They have friendships. They live in reality, mostly more than enough. On the other hand they yearn to leave this reality and come to something spiritual. I believe no one in America hit on the notion of a theory of materialism to top it all. It would be like carrying coals to Newcastle."

"So, you would drive all your artists into their ivory towers?"

"Very few over there, alas, live in ivory towers."

Stauffer: "And what about human misery, poverty?"

Lucie: "There's plenty of that over there, too. But as for real suffering, most of it, alas, comes from agitators, and those are people of our class, mostly well-housed, educated, people who for some reason feel impelled to act out feelings of revenge against their own class. Over there the general view is: everyone must work, find his luck, succeed, and not be discouraged. The state leaves you alone. If you're governed by morons or rascals, it's your own fault."

Lucie gazed long at the flowers, and said: "Suffering – belongs with us; it's not life, but it belongs with us like weeds in the crop. But we are the crop. And if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's this: happiness, beauty and freedom belong with us. That's where our identity grows."

They went into the city. Stauffer was moved by the thought of celebrating his second connection with Lucie, this time together with his daughter. They booked a table at Lucie's hotel, bought her some jewellery as a gift. She gave them little presents.

A voyage to the New World, into a new world, loomed.

As they made their purchases, Lucie pointed to brightly-lit Leipziger Strasse: "Look about you, Erwin, how lovely, how peaceful it all is."

## Ep. 11 (untitled)

This is the time when the dramatist Stauffer is pottering around in his apartment. For Lucie has phoned, she wants to pay him a visit, and he doesn't want her to see the place in this state. But

after half an hour's efforts at tidying up he sees how hopeless it is, he does what Becker has done: he leaves the apartment and goes for a walk.

### Ep. 12: PENULTIMATE MOMENT IN EUROPE

*Much loses its bitter character if you give it time and learn to know yourself better; many men who can't stand themselves discover this. And when the ship doesn't leave right away for America and you must stay behind a bit longer, you're not too bothered. Maybe you won't make the voyage after all?*

#### The two female adversaries

The Stauffers – Erwin and Lucie, with Laura tagging along – were at a loose end in Hamburg. For as they quickly learned, the blockade was still in effect and no ships would depart for the foreseeable future. But just as someone in flammable clothing can't approach fire without risking disaster, just so was the situation with Lucie in this city – not just any city, but the city where Klara lived.

Even in the train, Lucie had grown quieter for some reason Stauffer couldn't fathom. And that evening Lucie contrived it so that next morning Laura would have Stauffer all to herself.

She headed out to see Klara.

Whenever a god hangs something over us, we take comfort in bowing to an unfathomable will. But here a human being like any other, no, a common, jealous, vengeful female, has assumed the role of judge and sealed her own fate. Klara will be faced not by a human being, but by a mere object, an insect to be squashed. But since the squashing doesn't entirely succeed, the nine-tenths squashed thing will rise again for the sake of justice, and pursue its grievance.

When Lucie rang the doorbell, a maid answered. She was shown to the antler room.

Lucie, in a dark green winter coat, on her head a black fur hat, sat grim-faced at the table. This time there was no jolly commotion in the hall, and no dog, Laura had taken it with her.

A tall strapping person came in. She wore a simple house dress, arms bare. She smoothed the dress and asked in a friendly tone to whom did she owe the pleasure. Clearly she'd been baking in the kitchen, she brushed flour from her arms. She seemed to have not much time.

Lucie: It's on a very particular matter. And when Klara sat down in some surprise – a respectable beggar? – and Lucie saw the woman up close, she said calmly: "I'm the actress from the time when you and Erwin Stauffer were married, you knew her by the name of Lucie."

Klara, dumbfounded, placed a robust arm on the table. She wasn't too surprised. Laura had said she'd come back to Hamburg with the couple, and gushed about the wonderful movie script she'd landed up in, how the couple had found each other again after twenty years.

"So," Klara nodded, fuming at all the nonsense invading her home these days, all the superfluous warmed-up leftovers. "How can I help? My daughter told me about it."

"Clearly I've interrupted you. If you need to finish off in the kitchen, I can wait."

Klara forcefully: "Is it about Laura? I've never once allowed her to make such a trip."

"You seem to assume I'm here on account of your daughter. I am the actress whom you knew at the time of your marriage to Stauffer, by the name of Lucie."

Klara lifted her hand from the table, crossed her arms at her breast, frowned, her eyes flashed, she said loudly: "I don't know you, how should I know all his affairs from the past. It's nothing to do with me. You must have all gone mad. Leave me in peace. You must know that the man who is now your husband or fiancé sat there a fortnight ago intent for some reason on making a scene with me. He thought better of it."

Lucie had the same experience as Stauffer: she could not reconcile this woman with the matter that had brought her here.

Klara: "That man sent you here, admit it. He daren't come himself. Courage was never his strong point. You're here to negotiate about Laura. There's no need for obfuscations. Laura is his daughter."

"I am not here because of your daughter. You won't get away from her so easily. Not as easily – as you did me."

Klara held a hand to her eyes. In a changed tone she said: "Let me think, let me think." The letters, this is the woman.

Lucie: "Now do you remember me? I spoke to you just once or twice in the lobby of your building, and once at the apartment door. And we spoke on the telephone."

"I remember."

"Erwin was always busy."

"I knew why you were phoning. He was my husband. Others phoned as well."

Lucie: "I wrote letters to him. They never arrived."

"He didn't read them."

"You know that?" – "Yes."

Lucie: "Why are you lying? You know he read them, that's why you hid them away."

Clearly Klara would now stand up and exercise her rights as mistress of the house. But – she did not. This was the woman who had inflicted inexpressible pain on her long ago and whom she herself had harmed.

They talked of events twenty years in the past. In the meantime the Russo-Japanese War had happened, the World War, deportations, the flu had laid waste to Europe, ten million lay dead. The discussion went further.

Now Klara covered her eyes with a hand: "Why are you here?"

"I can't let the matter rest. Twenty years have gone by – and have not gone by. You see what has become of me. And much is not visible to the eye."

Klara: "Seeing you sitting there brings back memories. I was obsessed with the idea that I loved him. I didn't know what love was. And that's why – I hurt him. He guarded himself from me. For in the end everyone knows what true love is. But I couldn't let him go. It would have been an unbearable humiliation. I wouldn't let myself be humiliated. I couldn't allow it. Not that, I trembled at the thought."

"Afterwards, years later, he left me. And when I was really alone, with the baby, far away from him, and my husband appeared, my one true husband with whom alas I have had no

children, then – you cannot imagine how I changed, how I revived and came to myself. Many tears I shed over those unhappy years. What had I done with my life. What had got into me. But thank God, it passed mercifully from me.”

Klara smoothed her dress, stood and made her apologies. She went out. Lucie sat alone for five minutes.

Klara returned in a dark house dress, a grave, friendly, even likable lady. She stood before Lucie and without further ado offered her hand. She led Lucie across the corridor to a lovely big room. Klara: “This is my bedroom. Laura was born in that bed. Do you like her? She told me about you.”

Lucie: “She’s a joy.”

Klara sat on a stool beside the bed, gestured to Lucie to take the stool by the mirror: “It’s good that you’ve come. My husband is a kind man, but I mustn’t talk to him about this. I couldn’t. The child, you see, I took away from Erwin. He didn’t want children. My madness from those days has passed, but the child is still here. He was right not to want a child from me, I didn’t understand, but even so I had one. He should have had your child. But you have none from him, and as a punishment I have none from my husband, whom I love. You’ve no idea what I sometimes feel when I look at Laura and think it over.”

Yes, Lucie sat and listened. Here was another conversation proceeding otherwise than she’d expected. Perhaps she should bring some consolation. Lucie: “Your husband is good to you?”

“Yes, he is. He’s my life.” (Klara folded her hands.) “I still recall the hatred with which I bundled your letters and shoved mine in among them. I came close to killing myself. I’d fallen to pieces. My life seemed over. But it wasn’t my life at all. So when my husband appeared, I told you already how my heart leapt and a great weight lifted from me. He wouldn’t let me say a word. Once when I tried to tell him about my first marriage, he swore at me. And when I still tried to tell him, he actually boxed my ears. I can’t recall anybody ever hitting me before. But he brought me into line. I realised it was for my own good, and there was no other way. It was an exorcism. I assure you, when I look back on my years with Erwin, I was possessed by devils.

Lucie: “When you found yourself again, couldn’t you at least have given me some sign?” Klara blanched.

Lucie: “You never gave me a thought. Twenty years had to pass, a box had to burst open during a house move, before I could find out what had been done to me.”

Klara, softly: “I didn’t want to think about anything from the past.”

Lucie: “Meanwhile I had to live alone, unable to find myself.”

Klara raised her hands: “Is that my fault. I didn’t know. I never thought about it, I didn’t want to think about it.”

Lucie: “First it was the fault of a devil, then someone simply forgot. Do you really believe, Madam Klara, that it is not down to you?”

Klara: “Yes, it was my doing.”

Lucie went to the door, slammed it open. In the corridor footsteps came in pursuit, Klara overtook her and steered her into the antler room. “Please, stay, five minutes more, come, let

me shut the door. For heaven's sake, Lucie, you've stirred it all up in me again. Please, Lucie, take a seat, stay here in my home, don't do this to me."

Lucie stood grim and cold at the door. Klara knelt before her, hugged her, Klara's lips quivered: "Lucie, what can I do. I see it all. What can I do to make amends? What?"

There came the sound of a dog thumping against the front door, it scratched at the door, the door opened, the great beast raced down the corridor, someone came behind, the front door closed, and now came the ghastly cry: "Mother, mother." Klara was already on her feet. Both women ran into the corridor. With a wild cry Laura flung her arms around her mother and stammered: "Mother, father, father."

"What is it? For god's sake, what's happened?"

She kept crying, they pulled her into the room, the mother sat down and took her onto her lap like a little child. Laura slumped sideways onto the table and whimpered: "He's dead, father's dead." Then she slid to the floor. Lucie stood over her, shook her: "What are you saying, Laura, what's happened, tell us."

Laura stammered: "In the bathroom, the gas heater."

### The accident

And so it was.

Laura had waited for Stauffer at the agreed time down at the docks, where steamers departed for a round-the-harbour cruise. When father failed to show up, she phoned him at the hotel. When he failed to answer, she waited a bit longer and made another phone call. Then she returned to the hotel. They told her Herr Stauffer had definitely not gone out. She rushed upstairs and knocked and knocked at his door. She raised the alarm, and hotel staff opened the door. They smelled gas.

Stauffer's room was filled with gas. He lay lifeless in the bathtub, a book of Mörike's poetry at the bottom of the tub. Laura, who had pushed her way in despite warnings, fainted and was carried out. Doctors and fire brigade were called.

Lucie phoned from the corridor of Klara's home. The hotel replied: "They're trying oxygen equipment."

Turned to ice, she took a horse cab and headed there.

A devil had torn her Erwin away, just when he had come again into her life, just now: Satan's reign endures. For a moment the thought drifted through her head: Maybe I laid too much weight on Erwin. He dared not embark on a new life.

Numbly she rode the elevator up to him.

But no Satan reigned over our good old Stauffer. Little Laura had saved him. (Of course, others would have come along within five minutes, given, as stated, that the corridor smelled of gas, but Laura's fame as a life-saver endured. And we can foresee how the surviving father will have opportunity to form ample philosophical reflections as the daughter takes her revenge for twenty years of neglect.)

When Lucie peeped through the half-open door, Stauffer was lying in bed large as life, sucking dutifully on an oxygen supply through a big mask, and a man, clearly a doctor, was standing at his side checking the apparatus. Lucie slipped in without a word. At the window she broke into sobs.

At last, in response to Stauffer's frantic gestures, the doctor removed the mask, and Stauffer was able to call loudly across the room: "Lucie, what on earth is going on? Nothing's happened. These damned gas fittings, these self-service machines."

The doctor put his watch away. Stauffer had inhaled enough. She approached the bed. He let her take his hand. He was cheerful, said: "It's like a laughing-gas anaesthetic."

The doctor made ready to leave, advising more oxygen in an hour or two. He would visit again for a check, Stauffer should stay in bed.

As the doctor left there were whispers in the corridor, a woman's voice as well as the doctor's, then a scream. There was no escape from the drama. The door was flung open, a whirlwind stormed in, and since it wasn't a dog it must be Laura. Stauffer could have guessed.

He offered no defence to this assault. His life-saver had a claim. She lay as his daughter on the hero's breast. He too was proud at having cheated death in the bath. He smiled cheerfully across at Lucie, who had retreated to the foot of the bed. "So, Lucie, one must have died to experience this. She was waiting for me down at the harbour, I stood her up, and she makes not the slightest reproof."

Laura relinquished the paternal breast only when he declared he had to take more oxygen this very minute, because she was squeezing the breath out of him.

Meanwhile into the room, pale of face, downcast, streaming with tears, came Frau Klara. From his bed, which faced the window, Stauffer couldn't see her. He heard someone coming, turned his head, recognised her and looked bewildered from one to the other. Instinctively he grabbed the oxygen mask again. Not knowing what to say, he pulled the mask determinedly over his face and blotted out the world. He swore never to take off the mask, a genuine Staufferian gesture, a true ostrich as it lives and loves and doesn't fly.

Stauffer inhaled. But the apparatus was not turned on. He made silent gestures. Laura looked around horrified to her mother, whose tears at once dried at the need for practical service. During the War she had been in the civilian auxiliaries.

Out of the frying pan into the fire. The daughter let go of him, the mother sprang into action. She tried out what she had learned in the War, and was disinclined to be diverted one iota from what she had learned. Indeed, she had good reason to set to. She too was a martyr. The whole way here she had wept along with Laura; she, because she thought Stauffer was dead and no longer able to jog her sense of guilt. Now here he was, alive, the oxygen apparatus too, giving her the opportunity to demonstrate to Stauffer her change of heart.

Dumbly, stretched out on the bed, Stauffer lay snapping at the oxygen he was offered and didn't need at all. Klara, his ex-wife, stood there all serious, forceful as ever. She said: "Breathe in, deeply, breathe out, deeply." For sure he'd known since infancy how to breathe, but now he was being shown how to do it right. She held up her wristwatch, he dared not disturb the procedure since it was so completely official. Klara and the apparatus, not he, were the centre of attention.



Stauffer held out for ten minutes before they took the mask off and he was able to say that he wasn't supposed to take any more for one hour. He crawled under the bedclothes, annoyed with himself and outraged by the violation.

Then the bachelor gazed bemused at the three females assembled around his bed, all filled with concern and sympathy for him. But what astonished him most – for he was granted no explanation – was a gesture of Klara's towards Lucie. As Lucie approached, Klara came alongside and on impulse placed a hand on Lucie's shoulder, just like Poincaré with his old enemy Clemenceau on the Esplanade at Metz on 25<sup>th</sup> November. Klara's expression was urgent, pleading, and now there they were in each other's arms.

Whereupon Klara was at once completely herself again, and no longer at all bewitched. She strode determinedly to the telephone and in a loud voice told her husband where she was and what had happened, and if he liked he could come along too, he wouldn't be disturbing them. Then she told Stauffer he'd better stay in bed an hour longer. Then he can sit in a chair beside the bed, such a slight gas attack means nothing, fresh air is the main thing.

Laura asked about the harbour tour. Klara replied: "You can take the tour the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow you will be our guest, Erwin. And the hotel must find you another room, you can't stay here with that gas heater."

Stauffer felt impelled to make a remark. He said to the ladies: "Firstly, I'm embarrassed to be here in front of three ladies with nothing on beneath a dressing gown. And secondly, has anyone seen my Mörike?"

The bathroom was searched, nothing found, the fire brigade must have taken it away, no doubt as material evidence. Klara sat on the edge of the bed to declare: "What a marvellous notion of yours, this little bit of gas poisoning. It's done you no harm, and without it you, Lucie and I would have taken much longer to be reconciled." And to enthusiastic applause from Lucie and Laura she grasped Stauffer by the head and kissed him, as a mother kisses her child. He sank back exhausted and cried: "I'm still weak, it's all too much, I must die again."

Laura suddenly felt very hungry and thirsty, she must have something at once. Lucie too needed refreshment. She took Laura down to the hotel restaurant. They left Stauffer to busily bustling Klara, now totally promoted to the status of nurse. As soon as the two civilians were out of the room, she began putting everything in order and forced him to stand up. She brought him his things and dressed him appropriately without the slightest embarrassment. He offered no resistance.

Sitting there fully dressed, his face turned grey, he felt unwell. She regarded him without sympathy: "Pull yourself together. Unwell is nothing. You might even faint." If he began to feel faint he shouldn't make a fuss. She'll administer valerian drops.

As the two civilians relaxed downstairs, Stauffer the patient with his nurse felt himself in the very best of hands. As she tidied the room she asked him what plans he and Lucie had. She'd heard they were off to America. This he confirmed. Her opinion (which he thought quite justified) was why on earth go so far away, who knows their way around America, Europe's not so bad, only riff-raff go to America.

This conversation lasted half an hour. Shall we take a peep behind the brow of our reborn and brand new Erwin Stauffer, dramatist and poet, and report, quietly and *sub rosa*, what we

find there? For example, the conclusion: what an absolute brick she is, this Klara. So sensible, maybe a little homely, but honest and straightforward, a practical, energetic person. She talks about her domestic arrangements, about Otto her husband, Laura her daughter, and the trials the dog puts her through every half year, being a bitch.

It must be awfully cosy living with someone like this, thought our newborn Stauffer, a bachelor up till now. She's so – unpoetical. And he recalled a couple of lines from Heine: *I fain once more would love in quiet, And happy be – without a riot.*

At the word riot, there floated guiltily before his mental gaze – Lucie.

Oh this America that threatened. At the moment there were severe difficulties to overcome: the blockade, no ships. For the moment there'd be no voyage.

And as he sat there not at all faint or unwell, they returned, the two civilians Lucie and Laura, their laughter could be heard from far down the corridor. They flung open the door and were happy. Especially Laura. She called across the room: "Father, we telephoned. There's no way you can travel just now, except maybe via Holland. And you need such a mass of papers, being German." She danced about: "You'll have to stay here four more weeks."

Lucie sat at Stauffer's side to console him. "Try to be patient, my dear. It really will take several weeks." He squeezed her hand: "I know. I must be patient, Lucie. But we have learned patience."

### Ep. 13: THE HOUR WHEN THE DEAD HEAR GOD'S VOICE

*[NOTE: This episode is separated from the previous by 470 pages of text across two volumes; hence the need to recap "the story so far".]*

#### A gentleman and a lady set their sights high

The dramatist Stauffer, too, had heard the alarm-call of Revolution, and after all the troublesome politics and dangerous mysticism, we wish to spend a little time with this civilian who, like us, was a writer.

We are dealing with a personality of great merits. The dramatist Erwin Stauffer found in Berlin that his inkpot was empty. A middle-aged man who enjoyed good health, he suddenly found no joy in anything. It had begun in the last years of the War. He no longer wanted to see his own plays, and had no desire to write new ones. He no longer trusted himself, and no ideas came to him. He declared a kind of internal bankruptcy. This alarm-call had a negative effect on him, a Nietzschean devaluation of all values.

So what did the man do when revolution broke out and year 1918 inscribed the momentous date 9<sup>th</sup> November? He did as many others, went into the street, devoured newspapers. When he heard of the "Congress of Intellectual Workers" at the Reichstag, he even took a look. He sniffed around politics and revolutionaries, and lo and behold, they did nothing to calm his unease. They caused no ink to flow from the bottle. His ship had a leak, and he must inevitably go down.

In this vexing situation – as a dramatist, to be thrown from the stage down among the suffering audience – something happened for which he was unprepared.

But who among us would have been prepared to receive letters addressed to us twenty years before? Who was to blame – the Post Office? No. Badly written or incomplete address? No. The letters had actually arrived, but hadn't made their way to his hands. How is this possible? we ask, as the dramatist asked himself, when the letters fell out of a box of old manuscripts during a house removal out of Berlin (which he hated because of the revolution), at three o'clock in the morning as he dozed unhappily among the boxes. In his dopey state he turned the letters this way and that. They were all unopened, twenty-five letters in unfamiliar handwriting. And when he opened the letters, slowly and with growing astonishment, a female person was writing to him in terms of ardent love, signing herself "Lucie". He doesn't know her. He knows no Lucie. Lucie was only the name of a leading character in an old play of his from twenty years ago, titled *When the First Snow Falls*.

You can imagine the effect of such passionate declarations and invocations of love on a silly booby squatting morosely among the clutter of a house removal.

Suddenly Stauffer knew something. Scales fell from his eyes. His life had been withheld from him. No more, no less. He should have shared his life with this lady, his real life. With her he would never have sunk into this wretched state. And so floored was he by sorrow and despair at his loss that he was driven to the rum bottle, wielding it to such effect that he uttered loud cries of complaint mingled with threats against the perpetrator of this crime, against the one who had murdered his life, the person who had withheld twenty-five letters from him. He meant his former wife Klara, divorced long ago. The drunken row alarmed the porter, a doctor was soon on the scene, saw the rum bottle, smelled strong spirits, and administered a tranquillising injection to the raging man.

A few days later we see our dramatist on the train to Hamburg, to the long-divorced and since remarried Frau Klara. He means to put her on the spot, call her to account, wreak vengeance and so on. The first thing that happens is his wallet is stolen in a café near the station in Hamburg. Then some bold ladies attach themselves to him as he goes on his way, they console him, and with one of them he spends a happy night. And now he's ready to head off to see Klara, the woman of yesteryear.

Frau Klara has not just remarried, she's happily married. The wilting housewife at Stauffer's side has become the confident owner of a hotel, and Laura, daughter of her and Stauffer, has grown to a young lady. Into this unsuspecting Hamburg hotelier family poor Stauffer blows, searching for lost happiness. And he has no chance to speak up. He can't. They don't let him. He is all but manhandled to the front door. In this family he belongs among the ghosts, and they set no great store by revenants.

Only to the young lady Laura, his little daughter, is he something more, and as he slinks dumbly away she secretly follows him. Now she has her father again. Quite unexpectedly she reverses the spear and confronts her father: where has he been all this time, these twenty years? She's furious how she had to live her life without him. And without asking she clings to him tooth and claw, won't let him go. That's what came of his attempt at vengeance. She's delightful, but hard to shake off.

In Berlin, as he catches his breath and reflects on the outcome of the foray, he acknowledges it has gone awry, and his thoughts turn to the stolen and confiscated Lucie, of whom he knows absolutely nothing. Who is she? Where is she? Does she actually exist? Did she ever exist? Was

perhaps a character from one of his old plays writing to him? All things are possible. But Stauffer finds no rest, no slumber.

He picks up her scent, still in this world. He tracks her down, flushes her out. Let us draw a veil over how he finds her, in Switzerland, in the chateau of her friend the Countess, and pass over their first encounter.

He finds her, and – life is strange – she too has aged twenty years. For Stauffer a complete miracle. It could have entered his mind, but never did. To be frank, he had imagined this great event in his life quite differently. Anyway, she provides proof that she really is the lost and intercepted person. Stauffer resists, and thinks Frau Klara was right to intercept her. But he can come no farther. He has to acknowledge the situation, and resign himself to her company. Conversations ensue, and it emerges that through all those years she has never forgotten the dramatist, despite numerous and varied love affairs and a still-valid marriage in America – that she has almost always had him in her thoughts, now and then has even written to him, but this time, in view of the earlier mishaps, she never posted the letters (for which he does not chide her). To Lucie he has always remained Erwin Stauffer, her man of destiny, just as she, as she so resolutely assures him, is the woman of his fate.

He's dazed, it's all so overwhelming. In earlier days, which she knows him from, he was a notorious Don Juan, so this or that girl might easily have slipped his memory.

Lucie would not have been what she made herself out to be, if she let him escape with his skin intact. She interrogates him, what's he up to, how's he getting along, a total grilling. Without meaning to he finds himself in confession. (Actually he'd have preferred to confess to the Countess, her friend; he was considerably more attracted to her.) Lucie knows how to handle him. She has him over a barrel. She lets him know what's what, and how! – even more than little daughter Laura. When she sees how he's gone to the dogs, she claps her hands with a vigorous Bravo! It was all he needed. He stands there and – falls into her arms like a drowned rat.

How will his new, his true life with Lucie unfold?

First question: where? She decides: America. That's where they'll head. That's where it will all happen. So, off to Hamburg.

As long as the War lasted, no ships could leave Hamburg. And still not yet. They had to wait in Hamburg. So they happen to make contact with the Klara family, Laura included. And in an atmosphere now calmed and less heated on all sides, Stauffer ascertains that while Lucie, the newly-betrothed, is certainly a fine acquisition, at the same time earthy homely Klara also has estimable qualities, which tend to tranquillity. (This casts doubt on the seriousness of his intention to embark on a new life. But maybe he means by "a new life" something quite different from what we would mean.) Anyway, for the time being they must remain in Europe, he returns with Lucie to Berlin, the point of origin of the whole affair, and keeps an eye on sailings.

Now 1919 has arrived, and Stauffer and Lucie reside in a Berlin hotel. Both are of good cheer, vivacious and in the same mood of expectancy with which the times have blessed so many. They reside on Potsdamer Platz, Lucie and Erwin, returned after an absence of twenty years from the realm of shadows. They have been, so to speak, nothing more than Dream and Desire, and want now to achieve Existence. Dream and Desire have transferred their abode to the bodies of the dramatist Stauffer and an American lady, and feel at home there. But what will these fleshy structures, which were already inhabited, say to their new overlords?

Lucie and Erwin can afford the high-class hotel, because he's well off and the American lady is rich. In this Hotel Fürstenhof they are hardly touched by the breath of revolution. They look out of the window, but the Platz doesn't hold their interest for long. They seek out locations of earlier happiness, unrevealed and nipped in the bud, above all in the theatre where Lucie, then a young talent, acted in Erwin's play.

Now they sit silent in the auditorium as up on the stage August Strindberg, the favourite author of the age, is being performed. Now and then they exchange glances, Erwin shrugs his shoulders, she lowers her eyelids, she has the same feeling, neither of them is carried along, and this does not make them unhappy.

Unable to go to America, forced to remain in old Europe and Berlin, Lucie must at least visit the Botanical Gardens. Nothing was further from Erwin's thoughts. How can anyone go to the Botanical Gardens in mid-winter! She decides: "Come!" He realises that the Botanical Gardens belong to the life assigned to him.

She leads him into the hothouses. Actually, it's amazing. He'd never heard of such a thing. Normally he's quite satisfied with Nature in the open air, and even prefers her softer and more familiar specialities, modest mountains and their meadows. Faced with grandiose scenery, as in Switzerland, he feels horror. They wind their way along the paths of the huge hothouse and breathe the heavy, warm, damp air that billows up from below. Lucie laughs: "In the Tropics it's quite different. Not as confined as here, of course. You can escape the heat in a lake, or a river."

He: "But then there are crocodiles."

She: "Of course. You just have to not come too close."

He: "I am of the view that if Negroes and Indians are condemned to live in a Hell with crocodiles and snakes, we should leave them to it. Their presence there suffices for the rest of humanity. We should be content to read travelogues."

"Oh," Lucie scolded, "you're such a stick in the mud. So where will you find inspiration, Erwin? Where will your ideas and your inspiration come from? All these, the palm trees, the heat, even the crocodiles, constitute great living Nature, with the Earth, planets, the Milky Way. Surely you won't hide from them?"

He sighed: "Of course I won't. But in all my days I was never in such a hothouse."

Now she applied gentle pressure, took him by the arm and began to natter. She had the determinedly friendly look which only made him cringe.

Later they transfer to a cosier hotel by the Zoo. Lucie is their tour organiser. (As you see, it's no ghost-ride à la Hannes and Rosa, but one undertaken on solid, not to say thickly-carpeted, ground.)<sup>16</sup>

Lucie is slim, slightly greying, and very elastic. She still looks quite young for her thirty-eight years. At her side he makes an effort to conceal a certain fullness of figure, and to emulate her youthful freshness. She takes enormous delight in Erwin, her booty, who swam so tamely into her net after twenty years. She feels happy, is strong and tender, and they are actually on their

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<sup>16</sup> Some 50 pages before this, from her prison cell Rosa Luxemburg hallucinates visits from her beloved Hans Diefenbach, an army doctor killed in 1917.

honeymoon (despite the husband in Philadelphia). Stauffer spares no expense, he joins bravely in, does not flinch from the tribulations of this grand new life.

He quickly realises: nothing comes for free. She wants to visit certain parts of the city, where supposedly the Berlin Revolution and the life of a World City are playing out. They go here and there and afterwards visit various eateries. Much remains unexposed to their gaze, but she maintains her interest and he strives honestly to open his eyes as wide as hers and be amazed. But one day he is unable to conceal that he has a desire to take a look at his new suburban apartment, just this once. The desire urges itself on him from all directions. This afternoon Lucie feels unwell, which he interprets as a sign from heaven, she releases him with grace and goodwill when he expresses a wish to bring her flowers, and reading materials.bgggggggj

When he boards his suburban train at Zoo station and takes his seat, he feels like a dog off the leash. He has been with Lucie in Switzerland, in Italian landscapes, and now he rides through wintry Brandenburg, and it's a wonderful region, it's never before seemed so lovely. The very sight of it is balm to the soul. It's so relaxing. And as he gazes and loves it and appreciates it, he is already at his station and must alight. And there's the old newspaper seller, they've only seen each other a few times but already they're firm friends; they exchange hearty greetings. "Bin on his travels, Sir has, back again, looks fresh and recuperated does the Doctor, and why not?"

"Well then, how's business?"

"Lousy, thanks fer asking!"

And over there, across the square, stands his building, and the porter personally pulls the door open and is so pleased to see him he doffs his cap. Stauffer thanks him and is pleased, they chat, he clomps upstairs, apartment key in hand.

He opens up. Here we are. The apartment is tidy, everything in its place. Stauffer is dumbfounded. He goes through the rooms. All wonderfully neat and homely, as if a leprechaun has been at work. But who did it? They're leading me into temptation. The furniture is Stauffer's old furniture. There's nothing like old furniture, it fits as snug as old clothes. Even the writing desk is in its rightful place, with a neat cloth, that's a woman's hand, to the right half a dozen new pencils freshly sharpened, a whole pile of white paper, and there's the empty writing chair waiting with its new leather cushion. Net curtains and heavy made-to-measure curtains, carpets on the floor.

Deeply affected, after his inspection tour through the magically cosy apartment Stauffer subsides onto a chair in the dining room, still in hat and coat. The thick blue tablecloth is new, too. He feels behind him for the telephone receiver on the sideboard, asks the porter to come up. When he appears he's carrying a huge rather uninspired bouquet. He was to hand these flowers to Herr Stauffer on his return. "Who from?"

"Young lady. She said, Herr Stauffer will know. The one who sat in our lodge writing a letter."

Laura, my little daughter. The poignant little beast came to Berlin behind my back. Stauffer: "I suppose it was she who tidied the apartment?" The porter, admiringly: "Worked like a savage. Two days, morn till night. We helped a bit, of course, me and the missus. Sign's already up outside."

"What sign?"

“Furnished Apartment To Let. No one’s come by yet. Reckon we’re looking at spring.” Bowled over with astonishment, Stauffer took off his hat. What’s going on?

He said: “My daughter must have misunderstood. I’ve no memory of this.” In fact he did recall something. Laura knows about the trip to America, wants to help him out with his one-year rental contract. But still, an outrageous liberty by the little shrimp.

“Take the sign down, Herr Schmidt!”

“My thoughts exactly, Herr Stauffer. The lady said you won’t be taking the furniture to Hamburg with you.”

It’s lucky Stauffer’s sitting down, it’s easy to put his head in his hands. The girl thinks he’ll be joining them in Hamburg. He said, “Hm,” asked the porter to bring a hot cup of tea, if not too much trouble.

“With the greatest pleasure.” The porter went out. Now Stauffer takes off his coat and marches, still rather agitated, through the tidy rooms. Even the steam heating works. From this paradise they seek to expel him, partly Laura’s doing, partly Lucie’s. Yes, Lucie was in on it. No doubt she’s still lying in her hotel room, nursing her migraine. There’s always something happening, with a woman. Strange, actually, how Lucie gallivants so freely around the world, and she really does have a husband in Philadelphia, remarkable specimen, American ways.

Obscure sensations pressed in on Herr Stauffer. In due course, he thought, Lucie too can move in here, into this cosy nest. No, she won’t fit. Apart from which I’m supposed to begin a new life in America. Thank goodness it’s not happening so fast.

Herr Stauffer, bridegroom of the great Lucie, pilot of his soul, finds his bachelor apartment wonderfully relaxing, and because it’s grown dark he lets all the lights blaze as if there’s a merry party in progress. He pulls the curtains closed, sits down and writes a cordial letter to his little daughter, thanking her for everything, her attentiveness, her efforts, the big bouquet; and even for the portentous signboard: Furnished Apartment To Let. He really wanted to mention that he’d ordered it removed, but decided against; he feared the little beast’s claws.

Then he left the apartment to its pensive gloom, and went down in person to the porter, paid him, and observed the ceremonious removal of the signboard. Stauffer gave the porter, he didn’t know why, the address of his hotel.

In splendid fettle he bought a handful of magazines from his old friend the newspaper seller at the station, and then with everything done, dusted and relished he steamed homeward, elated at all he’d achieved,.

### Stauffer pulls on his trousers

But at the hotel near the Zoo Lucie was resting, and nursed her migraine.

She felt depressed, all because of Stauffer. It was so exhausting, with Stauffer. So hard to give him what she wanted to give. She wasn’t at all ready for Berlin. The English naval blockade put a big red line through her calculations. If they had sailed away, oh, then there’d have been uplifting situations, the steamer itself, the mighty ocean, America over there. She’d have led her friend to a truly grand fresh world, with none of the old world’s rust. They’d be dashing off to

Mexico and Panama. Instead they're hanging around in Berlin, sampling a little of its night life and the Revolution, and what else are they supposed to do?

Yes, even as Erwin rejoiced in his bachelor apartment, in her hotel by the Zoo Lucie was wailing, she would give it all up, she had nothing to offer poor Erwin, the man who had at last come into her life and was waiting for gifts from her hand.

In her armchair, legs drawn up, she began to smoke cigarettes, and as she did so she complained in the following terms: "Oh, Erwin, if only you could see into me! If only you knew what a wretched creature she is, this Lucie that you worship! I've sinned against you. Please don't think I wanted to, that I meant to deceive you. Circumstances are to blame. Circumstances are dreadful, I have no power over them, I need other circumstances to be able to give you what you so desperately need. I want to be true to my word. But I can't, here in Berlin. Berlin has nothing to offer you, nor Dresden, nor Munich. In Germany there's nothing doing."

At Lucie's feet on the carpet lay two big folios of pictures, early Italian and Egyptian art. She had bought these for herself and studied them in secret, to broaden Stauffer's mind at least in this respect. But it was horribly tedious. The folios yawned at her. What should she do with the beastly things?

"What's wrong with me?" Lucie wailed, lighting another cigarette. "An outrageous piece of luck, an honest to goodness accident, has brought to me the man for whom I was born and who was deprived of me and kept looking for me. Now he goes about hungering and hoping, hoping, and I ..." Tears sprang to her eyes: "I'm ashamed. I'll give myself a shaking: Come, Lucie, show yourself, prove yourself. But I can't!"

The long afternoon dragged by. She watched in terror as the hours advanced and Erwin would soon be back and demand his rights.

Then she embraced him when he arrived, the sinner, standing there with a hastily purchased bunch of flowers, sorry to have left her alone so long. He saw her in a cloud of smoke, grave and weighed down in thought, feared she might let loose on him with the obelisks of Luxor or something. But suddenly she began wailing about Berlin and the Revolution, added complaints about the English blockade, but there is always Italy, maybe they can go through Switzerland and take ship at Genoa.

Stauffer objected indignantly: that won't do, however can she think of such a thing, Italy was still enemy territory. As a German citizen he wouldn't dare head there and risk being thrown in prison. (A fantastic piece of inspiration.)

"Oh," she smiled tenderly (sneakily it seemed to him), it won't be that bad, in Italy you can always find a way, with money all things are possible.

He was a match for her. Powers stirred within him: "But the Capital Flight Law." They'd never be able to leave the country. They'd be subject to horrendous taxes, and months and months would be wasted.

"You think?" she asked, helpless. He: "Of course. I know our bureaucracy. And all these new decrees. So many want to leave, and cannot." He was gratified to hear her despondent groans. Clearly the chalice had been passed propitiously to him.

"Don't blame yourself, Lucie," he consoled her. "We'll find plenty to occupy us here. Maybe we'll visit Dresden, see the Sistine Madonna." (He thought of Bella, the actress, his lady friend



in Dresden. What a surprise if he turned up suddenly with Lucie. But serve the little prima donna right. She could have sent flowers to the new apartment, and not left everything to Laura.) Lucie whispered: "I don't like the Sistine Madonna. I have yearned for you, I want you."

Every time she spoke like this it unsettled him. Today it sounded milder, and she looked so weak and in need of loving. Lucie felt once more how deeply he trusted her, and was gnawed by a sense of guilt.

A sleepless night ensued. And in the morning, when the chambermaid brought coffee and the room was light again, it became serious. She sat up in bed and seemed to be jabbed by an icy finger. Suddenly she knew: it's not Berlin. I've grown old. I'm empty, it's all over with me. Trembling she took Erwin's photo from the bedside table, gazed at it and wept bitter tears. She flung herself back down, weeping. After a while she sent the maid to Erwin, asked him to come.

She waited. The man was taking his time. He took care over his dressing, stood before the mirror and studied his expression. He didn't want to appear excessively cheerful, though he was cheerful. Then, with deliberately lowered head, he stepped heavily along the corridor to her. He was surprised to find her still in bed, coffee untouched. Looks dangerous. Storm coming? Had she noticed something about him? Only when he sat on the bed and she flung both arms around him did he relax. It was all to do with her love for him. Well, it had to be talked about. She spoke movingly, with wonderful directness. He felt ashamed.

Lucie wailed: "She murdered me, that Klara in Hamburg, I'm dead, Erwin. You see me, but I'm dead. I wanted to shower you with a cornucopia of delights, and I did have the cornucopia, believe me. I know what you expect of me, what I owe you."

"And now?" Stauffer asked slyly. He already knew she couldn't. He was glad she had nothing. He had to restrain himself from letting out a great cry of joy.

She: "I know what you lack. An extensive life, new horizons, big ideas."

"We shall go travelling," Stauffer consoled her. "The Hawaiian Islands shall not escape us!"

"But I, Erwin" (she gave a loud sob), "I have grown old."

"You're thirty-eight, Lucie. That's not old. You're still young. And I don't want a silly goose."

But she wouldn't be consoled: "It's all over with me, Erwin. Such plans I had for you." (His hair stood on end, what dangers had he evaded!) "It fell to me to develop your ego. And now ..." He interrupted the stream of words and tears: "But now you have me, Lucie."

"But now I'm not here, and so, Erwin, you too are not here, and will never be here, and we must drift about like shadows. You have been deceived, Erwin, I am not who I pretended to be."

"We must comfort one another, my love. We shall bear our fate together." (But still, he thought in the background, still, this is a crazy business. But really she has actually conned me, when it comes down to it. For why did I make the trip to Switzerland, and why did I exhume her from those old letters?)

"Oh Erwin, when you stood there in Switzerland and didn't recognise me and weren't going to give me the roses, you saw the real me. I'm a criminal. I've treated you disgracefully."

He mumbled something, he didn't know what. The scene was already dragging, Lucie had to dig up new material. (If I want, he thought brutally, I can send her packing now with a magnificent gesture: Begone from me, woman, deceiver, you have cast me into misery.)

"Oh Erwin, I'm so sorry, what is to become of us, how can we go on like this?"

He said softly, as softly as he could: "You find yourself in the same state I was in six weeks ago, before your letters fell into my hands. Now you see how hard it is. But one pulls through." He knew it was an awfully stupid remark. But he thought: with someone in her condition you can make all sorts of concessions. He pointed to the cold coffee, urged her to call for a fresh cup.

But she gazed tenderly at him, and held his hand: "Stay with me, Erwin, don't abandon me, what is to become of us. What has that dreadful Klara made of us."

(Totally superfluous, this attack on valiant Klara in Hamburg. Doesn't improve our situation at all.) He made a despairing face, harrumphed, and to bring it to an end pulled his hand brusquely away and said with manly energy: "You're weak, Lucie, now I must take over the reins. I shall order fresh coffee for both of us. And before it arrives, I command you to not to open your mouth. You are not to say another word."

She lay back on the pillows and sighed: "Oh Erwin." But she obeyed. She said not a word until the coffee was there and they'd drunk it. He sipped his in smug rectitude, a much improved situation, the skies had cleared. Then, oh horror, as soon as she'd emptied her cup she started up again: "Oh Erwin," she implored, "if only you could forgive me!"

"I do," he said mildly. He swore to himself he wouldn't become irritated. In the end he would receive her complaints as acts of homage. But she didn't stop, she repeated: "If only you had followed your first inclinations, back in Switzerland, when you came upon me in the Countess's salon holding roses for Lucie. You didn't want to give the roses to me."

"I didn't recognise you, Lucie, we hadn't seen each other for twenty years."

"You literally shrank from me. Your whole being protested against me. And you were right."

"Lucie!"

"You were right. For it's not me, Erwin, now I can say openly: I have deceived you."

"Stop tormenting yourself, Lucie. We shall bear the burden together." (I know how.)

"No, you're not facing up to the truth, you're trying to hide from it. Maybe it's too much for you, but you should. Hear the truth, Erwin, the whole truth. I am not Lucie, not the one you were looking for. I have deceived you."

"But I know," Erwin soothed her; he was bored now. "I know, dear heart."

"Don't speak gently to me. I deceived you. You still don't see. I'm not Lucie, don't call me Lucie." Now he really was amazed. She'd gone a bit too far: "So who are you?"

She gave a sob, and patted his hand: "Catherine Eleanor Bollingham."

He: "What?"

She: "Catherine Eleanor Bollingham." She gazed at him through tear-filled eyes. "It's true."

He stepped behind his chair: "I don't understand. You are not the Lucie who wrote to me twenty years ago?"

She howled and wept and brandished hands in front of her face: "No, it wasn't me, I'm a confidence trickster."

He shuddered. All feeling for this woman had evaporated. "Repeat it. Say it again. You've played games with me. You adopted a false name?"

She: "Yes. Now go to the police and have me arrested."

He dropped wearily onto his chair. He'd been ready for anything, just not this. Bollingham, it's monstrous. This shameless person has played me for a fool, and now I'll have to begin the hunt for Lucie all over again. (But I won't, he told himself firmly.)

"Go, have me arrested," she sobbed into the pillows.

He paced distraught up and down by her bed. He spoke with great formality: "Then I would ask you, Madam Bolingbroke, for an explanation. How did you arrive at this extraordinary notion, to play such a trick on me?"

"I don't know. The police. Police."

He pulled himself together and left the room. He banged the door shut behind him (which for tame old Erwin constituted an act of violence).

He paced savagely about his room and thought of his suburban apartment. Suddenly it had lost all its charms. The fear and terror that fell on him the night he found Lucie's letters now fell on him again. The letters, those letters, but she did write them, they're in her handwriting. He fumbled in the drawer, there were the twenty-five old letters in young Lucie's proud free hand. And here a recent letter from her, from this criminal woman. Same handwriting, same handwriting. Stauffer buried his head in his hands. He pulled a few old letters from the bundle, stuffed them in his pocket, added the last one from Switzerland, and now back to her room. She was still lying there grizzling. Cold as a detective he shoved the breakfast things aside and tapped her on the shoulder (pink silk): "Please, Madam Bolingbroke, attend to me for a moment. Would you please open your eyes and look here. I have two letters. This one you wrote to me from Switzerland. This is an old one, from Lucie. Do you acknowledge the handwriting as yours? They are the same handwriting, it seems?"

"Same handwriting," she groaned. "Don't show me the letters, destroy them."

He roared. It's true, the placid fellow roared: "I demand a clear answer, no waffling, yes or no, did you write these old letters?"

She sat up: "Don't excite yourself, Erwin. Call the police. I admit my guilt, I have committed a crime. But I didn't realise it."

He roared: "Yes or no? Did you write them or not?"

"Destroy the letters. Oh God, what mischief have I done."

"Destroy the letters" (he ground his teeth); "that might suit your book, madam. You won't get away so easily. I shall keep them and hand them to the authorities. But in the name of all that's holy, how did you come to have the same handwriting as Lucie? Are you a forger too?"

She threw herself glumly back on the bed. "Yes, yell at me. I deserve it. Beat me. I'm anything you like, forger of handwriting included. All those twenty years, after you were no longer there, I just simulated Lucie's life. I was only a ghost, a shadow who convinced herself to go on living."

He was taken aback: "Then – you really are Lucie?"

"No. Lucie's ghost." A rock lifted from his heart. he sat on the bed and dug her dishevelled head out of the pillows. He kissed her teary eyes and her salty lips.

She hugged him and whispered: "Why are you kissing this old thing?"

A rock fell from his heart. He felt such gratitude, she is his Lucie, he has no need to resume the hunt for her, she's already here and it's not nearly as tragic as it just now seemed. And it was nice that she clearly couldn't continue as she would have liked to, and suddenly he felt again great pleasure at the thought of his cosy suburban apartment. He flattered her: for a ghost she's wonderfully fresh and alive. He gave eloquent, yes eloquent, tongue to the joy that flowed from various sources. For now she climbed from the bed in her pyjamas and did what he couldn't have resisted even as a corpse: she sat on his lap and he had to swear once again as she sat there to all that he had sworn as she was lying down.

Stauffer had rheumatism or gout in his left knee, the knee always hurt, and he favoured it. Now she was sitting on it. As she sat and he repeated the oaths to order, he tried furtively to shift her weight to the other knee. He gently took away his left leg. But she slid gently after it. Finally his knees came wide apart, but she sat firmly as ever. With radiant eyes she demanded affirmation of his forgiveness and trust.

Now the ruffian delivered his blow. He was furious that she imposed the full weight of her bottom mercilessly on his sensitive knee; suddenly he pulled the left leg away and she was held only by his arms. He let her slide into the abyss. Then he laughed out loud. She screamed. He pulled her up from the abyss, and stood straight. He laughed, it was only a joke, sorry.

At least he'd found a swift resolution to the incident.

### Of guinea pigs, dog-cats and whisky

The afternoon brought yet another development.

Lucie felt herself touched again by the cold finger, and she complained to Erwin, who thought he was already in the clear: "I've embroiled you in my unhappy fate."

He nodded, grave and resigned. You just have to let women complain, they stop eventually all by themselves.

She, relentless: "If only I had never come, Erwin, forgive me."

He forgave. The chagrin of a woman he worships has, for the man, something of flattery about it. That morning, as she crawled back into bed, Lucie had sworn she would be resolute in finding something new to fill his life. At which he had returned to his room, full of foreboding. Now he's relieved to see that nothing has hatched.

Once she had complained her fill, she released the beloved. The unhappy man must go find some amusement.

She lay alone in her room. Many thoughts ran through her head, including the memory of a melancholy event she heard of at school. A hundred years earlier there lived one Charlotte Stieglitz, who married a writer, a poet, who never amounted to anything. She saw this and realised at once what the problem was: her husband lacked a Grand Experience. Without a

Grand Experience a writer can create nothing grand. Since, naturally, a mid-sized philistine town offers no such opportunity, she would have to make one. Love alone wouldn't suffice. Her love for him he took for granted, like his daily lunch. Now and then she staged a quarrel. But that only made him less productive. Actually, he used every possible excuse to be less productive

Now it was clear to Charlotte, seeing him every day at his desk sharpening his beak and drudging away composing nothing but mediocrity and humbug, that she must intervene with a Deed. This Deed could be nothing less than a heroic suicide on her part. If, say, in his absence she were to stab herself and lie blood-spattered and silent on the floor, in the dining room or better still in his study, an expired corpse, she, the beloved wife – then the spirits within him must be unleashed and his genius, now shackled within, would be set free. And Charlotte set about her carefully contrived plan. One day she lay dead on the floor, and a letter on his desk revealed all.

That was the Deed of the female Stieglitz. The male Stieglitz, as soon as he saw her lying there, summoned a doctor, alerted the police, and showed everyone the magnificent letter. He screamed, beat his breast, wept. And that was all. He had no new song. After the event, the great event, he was still the little bird he'd always been.

When the memory of this sad endeavour naturally failed to console Lucie, she remounted her hobbyhorse.

People from America have a hobbyhorse – they call it their “hobby”. Some play with electric train sets, others restore worn-out slippers, others try to climb backwards up the stairs in the dark, yet others keep a cockatoo that can prophesize. Lucie, a.k.a. Daisy, had equipped herself for the long voyage with two hobbyhorses.

One was a totally screwy pooch, an utter confusion on four legs. People encountering this creature in Europe either grinned or shrank back, and pointed it out to their neighbour. Crowds of children pursued it. In America no one would have noticed. It was no bigger than a hand, and could easily be carried in a handbag. It seemed to have no limbs, was the same shape in all directions, a uniformly round, low-slung thing that apparently ran equally well backwards and forwards, and possibly sideways as well. But no clear conclusion could be drawn because the creature looked the same at both ends with neither snout nor tail. Many thought it a guinea-pig, which Daisy took as a compliment. But it was actually a guinea-pig *poodle*. And the poodle couldn't bark, just squeaked now and then. (Which sceptics took as proof that it was really a guinea-pig. To Daisy's delight.)

Now this fairytale dog had gone missing in Berlin, somewhere. But actually in a pharmacy where Daisy was picking up a sedative; she left her handbag behind, with Puck in it. The pharmacist took pity on the guinea-pig, put it in his laboratory with the others. Puck was relieved, and he told all the others what a dog's life he'd been leading.

This occurred during the first days in Berlin. When Daisy couldn't find her Puck, pet shop owners advised her to try something similar. Of course there were no other Pucks. Not, at least, among the canines. They offered her a cat that looked like a dog. That was worth discussing. But what should Daisy call this cat-dog? Can a cat-dog be called Puck? No harm trying, they said. If it doesn't work we'll take it back less a deduction for wear and tear. Whereupon Daisy bought two creatures of this kind, paid in dollars, and off she went.

Here's what happened next. As soon as Daisy let these kittens that thought they were dogs, and even looked like dogs, loose in her room, they disappeared. They didn't answer to "Puck". Daisy, already weighed down by worries over Erwin, had to climb on chairs, search under cupboards, until she found the little creatures asleep side by side under her own blanket. Daisy gave a glad cry, "Puck". The startled kittens lifted their heads, clearly felt insulted, and vanished.

Now Daisy, desperate, let the chambermaid in on her secret. The maid uttered six times in succession the magic words "Kitty kitty" and "Puss", and the little creatures poked their heads out from under an armchair and let themselves be fed milk. So Daisy sat there happy with her new toys, who now knew their names, in her lap. The maid then said she wasn't allowed to keep animals in the room, it's against house rules. What to do? The maid offered the American lady her own room on the fifth floor. No one will bother the kitties there, and Daisy can come up any time during the day to see them. And so it happened, and the kitties were smuggled in, and now Daisy, unbeknownst to Erwin, occupied two rooms in the hotel, at least during the daytime, one official and one secret. (Just as Erwin kept his suburban apartment secret from her.)

In the days before her outburst of despair, Daisy had occasionally resumed her *other* hobby, also upstairs in the maid Ella's room. As the tragedy became ever plainer and sorrow raged within Lucie, she gave herself over totally to this other hobby. As you might have guessed, it had to do with alcohol, in the shape of whisky and cocktails. Since neither the two kitties nor the rest of the world offered her sufficient joy, she immersed herself by means of those beverages in a sense of wellbeing that no one could disturb. Cigarette between her lips, several cocktails in her tummy, and a full glass of whisky at her side, Lucie enthroned herself for hours deep in her dreams in the maid's low-ceilinged bedroom, on a rickety cane chair, a dog-kitty on each shoulder like Wotan's ravens, luxuriating and deciding the world's fate.

And once it happened – curious absorption in dreams – that beside her glass lay a pencil and sheets of letter paper, and she began to write, to Erwin, to the man she had met twenty years before and who disappeared and who she searched for and one day would find again. Yes, in her dreams she had already despatched Erwin on his travels again, she saw him traipsing around foreign parts, in the dark and all uncertain. In her letter she said nothing of the room she was currently occupying. She used generalised expressions depicting a fairytale yearning. Still, she was able to impart that she was on the run, perils threatened, but he shouldn't be alarmed. She mentioned the cat-dogs, wonderful creatures, her companions and protectors.

Whisky and cocktails pack quite a punch. They bide their time while their impact unfolds. The impact differs according to the quantity imbibed, and the condition of the imbiber. Lucie, grieving over her failure, found herself in a condition that cried out for alcohol like a sponge for water. She didn't hold back, but pumped herself full of the manna. Great was the quantity, for she was no novice. She sat in a constant happy haze filled with benevolence towards all earthly things. Since only the maid and the kittens were around at this first stage of ecstasy, she was the only one to profit by it. The maid accepted tips and had to tell about her life. She couldn't quite bring herself to it, didn't want to tell, she must, and so she told a mishmash of truths and untruths under Lucie's vigorous urging to hold nothing back and reveal all. She was a maid like one in a novel, buxom, nimble and in love, also a liar. She'd had a non-stop series of love affairs, and constant money worries. Then Lucie turned to the cat-dogs, which were subjected to frequent painful embracings that they tried to evade by scratching. But Lucie was stronger, and the room was small. She always caught them.

Then Daisy's sense of wellbeing grew in waves. The more the external world lost its lustre, Lucie turned to characters in her inner life, held whispered conversations with friends from long ago, even her husband in Philadelphia, apologising for all the wrongs she'd done him. In her mind she staged scenes of past situations, and enjoyed them. She retouched them, brought out fresh nuances, mostly of a comical nature that caused her to laugh out loud. Thus did Lucie correct her past. And from the depths there rose the indestructible Erwin Stauffer, her brief blessed young love. And when he appeared she entered the fully developed expansive stage of Benevolence. She established a direct rapport with him, set him ablaze with inspiration, for she was Lucie, his predestined Lucie. She scribbled down all her dreams and her advice to him, put the pages neatly in envelopes, and wrote his name on them. When Lucie-Daisy, accompanied by the maid, left the room, the letters lay among the bottles and empty glasses. The maid carefully gathered them up.

Ah, letters, letter-writing. Lucie had had no luck with it. But she couldn't stop.

Rumours of unusual drunken binges and conversations in Ella's room reached the ears of the hotel porter, who was currently friendly with the maid. The maid mentioned nothing about tips, she meant to keep these for herself. He was suspicious, put her on the spot, and to calm him down and distract him she handed him the letters. It was a monstrously stupid step. The letters, which she hadn't read, reported the confusion of truths and bragging with which she had regaled Lucie. The lovestruck porter's hair stood on end. That evening he took his girlfriend aside, read out the very confessions she herself had made, threatened her, and bopped her one. She wept and implored and insisted it was all made up, the lady liked to hear such stuff, they'd been drinking, she's American, she has a little birdie, and Daisy paid her to look after it.

The very moral porter received this admission with great anger. So after all she had to hand him all her hard-earned tips. Not content with this, he swore revenge on the American dame: she would have to leave the hotel.

Around this time Lucie climbed the stairs once more to her cats and other friends. She found the door open, the kittens were pacing wearily around, and cast accusing looks her way. She sat down and made everything cosy. She poured and drank. She smoked. The cat-dogs had lost all their good cheer. Daisy gradually noticed. What's wrong? They must be ill. With her incipient sense of wellbeing, Lucie poured whisky into the milk saucer. They wouldn't touch it. They discussed among themselves. They drew back and hissed. The creatures must really be ill. Lucie drank some more, to clear her mind. Clarity grew. After observing the little creatures for a while (they hadn't been fed yet) she knew: someone has poisoned my darlings.

She grabbed hold of them, stuffed them under her arms, and set herself in motion in her black silken slacks, her red jacket, little red slippers (normally she had a long black coat over her shoulders, but she left it lying). She went downstairs to find help and raise the alarm. On the fourth floor she encountered a haughty elderly lady, and asked her about vets. The lady recoiled as she approached, ran to her room and phoned down to the porter: how is it that drunken females are permitted to roam the hotel and are we supposed to find it amusing. A scandal, a person wearing man's trousers. The porter alerted a waiter on the fourth floor, he met up with thoroughly sozzled Lucie as she hunted her absconded kittens down the corridor with loud hallos. Every door was open, people stood amazed, and scolded. But Daisy cheerily asked the waiter for the address of a vet. The young man, who recognised the rich American woman,

asked her to wait one minute, he'd go and check. He ran to Erwin to report that the lady in Number 47 was unwell, wandering the corridors on the fourth floor.

Erwin had seen Lucie only fleetingly today and yesterday. She'd left him to his own unhappy devices, she wanted to be alone, and he was keen to see what solitude would make of her. Now he was alarmed. Wandering the hotel? Penthesilea in her demented state murdered her lover Achilles. In a grim mood Erwin donned his jacket; upset and a little anxious he asked the young waiter to accompany him upstairs. (Who could predict the next twist in this fantastic tale?) The fourth floor was in uproar. Guests, waiters and chambermaids were dashing about yelling. Erwin couldn't believe his eyes when, at the centre of this tumult, he found a plaintive woman in black slacks and red jacket and red slippers, on one shoulder an angora kitten, and this distraught thing was none other than his Lucie. What a dreadful sight! She must be sleepwalking. Sleepwalking. She had driven her fate to this point (and he too was not without blame). Now she came stumbling along on the chambermaid's arm, clearly not in possession of her senses. (It occurred to him: she's more like Ophelia, stepping into the water as she strews flowers and sings and floats on the water and drowns.)

Lucie approached. Erwin held tight to the waiter. She stood facing him. She recognised him. Now her grief would burst out horribly. Erwin shrank back. He was glad there were so many people around.

Then her face (red bloated face, how unnatural) broke into a grin. She erupted in wild joyful laughter. Unembarrassed before the onlookers, she flung both arms around his neck and cried: "Erwin, Erwin, there you are! At last, phew, where've you been hiding?" He jerked back, tried to extricate himself in front of these common Germans. Moreover she stank horribly of alcohol.

She moaned: "I'm looking for a vet, Erwin, nothing infectious, the other kitten must have run into a room. These people won't let me look."

With difficulty she pulled herself upright. The maid took her left arm, Erwin her right. The waiter grinned behind their backs. Thus did Erwin descend the stairs with the pilot of his soul, pursued by indignant comments.

In her room she flung herself at once onto the bed and shrieked for the other cat-dog. The maid dashed out. Before she returned with the other kitten, Daisy had fallen fast asleep. Erwin slipped away.

While Lucie slept off her alcoholic haze amid her darlings, now recovered and fed, Erwin paced up and down in his room. The man understood nothing, absolutely nothing, about the cats, about alcohol, or about the room on the staff floor. But with an obscure sense that it was connected somehow to Lucie's disappointment, hence he was involved, he slipped back to her room to take a look.

She was fast asleep, one kitten beside her. The other had made itself invisible again, having overturned a table lamp and knocked a tall, water-filled vase off the mantelpiece to smash in the fireplace. Erwin's gaze flicked about the room looking for it, he hoped it might have committed suicide.

After half an hour's absence he again stepped into the room, mainly to check if his hopes for the vanished animal had been fulfilled. Lucie was already up and about, dressed and silent at the window, looking down on the street. Both kittens were playing happily on the unmade bed.



When she heard Erwin she turned, her face clear and serious. "Sit," she said calmly, pointing to a stool. He sat without thinking. The kittens on the bed made rustling noises. He looked across. They were engaged in demolishing Lucie's pyjamas.

"What should happen now?" Lucie asked in a deeply tragic tone. It sounded like the end of the world, but otherwise made sense. "I'm ashamed of myself, behaving like that. I've no idea how it came about. I like this kind of pet. I didn't want to tell you." (Nothing about whisky.)

"Whyever not, Lucie? I like them too."

It was already unnatural for him to make this assertion, for the sake for peace and to gain at last a clear view of the situation. He hated those cats, he'd looked around in his room for something to use as a cudgel, but found nothing – as he looked for a cudgel he thought too of Lucie, who could use one.

Slyly she again spoke of the cats: "In the past I never bothered with such things. I had a wonderful little dog that I carried around in my handbag."

"Are there such things?" he asked, seemingly interested, "You never showed me."

"I wanted nothing to come between us, Erwin. I wanted to be alone with you, with you only, for ever."

"And so you killed the dog?" he asked, half appalled, half glad.

"No. I left it somewhere. People thought it was a guinea-pig, because it couldn't bark. All it did was squeak."

"Maybe it was a guinea-pig," said Stauffer, not without design. He meant to annoy. She burst into tears: "Don't say that, Erwin. The poor little thing, where has it got to? Those two new little pets I kept upstairs in the attic, so that ..."

He interrupted rudely: "I know, Lucie, so that nothing should come between us. And that must be also why you made yourself drunk upstairs?"

Quite innocent and unapologetic, she said: "It was whisky."

"And?" he demanded indignantly.

"And cocktails," she said. "Over there we drink cocktails."

"So do we," he said scornfully.

"I was trying to restore my balance."

Now he had to laugh out loud. "So that's why you get drunk in broad daylight and can't go down the stairs without help?"

She: "You don't notice when you're sitting down. I should have taken the lift. But I was looking for a vet. They were sick, Erwin."

He glared at the two monsters on the bed: "Lucie, if only we were as healthy as those two. They're ripping up the pillow now."

"Let them," she said, captivated. "They're always ripping up the laundry." She shifted nearer and laid her head on his shoulder: "What should happen now, Erwin? What have I got us into? Is it all destroyed, our whole life, our future, our past as well?"

Clearly she could see she had transgressed. He was most gratified: "You've been a naughty girl, Lucie. You will keep drinking."

"I know," she said sadly.

He shook her shoulder: "Now now. That's no help. You must pull yourself together."

"Don't you ever drink?" she asked accusingly.

He: "Seldom. Not to that extent, anyway. And certainly not whisky."

"I know it now, Erwin. With whisky you must pace yourself. First you must take a third of whisky in a glass of water."

"No thank you," was his cheeky reply.

"And cocktails?" the American lady wished to know.

"Stop talking about cocktails," he scolded.

She wailed: "I need them to console myself. I even wrote you more letters."

He couldn't believe his ears. She'd written to him. He was enraged. He'd had enough of all this letter-writing. Letters had started all this mischief. "Wrote? Why? I'm here. What did you write?"

"About the pets, the maid, and so on."

"What does that have to do with me, Lucie? Couldn't you just tell me about them?"

She wept on the neck that had come back to her, held firmly to it: "But I'm always writing to you, Erwin, I have to write, all the time, because I yearn for you so much. I had nothing else all those long years."

He groaned, she was squeezing his throat: "But now you have me in person. Please don't squash me. You can stop that damned scribbling now."

She: "I'll stop writing, Erwin, I swear. But you must help me, stand by me."

He realised from her words and behaviour that something between them had changed. No longer did she make herself out to be the magnificent pilot of his soul, his despotic mistress assailing him with her plans for his life. She was simply a lady who tiptoed, and he'd found her out. He was determined to make the most of it. He swallowed down his annoyance and ordered her first to send back the two kittens. Begone from the room, he doesn't care where, maybe through the window.

In silence the sinner grabbed the creatures and locked them in the bathroom. He crowed, it was so wonderful. He praised her for listening. He even silently praised the whisky for creating this convenient situation. Now she sat at the dressing table beside him and implored: "Don't be too hard on me, Erwin. Don't cast me out. I devoted my whole life to you. It's what I've become. If I'd had you, I'd be different."

He, icy cold and apparently deeply insulted: "Let's have no talk of casting out. But rather of a change in your lifestyle."

She: "I know. I shall pull myself together. I see quite clearly now ..."

"What do you see clearly?"

She sobbed: "I'm old, much too old for you, and empty. I have nothing to offer you."

At this confession of guilt he let himself rip: "Now, please, enough grandstanding. You really are completely *de trop*." (He enjoyed calling a spade a spade and allowing himself a little coarseness). "I shall have to grow used to accepting that certain ideal things are denied me for the rest of my life. It will be hard, but no doubt it must be. But what I demand with absolute resolution is that you stop drinking."

She nodded sadly.

"It's the least I can demand of you."

When he made no further demands, she shifted closer. She glanced at him, he seemed annoyed, but not stern. She dared to reach for his hand, and when he didn't repulse her she laid her head on his knees like a child, but on his right knee, the sound one, and he was pleased she'd noticed that his left knee was sensitive, and the memory of the recent scene where he had dumped her on the floor softened his mood. He stroked her hair soothingly, spoke down to her and exhorted her and encouraged her. He was gratified when she soon sat up and humbly thanked him. She seemed contrite. He promised indulgence.

And when they then kissed, the contact of their lips meant questions and answers, promises and warnings and threats. His enjoyment of these tendresses was fully conscious.

Now everyday life resumed. But a new everyday. The difference revealed itself at once. He wanted to know about the whisky bottle and the cocktails. Lucie said she'd found them waiting up there in the maid's room. Erwin asked the porter to send a waiter to fetch various items that must still be up there. When the porter appeared in person, Lucie vanished into the bathroom, Erwin instructed that the bottles and other things should be brought down, and at the same time gave notice that he and Lucie would be checking out. The porter returned with four empty bottles and two others half full. In his pockets were several cigarette packets, an ashtray and two corkscrews, and in his breast pocket, wrapped in newspaper, several glasses of different sizes. None of this lot, he said in an icy tone, setting it all down on Lucie's dressing table, is the hotel's property. He would permit himself to draw attention to the house rules, whereby no pets of any kind are allowed. Erwin turned his back on him.

When the man had gone, the door to the bathroom opened. Lucie emerged radiant, like a Greek goddess, crowned not with a *corona muralis* but with a live kitten. The other, the one that hadn't planned to commit suicide, sat on her shoulder making desperate efforts to climb Lucie's hair and join its colleague. Lucie shrieked and tittered. He had to relieve her of the creatures. She laughed when it was done and Erwin retreated with his scratches.

Lucie comported herself now in an open and approachable manner. She was amenable and ingratiating. He thought: is there no end to what a woman hides in her. Lucie was really no different in her behaviour from other women of his acquaintance. He could enjoy a love affair with her too. Curious adventure. But will Lucie want a mere affair, after having stood so high on a pedestal? Almost seems like it.

She was amazingly cheerful (damn it, why couldn't she have shown me this side from the first?). After being freed from the kittens, her glance fell on the parade of bottle and glasses by the mirror. She raised one empty bottle after the other, and protested: "No, Erwin, others have been at these, too."

“The maid,” he suggested.

“Unlikely. I had peppermint liqueur for her. I swear, Erwin, this wasn’t all my own work.”

He was not quite convinced: “This is no glorious chapter in our story, Lucie.”

It went over her head. It was astonishing how much could go over her head. She rang for milk to give the kittens, and for the maid.

That afternoon Erwin appeared at her door – with what? Two new bottles, which he swore he’d check on. One was egg cognac, the other a less potent cocktail he quite liked. A corkscrew and glasses were already on hand, from the bankrupt business in the maid’s room. They sat together, smoked and chatted and drank until evening. Erwin discovered several new charms in Lucie. This lady was far superior to the previous one from Switzerland, and not once in the course of the afternoon, unlike the day before, did he think of escaping to his nice cosy suburban apartment. He’d never felt so good. Really, he wouldn’t mind being married to such a woman.

Now we see Lucie alone in her room. What is she up to?

She’s playing with her restored kittens and is still fresh and cheerful after the long eventful day. And the day isn’t even done yet. How could it be allowed to end so abruptly, signifying as it did a turning point in life, for it had shown that she can tittle to her heart’s content, and be as old or young as she likes.

Daisy, in a chic evening gown, that evening fetched Erwin from his room where he had already settled down comfortably, but for goodness sake he’s not ready for bed yet, surely. He gets dressed at once, and off they go into the town.

Around this time the revolutionary struggle is in progress in the middle of Berlin and in the east. But there was nothing to be seen of it in Tauentzien Strasse. Erwin and Lucie visit bars. They delight in the jazz music. There are conversations with chance neighbours. Dances even. They stay out until two in the morning. And then there are invitations to the homes of other unknown acquaintances, the man is a theatrical director, the two young ladies are actresses. They stay there until morning, when coffee and sandwiches bring strength for the new day.

When Erwin finally throws himself down on his bed at seven o’clock, he’s unsure: is he in Berlin? Is he in Switzerland at the Countess’s after a ball, has he found Lucie, or who?

Ah, this night has confirmed to him that he has found something marvellous, he has fallen for it body and soul, hide and hair. Lucie.

Lucie too is sleeping. She sleeps until midday.

In *Tristan and Isolde* the two tragic lovers sing: “What was my dream of Tristan’s woe? What was my dream of Isolde’s distress?” They sing this after they’ve drunk the love potion, and are poisoned by it.

Erwin and Lucie aren’t poisoned. They’re enchanted.

## Ep. 14: Disenchanted

Erwin and Lucie slept until late afternoon, disturbed by nothing – not by the telephone, because they had lifted the receiver, nor by knocking at the door, because they didn’t hear it.

But at last the knocking on Lucie's door was so loud that she woke with a start and demanded from her bed to know what was up. But at once she knew: someone's complaining about the kittens I locked in the bathroom, where they're mewling and crying piteously. But through the door came another message: someone's phoning Herr Stauffer urgently from his suburban apartment, and Herr Stauffer's not picking up.

Lucie jumped out of bed, and first released the kittens, ordered milk and carefully fed it to them. Then she threw on a coat and shuffled to Erwin's room in slippers, and when she knocked (was she more energetic than the waiter, or was there some magical influence?) he at once opened the door and let her in. She phoned down on his behalf, and learned from the porter that a message had come from outside the hotel that the young lady in question was at Stauffer's apartment waiting for him.

Stauffer laughed: "Now I'm in the doghouse! My little daughter, Laura, feels insulted. Just think, I wrote to her just now when we were out, some nice words, thanked her and so on, not a word about her plan to sublet the apartment. And now she's there and she'll bite my head off because I had the sign taken down, and I have to confess that we shan't after all be going to Hamburg."

Lucie: "I'll go with you, Erwin. The child is so attached to us I wouldn't want you to hurt her feelings. Anyway, do you really think she wants us to stay in Hamburg? Seems to me she had her mind set on America."

Off they went at once. At the station exit Lucie bought a bouquet for the young lady.

And when they stood at the apartment door and rang, for a long time nothing stirred within.

Then, to their shock, a strange voice answered. Erwin gave his name. The door opened. He wanted to sink into the earth. In pyjamas, sleepy, blond locks dangling and a rosy doll's face, there was sweet Bella from Dresden. The creature let loose a scream. Then fled into the interior of the sanctum, and nothing more was seen or heard of her.

Erwin and Lucie stepped cautiously in, she in front with a proud smile on her face, he behind a little less proud, but with a sickly smile.

In the living room he had the astonishing presence of mind and keenness of wit to remark: "It's not Laura, as we'd expected, Lucie. Please, put the flowers in a vase. I'll fetch water. Maybe Laura is on her way."

They sat down at the dining table, on which a half-full bottle of beer, a glass and a plate with remains of cake lay sorrowing. Lucie suggested: "She was eating, we probably disturbed her. Should we go and look for her?"

Erwin: "She'd finished eating. She was still in pyjamas."

"Who is she?" Lucie wondered.

Erwin: "Please, don't call her."

"You think she's gone back to bed? So what's her name? Who is she?"

"Bella."

Lucie: "Not bad."

Erwin sighed unhappily: "She's Fraulein Ringleder, from the theatre in Dresden."

“Has she acted in one of your plays, Erwin?”

“Last spring. It wasn’t much of a success, no success at all actually. Lucie, believe me, I never invited her here. I can’t understand how she got in.”

“On the phone the porter said he let her in. Seems he already knew the lady, and trusted her enough.”

Stauffer murmured: “It’s her. She wouldn’t pilfer anything. – I’m devastated, Lucie, I’m not to blame at all, this is so embarrassing.”

She whispered: “Not so loud. I’m sure she’s listening at the keyhole.” Louder: “Anyway, it’s pretty as a picture, your apartment. I never knew you could make old furniture look so good.”

“Laura did it.”

She, softly: “Hand on heart, maybe Bella too? She wanted to build a little nest here for you?”

Erwin: “I swear, Lucie.” Lucie sat at his side, put an arm around his shoulders, and whispered: “And in the meantime you came over here now and then, and took a rest from me with this little doll. No fibs, Erwin, why are you trying to pull one over me? Why so bold, my hidalgo? I can empathise with you. As I sat there with my Egyptian and Florentine books and tormented myself, I thought a hundred times: how can the man hold himself back like that? I literally respected you for it, but was afraid as well. I wondered if he’s perhaps not a proper man, something’s missing, Erwin, you could offer me nothing lovelier than this little surprise.”

He lowered his head: “I assure you, Lucie, I swear, I did not invite her here. She hasn’t shown up even once until now.”

“Then so much the better that I bump into her now.” Lucie was delighted: “It makes me so happy. I hate supermen.”

And behind them the bedroom door opened very gently. Lucie noticed. She saw Bella, now superficially decent, already with hat and coat, carrying an open suitcase. Sitting at Erwin’s side, face turned to Bella, Lucie laughed as she gave her stupefied sinner a kiss, and repeated: “I hate supermen, we’re all human, after all.”

She gave Bella a gracious smile: “Please don’t let us disturb you, my dear young lady. I’m otherwise occupied just now, or I’d give you a hand.”

Now Stauffer became aware that something was afoot behind his back, confirmed when Bella threw down her suitcase. Lucie jumped to her feet. Erwin stood. Bella was already standing. They formed a triad around the spread-eagled suitcase. The scene can begin.

Bella’s plan was to start with a big gesture. She had meant to swish past the woeful pair, suitcase in hand, straight to the door. A hitch developed right at the start. She picked up the suitcase before locking it, and at once it disgorged toothpaste, toothbrushes, lots of little jars and boxes, and finally a book. Erwin bent down and began to repack the jars and boxes. She said sharply: “Oh really, please leave it.”

But kneeling on the floor he was glad to be down there doing something with his hands. And then she was his pretty Bella, who’d provided him with many a pleasant hour, and it was all a misunderstanding – why all the excitement. Thank God these powder puffs fell out, they’re cleverer than their mistress.

"You can keep the book," Bella snarled. He was about to shove it in the case. He opened it: Dante's *Divine Comedy*, richly illustrated, bound in leather, from his library.

"But do please read it, Bella, if it interests you."

She: "I just wanted some idea of what it's like for criminals, after they're dead."

Stauffer, sad: "It's bad for them, Bella, isn't it? I've known it for a long time. Bella, may I introduce my wife? This, Lucie, is Fräulein Ringleder from the theatre in Dresden. She's a distinguished actress, an excellent one, not least in my plays."

Now Bella was no lady of great refinement. Until now it was not spiritual delicacy that Erwin sought in her. Being expected to believe that the person who'd shown up with Stauffer and kept smothering him with kisses was his wife was too much for her sensibilities. It was a curious and unexpected insolence on Erwin's part. Bella, moreover, was a hardnosed creature who had already tumbled in and out of love in surprising ways.

She resolved to bring the matter to a head, as she had planned.

She shoved the book at him across the table past the plate with the cake crumbs, with an appropriate expression (about criminals, for a criminal, this one's for you, sir!), knocking over the beer bottle. She closed the suitcase, picked it up, walked very erect with a "pah!" for Lucie and not a word wasted on him, out of the room. She slammed the living room door, slammed the front door, and was gone.

On the stairs she said to herself: That went off all right. (She meant: blew up.)

At that very moment she remembered the nightgown and slippers she'd left in the bedroom. She turned resolutely back and knocked with vigour. (Blowed if I'll leave my nightie and slippers for you, on top of everything.)

Erwin recognised the knock, and let her in. She brushed wordlessly past and into the bedroom, where Lucie was already standing with the nightie in her hand.

"That's mine," said Bella, snatching it from her.

Lucie: "Sorry. I found it lying here."

Bella looked for her slippers. They weren't to be found. Lucie asked humbly: "What are you looking for, Fräulein Bella?"

"Ringleder, if you don't mind."

"I beg your pardon. What are you looking for, Fräulein Ringleder?"

"My slippers." – "What colour?"

"Black, with a B sewn on." – "Capital B?"

"Of course. In silver."

Lucie: "Oh, we'll find them."

The two ladies hunted in silence, finally looking under the bed. Suddenly Bella stood up, flung open the door, and called into the living room in a sharp tone: "Erwin, have you hidden my slippers?"

To Lucie she explained with a grim expression: "He's always hiding my slippers."

“Why?”

“Because of my feet. I always have to go barefoot. He loves it. He doesn’t care if I’m cold. He’s a monster, your – husband.”

Lucie crossed her arms by the wardrobe mirror and sighed: “A fine mess I’ve got myself into.”

Bella: “He’ll give you the shock of your life before he’s done.” Again she bawled: “Erwin, where are my slippers?!”

He appeared from the living room: “They’ll be where they always are, in the bed, at the foot.” Bella grabbed the blankets, pulled them down, and beamed: Right, here they are. Abashed she mumbled: “So he’s right for once.”

Lucie took advantage of the moment to approach the blonde doll: “We’re dismayed, Erwin and I, that you want to rush away from us, Fräulein Ringleder. I really don’t want to chase you off. Please don’t think I’m so rude. Would you give us the pleasure of fifteen minutes of your company, at least? Erwin has already told me so much about your talent and your perceptiveness, especially of his roles.”

Bella stood considering at the end of the stripped bed, recovered slippers in her hand. She tossed her little head and remarked snidely: “But he never told me a thing about you, madam, so sorry.”

“That’s not surprising, Fräulein Ringleder. With you there’s lots to say. I’m nothing to write home about. I really am his wife.” She took her hat off. “See my grey hair.”

Bella stared. Then she burst out: “So he’s an outright conniving rascal. He never said a word about it. Erwin, you will come in here.” When he failed to appear she ran to the door: “Erwin, come here this minute! You’re a cheat, a rascal. Never said a word about being married. You lied, said you’re divorced, and have a grown up daughter.”

He stood in the doorway: “I do.” She shouted: “You’re not divorced. Your wife’s standing here. You two aren’t divorced.” Lucie gazed at him: “No, Erwin, we are not divorced.” Bella: “You hear that, you criminal, you arch-criminal. He’s deceived you and me both. He’s a bigamist. He’s made himself a bachelor pad here.”

Erwin: “Bella, believe me, I am divorced.”

Lucie nodded gravely: “He is divorced, Fräulein Ringleder. But not from me.” Erwin: “We’ve only just got married.”

Bella stared bewildered from one to the other. Finally she said: “Well then,” and burst into tears: “When, just now? Now? Four days ago the rascal wrote me a long letter from his new apartment, saying how happy he’d be to see me again.”

Lucie repeated: “Four days ago.” Bella: “Four days. Here it is.”

Lucie, accusing: “Erwin, one should not write letters. You keep forgetting. I shall go out now, and you must repent of your sins and treat this lady as she deserves.”

When Lucie had left, Bella stood showing her teeth and mocking: “I’ll grant you that. Now you’re in the soup, fallen between two stools. She’s gone, and you can find yourself another one at the market for three Mark.”



He wasn't sure what she was saying as she closed the suitcase. The woman lacked delicacy, he knew that. After an indecisive minute he found Lucie in the kitchen, calm and placid. She was surprised to see him so soon: "Go back to her right away, Erwin, speak to her."

"Lucie, what for?"

"Come, we'll go together." But when they entered the bedroom, it was deserted. Rapid footsteps sounded from the corridor, the front door was quietly opened and closed, sweet Bella was gone.

And now they sat by themselves in the living room, among the remains of Bella's last meal. Lucie: "I hope you can calm her down, and I also hope, Erwin, that you will long retain an adequate sense of shame. Because you really did write to her four days ago, behind my back." The sinner nodded dumbly.

Lucie: "I'm delighted this has happened, Erwin. Truly. I needed this scene to complete my happiness. The whisky brought it into the open. You preferred this pert young thing to your learned bluestocking Lucie, who tormented you and tried to make of you what you didn't want to be, and what she didn't want, and couldn't anyway. Another two weeks and we'd have fallen back into our old misery, me with the letter-writing and whisky in the background, you with that sweet goose here and the lies kept from me. In the end we'd have gone our separate ways. The whisky brought us together."

He gave her a big hug and added: "I already have a better head for it."

That very day she fetched the two kittens and moved into Stauffer's apartment.

### Ep. 15: Erwin and Lucie

One more glimpse of these two. Nothing here has gone wrong.

They'd both tried to delude themselves, and (luckily) had not succeeded. Lucie had to admit she tiptoed, and Erwin couldn't keep sweet Bella hidden in the basement forever. Lucie, now that her ideal ghost had been chased out of town, revealed herself in the times that followed to be a strong, cheerful, sensible creature. She no longer wanted to travel the world, or the Universe, with Erwin or any other gentleman, to see if perhaps such journeys would bring her to her true existence. She felt good, totally at home, and glad to have achieved a happy landing.

Erwin on the other hand, having achieved wisdom without any awkward excursions, enjoyed his realistic new existence. Now he rejected, almost forcefully, the notion of making of himself more than he had in him, like a bullfrog that squats under an inward pressure and risks exploding. After the wake-up call and under Lucie's influence, he had dreamt of rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the old Erwin. It wasn't necessary, in fact everything went much better without it. (Or maybe that is the Way of the Phoenix? Neither Erwin nor Lucie considered this, but we won't dismiss it out of hand.) Having come through the ordeal and survived the catastrophe, he turned out to be a cheerful man, no deep thinker, who now and then could even display a charming innocence. He dressed elegantly – both he and Lucie had the necessary spare change – and he continued to adore pretty little things.

But among the pretty things he cultivated so tenderly were Lucie's love and his love for Lucie (in which he saw an allegory of higher loves, without however taking steps in that direction).

He wrote no more plays, asked himself: what's the point? People will get by even without my plays. They waged war without my plays, they made peace without my plays. If I were a baker I could say: some people need my bread. But why would anyone need my plays, evenings between eight and ten? Let others play games in these times. I prefer to keep my eyes open.

Yes, he (and Lucie) began to look around more intensively at existence, they read, too, which he had seldom done in the past, they reflected and discussed. He tried to clear his mind. He did this not with the vehemence of a Friedrich Becker (a character from whom he and Lucie were disengaged), but with a cautious delicacy appropriate to his education and background. Erwin was one of those who tiptoe around the bronze doors of Truth, and may sometimes knock on them, but start back when the doors seem about to open. Then they creep away and pretend: It wasn't me. Erwin preferred, not those who knocked, but those who came out.

But they did make the trip to America, in the summer of 1919, via Italy. They had to take Laura along, Erwin's eruptive daughter from his first marriage. They couldn't shake her off. Erwin managed to tear the enchanting creature from the clutches of Klara, his ex, for a couple of months, swearing a formal oath to keep a close eye on her and bring her back safe and sound.

But America proved stronger than the oath. Laura was captivated by all the freedom over there. While Lucie was busy sorting out her divorce (for she still had a husband in Philadelphia), Laura toured the new continent and ended up somehow in the far west. There she demonstrated a talent for the movies. And when Erwin and Lucie, now married, came to fetch her back, she already had her first contract for a minor role. They tried to weaken her resolve by reminding her of the oath that she too had sworn. But she declared she'll just have to be a perjurer, and she'll make it up with Mother, sure enough.

So there she stayed, and her father had to admit she was right. For what had Europe to offer her? Two years later Laura turned up in Hamburg bringing her first baby to show Mother, along with her second husband. For over there, as she said, it all goes faster than here. Klara was stunned. She remembered the awful misery of her first marriage around 1900, with all its heavy consequences, the letters included, and how Erwin was able to unite with his Lucie only after twenty years, she being part to blame.

In those days curious rumours circulated about Stauffer, who spent long periods abroad and once was away from Germany for a whole year. We shall not suppress these rumours entirely, for rumours often contain a kernel of truth, and may even contain more truth than the reality they conceal beneath a brittle shell.

According to one of these murky reports, Erwin, having been enlightened about certain episodes in his past by the discovery of old letters, set out to meet his fate in the form of a certain person named in the letters, a female of course. He could find no trace of her in Europe. He followed her, like a dream-figure, across the ocean to America. And there he who sought so despairingly and never found became attached, not to the person named in the letters, but to a young lady who knew his work and had read about him in the papers. She supported him in his search, and when it proved fruitless he recalled the classical saying: why rove so far when the Good lies so near? And the Good really was close at hand, it was the young lady, and they married and lived a happy life.

But why did Erwin return so seldom to Europe and Berlin, and alone, and never spoke of his American wife and the remarkable happy ending to his dream-chase? Oh, he has good reason,

rumour whispered, and a terrible one. His marriage with the young lady soon ended. It had to be annulled, because it turned out that the unlucky man had married his own daughter. His own daughter, just imagine, and so he was revealed as a variation on Oedipus – who married his mother, but for Erwin it was his daughter. Oedipus had tried to evade his fate, but Erwin, his European life barely ticking over, went in search of his, he required a “destiny” and thought a woman would provide it. The misfortune didn’t cause Stauffer to put out his eyes in ancient Greek fashion, but, according to rumour, he became depressive and avoided his home town.

And how did it all come to light when neither of them, Erwin and his young wife, knew anything of the other? What visionary Tiresias brought light to the darkness, what witnesses came forward? Visionary and witnesses appeared all together in one person – the dream figure he had never found. For she was alive, she really did live in America, as an elderly sober person with nothing dreamlike about her, not these days at least. She read in the newspapers about the curious adventures of the famous European author, her former lover, and then stumbled on the name of his young wife. For she knew that name as the name of the husband that Stauffer’s wife had taken at the time of her second marriage, and she knew about Stauffer’s daughter, Laura. Her suspicions aroused, the sour idle person set off and landed in Erwin’s happy home to get to the bottom of the secret. Her mere presence was a shock to Erwin, he shrank back, it was she he’d been searching for, and then she revealed all, and the couple’s happiness died a swift death.

We discern the elements that underpin this fable: Laura’s tempestuous devotion to the father of whom she’d been so long deprived, the voyage together to America, the fact that he did return to Europe alone, the first time at least, while Lucie was busy over there. The current epoch was rife with Oedipus fantasies; it felt guilty, weighed down, and knew not why.

Another rumour came closer to the truth. According to this one, Erwin had at last found again the Lucie so tragically kept from him, using methods, it was spitefully suggested, that he could never set down on paper. He brought her to Berlin, and lived with her in a hotel and a suburb. She had become completely American. It turned out they couldn’t stand one another, they were both older, and had changed. The initial residue of youthful zest that beguiled them soon vanished. Each had sought a scorching affair, and of course did not find it. All that emerged was that she drank, and he was a square. Lamentably detailed accounts were given of the incident at the hotel where the pair bumped into one another in a corridor – he had his de luxe suite; she, following the romantic debacle, had taken up lodgings with her kittens and whisky bottles in a hotel maid’s attic room. And when this legendary Stauffer came across the reclusive tippler in the corridor, surrounded by amused guests, the whole thing for him was finished. And soon enough for her too.

Stauffer, annoyed, is then said to have acted somewhat madly. He had totally lost his equilibrium, he who was reputed a decent fellow. To outward appearances he still lived with the American woman, no one knows why, but he carried on in full view an affair with a young actress from Dresden, cheekily bringing her to stay with them in his suburban apartment. Young Bella was not the only one with whom he whiled away the time, in protest against the fact that nothing had come of his “great love”.

On one occasion, when he returned from a trip with one of those beauties who extracted money from him, and began looking for his old flame, the American bird had flown, taking with her the kittens and whisky. And Lucie, who earlier could never have enough of letter writing, this time left behind not so much as a line.

She had torn away from the one to whom she had pledged her life totally, her inner life at least. He had shown himself a wimp, and she'd cast him from her heart lock stock and barrel. She took herself off to her friend in Switzerland, the countess at whose chateau Stauffer, to her misfortune, had found her. To her shocked friend, who still recalled the amazing circumstances of restored youthful bliss, she confessed: "He was nothing, and I was nothing." Countess: "And the twenty years of waiting?"

"All nonsense, romancing, on his part and mine."

It was dreadful to hear. She quoted Goethe: "'The Eternal Feminine draws us on high.' Meaning me, drawing him, dear heavens!" She gave a great laugh.

She stayed a few more weeks in Switzerland, until telegrams summoned her back to America, telegrams from her fat husband in Philadelphia that seemed to cheer her up. She packed her things and took the next boat from Genoa, departing the continent that made illusions of true ideas, and turned misery into reality. The vessel was a small one, taking her only as far as her ocean steamer at Lisbon.

But off Gibraltar the boat hit a floating mine from the War. Lucie was not among those rescued. From that moment on, people said, Stauffer went off the rails. He was struck dumb and condemned to sterility.

Those who know the lives of these two know that their lives might well have taken such a turn. In reality Lucie did not lift Erwin out of his almost criminal stupidities only so that he could continue his old ways. Now there would be no more cosy collusion. They'd figured out that sins don't cease to be sins just because they're shared. Erwin was already caught in the trap, and she hauled him out.

With the alarm call in his heart, he lived resolutely in the universally maligned "ivory tower". But was it the solitude of the aesthete? Once, with a grave smile, Lucie placed on his desk a little volume by the mystic Suso, and pointed to the aphorism: "Live as if you are the only creature on Earth."

"What do you say to that, Erwin?"

He leafed through the book and found: "The strength one attains in drawing back from things is greater than the strength one acquires by possessing them."

And: "If you would be of help to every creature, turn away from every creature."

These sounded different from the daily slogans screaming "solidarity" and "community". And if these sayings were far in advance of anything a Stauffer could conceive, their tendency pleased him, and he absorbed them. He resisted all temptations. He never appeared in public. He condemned himself, as some said (but few said anything at all of him), to death.

He himself explained, when put on the spot, that he was not ready to adhere to any political, spiritual or religious faith. He is undecided about so much, and is content to be seen as indecisive.

He was asked what he was up to, did he have a circle of disciples or youths, as others did. Or what. He could only answer honestly: No, he has no disciples. But as far as he knows, neither do the others. And they too can do nothing. No, nobody living can. It's all appearances.

Something dark rose over Europe.

Solitude became oppressive.

Nothing was real, nothing grew, nothing thrived.

Existence became ever more uncanny year by year.

People shuddered, and liked to hide away.

THE END

## 7. Conversation in the Palace of Ch'ien-Lung

*Written in 1912 as an episode in The Three Leaps of Wang Lun, this scene was one of many cut from the novel as published in 1916. It first appeared in 1922 in the Berliner Börsen-Courier, without an explicit link to the novel, and was included – similarly orphaned – in a 1977 collection of Döblin's short stories (Erzählungen aus fünf Jahrzehnten – Stories from Five Decades).*

*Early in his preparatory work for Wang Lun, Döblin began corresponding with Martin Buber. Later a famous philosopher, Buber was at the time a publisher's reader, and had recently published an extensive supplement to the first German translation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC philosopher Chuang Tzu/Zhuangzi. Döblin was anxious for advice on Chinese religion and philosophy, especially Daoism and sectarianism. In October 1912 he sought further advice: "I need all kinds of Chinese miscellanea to ensure fidelity to the milieu. Everything accessible I have already read. But no doubt plenty has escaped me." He specified: "Depictions of customs, matters of daily life, prose especially from the 18th century (Ch'ien-lung period); I can't have enough of it. Do you have any biographical snippets of Ch'ien-lung himself? I'm dealing with the fate of the WuWei sect (led by Wang Lun); do you know of any monographs on this or related sects?"*

*Döblin then sent the completed manuscript to Buber for comment. The extensive cuts made before printing clearly stem from Buber's advice. Sending Buber another manuscript in 1915, Döblin notes that "last time you helped me with a truly great input to Wang Lun, pointing out many passages that were too long, too short, and other similar inadequacies."*

*Buber's advice was to omit extensive passages relating to specific historical actions, notably the brutal Ch'ing campaign against the Dzungars in the late 1750s, so that the action of the novel, although obviously taking place during the reign of Emperor Ch'ien-lung (r.1735-1796), would offer a less political and more timeless setting.*

*While some of the cuts matter little to the overall impact of the novel (one critic thought it would be better at half the length!), other cuts materially distort the shape of the narrative. Döblin's original conception was that the ending (Haitang's pilgrimage to the goddess Guanyin) should circle back to the Prologue, in which her husband Chao Hui's actions lead eventually to the deaths of her two children.*

*That this scheme was still foremost in Döblin's mind 15 years later is shown by a remark ("I started a Chinese novel with such a drumbeat...") during his great 1929 lecture on 'The Construction of the Epic Work'. My translation of Wang Lun for the first time restored the Prologue.*

*Three other cuts were published by Döblin in the 1920s, without reference to the novel. A large number of other cuts (over 13000 words) were discovered in archive papers, and appended to the 2007 German critical edition of Wang Lun.*

*This translation first appeared in The Brooklyn Rail in 2015. It is worth preserving for the density of the evoked atmosphere, and a remarkable example of synaesthesia. A small amount of overlap with the text of the novel shows that this outtake was originally intended for early in Book 3 of the novel.*

The session of the High Council which convened on the morrow was unable, through an external circumstance, to give consideration to the Torghut question. Once certain personnel matters which had lain pending for too long had been dealt with, the Emperor was called away

to view, together with the Chief Overseer of Eunuchs, the young ladies who had been chosen to replenish the Imperial harem.

Seven Manchu beauties of distinguished family trembled on rugs in the vestibule of one of the Imperial houses of women. The Minister named each of them to the Emperor, who nodded thoughtfully. As each was named she stood up, let fall her milk-white veil, exuded the scent of choice perfumes, lifted her gaze. The Yellow Lord was pleased when the third, stupefied, tugged at her veil without loosening it; with a glance he held back the portly Chief Eunuch, who was about to tear away the veil. Ch'ien-lung took the end of the veil that dangled at her waist and placed it around her neck. She shrank back emitting a little squeal. Ch'ien-lung, laughing, pronounced her name to Hu, who was purple with anger. Hesitant, astonished, he engraved the name with a stylus on a wax tablet carried by a house-slave behind him: the young lady was to wait upon the Son of Heaven at the double hour of the Dragon.

The Yellow Lord commanded that Chia-ch'ing, the King of Turkestan and sundry nobles who had his confidence should meet with him in the afternoon.

In the palace the Yellow Lord sat by himself on a dais, his guests on low chairs below the steps. It was already known that the Emperor was discomposed by the Torghut business, that he wished to move matters forward, but that certain difficulties had presented themselves. Chia-ch'ing squatted motionless on his chair. The situation displeased him. He foresaw debates, outbreaks of anger, misunderstandings. He glared at the white-bearded Khan of Turfan, whose bright blue eyes, he thought, lent the man a ridiculous appearance. The inevitable Sung with his owl eyes squatted next to the foreigner, then the chatterbox A-kuei. How to manage it so that nothing would follow from them. Life at Court would be easier to bear without them. Let them all be sent tripping one day over a staff. The blue-eyed King of Turfan, a vigorous old man with a goatee and a Manchu queue, was in a cheerful mood as he regarded Sung, who had regaled him splendidly for half the day with refined and learned verses; clearly Sung took him very seriously; he did not notice how much he revealed to the seasoned Minister by and by about his relation to the Torghuts and to Lhasa. Absolute silence reigned once the Emperor appeared and the guests had prostrated themselves; then, at a word from the Emperor, they took their places. Below the ceiling of the little hall hung an enormous yellow silk cloth; a mighty dragon embroidered in gold, blue and red soared across the symmetrical silken folds that came together in the middle of the ceiling. The windows were curtained despite the daylight; heavy bronze oil lamps hung from chains that pierced the silken ceiling, cast their ruddy glow over the carpeted steps, the sovereign in his yellow gown, and the resplendent silent guests. Young eunuchs busied themselves soundlessly above and below, served tea in a golden service. For a long while Ch'ien-lung held his little cup with its little porcelain lid aloft, flourishing it gently above his guests, and read the verse that decorated the cup, which he himself had composed:

“Over a low fire set a tripod, whose bloom and grain betoken long use. Fill it with pure snow water. Boil for as long as would be needed to turn fish white or crabs red. Pour it onto tender leaves of choice tea in a cup of Yüeh ware. Let it steep until the steam has risen in a cloud and on the surface there remains but a thin swirling mist. Drink this precious liquor at your pleasure, and it will dissipate the five causes of ill-humour. This moment of peace I can only taste and enjoy, not describe.”

And how happy the poem made Chia-ch'ing at that moment; for the phlegmatic man hoped and foresaw that the Emperor would be inclined to believe his own poem and at least feign a certain equanimity.

The narrow-shouldered king, addressed by the Emperor, broke out in hypocritical formulae of obeisance. Then the Emperor asked Sung whether Chao Hui had been invited. The lanky general, seated beside A-kuei, had gone unremarked by Ch'ien-lung, whose eyes were failing. Ch'ien-lung nodded to him with a smile: "Could your troops, Excellency, within two months stand once again on the Ili?"

Chao, shocked, pulled himself together and confirmed it. The sovereign's eyes had a wicked malicious gleam; he knew, must have known, that a slaughter unworthy of humankind had been perpetrated on the Ili; the benevolence he was wont to accord Chao could not mean he would entrust him with a repetition of this gruesome task. But you never knew with Ch'ien-lung.

And how old was Chao Hui and how many sons did he have.

The Tartar answered his sovereign with effusive expressions of obligation for his graciousness.

"No need," the Yellow Lord rocked himself in his armchair, "you are strong and your son will tend your ghost. I calculate that your Excellency will dispose of thirty thousand men. In addition to your own tested core troops you will receive Mongolian Banner regiments. The Tsongtu of Chihli will be responsible for filling the ranks, and he will also, upon your request, supply Green Banner regiments. I do not know whether you will find a use for these. At tomorrow's Council we shall make a decision. But the country is empty, the Ili country. At least you will have space for your troops until they are needed. And in your free time, your Excellency can make sacrifices for the fallen rebels of Ili, who I understand from A-kuei still rob you of your rest."

Chia-ch'ing bowed his head. He, like the Emperor, was smiling. He recommended mustering a regiment of bonzes, since soldiers might not have experience of sacrificial rites.

"Excellency Chao Hui is free to recruit such a regiment," replied Ch'ien-lung in a calm, still mocking tone, "I was merely making a suggestion. The details and provisioning of his priest-troops are matters for Chao Hui himself to decide. What I have in mind for you, Excellency, is indeed a perilous task. You know that the Torghts intend to come to the Ili next year. Well, you will be there on the Ili with your selected troops. Who will be driven back will be decided by who has the hardest bones. But anyway, ever since your unforgettable deeds, the lands on the Ili belong to me. And if necessary I shall issue a decree assigning the hardest bones to you."

"The soldiers of Your Majesty under my command are armed and ready. We await Your Majesty's orders and these orders will empower us to prevail."

The Emperor, disarmed, nodded his head. The doughty warrior's words betrayed not a trace of petulance.

"We are not in Council, Excellency. This is not a serious debate. You are my guests, and we are having a discussion. I hope that I am wrong about the Torghts."

After they had all raised their cups, Chia-ch'ing declaimed: "Drink this precious liquor at your pleasure, and it will dissipate the five causes of ill-humour. This moment of peace I can only taste and enjoy, not describe. – But if you will permit this youth unblessed with wisdom, he



would like to put forward a suggestion, in the event that Excellency Chao is forced to mount up once again.”

Ch'ien-lung: “To take you along? My son Chia-ch'ing, the lancer.”

“If it please the Lord of the World, then yes. Even though Chia-ch'ing takes more pleasure and delight in the company of his father and music than of sweaty Torghuts and soldiers.”

Sung piped up: “For nails you use bad iron and for soldiers – ”

“No bad men,” Chao interjected, “but good iron.”

Ch'ien-lung laughed contentedly and lay back. He sent a eunuch, who glided down the steps at the side, to bring to the general candied figs from his plate. “Only good iron, Chao, the hardest that you can gather.”

Chia-ch'ing hummed and hawed, sought for words: “It has still not been clarified, if I may point out in support of His Serenity Sung, whether iron is in any case a particularly valuable metal. It has no colour, does not shine, plays no role in determining auspicious or inauspicious events. One has need of iron, but – perhaps savants of more advanced understanding will mock this youngster – if the outcome were to depend solely on hardness, then forged iron would be better than the man whom it slays; and the primordial Yin and Yang would have erred in embodying themselves in people rather than in iron. But I did not want my proposal to be forgotten.”

“You are not quite right, Chia-ch'ing,” said the Emperor, “but it is enough generally to be a little bit right, so that errors can be revealed. Iron has its time, jade has its time, water has its time. Sometimes iron has my time.”

“How would it be, I wanted to propose to Your Majesty, if Your Majesty were to augment the planned regiment of priest-soldiers by attaching to it the long-nosed missionaries from the West. They claim that the enviable spirit to which they pray can perform boundless acts, far more than any spirit of the eighteen provinces; there are even some among them who assert like children that they have the real, the true, the authentic spirit, who can do anything. While everyone knows that no spirit or god should be allowed to grow too big, as then he would become negligent and neglect his simplest obligations, and it is customary among us to serve many spirits, turn and turn about according to their capacities.”

“If Chao Hui desires, I shall put together a battalion of missionaries for him and despatch it to the Ili. It will be a test for them: whether the Torghuts can be brought to a stand through the intercession of the western god or not. This god is not known to us; we do not want to show prejudice against him: but of course we would rather depend more on the iron that Chia-ch'ing has disparaged. And on the calculations of our own astrologers.”

Sung, the jolly literatus, craved leave to speak; his old clever face was creased by a smile: “While working on the glorious history of the K'ang-hsi period, this ant came across a report of the Censor of that time, to whom were delivered some western presents for the son of the Son of Heaven. Old Sung's legs may be weak, but his memory is still moderately good. The report on the presents of the Jesuit priest Li-ma-tsu read something like this: ‘We have no connection with the west, where people follow neither our laws nor our rites. The pictures of a supposed lord of heaven and a virgin, tendered by Li-ma-tsu, are of no value, the bones which he thinks to present belong, as he says, to immortals, fairies; but he does not consider that when these go

to heaven they take their bones with them. We therefore conclude that we can have no truck with such novelties and must send back this man and his presents.' This is what the Censors of old wrote. This ant would add that Li-ma-tsu also offered the Son of Heaven a globe to which no credit could be given, as one sought in vain on it for the Four Seas."

Soft laughter. Teacups and lids clinked. Warm gentle steam filled the hall. The King of Turfan felt impelled to make an observation to Chia-ch'ing. Employing unhelpful men from the west for the war in Ili might perhaps be superfluous; for, setting aside all other considerations, the westerners' god, what's his name, had not the slightest knowledge of that region; the paths and passes between Kulja and Kashgar are difficult enough for natives, unknown in parts, sometimes impassable; southward from Lake Balkhash and deep into Dzungaria bare mountain regions soar over steppelands, populated only by foxes, bears, wild yaks. What could a spirit whose home lies a thousand li to the west achieve here.

As they relaxed, as lissom servants glided over the carpets and the guests engaged in whispered conversations under the gaze of the Son of Heaven, from behind a heavy red cloth curtain to one side bamboo flutes set up a soft music. The wide curtain was painted with discreet magnificence; a curious network of violet lines covered the red background, which almost imperceptibly developed towards the centre into figures and forms. It had been painted by Ku K'ai-chih. A lady sat before a mirror, a round green glinting mirror held up for her by two maidservants, one of them was standing, the other rested the edge of the mirror on an outstretched knee; an ancient eunuch leaned on a staff in the background, observing the young artist who stood behind the lady, winding her tresses into the prescribed coils. No figure was painted complete; only silhouettes, folds, outlines were given, so that the figure was always melting back into the ground. The bright yellow of the lady held the focus; the broad folds of the eunuch's gown in pale blue finely balanced the pink of the hairdresser, whose hands and fingers plunged silver-white into dark masses of hair. The mirror framed the sparsely outlined maidservants; the brown of their garments swelled out of the grey-black of the floor.

The music twittered and chirped, flutes sketched wide springtime landscapes, flocks of grazing sheep, soaring finches and larks; in the curtained hall they enchanted with the delights of the earth over which the sovereign on the dais held sway.

Chia-ch'ing looked up at the dim oil lamps; he was happy and moved by the music. The Emperor called to him as their eyes met: "Would it not be good, Chia-ch'ing, to fill another land such as this with people and let them tend the soil in its fruitfulness? I would gladly keep Chao Hui here, and spare him. You friend of peace, give me your advice, music is filling the hall, you can speak."

"I believe in the might of Your Majesty. The eighteen provinces are prosperous. Happiness rests in Your Majesty's lap. The wastelands on the Ili should be entrusted to the Torghuts. With the Tashi-lama as their leader, Your Majesty will overwhelm them with the riches of our culture. If the man of accomplished wisdom in Tashi-lunpo guides your thoughts and hopes now and in forty years, then in fifty years Your Majesty's people will have converted to them. Their children will speak of the holy men of Tibet as we do – and wear the robe, worship the ancestors, sacrifice to Heaven – like us. The pacific always prevail over the enemies of peace. Wars bring only momentary success, unless they are the final word of an almost completely accomplished move to peace. This ignoramus dares to utter his opinion. And he has no doubt that K'ung-fu-tse will

prevail as he did two, three thousand years ago, for another thousand years wherever he encounters crude barbarism.”

“You friend of peace, singer of peace! Tomorrow I shall sit and try to turn your thoughts into poems, Chia-ch’ing. This old man rejoices in his son!”

The deep rapid ever-changing tones of the flutes erected towering cliffs; nomads hunted over narrow passes, muddy brooks tumbled downward, you went reluctantly through the bare landscape.

^^^

## 8. THE PILGRIM AETHERIA

Written 1946-49; published 1978; still largely ignored.

*This long story/short novel was never published in Döblin's lifetime, except for two short excerpts in a Catholic magazine. The first full version appeared in 1978, more than two decades after the writer's death. It attracted little attention, and scholarly appreciations remain extremely sparse. Yet Döblin had declared this, his only explicitly Christian fiction, "his favourite of all his writings".*

*Alfred, his wife Erna and youngest son Stephan were baptised on 30 November 1941 at the Roman Catholic Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Los Angeles. (Their eldest son Peter, who worked as a book designer on the East Coast, was baptised separately around the same time.) The Döblins started taking instruction with three Jesuit priests just a few months after they arrived in the USA in September 1940 – the beginning of their "second exile" after harrowing months on the run from Paris to Lisbon.*

*For almost two years Döblin insisted the conversions be kept confidential, revealed only to a few close friends. He expected negative reactions from two sides: from fellow Jews, who would be shocked by a seeming betrayal, especially given the help Jewish organisations had provided the family in securing travel funds, exit and entry visas, and an initial employment opportunity in Los Angeles; and secondly from other exiled intellectuals – mostly rational, irreligious children of the Enlightenment – who would find such "backsliding" hard to fathom, perhaps caused by a pathology of some kind.*

*Döblin went public on 14 August 1943, at a party to celebrate his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday attended by many luminaries of the German exile community: writers, actors, professors, musicians, people in the film business. His revelation was received as negatively as he had feared. Bert Brecht wrote a widely quoted poem ("Embarrassing Incident") and in his work journal expressed dismay "as when a fellow prisoner undergoes torture and spills the beans". Thomas Mann, more sympathetically, thought rather lamely that "Jews and Catholics must have it easier" than Protestant humanists such as himself. Gottfried Benn, in an essay much quoted by the unreligious, declared that "God is a bad stylistic principle" compared with Art. (He did not explain why Art should be a better stylistic principle.)*

*Broadly religious concerns had featured in Döblin's works from schooldays on. His years as a medical student led him to distrust materialistic explanations of human mental states. In the 1920s he explored the meaning of human beings in a context of Nature, the World (society, politics, the arts), the Cosmos, and the mystery of the psyche. "I keep saying 'Nature'. It's not the same as 'God'. It's darker, vaster than God. The total whirling secret of the world. But still something separate from God."<sup>17</sup> His epic novels often feature demonic intrusions into the everyday world.*

*Conversion was not a surrender to mysticism, or an escape from seemingly insoluble political problems. Döblin was keenly aware of historical trends and deeds. His South American trilogy *The Land without Death* (1937-38) explored the brutal impact of Enlightenment rationalism in the Conquest; contrasted it with native animism; and depicted brilliantly the efforts of Jesuits to provide native tribes with a worthwhile life on Earth, rather than baptising them simply as a prelude to slavery and death. (The anti-religious Voltaire declared the Jesuit efforts "a triumph of humanity".)*

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<sup>17</sup> 'Remarks on Mountains Oceans Giants.

*The Jesuit enterprise in Paraguay and Brazil was cancelled by “enlightened” European rulers. Hence it seemed to Döblin futile to combat ever worsening inhumanity from a wholly secular standpoint. Concepts like Democracy and Civic Virtue and Art were no substitute for transcendent notions of active forces beyond the Self. Rather a conception of humanity made in God’s image needed to be asserted politically.*

*While still in Los Angeles, Döblin wrote a large work in a genre hardly known since the 18<sup>th</sup> century: a religious dialogue called The Immortal Human. This was well-received by churchgoing reviewers and readers when first published in West Germany, and then ignored. He also composed a second dialogue, Struggle with the Angel: a tour through the Bible. First published in 1978, it too has been largely ignored.*

*For three years (1946-49) Döblin crafted his only explicitly Christian work of fiction: The Pilgrim Aetheria. It has been almost ostentatiously neglected by Döblin scholars, and has found few readers. Yet it is an artfully constructed tale, full of Döblin’s customary irony; an interplay of comedy with a serious search for righteousness; a mingling of heathen and Christian motifs; and a confrontation with the problem of evil in the world despite a good God.*

*Various narrative techniques are employed: events in the past tense, as history; in the present tense, as happening now; dialogue; direct speech, indirect speech; a kind of verse. The narrative often adopts the style of religious legends, which as with fairy stories are immune to accusations that they lack realism. Döblin’s narrative talent here continually walks a fine line between the supernatural (demanding total suspension of disbelief) and psychological plausibility.*

*The non-religious reader (of whom your humble translator is one) can still be moved by the literary and spiritual qualities of this skilfully wrought and engaging tale.*

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## Part 1: The Pilgrimage to Rome

### *A paradisaical moonlit night*

When the pilgrim Aetheria set off on her first journey to Rome – she came from Portosa, down by Salerno, south of Naples – she was in her mid-twenties, a raven-haired country beauty, robust and cheerful, warm-voiced, on good terms with all her neighbours. As a little girl she was nicknamed Aetheria on account of the transfigured, even ecstatic, expression her face wore now and then; ordinarily she was Sabine, a fisherman's daughter. She went off to Rome at the urging of the husband she loved boundlessly, with her whole heart, with a joyful sincerity that already could scarce be overtopped. She put her whole being into this love, and you could see, when she stood together with this man Valerio, that she felt blessed by the love he shared with her.

Valerio too was a fisherman. But like many in this region he no longer practised the profession. Here they engaged in a different, more profitable trade: from their inconspicuous robbers' nest they fell upon travellers who plied the great road to and from Naples singly or in convoy, and plundered them. They did no harm to the travellers, but word spread in the region, and merchants on their way from Sicily or Greece knew that when it came down to it, those fellows would brook no nonsense.

But on one occasion, a convoy of Greek merchants they crept up to by night turned out to be unusually well guarded. In fact it had an escort: another bandit gang from the same region. Faces were recognised at once: they were men from Ravello, frequent collaborators in friendly fraternal escapades. The Portosa gang, among them Valerio, Aetheria's spouse, could not believe their eyes when at the head of this train – the train they were intent on plundering, they'd been informed it was a rich one – there was the Ravello gang, many armed with swords and shields, some even had helmets, like actual soldiers. The tail of the long wagon train was formed by a gaggle of Greeks, normally considered easy prey.

It was a gorgeous moonlit night in wooded hilly country. To the north the cone of Vesuvius soared into the clouds.

What happened?

The highwaymen from Aetheria's village crept closer one by one to check out the situation. For they hadn't reckoned on a trick such as the Ravello lot were pulling, their monstrous knavish skulduggery in playing highway police, and against their own comrades to boot. Though no one said it out loud, their disgust was mingled with respect, which spurred them on. They meant to give their all and not come off second best. Contrary to their normal disposition, they were fired up and ready for a fight.

First they pushed forward a comrade (suddenly promoted to leader) to negotiate a peaceful solution involving joint plunder of the Greeks. This was not quite what the policemen had in mind: the better part of their pay was already in the bag. But the two groups, under the beady eyes of the Greeks, debated an armistice and a fifty-fifty split, the other side inclined more to two thirds and one third, meaning two thirds to themselves. The Portosa gang nevertheless agreed to this, mainly because of the disparity in weapons, and now they discussed how to go about it: a fake assault on the train was suggested, leading to a fake fight, the Greeks would flee, and the loot would be divided.

But the wretched Greeks had to stick their noses in, they had their suspicions, being themselves experts in deceptive manoeuvres, and not easily led down the garden path.

And to crown it all the police squad, the competing gang from Ravello, those sly dogs, had chosen as their captain one Sebastian, on account of his strength and resoluteness, though not his cunning. This Sebastian, an army veteran of many wars, had suffered a broken cervical vertebra, he can't hold his head up but presses it to his chest and glowers up at everyone from below; he's actually not so dangerous, for whenever someone approaches who seems to have authority, he at once becomes a model of discipline and obedience, every time.

So when the Greek merchants turn up at his side to express concern and check out what's going on, that military sense of duty which has so often proved his undoing awakens in him and – sitting upright in the saddle as if he never was demobilised all those years ago but is still in charge of a squad – he issues the order to clear the field of these footpads here, the comrades from Portosa, send them scuttling, and no arguing.

The tone is of course unacceptable to the other lot. They have their self-respect, they feel challenged and provoked by the Ravellan's absurd presumption.

"What?" roars Valerio, spouse of that Aetheria who, once this is over, will be sent off on her trip to Rome; and again he roars "What?" and jumps back into the trees.

"Forward!" crows Sebastian behind him, casting a servile glance at the Greeks, who see that he's their man. Horses start pulling, wheels creak, the train sets itself in motion. Vesuvius looks down in silence, from here to Vesuvius and Naples takes around two days. But Aetheria's journey to Rome will take longer.

Back there in the patch of woodland, some of the Portosa gang also have horses. They set off at a furious gallop, ready for anything, even their own broken bones. Half an hour's riding and they fell a few trees across the highway to form a barricade. They wait nearby. Hard to say what they're thinking, how they see their role in the coming fight. They will fall on Sebastian's gang, put their own bones on the line, then what will be, will be.

And it is. Apart from weapons and numerical superiority, in Sebastian the Ravello gang have themselves a strategist. The triumphantly imagined battle at and around the barricade concludes – by never commencing. For Sebastian comes around behind them, and while they lie concealed, agog to follow events at their unassailable barricade, up he comes strolling in among them, and takes the astonished and dismayed colleagues from Portosa by the ears and drags them to their feet. The ones who weren't taken dashed away pell-mell like a family of hares. They stumbled, they fell down, had nowhere to hide. Utter defeat. Sebastian let most of them run off. Only two, who'd been lashing out and stabbing away savagely, all the while swearing horribly at the victors – they dared call them, in the hearing of the Greeks, "professional highwaymen" and "fake bandits" – were trussed up by Sebastian at the request of the Greeks, who wanted a souvenir of the battle.

But Aetheria's husband would not yield. His horse had been driven off as they lay in wait, now he has no horse, only a dagger, and Sebastian, who owes him a reckoning, sits high on his steed and has sword and shield.

Sebastian hustled his adversary, his old comrade and partner in crime, away from the Greeks, who were sticking their noses in here too. Sebastian implored Aetheria's husband to ditch his

stupid dagger, for goodness sake. He should scarper and give Aetheria his best regards – and they'll soon all sit amicably together once again.

But there was no helping Aetheria's husband. He danced around Sebastian's steed like a lunatic. As if warding off a bluebottle, Sebastian kept flourishing his sword to keep Valerio away from his horse and his own bare legs. The foaming insulted man below, who saw how two of his friends had been trussed and were being carried off, lunged and jabbed about him as if he too was already caught, and he wouldn't stop until – until Sebastian set the cold point of his sword to the man's sweaty throat and pressed it against the collarbone. It was like opening a hot spring. At almost the same moment Valerio opened wide his mouth as if about to ask a question, raised both arms high, and sank to his knees and then onto his face.

And that's how they brought him to Aetheria, the raven-haired beauty, his wife. She was a Christian. Later she undertook her journey to Rome, not to pray with the women of the city in the catacombs and before the bones of saints and martyrs, but to fulfil Valerio's dying wish. On that paradisaical moonlit night his wailing friends carried him all bloody into their little cottage, the man who a few short hours ago she'd sent merrily on his way. He's still breathing, he's white as chalk, can still open an eyelid.

Far, far down the highway, over hill and down dale, the merchant convoy rolls along under the protection of those locals who have earned high praise from the Greeks and will enjoy a growing reputation. Jolting between two Greek mules are the two trussed-up captives, heading for Rome to be handed over to the authorities. The victorious Greeks, who have a liking for dramatic entertainments, mean to attend their trial and execution in person. Already they sing the praises of that incorruptibility, that strict justice by which – more so than by the sword – the Romans have conquered the universe. As for the precise method by which this pair (one of them is Aetheria's younger brother) will be executed, it will surely have to be (they said this out loud) by simple beheading. But this of course will require special pleading, for in view of the gravity of their crimes – breach of the peace, armed assault on an innocuous merchant convoy – a somewhat protracted penal process might be in order.

\*

Here we are in the fifth century after the birth of Christ, in an era of world history long since confined to books and libraries; which, having once filled the earth with the usual clamour, is now happy enough if some student should show a bit of interest. The mighty Roman Empire is still around at this point, though in dire straits becoming ever more dire. It's ruled by an Emperor Diocletian. He secures the frontiers, and within them is undertaking a cleansing aimed at enemies of the state of whatever stripe, among them political dissidents, common law criminals, and Christians. He throws them all to wild beasts. This is what the sensation-hungry Greeks envisage, they who have just attended an unconventional performance. They prepare themselves and their captives for a more formal and orderly spectacle at the Circus.

\*

Aetheria hears what has happened from the lips of Valerio and others. She flings herself at the dying man, tries to keep him warm, intent on catching any word he's still able to breathe. It was Sebastian from Ravello who set the trap. Sebastian who struck him down. Sabine, i.e. his wife Aetheria, must swear to avenge him. These are Valerio's last words. His hand felt for his girdle: she understood: he wants to give me his dagger. They had to drag her off the body.



Her love for him was boundless and whole-hearted. She loved him with an unsurpassable sense of bliss and intimacy. This love filled her completely, she entered completely into it. And whenever she stood at Valerio's side you could see: she felt blessed by this love, just as he was blessed by her love for him.

### *The pilgrimage to Rome*

Next morning Aetheria demanded that the others go and hunt Sebastian down. But fear has entered their very bones, they are more inclined to hide away.

Aetheria is a Christian. That she, along with some other women in their village, had become Christians was the only source of quarrels between Valerio and her. And when she now goes about numb-faced, and tends her plot, and no longer joins the clandestine prayer meetings, the women advise a pilgrimage to Rome, to the holy men, to pray with them at the sarcophagi of the martyrs, and beseech the Saviour for succour.

Eight long days after that paradisaical moonlit night they set off on their journey, their pilgrimage. This had long been desired, because of various grave illnesses in the village. But Aetheria went to pray for her poor beloved husband Valerio's soul, and to implore the saints to lend her the strength to kill Sebastian.

So off they go. Five young women, peasants, off to Naples. Now and then they sing their songs. Who would think them Christians on a pilgrimage to Rome?

Hillslopes loom bright yellow as far as the eye can see: that's gorse in bloom. Dog-daisies everywhere, green groves of olive trees. Spring is dancing across the Earth, and calling out.

These women have human bodies. They wear clothes that their homeland deems proper. They are nourished by the food of humans. Their bread grows from soil, their fruit from trees. When thirsty they drink water with wine. Where in them is there room for anything more? Within them something grows that does not originate in soil, in wells, in trees, in gardens. And when they take rest and huddle together, they hum strange songs of Christ Jesus, sweet child of Heaven, and of Mary who conceived him. Their eyes, human eyes, glisten with joy and longing.

And if you ask: what do they look like sitting there in the shade by the roadside, you realise: they look like little birds that hop about in grass, flap into the air to light on swaying branches, and drop back down to the ground. They sing of Christ who died on the Cross, of the Son of Heaven – and Mary stands below the Cross.

They proceed through wonderful, wonderful springtime along the coast towards Rome, where Christians are killed.

\*

Aetheria strode boldly along with them. Her face under the bright headband was as open as ever. Her lips that no longer kissed still swelled proud and red. Her voice that no longer breathed words of love sounded warm and placid. Her eyes saw Heaven and Earth, but not the ones she so wanted to see, yet her gaze was mild and betrayed nothing. For Aetheria was suffering terribly, her insides were in turmoil. Hatred and pain raged within her and melded to despair, to such grief that she knew not how to go on living.

And after dropping off to sleep in some lodging alongside the others, she would awake, something had called shrilly to her from the darkness, who was it, she sat up trembling, her gentle eyes could not see his image by day, but it came at night outlined in flame, Valerio, her beloved. She told him she couldn't live without him, and wanted to follow him so she could embrace him wherever he might be. And when the fiery image faded, she would sink back and utter passionate, urgent prayers with furrowed brow, beg for justice and success in stabbing Sebastian from behind or from the side, or killing him with a dagger to the throat.

For if she were unsuccessful, and unable to keep the oath she had sworn, and if something should happen to her brother as well, the one they'd dragged off to Rome to be condemned, then – then she would no longer call herself Christian, then Christ would have no claim on her, and she would find no justice through him.

Oh, such a long strange journey, crawling over hills and mountains along the coast and on to Naples below. The Greeks must have followed this road, the villain ahead on his horse with the bloody blade that he'd plunged into Valerio's beating breast and opened up his lovely heart. Oh the crawling along this endless path, the same path the devil on horseback had taken, sword naked at his side, and air played around it, the same air she was now breathing, and it hadn't poisoned her, and the same hot sun that now shone down saw the sword and the man who wore it openly on his steed, and didn't turn him to ashes, him and all his company and the entire convoy of Greeks. Oh, just one flame from Heaven and it would be done.

No flame came. Justice, where was justice?

They reached the broad military road, guard posts, sentries and patrols, people of many nations, whole trains of ox carts bearing foodstuffs. Tollbooths.

Rome, huge, mighty, terrible Rome.

\*

Enquiries led them to what they sought, they knew the names of adherents of the Christian sect. Ebonius, a spice dealer, a venerable man, Elder of the community, received the women and lodged them with friends outside the city gates. There they rested from their journey.

But Aetheria was already out and about. Where were the Greeks? What had happened to the two captives they'd abducted? The city was so big. She looked for and found their lodging place. And next day she spoke to someone on the way there – and it was Sebastian! He had caught wind of her. On a wretched little plaza they sat in a tavern. They were shown to a vacant back room. As she sat at his side, grief for her beloved Valerio overwhelmed her horribly, and fixed itself with such violence on Sebastian there in the flesh that she broke out in blind laments and sobs, and couldn't hold back even when Sebastian spoke to her. Now at last she was able to weep and lament and sob. She babbled helplessly, and was so taken hostage by misery, love and longing here in front of Sebastian in the flesh that he took her in his arms and pressed her to him and begged her, implored her, pleaded with her most ardently to calm down, and he uttered caressing words until the storm passed and she clung to his breast. Tears had come to him as well; yes, he wept along with her.

Now she was able to stand and unclasp herself from him.

He passed her a beaker of wine and she took a sip. She came to herself and saw him alive, hale and strong beside her at the table – he, the one Valerio had seen and attacked at the end

and she was to pursue the fight from where it had come to a stop with Valerio, and it was her task even if he did have tears in his eyes and sniffled and drank and pressed more wine on her.

She admonished herself to remember how Valerio was carried in so pale and how he passed away and they carried him out next morning and he would never know another morning or drink wine again, and they threw hard dry clods of earth onto his coffin, onto his radiant face, his mouth.

“Come, come,” she whispered, eyes closed there beside Sebastian the murderer, she was thinking of her beloved: “come, I’ll keep my word, I shall do as I promised, come.”

Now Sebastian took her hands from her eyes and hugged her tenderly. She kept her mouth firmly shut. She squeezed her eyes shut so not a ray of light should enter, and then she prayed, prayed to God that she remain steadfast. She spoke to God, told him of her intention, and what she had to do and would do, namely grab Sebastian’s left hand that was stroking her fingers so tenderly and at the same time with her right hand draw the dagger from her skirts and stab him in the throat.

This she shared with almighty God. And she begged him for the strength to do it.

But Sebastian thought she was looking for more and stronger consoling. And so he gently took control of her right hand as well, and her right arm that she’d meant to keep free. But she tore herself away and plumped both elbows obstinately on the tabletop and buried her head in her hands and once again explained her predicament to Christ in all urgency, and implored him most intently to lend her the strength to grab the dagger from her skirts and plunge it into Sebastian’s throat.

These brusque movements dismayed Sebastian, and in order to ascertain her mood he attempted renewed approaching and comforting. But she, being likewise disappointed and annoyed, having thus far been left in the lurch by Heaven, directed her anger at him, he understands nothing, for he’s been nice to her and wants to be even more tender, and that’s all the thanks she has. Out of nowhere she heaped invective on his head, called him and his friends robbers and murderers, and this so loudly that they must have heard it from the barroom next door. And now she boxed his ears, and he lost his temper and delivered (albeit regretfully) two great smacks on the mouth that knocked her back on her stool and brought her blood to a boil.

Without further ado her hand found its way to her skirts and the dagger. She leaned back, leaned forward and stabbed and stabbed – into thin air. She tumbled, arms outstretched, stool and dagger and all, backwards onto the floor.

For the move towards her skirts had not escaped the seasoned veteran’s notice. All he’d done was lean forward slightly, hook a leg under her stool, and send her flying out of the saddle. The dagger clattered from her opened hand onto the floorboards.

Sebastian leaned down. “Look at that,” he growled, now sober, and shoved it into his girdle alongside his own. He stood glaring angrily as she clambered to her feet. He offered no assistance. With a curse he grabbed his beaker and emptied it into his mouth. He glared at her again, and turned towards the door.

She was alone at the table. She whimpered to the knotty wood: “Valerio, beloved, what should I do?”

To Christ she had prayed at home, on the road, in Rome, and here at this table. Now this.

The landlord appeared with customers. She had to leave.

*Aetheria lodges a complaint*

Christians came together in great stealth. This Emperor was crueller than his predecessors.

Why did he want to crush the Christians? He had no understanding of their doctrine, it was beyond him, he felt comfortable in his heathendom. But they were presumptuous with their know-it-all attitude, and undermined his authority with their prating of a god who sent his son down to Earth and was greater even than the Roman Emperor. He was in no way prepared to tolerate such talk, not least because this Son of God revered by the Christians, as they themselves had to admit, had been unceremoniously put to death without being able to demonstrate any of his powers, hundreds of years ago, under Tiberius, and his native land was still even today under the sway of Rome.

These universally acknowledged facts led the Emperor to have Christians locked up or banished, beheaded or thrown to wild beasts. That with these measures he was on the right track was evident in the security of the Empire and good progress in every province of the New Order.

What Aetheria, torn by grief as she was, mourning the husband they'd taken from her, a firestorm of longing, outrage and accusation – what she now wanted of the community of true believers here in Rome can easily be surmised.

She wanted to lodge a complaint. She wanted to bring her case before the Elder, the pastor of the community, and make her accusation. Yes, she meant to lay an accusation against her God, she had been remiss in nothing towards him, neither in the good years when Valerio was alive, nor after the calamity. Day and night – whole nights and days – she had prayed and beseeched, had laid siege to God that he might help her. But God, to whose faith she had converted and thereby brought the sole bone of contention into her marriage with Valerio – he would not listen.

Now she meant to confess to the Elder, the pastor, what had happened in the tavern, and wanted to tell everyone so that their eyes would be opened.

Thus primed and purposeful did Aetheria – complainant, accuser, widow, sturdy young peasant woman – present herself along with her companions to the spice dealer Ebonius, he in whom the office of Elder was vested and who set aside in his storerooms a place for meetings. While the others, eager to kneel before the relics he safeguarded, filed into the strongly spice-scented space, Aetheria stood before long-bearded Ebonius by the wall of his living room, sobbing and pointing to the scratches on her face and the purple patches on her arm from the mistreatment inflicted on her by Sebastian, who happened to be in Rome. She willingly admitted and confessed all this to the venerable Ebonius, for she knows, she really does, you're not allowed to keep anything secret in confession, and it would only cause Valerio, her passionately beloved husband, her only friend in life, only cause him hurt, even more hurt, because he didn't want to accept the holy faith and she knows he's burning right now in the fires of Hell. He's dead, stabbed by that same Sebastian who's here in Rome at this very moment with some Greek merchants who hired him to protect their wares. Valerio used to work with him, and everything went along fine and they were good friends and Sebastian even visited

them, lots of times. But this time the Greeks paid Sebastian an enormous sum, and so he didn't hold back from striking his friend, her Valerio, dead.

Aetheria's laments and wailing echoed horribly through the venerable man's living room.

"What is it? What is it?" the kindly old man had to interrupt her. What had led to all this? He was accustomed to verbose drawn-out confessions where it took ages to arrive at the heart of the matter. But this explosive young woman's confession threatened to take on a dangerous dimension. He still had no idea how the friendship between those two men, the death of this woman's husband, her furious agitation, and the clips on the jaw she'd received from the murderer all came together, or what he was supposed to do about it.

"What is it, my child, what is it? You've lost your husband? You loved him very much?"

At last he brought her to the point where she was able to speak of a certain specific aspect of the case. She mentioned the dagger Valerio gave her as he died. With this dagger hidden in her skirts she'd followed the merchant convoy to Rome. She'd found the Greeks at their lodgings, and Sebastian was never out of her sight. And then it came to the meeting in the tavern that she'd spoken of. The bandit had other intentions as he sat by her side.

"But I – I took hold of my dagger, and then –"

"You – ?"

"What?"

"You killed him? Speak, Aetheria. We are alone. Unburden your heart."

She gave a sob, blew her nose, stammered. He couldn't make out a single word.

"Speak, my child. Here is the place where you must speak."

She saw in front of her the dead beloved, soul of her soul, burning. In despair she stammered: "I couldn't do it. And I prayed so much. He was sitting right there beside me, I could have done it easy as anything. But – I couldn't. God did not lend me the strength."

Ebonius silently took all this in and tugged at his mighty beard. His house was often host to curious characters from the south, from the provinces, but here was a very special case. He sent out a cautious feeler: "You say you are a Christian? Who baptised you? When?"

She provided the information.

"And what did you do in the tavern? What happened?"

"He grabbed hold of me, and I smacked him to make him leave me be, and he gave me back a one-two so I fell off the stool. And then I got hold of the dagger, and then –"

"Quickly now, child. The others are waiting for us."

"He bent down and pulled the stool out from under me, the bandit, and I went sprawling, and he took the dagger off me and he swore and then he left."

"So nothing happened," the venerable man murmured, puzzled and relieved.

"Nothing," she sobbed. "But – he took my dagger."

"Well, well," he murmured. His hand remained tangled in his beard. "So, Aetheria my daughter, you have suffered a heavy grief. You have lost your husband. You and all of us shall

pray for his soul. And now you have encountered the unlucky man who shall suffer God's judgement. You complain of mistreatment. But God has preserved you from worse. Praise God for all he has placed upon you. He knows better than you what is good for you."

"I prayed to him, on my knees, on my face, at home, when they brought Valerio to me. I begged God to let him live. But he died. Ever since Valerio's no longer with me, ever since he was laid in the ground, I haven't let a single hour pass without turning to God, without calling him the greatest and strongest and the only true god, the god above all gods and above the Emperor, and prayed for his help in my greatest need. I prayed for strength. Because Sebastian has to die and can't be allowed to go on living. Before I went into the tavern and actually in the tavern itself, I prayed with my right hand on the dagger. God must have understood what I wanted and why I beseeched him to relieve my distress."

Ebonius was no longer listening. He forced himself to remain calm, stood up. This peasant from the Salerno region actually came here, undertook the long journey to Rome, in order to kill the man who slew her husband, who must also have been a highwayman. And now she complains that matters did not turn out as she hoped. Ebonius slid both hands under his wide silken girdle. He maintained his self-control and regarded the ardent simple woman. God had heard her prayers, and quite clearly had protected her.

He raised the peasant woman to her feet – she had sunk to her knees and was holding up an anxious imploring hand – oh, she suffered, how she suffered. He pulled her by the shoulders and consoled her like a father. He made no mention of what she had said. He invited her to come join the others. There they would pray before the bones of martyrs most recently tortured and beheaded here in Rome. Their deaths had earned them a place in the kingdom of Heaven, and through them plentiful mercies would flow down upon any who turned to receive them.

How cleverly this worldly-wise man spoke to her. He saw she was a believer, even if still in the antechamber of faith. He led her to the others.

There they prayed until late into the night. Ebonius spoke of the words and deeds of Christ when on the third day he rose from the dead but had not yet ascended to Heaven. He spoke of the joyful singing of the angels when they saw the stone rolled away from the grave by no man's hand, and Jesus emerged. The angels called out that he might come to them. Jesus spoke, greeted them; he would linger a little while among his disciples, who were distraught after his crucifixion. He would raise them up, and teach them. He could not yet leave them, leave people behind.

Later a woman sang a song of the martyrs present here. Towards morning one woman after another began to twitch and babble in ecstasy, speaking to invisible beings.

Aetheria was the first to rejoice so, to twitch and throw herself about.

\*

But Ebonius the spice dealer could not put aside Aetheria's report. And instead of taking himself off to bed like the others, he slipped down the grey dawn streets to Psittakos, a freed slave, a caretaker, an adherent of the faith. They discussed the case. Ebonius feared that Aetheria would be impelled to an assault on the man she was stalking, which would rebound on the heads of Christians.

One morning the two men found an excuse to detain the pilgrim women, and Ebonius again called his strange confessant, the passion of whose prayers intrigued him, to come to him. Now she was once again sullen and uncertain. She was still obsessed with the bandit called Sebastian, and how she might run him to ground, and inspected herself to see if she had gained courage after her devotions in the presence of the relics; it seemed not.

Ebonius now turned to the other women and questioned them all together and confirmed what Psittakos, that merry prosperous man, had whispered to him in passing as he left: they're all cut from the same cloth. The peasant women know of Aetheria's plan and they totally back her goal. They all think it a done deal, she'll never let it rest.

Ebonius wrung his hands. Why had Psittakos left so soon. Instead of paying heed to his tenets and teachings, instead of maintaining contrite silence and vowing to reform, the whole gaggle of young females thronged around him shouting and protesting that the affair had nothing to do with religion. No one in the city of Rome could possibly understand. Only someone from the Salerno region was competent to judge. They gathered Aetheria, who stood mutely by, into their midst, hurled accusations at venerable Ebonius, consoled the widow, she really mustn't let it muddle her head – all this loudly in the hearing of the kindly man transfixed in his astonishment.

In sorrow he had to let this strange provincial company of devotees go their way. He calmed himself before the bones of the martyrs. In the morning he would betake himself to the lodging of the rabid peasant woman and see how he might bring her under control.

There was no need. Before he even stepped out to set the women aright, Aetheria appeared, Aetheria herself, here before him. This time blithe and lively, she literally stormed into his shop. And without further ado she pulled venerable, greatly astonished, happily surprised Ebonius from his shop into the back room where she had made her first sad confession; and while her hand still rested on the doorlatch, she showed him in her left hand – a dagger. She laughed, beamed at Ebonius. Yes, she has it, the dagger's back. Sebastian brought it to her.

She gushed: "He came. He brought it to me himself. How great is our God. Our God is the greatest. Christ is lord of the whole world."

She knelt down and praised God and thanked him and raised the dagger high. She stood up and pressed the dagger like a baby to her breast. "God has heard me."

Again Ebonius had to control himself. This was dreadful news. He felt revulsion, his anger was great. She spluttered: "Sebastian came and was so small, so crestfallen. I'd never seen him like that. He was afraid. Yesterday he hit me. Today he chases after me and begs me not to bear a grudge." Then all of a sudden she fell silent, her face grew sombre, her gaze fell on the dagger. She started to cry, with both hands pressed the dagger to her brow.

She wailed so loudly that he ran to close the street door. When he came back she was sitting disconsolate, crying into her hands. He passed her a kerchief for her tears. She sobbed and thanked him and said again: "Sebastian told me how he'd told Valerio he'd better go, he'd better put the dagger away, or else he'd leave him no alternative. Yes. He promised Valerio that if he left he'd give him half the proceeds, all he has to do is go. And then a quarrel started up, Sebastian says, and his hand slipped."

She sat head bowed and let her tears flow. They fell onto the kerchief in her lap. With a shake of the head he regarded the young person who'd swept into his house and still, it seemed, gave herself to silent melancholy.

He opened the shop door again and sat by her. She looked at him and really, she smiled at him. "He's going to bring me a bolt of silk tomorrow morning. Yes, he's going to bring it. And it would never have got so bad if Valerio wasn't so obstinate. He was really sorry. They were all so sorry. But now he's dead, my Valerio's dead."

She gave Ebonius a quizzical look, like a child: "What should I do now?"

She was eager to hear. A rock fell away from his heart.

She: "My friends tell me I must go through with it, since I promised before he died."

"And you?"

She jumped to her feet and knelt and praised God in childish terms and thanked him and pleaded: "I'd rather not have to kill him. Oh, take this from me."

Some distress and uncertainty stayed with her, which he was unable to dispel. He lectured her for an hour on how one must bear one's sorrows and love even one's enemies.

She had placed the dagger on the table behind her. She made to leave. But at the door she stopped and turned to him.

He must give her the dagger.

\*

What led Sebastian to bring the dagger back to her?

Immediately after the notorious fight scene, the veteran, one more victory under his belt, this one in the most absurd circumstances, marched straight back from the tavern to the Greeks' lodging, to announce this latest triumph to his assembled friends, and tell them about the trick that the lovely sweet Aetheria they all knew tried to play on him, and how he unsaddled her. His boasting was not well received. They almost lynched him. For only now did they learn for the first time that the Aetheria they all knew and esteemed was a widow, and that on that paradisaical night during the skirmish on the road between Salerno and Naples someone had lost his life – namely Valerio, whom they had all loved dearly. All for this gaggle of Greek merchants and rascals was our renowned Valerio was, and lovely Aetheria robbed of her husband. If this news ever became known at home, they would never be able to show their faces to their very own wives.

Sebastian, unprepared for such a reception, declared his innocence in the matter. All he'd intended was simply to give Valerio a little memento when he refused to back off. But amid the curses they hurled at Sebastian, the gang decided to do without delay what they had long planned, namely first, set their two captives free, second, loot even more comprehensively the store of goods they had escorted here, as justified by the new circumstances, and third, send Sebastian to Aetheria with a gift of money, a peace offering, and an assurance of their condolences. Sebastian, the veteran who'd never received so much as a scratch, complied with the collective demand to carry out this mission. He was given one further task: to take back to the widow Valerio's dagger that he'd taken from her, and apologise.



So it was that next afternoon, before Ebonius had got around to visiting the women in order to calm them, reassure them and change their minds, Aetheria turned up more blithe and cheerful than he'd ever seen her. Just by looking you could see she brought happy news.

The widow Aetheria – Sabine – was overjoyed to learn that the pair held captive by the Greeks had been set free, on the very day when the Greeks were going to turn them in for judgement. Further details were supplied by two members of this gang well known to her, who brought her that same day, in earnest of the truth of their tale, a heavy bolt of silk and several flagons of good Greek wine, which they left with the widow in propitiation.

But it was Sebastian who put icing on the cake. He followed the two abductees on foot, and in the name of his friends and at their behest expressed to Aetheria yet again his and their regret, indeed anguish, at the unintentional and really inadvertent grief she had been caused.

Sebastian, stoop-necked veteran, observing that she received them with no indication of hostility, described once again the dreadful situation on that paradisaical moonlit night, and how it all came to pass, and he feels himself innocent, for he's an experienced warrior, and if he means to kill someone he darn well knows it, and if not, he knows that too.

She seemed content with this explanation, and shared with him a beaker of the Greek wine she'd just received, and then another.

Sebastian said more: they've broken with the Greeks, who have lots of coin but all in all have shown themselves to be of bad character, domineering, also rabble-rousers, as revealed during the skirmish.

Then he left.

### *Conversations*

And then she, the widow, sat there in Rome with her misery and her dagger.

Together with the other Portosa women, she visited the Circus where her brother was to have been delivered up to wild beasts to be eaten. With horror she saw several Christians, women among them, torn to pieces. The city's an atrocious place, alien and sinister.

She attended the requiem held by Ebonius for the souls of those torn apart at the Circus: "Christ, King of Glory, preserve the souls of the faithful from the torments of Hell and from the abyssal underworld. Preserve them from the jaws of lions, that they may not be plunged into darkness."

But Valerio had died an unbeliever. In his prayer Ebonius uttered his name too. She was stunned. Someone's speaking to him, he's here.

\*

The Portosan women were lodged with country people outside the city gates. Ebonius visited them there. On the way back he chatted with ever-cheerful Psittakos, the caretaker.

"I've just been outside, where I saw and spoke with Aetheria, the widow who has caused so much mischief. I sought her out, because you and I both thought it unsettling to see her make so little use of her time here. She so seldom goes in the company of her friends when they visit the city and come to us, but prefers to stay out there by herself."

Psittakos: "Maybe she prays privately. I gave her a scrap from the dress pious Agape wore when she was beheaded."

Ebonius: "It's my impression she does little praying."

Psittakos: "Did she mention anything of her earlier – intention?"

Ebonius: "Not in so many words. But she thinks about it."

Psittakos: "It grieves me to hear this."

Ebonius: "Me too, Psittakos."

Both gazed at the ground.

Ebonius: "If matters stood with her yet as I saw them several weeks ago, when she first spoke to me of her calamity and expressed vengeful intent, I would simply feel sorry for her. I would tell myself: she is from the south, she is baptised, but knows nothing of our faith."

Psittakos: "It would astonish me, Ebonius, to hear that you have altered your opinion."

Ebonius: "But I have. She – knows about Christianity, and God knows about her faith. He saved her from committing murder."

Psittakos: "You are right."

Ebonius: "He's weakening her will, and she notices. The more she prays, the weaker her evil spirit. But she hasn't put two and two together. She prays for the strength to commit murder. All she sees is her inability to avenge her husband, whom she loved so inordinately. She really should feel blessed in that love. She doesn't. She stands transfixed, out there by the cottage, like Hecuba when she lost her children. She glances at you and from her mouth you hear only that she sees herself cursed, complicit, because she cannot save her husband from Hell."

Psittakos: "He was not a Christian."

Ebonius: "No."

Psittakos: "How awful. So it's still the case that she is baptised but knows nothing of Christianity. Why then do you not bring her to understand that God has already saved her?"

Ebonius: "You try. Speak to her. You'll see. Anyway, she's no different from those other women. All from that region have the same notion, and baptism does not alter it. She must act out what she has sworn to do. That's why the others leave her so callously alone out here: they're annoyed with her. Be sure of it: she embarrasses them. When they are all back home she'll not have an easy time among them."

Psittakos: "How wretched."

Ebonius: "They consider Aetheria's behaviour scandalous."

Psittakos: "Then they're no Christians, Ebonius. So let us two state our view clearly, in their hearing. Let us threaten to remove our hand from them, and expel them from our community."

Ebonius: "You would cast them into the desert? They are strayed sheep. Aetheria – is being tested. God has presented her with a trial. Up to that point she knew only love. It seems to her that by taking away her love, everything has been taken. She still does not understand. What would we be without trials? Animals."

Psittakos: "How will you deal with this?"

Ebonius: "I trust the One who saved her from committing murder will show her the way."

Psittakos: "Let's invite her to come to us in the city, and lodge with our families."

Ebonius: "I too thought of this."

Psittakos: "I'll take her under my wing once her friends depart, if she's willing to stay."

Ebonius: "And when she asks why she should stay, how will you answer?"

Psittakos: "Stay, because we need your help. We Christians are under grave threat. We are hunted down. We need clever people to go about and alert us whenever danger threatens."

Ebonius: "You will say this to her?"

Psittakos: "It'll shake her out of herself. She's being buried – as if the dead man is dragging her down to him."

\*

Ten weeks in Rome.

She lodges with Psittakos' family.

Pays visits in the city.

\*

Psittakos: "You've seen how she can be happy. She's becoming herself again. It's letting go of her. You cleared the room beside the children's room for her. She saw the flowers."

Hortensia: "She's a child. So are her friends. What kind of people are they down there by Vesuvius. I'm glad the others are leaving soon. It'll be easier to engage with her. She'll open up. At the moment her mouth is sealed."

Psittakos: "Her heart."

Hortensia: "My first impression was that she's possessed by a devil."

Psittakos: "Don't say that!"

Hortensia: "You thought so too."

Psittakos: "Don't say it. Don't think it."

Hortensia: "But if you fear it is so, you must drive the devil out. She could harm us."

Psittakos: "What are you saying."

Hortensia: "Are there no devils? There are devils. Thousands of devils. Our Saviour knew them. The apostles knew them too. What has happened to us that we no longer see devils? Psittakos, we're in a bad way when we can no longer recognise devils. We push everything onto human beings. Maybe you condemn Aetheria. But if she has a devil in her, and he closes up her mouth? She must be helped."

Psittakos: "What notions women do have."

Hortensia: "Ha, we're not meant to have notions. And if we do, then they're meant to be yours. Think: her husband was taken away. She opened up to me once, said she loved him

beyond words. I've never forgotten her expression as she lifted her head – she was sitting just across from me – she'd been staring all along at the table. Now she lifted her head and opened her eyes wide and looked at me. Such a big silent gaze, such pain, so quizzical: 'I loved him beyond words'. They were one body and one soul. Now it's been cut in half. They were not granted a child. Oh, Psittakos, how mysterious, how dreadfully stern is our God to us poor creatures: not to grant a child where he is so beloved, seemingly beyond all bounds. We're not allowed to be too happy."

Psittakos: "You've said it. Her grief is enormous – bigger than her faith."

Hortensia: "Now leave her with me for a while."

\*

Psittakos spoke a second time with venerable Ebonius.

Psittakos: "Yesterday noon I came by your shop. I peeped in. The shop was open. It was empty. You sat in shadow, not moving.

Ebonius: "I saw you."

Psittakos: "You did not greet me."

Ebonius: "I was thinking. Forgive me for not greeting you, not inviting you to step in."

Psittakos: "What was on your mind, Ebonius, my old true friend?"

Ebonius: "The problem of righteousness."

Psittakos: "Can you speak with me now?"

Ebonius: "I can."

Psittakos: "What is this problem of righteousness that bothered you so that you sat mute in a corner of your shop, and never moved in a long while?"

Ebonius: "I was unable to solve the problem, even though it's so urgent. We are Romans. We live under the laws of the Roman Empire, which establish order among peoples."

Psittakos: "Our justice is renowned."

Ebonius: "It was created by heathens. How then can it be justice?"

Psittakos: "You pondered a long while on the problem of righteousness. What, my old true friend Ebonius, led you to this problem?"

Ebonius: "Aetheria, our protégée, came to me. She was with me just before you tiptoed into the shop, peered about and spotted me in the corner. I thought perhaps you'd bumped into her, and I'd have been able to pursue the conversation right away, but I had to gather my wits."

Psittakos: "How was it expressed, this problem that Aetheria posed and left you speechless?"

Ebonius: "I started with: The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away, praised be the name of the Lord. She responded: Then justice is no more."

Psittakos: "She always thinks and speaks like that. She has only one idea. She lacks humility."

Ebonius: "She said to me: 'You tried to take my dagger away, and told me I wasn't allowed to kill Sebastian. And you forbade me to kill myself.' I countered with: 'That is as it should be,

because your life was bestowed by the Lord.' To which Aetheria: 'But Sebastian's allowed to throw away a man's life?' To which I: 'He did not intend to throw it away.' Then she stared hard at me, at first said nothing, and then: 'Better if he had done it intentionally.' I: 'Why?' She: 'Because now it's not Sebastian who killed my husband, but God.' I was outraged. I told her to keep silent for a while. She sat there calmly, without fear. I asked her: 'Do you want to cast off your faith, and revert to ignorance and the worship of idols?' She: "I was at the Forum, and saw how justice is done. It was all quite open. The crime was confirmed, the statute was read out, the accuser demanded the penalty, the defendant sought to reduce it. The verdict was pronounced, on the open Forum, in the presence of the accuser and the accused. There could be no injustice. It had to be evident to all those standing around that no injustice would be tolerated. The victim received satisfaction ... You spoke to me of mercy."

Psittakos: "She said this?"

Ebonius: "Word for word. She went on: 'Right at the start of this process, even before I could bring the case before the law, you spoke to me of mercy.'"

Psittakos: "She's wicked, she must be possessed. She should be kept at a distance."

Ebonius: "And throw this burning brand into someone else's house? I spoke to her, without becoming agitated: 'You can find that kind of justice at the Forum, here or in your home town. The Emperor has his officials everywhere, the law is the same throughout the Empire. And then Sebastian, whom you accuse, would be interrogated and – let off, because as you say, he was hired to protect the Greek merchant convoy. There you would have the justice you seek.' She: 'Why shouldn't I take my case to the Forum? It's between me and Sebastian. And if it turns out as you say, and he asserts that he didn't mean to kill, but Valerio has been killed all the same, then – it's all settled between us. So, Father Ebonius, it would be exactly as you laid out for me at our first conversation. So it would then be between me and God. The Lord gave, and the Lord took away ...' She never finished the sentence. I pointed this out to her. I pressed her and asked if perhaps she did not know how to finish it."

Psittakos: "And? What did she say?"

Ebonius: "It's hard, Psittikos, to recount to you, who like me are so concerned with saving souls, how the conversation ended. Her lips remained sealed. I could not wrest an ending from her. She left me soon after. You didn't bump onto her. But she saw you, and avoided you."

Psittakos: "She lives with us in a room next to the children's room. Hortense places flowers there every day, to cheer her up."

Ebonius: "Don't be alarmed, Psittakos. She made an offhand remark: If God took her Valerio, then it was a worse punishment than that suffered by the condemned in the Circus, for they were torn apart by wild beasts, suffered a terrible death, but the agony was soon over. But she, she's torn apart every day. And how is she guilty? What was her crime? Then I appealed to her experience and her insight. I asked her if anything of the sort had ever happened to others in her village, or any neighbouring village. She almost screamed at me: 'What do you mean? Of course it happens to lots of people. They have bad luck, suffer when it comes, and then it passes like a thunderstorm, or an eruption of the fire-mountain. They're dull-witted and remain dull-witted. Nothing hurts them deeply, nothing, no, nothing cuts them to the very quick.' To which I asked: 'Aetheria, have you noticed how we care for you? Do you not see how we grieve with

you? You're our daughter, our sister. We too feel your suffering, and are saddened when we see you. We are trying to set you right.'

"'Why should you!' she screamed. 'You shouldn't. You all want it forgotten. You want to take it from me. I'm to be stupid and unfeeling and ignorant like the others.' And she stands up, steps close to me and wags a finger in my face: 'How can you do this, Father Ebonius, you, the Elder here of the Christian community, how can you take my misfortune away from me and leave me stupid and ignorant and shameful?'

"I remained calm. At moments she seemed crazed. I alluded to our duty to stand by one another. And that was the nadir of our conversation. She clapped hands to her face and – laughed. She sat down, still laughing. I kept calm and asked: 'Why do you laugh, Aetheria?'

"At once she lowered her hands, came close and apologised. I had to stop her kneeling before me. She begged: 'It just happens, Father Ebonius. I don't want to, it just comes over me.'

"'Speak, my daughter, tell me why you laughed.'

"She sighed: 'Father, once I was like the others. If some blow came, I'd accept it and wait for a bit and it would be better. Now, it's too much, too much for me. I have a dreadful secret to reveal, Father Ebonius. I've never told anyone. Back then I found Valerio, we fell in love. We had no children. I was a heathen and prayed to my gods and his, and begged them not to grant us children. I wanted Valerio and no one else between us. They granted my wish. And so we lived happily, blissfully, Valerio and I, more than happy, a single flame – and it scared me. I sacrificed all I had to our idols. I went around and asked the old people what our idols wanted from me, how to avert their wrath. Valerio had no idea how much of our meagre holdings went to these old people so they could make sure it reached the idols in the proper manner. I was afraid for Valerio. Then when I heard about the true God and a man from Syria came through our village and did baptisms in Jesus' name, I was glad and ran to him. Lots of women took baptism, I did too. How happy I was to be a Christian and devote my whole heart to the Son of God who spilled his blood to save us. All at once I – had no more fear.'

"I asked: 'And then?' She nodded, gazed helplessly at me like a tormented child, and asked: 'Father Ebonius, why? Why? The idols did not spare me, and Jesus Christ ...' Oh, my dear Psittikos, how it moved me. She importuned me no more."

Psittakos: "Hear me, brother Ebonius. I see ever more clearly the whole dreadful situation. God our almighty Father, to whom she has devoted herself, but with reservations, with concealed intentions ... God our almighty Father, who sees into everything, He is reaching out to her. Now He wants her, all of her. Of each of us He wants our all. In her own way she has admitted God into her. But it is no game."

Ebonius: "So what now?"

Psittakos: "He draws her to Him, in His own way. He heaps punishment after punishment onto her. He tore her asunder by taking her husband and leaving her alive. He punishes her by taking away her faith. Faith is embedded in her like a spear. She tries to pull it from her soul. But she cannot."

Ebonius: "What an interpretation, brother Psittakos! It seems you have clear vision. And can you explain why, in your view, this has been hung over her?"

Psittakos: "Because God loves her."

Ebonius: "How?"

Psittakos: "He must love her more than you or me."

Ebonius: "So that is how you see it, my brother Psittakos. Let us go soon to pray with her together, lest we be remiss in our support."

Psittakos: "We must be patient. She's still lodging at my place."

Ebonius: "Let me know when she becomes a burden to your family. Then I'll take her in."

### *Departure from Rome*

The pious community in Rome felt relieved when the women from the Salerno region declared their intention to quit the city – this city of Caesar Imperator – and return home. They had had their fill of praying and praying before the bones of saints. Blessings and great mercies would surely come upon them, and they would take these on their way and carry back to their villages whatever they had acquired here.

Ebonius shared his thoughts with his brother Psittakos when he heard they were leaving:

"Is it the difference between town and country, is it the contrast between Rome and that region around Vesuvius? There is something repellent about these women who made a pilgrimage here from Salerno and kept up their pious zeal to the end. They are Christians and attract new people, but they remind one of chicks that carry the broken eggshell around with them. Their birthplace, the landscape, the whole unknown heathen landscape clings to them, that fire-breathing mountain, the sea, olive trees, wine. And so they sit in their villages, work, sing, dance, hold festivals – and once upon a time they heard from a Syrian emissary about the true God and our Saviour, of him who allowed himself to die for love of humanity. They learned of his miracles, of the Virgin Mary and of Joseph, and it impresses the women and they drop their tools and fold their horny hands, and instead of rude songs, their lips now murmur gentle prayers, sweet humble pleas to heavenly beings and intercessors. Thus do they give themselves to the faith. Recently, brother Psittakos, you explained why the pilgrim Aetheria, the child of our concern, suffers so, and how God engages with her. Can you tell me: where in this woman from Salerno does faith hide itself? I ask because they are about to leave."

Psittakos: "May their faith be like that seed of which the Son of the one true God in Heaven spoke in his parable of the Kingdom of Heaven: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that a farmer sowed in his field. Though smaller than all other mustard seeds, it grew tall to become bigger than all other plants in the garden. It grew to a tree so that birds could come down from the sky and dwell in its branches.'"

Ebonius: "It gladdens me to hear this. When I am no more, and if the persecutors seize me, I shall go in peace knowing you are here. When those women leave, will Aetheria, the widow, the child of our concern, be among them?"

Psittakos: "She will stay."

Ebonius: "Is that a good sign, or how do you understand it, my clever brother Psittakos?"

Psittakos: "She told Hortensia my wife she was glad the others are leaving. She wants to be alone. The others never stop talking of that bloody deed. But when they start, she shrinks back

and cannot speak. The women despise Aetheria because she'll stay and she let herself be bribed by that man Sebastian with a bolt of silk and some flagons of Greek wine, and sell out her own dead husband."

Ebonius: "I know. That's why I sought this conversation with you."

Psittakos: "Patience, brother Ebonius. Think of the mustard seed."

\*

And so they head homeward, those young women. The road leads south, along wide military highways, past soldiers, guard posts, patrols. They make their way through hordes of people of many nationalities. This is great, mighty, terrible Rome.

They sing quietly as they huddle together. They have human bodies. They wear the clothing of their homeland, they sate their hunger with human food, their bread comes out of the earth, fruit from trees.

But there is room in them for more, much more. Where does it grow, this more that is not from wells, from trees, from ears of corn? They are Christians.

Christ died on the Cross. Mary was his Mother.

Aetheria alone in Rome. Now and then, only now and then, she turns up at services, and once, but only once, she took part in Holy Communion.

How those around her suffer.

Always, even when she sits mute, her face is happy. Her voice is still warm and melodious. She will let no one take a peep inside.

\*

Such was her situation at the end of her visit to Rome. Ebonius insisted time and again: she is not yet won over, she fell once under a spell, and then fell under the spell of a new miracle – the spell has flown, and she has reverted to the customs of her native place.

But Psittakos the caretaker and his wife Hortensia, who spoke to her every day and kept close watch, dared no verdict. They did a lot of good, and were patient. They prayed for her.

She was like one who sells a big house to a new owner. He grew tired of it, sold it off all contents included. But now the new owner makes an inventory. Every item is examined one by one, turned about, knocked, inspected. The former owner sees pictures and carpets, cupboards and chests, books and bric à brac that he never noticed before. But they were in his possession for decades, were his property. He never made use of them. Now he's to be parted from them. He doesn't like it. Whyever must he give it all up?

Such was the situation with the pilgrim Aetheria, the widow Aetheria. What had she gained, who had protected her from her calamity, what could help her now? Here she was in Rome, all alone, lodging with strangers. She made known her wish to return home. She took cordial leave of her new friends.

A ship was found. Away from Rome, whose streets she had trod so resolutely.

\*



But once Ebonius and the community had said prayers for Aetheria following her departure, a jingling could be heard in the air. They heard such distant jingling often. They said so many prayers, and their pleas and laments were strung across the air like a harp – but none knew who played this harp that sounded like whoops of joy.

Ebonius, who could hear this jingling and warbling, thought of King David as he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem: “So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house into the city of David with gladness. And it was so, that when they that bare the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed oxen and fatlings. And David danced before the Lord with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod.”

Was it not an angel that jingled and warbled there? Was it not Aetheria’s guardian angel singing out in jubilation? So Ebonius thought.

Oh how moving it was when she was in despair, and wanted God to grant her a murder.

## Part 2: Jerusalem

### *Back home*

She went ashore at Naples. Her brother toiled on his plot as if nothing had happened.

With dragging feet to Valerio’s grave.

The flowers she carried in both arms she strewed across the mound. She flung herself down on the mound. She begged forgiveness, blamed others, promised not to leave him in limbo. As long as she lived he would not be lost.

“I was at Rome. I’ve come from Rome. I haven’t been back yet to our little hut. This is my first step, Valerio my beloved – to you. Your Aetheria is here. Can you hear me? I’m so close to you, to your beloved face, your beloved lips, beloved hands.

“I was away at Rome. Forgive me. It was our only quarrel, when I went to the Christians and you didn’t want to. You were right. Their god has shown me no mercy. They promised so much, I was such a child to believe them. God made me weak. I must save myself from him. I want to know nothing more of him, I no longer know him, believe me, Valerio. Nothing comes between us.”

While Aetheria, the young peasant woman, lies on the flower-strewn mound and makes up with her dead husband, a herald from God, a heavenly angel, her guardian angel, stands behind her, and stays silent.

He leans over Aetheria and touches her shoulder.

But angels are God’s invisible creatures. They have no need to be burdened with a body.

Unnecessary to describe how light they are, to compare them with a feather, or with air.

Truly, they are weightless.

And because we humans have at our disposal only other humans and images from our experience, we can in no way state what they are like.

But because they *are*, we should strive despite every obstacle to find words in our language for their actions and their comportment, and for images that reflect them.

They appear, it is to us a mood, a vision,  
They vanish,  
They leave us to ourselves.  
A different vision,  
A different mood.  
We believe  
These are ourselves,  
Ourselves alone –  
But who are we without them?

\*

Aetheria, drained, stood at the graveside and dried her eyes. She was comforted. She had a sense of clarity and assurance.

This clarity and assurance were other than what she knew.

*Months go by. Years go by*

And Aetheria, back from her pilgrimage, lived and toiled alongside her brother on their plot.

Months go by. Years go by.

She grows graver, calmer. Her beauty persists. It becomes a different kind of beauty. Her melodious voice persists. It's another kind of melody.

Like many others in the village, she has a loved one in the cemetery. Her husband. His grave is tended and adorned with flowers.

Once upon a time, up until the death of her husband, the young fisherman Valerio, she was a Christian. Her husband lost his life during one of those bandit raids. The strange thing was, the occasion was a clash between two gangs that normally pursued a common task, but this time found themselves on opposing sides. Valerio and his people realised this only as their raid began, found it intolerable, even unjust. And so he attacked his erstwhile friends, and was killed. The victorious gang did all they could to assuage the grief of Valerio's widow, and the two gangs, who saw the sad outcome as a warning, even made a pact that never again should it be left unclear when a trick was being planned on a travelling convoy. The pact held, in memory of the calamity, and had a wholesome effect.

The widow herself, no longer in distress, soon after she returned from her trip to Rome removed the holy emblem of the Christians, the sign of a fish, from her room and under the eaves of the cottage. Since she could change nothing else, she thought she owed her husband this at least.

At first people made spiteful remarks behind her back when she went off to the cemetery. Then no more.

Months went by. Years went by.

Her beauty lasts, it's a different, more sombre kind of beauty. Her melodious voice lasts, but new notes are present in her voice, though she is unaware of it.

Angels turn up.  
Disappear.  
They leave us to ourselves.  
An altered vision.  
An altered mood.  
We believe  
That it's ourself,  
Us alone.

At the place on the wall once occupied by the fish emblem, the sign of Christ the divine Redeemer, who, as was reported, died on the Cross in Palestine – at this spot, greeted and kissed every day by loving glances, is now a little shelf, and on it a clay statuette of her revered Hestia (Vesta). To the heathens who rule the Roman Empire she is the goddess of the domestic hearth, daughter of the goddess Rhea Cybele, who is accompanied on her travels through the land by corybants playing horns, cymbals and flutes. She pursues the pretty Phrygian youth Attis with her love. He desired a mortal human maiden – but at the wedding *she* appeared: Cybele. Dread terror fell on all when the great goddess appeared. Attis, the handsome bridegroom, fled maddened, fled into the mountains, and plunged a sword into his breast. Now come laments for abandoned scorned Rhea. And year after year ever since, at the equinoxes, the corybants, Rhea's entourage, come storming across the mountains calling "Attis, Attis!" to find the one who scorned the great goddess' love and was run to ground by the great goddess at his wedding with a mortal maiden. She cast terrible dread over Attis and his companions, and Attis, maddened, took his own life in the mountains. From his blood, violets grew.

Cybele's love brought forth a daughter. This was Hestia. She kept quiet. She desired no man. Gods turned up and tried to woo her. But she – year upon year she shared in her mother's grieving for Attis, the pretty Phrygian youth torn from her. Often while still young she would run with the mad corybants through the mountains, clashing cymbals and crying out Attis, Attis! She hoped to awaken him for her mother.

But he never showed himself.

For ages, violets bloomed from his blood.

Then she knelt before her mother. She held suffering Rhea's hands and begged her to ask the king of the gods, Zeus, to grant her, sad young Hestia, a favour. For she saw what was wrought by love, this terrible love between male and female, whether mortal or divine.

"So what favour, Hestia my dearly beloved, my favourite daughter, am I to ask the king of the gods for you?"

"That he permit me to spend my life far away from men. That he preserve me from the violent pains of love."

"Oh, there is more to love than pain, my beloved daughter."

"I see you, mother, I hold your hands. I know how you suffer. Every year at the equinoxes I would run through the mountains and clash my cymbals; the corybants would play their flutes, clash their cymbals and blow their horns until the forests echoed and birds shrieked and flew

away. We never found Attis. We never awakened Attis for you, mother. They whipped arms, breasts, legs with rods, called out Attis, Attis, made their blood flow. Maidens would run with us, they sacrificed their honour for you – and will go on doing so year after year – but they never awakened Attis.

“They cannot, for I see now that this is the law of love.

“And that, mother, is why I beg you to go to Zeus and soften his heart, so that no man may touch me and Apollo and Poseidon may be kept from pestering me.”

Rhea Cybele, the great mother, took her daughter onto her lap. Hestia’s cheeks were cold, her hands shook. Hestia whispered: “Will you go to him, to Zeus?”

Rhea pleaded: “Grant her this.”

Zeus: “You want to kill her?”

Rhea: “I succoured you, Zeus, in the caves of Mount Ida when you were a babe. All the Earth’s fecundity, all that comes of animals and plants, is awakened and tended by me. Take it from me, grant me this relief. Free my daughter from the great, violent, terrible law of love.”

Zeus pondered. He was not happy with her request. There was strangeness in her tone, as if some danger was announcing itself.

“I will,” he said at last, when Rhea already feared the worst. “If she herself wishes to keep love at a distance, she shall watch over the loves of others so that they do not become savage, raving, destructive. I cannot free her from ever observing love. That I will not. Or else it might occur to her to break out of the house of my world. I bind her, chain her to the loves of others. It shall not be your burning love, that follows the dead even unto the Beyond. She shall sit at the hearth, protect the hearth fire, see to the peace of the household. You are my mother, the mother of Zeus, lions draw you on your way, Rhea. She shall be chaste. But she shall sit where women spin, children play.”

“To all that you grant, O Zeus, we accede.”

The pilgrim Aetheria – Sabine whose husband was taken from her, he whom she loved so boundlessly and no one up till now had been able to place bounds on her love – every day she placed flowers and produce of the field before the little figurine of Hestia the virgin goddess. Having to part from her fellow Christian women, and those women at first scolded and reviled her – that was hard.

But she remained steadfast.

### *The word Jerusalem*

Her brother has married, an infant lies in the cradle. Aetheria watches over the child when the parents go off to the dance.

Once a man from Syracuse passes through the village. He has come from Rome. He is a Christian and has visited pious Ebonius and his flock. Ebonius charged him to convey his blessing to pious sister Aetheria, and when he arrives in Syracuse, if time allows, he should write a letter reporting his safe arrival and how things are with Christians in those southern parts. In particular, Ebonius would like news of that pious sister the pilgrim Aetheria, who some time

ago made the pilgrimage to Rome to pray for her unlucky husband before the bones of the holy martyrs, and to soften her own widow's grief.

The man from Syracuse, back in his home town, thanked his good fortune in being able to send the requested letter to venerable Ebonius via an emissary, informing the pastor of the Roman community of his unremarkable, even happy, journey and his arrival home, where he will promptly spread word of the steadfastness of the Roman flock. Even if Caesar Imperator is so mightily enthroned in that wonderful city, and extends and secures his dominion over the whole of the inhabited world, yet he will never succeed in breaking the souls of the pious. And so he, the man from Syracuse, has also met with the community of Portosa near Salerno, on the recommendation of venerable Father Ebonius. He has spoken with each of the women separately, and found in each a true handmaiden of Christ. It did not escape his notice that the people who dwell, farm and fish in their remote village have great need of frequent and sustained instruction, because their menfolk, as Ebonius knows, adhere to the traditional worship of idols, and some even, who were mercenaries in foreign lands, have brought back with them abhorrent cults from Africa and Egypt.

As for the pilgrim Aetheria, to whom Father Ebonius commended his particular attention, he is saddened to conclude this missive by noting that, as far as one can tell from outward appearance – and who can gaze into the heart? – she has fallen away from the holy faith. She no longer takes part in communion. Her friends, the other women of the village, including those who made the pilgrimage with her at the time of her grief, have not managed to draw her back to our faith – so that when I visited her in her cottage I found a heart-wrenching spectacle. In a very visible spot opposite the window is a shelf that she has turned into a shrine. Fresh flowers and fruit were laid out on the shelf, and the little brown figurine at the centre of this token of veneration, gazing down upon it, is the heathen goddess Hestia. Though troubled already, even shocked, at the sight of this idol – I had expected some weakening of faith, but was not prepared for this – something else troubled me even more. It was the sight of the woman Aetheria herself in this cottage, this little room, before the decked-out shrine to the goddess Hestia. For it will not be news to you, venerable Father Ebonius, that she is regarded as the goddess of the domestic hearth. And there she stood, Aetheria, alone in the room, and decked out the little shrine to this goddess – she who was granted no child during her marriage, and her husband now gone. I thought: why does she cling so fast to this? With us in our faith she would have found consolation and support. I dared not question her. She is a sturdy young woman of a special and delicate beauty; the Lord has protected her, living alone as she does, by not letting her come to Syracuse, where she would be exposed to ruination. Father Ebonius, she sat there friendly enough, but unapproachable. It pains me to relate that even the greetings you and brother Psittakos and his family sent were acknowledged by no more than a nod. I could not bring myself to say much to her, maybe I was too weak. I felt like a hawker offering some unappealing item. What a loss to us, Father Ebonius. For she is clever and energetic and enjoys respect in the village, even among the men.

“Ghosts,” Aetheria whispered to herself after showing the guest to the door. Nothing stirred in her. Again she took refuge in virginal Hestia, all-knowing goddess, the only one with whom she could achieve understanding.

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The man from Syracuse was but the forerunner of many others who at that time made their way from northern Italy and Rome down to the south. For the first time the people of Salerno learned that dangers were abroad in the world. Barbarian hordes were said to have moved close to the imperial frontier in the north. Bands had already been spotted on the Po plain. And even if such reports could not be verified, they could see with their own eyes many vessels heading south, filled with rich people fleeing Rome, seeking safety in Sicily and Africa.

And in truth, there came a few weeks later a mass flight of families from Rome down to the south. At first those meridional landscapes profited: the refugees were provided with temporary lodging, and food. But the strangers said things, people questioned them, and now the countryfolk grew uneasy. Where are these barbarians? What direction are they heading in? How big are their armies?

Then imperial troops came riding through the villages, calling to all veterans and fit men, recruiting and pressing. They distributed weapons to those who stayed behind with their fields, and formed squads who were to organise defences. Even women were not disdained, for among the barbarians women too were fighters. Of course strong resolute Aetheria took up arms and joined in the exercises and wargames supervised by veterans and legionaries.

The stream of refugees heading south swelled to a flood. Dreadful reports were whispered in the village. The Emperor's rage against Christians had redoubled. He blamed Christians for undermining the defensive capability of certain legions. Here and there he had mass executions carried out, whereupon the numbers of Christians among the refugees grew. Aetheria guided and cared for many of these. She did her duty without emotion. She asked after Ebonius, that venerable man, and Psittakos and his family, and how the community in Rome was holding up. The leaders were known to be in hiding, they would not be found inside the city. Now Aetheria was alert. If even Ebonius is on the run, if she might meet him and Psittakos and Hortensia right here ... She kept her ears open.

Such laments from the refugees, men, women, children. Day and night. Mothers who had lost children, children wailing for parents, grieving women all on their own. Help was needed day and night.

The word "Jerusalem". Many thought to seek safety over in Greece. Many knew only the one word: "Jerusalem".

Aetheria pricked up her ears. The word intrigued and nagged at her. One night it was whispered in her ear. She sat up, stared about her into the darkness, paced about the room. No one was there. Her heart thumped.

The next night someone again threw this word her way. She kept to her bed. She pulled the blanket over her face. So someone says this word: what does it have to do with her?

But the following night she woke up to a dreadful shriek. She was about to leap from the bed and throw on her cloak to see what was happening out in the road. But all was silent. She sat on the bed and waited. No sound came. She lay down. But the moment she stretched out, the shriek came again. At once she was on her feet, grabbed her cloak. Now she could make out words amid the din, a clear voice shouting: "Come, you wicked disobedient woman! How long must I take care of you? What are you up to?"

Who was speaking? Who was being scolded?

She went to the door, opened, listened. Complete silence. Perplexed she closed the door. It was pitch dark, the night not yet half over. She would slip quietly back to bed. She felt her way along the wall. Then again the shouting, very close, obviously there in the room:

“Now I have you. So you think your clay idol will protect you from me. Your idol won’t help, you wicked stubborn woman! Will you understand at last? Must I come with thunder and lightning to open your ears, Aetheria, you dragon in its lair?”

In the morning she did her usual chores. More refugees had arrived. These were Christians, terrified of Diocletian.

\*

She understood when she regarded the little brown figurine of Hestia in her room. She wept before the figurine: “I’m going to Jerusalem, Hestia. I have to go.”

The figurine said nothing.

Aetheria: “I must, Hestia, I must. Let me go. Forgive me. Barbarians are coming. Who knows what will happen to us.” When the figurine made no reply, Aetheria sank to her knees and lifted her arms: “I do not wish to offend you. But I cannot stay. I cannot care for you and set flowers before you. Oh how it pains me to leave you, Hestia sweet sister.”

She could not stay. All at once everything had changed. Like a vessel that has lost its anchor and is adrift in a storm, she was swept onward.

“Why leave?” her brother asked. “You’re strong, you have weapons, you should help us.”

“I cannot.”

“This is our land. This is the Roman Empire, and we are Romans.”

“I know.” Nothing more, apart from tears.

“So where will you go?” asked young Julia, her brother’s wife. “Are you scared? I’m staying.”

But Aetheria would not name her destination. She was unwilling to say the word that pursued her day and night, the word she could not deny, but had to throw herself into its arms. She was like a ship that has lost its anchor and whirls madly before the storm, lofted by waves up into the clouds and then plunging to the depths of the sea, drenched in foam and water.

Big, strong, grave, her guardian angel stood at her side. He went ahead, stepped calmly along, and she could not pass him by.

“What’s up, dear seedling,” he said one evening to Aetheria; the angry departure now long behind her, and the village and the cemetery, Valerio and Hestia. “Why did you rend your garments when you stepped for the last time across the threshold of your home? You shall not see it again for a long while. But it is your will, and they all begged you to stay. They urged you, warned you. Why, before you crossed the threshold of your home for the last time, did you take the clay figurine in your arms like an infant, and press the image to your cheek and kiss it and let hot tears fall upon it?”

“Why shouldn’t I weep when I must leave my Hestia, my sweet silent sister, all forlorn?”

“Why, my sweet seedling, did you stand so long that morning silently by the grave of your husband, and you smiled into the air and you bowed twice, three times, and never glanced down

at the grave and you whispered: I'm here, Valerio, I'm here now, come, make yourself ready for the journey."

"You call me sweet seedling. Why do you call me this?"

"You know." – "Tell me."

"See how a seedling emerges from the seed. When a seed is laid in the earth, it swells in the dampness and the green shoot makes its appearance. As the green shoot pushes up it forms a stem and little leaves. As the stem rises, the leaves unfurl. Leaf after leaf emerges from the stem and unfurls. But when the time comes, on the plant, on the stem, between the leaves, at the tip, little buds appear that open and reveal their colours."

"I'm not a seedling. I have no roots. I have feet to stand on and legs for walking. I can't bring forth leaves and buds."

"Aetheria, dear seedling, yesterday you were a shoot, today you are a stem with little leaves, tomorrow the stem shall climb yet higher, leaves shall unfurl, and buds shall come forth. Then flowers with their colour and their scent. All in due sequence. You have everything within you. You shall bring it all to the light of day. Do not resist. Do not balk. You are not a seedling to remain always a seedling. You should not remain always a root. You won't even remain a flower for ever. Oh the mystery of unfolding. Like one stepping out of a bath, or a swimmer from the river. First only the head with its face and breathing lips. Then the dripping throat and shoulders and arms come up out of the water. The arms keep rowing. Then chest, torso, body; the feet are still on the riverbed, the legs bear the body, droplets trickle down the ruddy skin. But the swimmer does not rest. The bathe has refreshed him. He climbs from the bath."

"What is all this? What are you trying to say?"

"One thing must follow after another. Aetheria, you cannot wrest yourself from my angel. You do not frighten me when you wipe away the emblem of truth in your little house and place a clay idol on your shelf. The clay idol does not frighten me."

A wave of grief swept over her as the angel neared. She implored: "Speak clearly."

"You think you must do battle with me. You want to, but I do not yield. I cannot. I have been sent by one higher. The Highest sent me."

"I'm only a poor human. What do you want with me?"

"You do not know the meaning of human. The Highest was once human. Mary was human."

"Oh, let me on my way. I want to go to Jerusalem, with the pilgrims."

"Will you kill again this time? Who will you kill?"

"Who do you speak of?"

The conversation was at an end. He faded into the wall niche. His voice again: "What does Aetheria want?"

"To go to Jerusalem. I want to go – to our great Mother. She sweeps across the mountains. She drives a lion chariot. They dance behind her and rattle their castanets and cry their yearning cry Attis, Attis, the lovely youth has sunk into the earth. Where is Attis?"

"That is why you're going to Jerusalem? That is why Aetheria is a pilgrim? To call to Attis?"



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She went ahead of them all with her tall staff, the pilgrim Aetheria. She carried her head high. The angel held her in his embrace.

She was full of energy, calm and sure. They listened to her. She swam in the stream of refugees, the frightened. She wasn't fleeing. She wasn't afraid.

Until Brindisi they all held together. At the harbour the stream split. Some took ship for Greece, others would go on to Syria, the Holy Land.

And there at the harbour, as she went at the head of the pilgrim men and women to guide them to their ship, the angel let go of her. He strolled at her side like a harbour worker carrying baggage, and addressed her merrily: "Good for you, maiden Aetheria, helping them all. Truly, when anyone sees this they know that no barbarian can do you harm. You might do well to stay here. You'd soon find yourself a husband of your own kind."

"I am no maiden, I am a widow."

"Then one must lament for the husband who had to leave behind such a strong pretty wife. You're going overseas, you'll pray for sure over there, when you can no longer bear your grief."

She thought for a moment: "It is not grief that drives me on."

"And you have no fear of the Vandals?" – "I have no fear."

"Then you adhere so strongly to the Christian faith that you leave everything lying here and must head over there and plan to serve your God and plan to live a poor chaste life."

"Who are you? What brings you to question me like this?"

So he stroked her head most tenderly, and laughed: "So you won't even answer. Farewell, Aetheria, widow who is no widow, pilgrim who makes no pilgrimage. Bon voyage!"

He vanished into the throng.

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On board she sat by the mast, big strong woman, sheepskin across her knees. Head and face were protected from the sun by a bright colourful cloth. A small bag with bread and fruit lay at her feet. There was much lamenting on the vessel. She listened, as she had back home. She went about, consoled, and shared what she had and what others gave her.

The Greeks and those heading for Greece or the islands were soon more cheerful. They saw the coast of their land and it seemed to them like Paradise. They sang. There on deck young couples twirled and danced. Others were touched to the heart when they saw the happy land of Greece, and could not sing. Ah, where was their own land? Many were charmed, chatted with this person or that, and went ashore at some spot where the vessel called in. They gathered bags and chests, took children into their arms or by the hand, and made their cautious way down the ladder to the rowboat below. And see: they've left the vessel behind. See: Italy, Rome, the village, barbarians – now all lies behind them.

The others watched from above. They waved, waved back and forth. We're travelling on, many hours still to go, days even. We are pilgrims. We're headed for the Holy Land.

They were a very cohesive group on the big ship. Now no more shouting children, women running back and forth. The sick and the frail lay under sunshades, they are making this journey for themselves. Some are returning home after a misfortune, and hope to bring back a blessing. Some have been affected by the general fear. And once some stood at the railings and prayed, gazed with longing to south and east.

They sailed past Crete.

The woman was filled with such fervour.

Here is the sea on which the Apostle Paul, the holy man, voyaged after the Saviour appeared to him on the road to Damascus, in a flash of light: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul fell dazzled to the ground. His sight returned in Damascus. Paul gazed upon these waters, this wind heard the words he spoke to his shipmates, this sun on high saw how he exhorted and comforted his fellow voyagers.

The ship swooped and veered like a bird sipping water. Wind blew and the ship flew blithely before it like wave-foam. It skimmed wavecrests like a dancer who touches the floor only on tiptoe. The waves played with the ship! They knew these voyagers, were well disposed.

These were not the Nereids spoken of by idolaters – sisters and daughters of a sea-god brandishing the triton with which he made Earth tremble. Thetis too, mother of the hero Achilles, belonged to him.

But these were creatures of God the heavenly Father, who on the second day made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. On the fourth day he commanded: Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that has life, and he created great whales, and every living creature that moves, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind.

And so all of these, waves and fishes, were creatures of the one heavenly Creator and knew each other, whatever road they were on.

And how could they know nothing more and nothing other of the ship than its weight, its timbers, its helm, its rudder, its sails masts and ropes, and the heavy anchor now stowed high?

How could the dainty, limber, flickering, foaming, yielding, questing sea not know about people, about people whose yearning, hoping, grieving, pleading, wishing enveloped the ship like a cloud, like the warm steam given off by a trotting horse in frosty weather.

Now on the ship there was no more lamenting about flight and expulsion, on deck or down below, only eyes directed south and east, whither they were gliding as if drawn by a magnet. Towards that enormous flower, that bloom whose scent wafted to them across the water.

Aetheria was a voyager on this vessel. We know what she has been through.

I guarded you like the apple of my eye. You were torn away from me. You were the sweetest secret of my heart, of my very "I". Then someone came whom I did not know, did not want to know, and knocked at my door, so that my heart trembled and opened and at last broke and spilled all that it contained. And here I float like a plank on water, bobbing on the waves.

All that is past, Aetheria. In the meantime you have been to Rome, and yet they could not help you. If they had helped you to avenge your husband, to cut Sebastian down so that he lay

there in his blood, as ashen as Valerio was when they brought him to you – all would be different. But it was not to be.

And that is why I choose to float on the water like a plank after shipwreck and bob up and down with the waves, and I'm glad when a wave lifts me and the fish open their mouths and ask: what is that, what is that, what kind of creatures are they that cannot swim, that have no fins, they place a plank in the water between them and us, what manner of life do they live?

And now the wave rears up, bends its back and crashes down on us, marvelling, spraying water and telling the others all sorts of things.

What can such a wave think of people, of me, pilgrim Aetheria who was once a Christian, and what is yet to happen to me? If only it could tell. The man at the harbour could not.

Heavenly sky, heavenly sea, heavenly light. And me in between.

Is it all just luck?

Not Rome, not Salerno – only luck?

Not Jerusalem – only luck?

Jerusalem – heavenly sky, heavenly embrace, no talking, no parting.

Now you are here, Valerio. Now I have you, here on the sea. It's your sea too. To think I find you here. Greetings, Valerio. All – luck.

I could lie like this forever, just swimming. As far as I'm concerned, the ship need never arrive. To be a dolphin, chase about with it, with our great Mother, with her through the forests, up and down the mountains. Mighty is our great Mother. They seek Attis, Attis.

And this is Cyprus. Not much longer now.

And the dark line over there, it's Asia Minor, and Jerusalem is over that way.

She sank to the deck. They all knelt. Bent the neck. To think they dare approach Jerusalem. Sails billowed, stiffened. Unstoppable, as if under its own power, the ship strained eastward.

Land came to meet it. Mountains. A wide anchorage opened out at the foot of a mountain. This is Haifa.

The voyage is over.

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Women rode on mules, modest, eager, silent, others rode in little carts, other prayed aloud, and now and then exchanged words. They praised God and glorified the Virgin Mary, who bore the holy child.

Aetheria went among them. The voyage had been lovely, full of promise. As dark and filled with grief as the trip to Rome had been – oh Ebonius, Psittakos, oh oh Sebastian and the rest – just so was this voyage filled with light. That is why the cry had gone up: Jerusalem.

And maybe the one who drew her onward now was the same one who spoke to her back there – her confidant, the one who knew her best of all, in whom she could confide all that oppressed her, and who knew even more of her than she knew herself, who sometimes threatened her and adopted the discourse of a learned man. Oh what does he want from me,

sometimes he frightens me. Of course he is one of those who fly between heaven and earth and take hold of people, or sometimes tempt and ruin them.

Aetheria could feel him up ahead of their little procession. Now and then this or that man must be him, she thought, one who turns around and looks at her, stands by the wayside and gazes after the train, and follows at a distance.

Palms of Tiberias. The Sea of Gennesaret. All night the young men fished in vain, but as dawn greyed an unknown figure called across from the shore: "Children, have you nothing to eat?" It was the Risen Man.

The Jordan valley. Black felt tents of Bedouin. Men ploughing, the women stand outside the tents with children, call and sing. They bake bread.

Silwan in the Kidron valley. And there is Jerusalem, lofty city.

It was destroyed by Titus and Vespasian. Rubble lies many yards thick.

Oh God, heathens have fallen upon your heritage. They have despoiled your temple and of Jerusalem have made heaps of stones. They have exposed the corpses of your servants in the open air to be devoured by birds, and the flesh of your saints by beasts of the countryside. They have spilled blood over Jerusalem like water, and there were none to dig graves.

This was the royal palace built by Herod. Here Pilate interrogated the Lord.

King Solomon built himself a palace, it stood on Mount Ophel.

The pilgrim women looked for the temple to which Mary brought the Christ Child. It once stood here. A heathen forecourt surrounded it. The Hall of Kings had four naves. They were roofed with cedar. Pillars stretched away in four rows. In the west a remnant of the exterior wall: the Wailing Wall.

Blocks of stone a yard thick, dense scrub between. There an ancient tottering tower; it flanks the palace built by King Herod.

Pilgrim men and women wander about, trailing behind pious men who have taken up residence on these heights. They pray with them in wretched little huts and chapels, in open air. For here, among Bedouin, Syrians and Egyptians and pilgrims from all four corners of the world, imperial decrees have no force.

\*

Aetheria had sailed blithely over the sea. Here she applied herself again to being helpful, as if she were back home and not herself a pilgrim. She supported the frail, and led them to the chapel of pious Eusebius. In order not to give herself away, she had to join in their prayers whether she wanted to or no. Although she followed the service distracted and without emotion, she was soon carried along on the rapture, mightily, against her resolve to stand fast and merely keep an eye on the women she had led here. And now here she lies and carries others with her, praying and babbling in ecstasy.

Eusebius, the Father Superior, hated such behaviour. He spoke to Aetheria before they left, not in a friendly tone; interrogated her. She was ashamed and angry with herself. The mysterious man must have done this to her. He would not leave her alone. She swore to herself that next

time she had to step into a chapel she would think of Hestia and pray to Great Mother Rhea. Oh yes, she'll call on her protectors, for she is no Christian.

I should never have come here, she wailed. If only he would show himself again, that weird fellow who claims to know all about me and advised me to come to Jerusalem, even though he knows I carry within me a secret grief for Valerio.

Was it really to help me that I was enticed here? I shall not let myself be tricked.

\*

And then they were taken off to see Bethlehem, and all were eager and joyful to make the trek to where the Christ Child had lain in the manger, where the Saviour came into our terrible world. Aetheria went along. She had to join in their devotions. She was filled with resolve. She called to Great Mother Rhea – and lo! she came happily through every test.

But then on the last day it hit her. And how the blow landed, this time! It came at the final prayer service, which she attended, her resolve firm as ever. After a short while she began to whisper, and her gaze was transfigured. Later, others mentioned it. They were happy for her, jealous. But the second time was worse, and of more consequence.

In ancient times, as everyone recalled, three kings came out of the Orient towards Bethlehem, to greet the King of Kings when none but His mother yet knew Him. They brought gifts, the first reverential gifts of this mundane world which owes to Him its very existence. They brought gold, myrrh and frankincense, and had ridden far and had often to ask the way. But a little star in the sky came to their aid. It floated ahead and they followed until they came to the grotto where the Holy Mother of God lay with the Child. The star came to a stop above the grotto. Oh what ages have passed since the Magi journeyed to Bethlehem and revered the Child in its crib.

The Child grew up, became Jesus of Nazareth; he wandered through the land preaching, performing miracles, and in his thirty-third year was brought before the Romans in the high city of Jerusalem, on the hill of Golgotha, and there was crucified between two thieves as he had prophesied; and he also foresaw and prophesied that on the third day he would rise again. His grave was found empty. He had ascended to Heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father.

\*

There is at Bethlehem a big cistern, or well, known even to the ancients. And when Jesus vanished from the Earth to be lifted up into Heaven, the little star did not follow him. It had fulfilled its task here below by leading the three kings to their proper destination. But it was not as other stars. When could just any star be assigned such a task? There they stand every night, a countless host as anyone can see, wheeling imperceptibly and silent as sheep in the blue meadow prepared for them. Slowly, regularly, the multitudes coalesce and diverge according to the season.

But that little star was chosen one day by God the Father and summoned to quit its silent assigned spot in order to undertake a great mission in the scheme of salvation on which the Son of God had now embarked. The name of this star is lost to history. We know it only as the star which guided the three kings out of the Orient, which they followed when they set off until they could ask: "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw his star back there in the east, and have come to revere him."

The star proceeded steady as a guide dog ahead of the three kings. It lighted up their long weary way.

But clever and obedient as the little star was, the three kings that it guided were not. They were meant only to follow and kneel down and revere, so that the day of the Lord's birth might be known not to the angels in Heaven alone, to be celebrated only by the heavenly host – oh with what bliss did angels announce to shepherds in their fields that night, that unremarked but greatest of all nights: "I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day a Saviour." And the heavenly host sang in praise of God and promised peace upon the Earth to all people of good will. And what fear and sorrow sounded in the angels' singing, for they knew who lay in this crib and what path he would follow among humans all the way to Golgotha, to that moment when his head would droop and he would breathe: "It is finished."

And so that this night of all nights would be celebrated not just by angels and not just by shepherds in their field, but by people all over the world – that is why the three wise men appeared out of the east. But they babbled the secret, so that King Herod learned of it and issued an edict that all children up to the age of two years should be murdered. But Mary and Joseph and the divine Child assigned to their care were able to flee.

The humble little star that had fulfilled its mission was not recalled by the Ruler of Heaven to its former place in the great blue firmament. And the star itself had no desire to quit Bethlehem, having heard and seen so much. The little star desired to remain. And the Lord granted its plea.

And so the star sank itself down into the well at Bethlehem, where it often glimpsed Mary when she came to scoop water. There deep down in the cistern the humble pious star hid away in its hermit cell, and no one could see it in the deep dark basin. Apart from a select few, apart from those on whom God's glance lay.

This was well known in Bethlehem and across the entire Holy Land. And when the pilgrims reached Bethlehem they too were led to the well, and almost everyone gazed down. So that the sun's reflection on the water would not dazzle them, most were provided with a linen cloth to cover the head. They gazed down, but aeons had passed since the humble little star, a monk hiding in his cell, had last revealed itself.

Now the company of refugees that we followed across the sea is in Bethlehem, at the well's rim. Shy, hearts thumping, each of these children of humankind covers the head, one after the other they accept the linen cloth, and scan the depths. Each is allowed a little time to gaze and seek. Then they straighten up, return the linen cloth, and blink and smile, sheepish and sad. No, I saw nothing. The others smile too. Basically it is just a game.

Now the pilgrim Aetheria is here. It is her turn. She is the last to stand at the rim, she has hung back, reluctant to join in. On the other hand she wants to avoid suspicion among the people she is travelling with, and avoid revealing what she thinks of all the prayers and pious revering. She has seen behind the curtain, she has the benefit of some experience already.

People ribbed her when she would not step forward. Did she think she was somehow special? No, here everyone must show her colours. It's a kind of confession, nothing like it in the whole world. Only the totally innocent and pure of heart can see the star. They laughed: Aetheria's embarrassed! She grew angry. The thought of joining in the game revolted her.

But there was nothing for it. She took the cloth and bent over the rim. She bent so low that they laughed and called out: "Careful! Don't fall in!" She was furious, grim, they could not see her screwed-up face. She had a secret desire to tear a scrap off the cloth and throw down a curse. She pressed her breast harder against the rim.

Then they saw both arms stretch across the abyss, and remain rigid.

They heard her groan, sigh, utter little cries. Everyone kept quiet.

Again she cried out, again, little yelps of joy, a jubilation.

They ran to help her. She lay silent on her breast across the cistern's rim, her head dangled, her arms fell slack beneath her. They pulled her up, shook her. She turned her head aside, her eyes opened, but she closed them at once. She let them stand her up and lead her to a bench.

Some ran back to the well and looked down to see what was there. But there was nothing, just as before.

They crowded around Aetheria. She sat limp on the bench, and spoke in a monotone. Every phrase had to be torn from her.

Yes, there was a gleam, a pale gleam down there. It was light, it rose out of the water and sparkled. It moved from side to side. It gleamed, there was humming, or singing, very delicate, very soft.

Nothing more could be got from her. Once she had let this out, suddenly her face assumed its old healthy natural hue. She stood unaided, held the linen cloth to her face, and wept aloud.

Pilgrim men and women knelt and prayed.

\*

Rumours of what happened at the well in Bethlehem spread rapidly across the land. People came from every direction to find out more, and to see Aetheria. Oh, poor defeated Aetheria. For days she could not stop sobbing. They saw her tears flow, they saw her red swollen face, and knew: something shattering has occurred. But those who harboured this thought and wept along with her and prayed at her side and penitently beat their breast did not know Aetheria, beaten, upended, despairing Aetheria, stubborn creature, this lovely pilgrim, who tore herself to bits and never found peace. Oh that she had ever come over the sea. They meant to humble her. Oh that she had ever been lured here to Jerusalem.

### *Pausanias*

In conversation with Pausanias, a Greek whose mother was among the refugees from Italy and was now reunited with him, Aetheria later spoke a little of the events at Bethlehem.

This educated Greek, a man of the world, came into contact with Aetheria soon after she returned from Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, just at the time of growing tension between her and Eusebius, that fanatical doctrinaire man. Pausanias consoled her: "Now it's behind you, Aetheria. You haven't yet burned all your bridges to these other pilgrims, but I'm satisfied with you. Your effect now is like that of a lovely temple with marble columns and cheerful halls, through which crows fly emitting their squawks. We'll soon send them packing."

"Pausanias, you know how grateful I am. But don't talk about your temples."

“You don’t like to hear it, my fair Aetheria. But the temples stand, and many of your priests feel so drawn to them that rather than creep into a secret room to worship your god and theirs, they would prefer to climb those marble steps to the pillared halls, even if half the pillars have tumbled, and in a side-hall they call to their god along with their flock – while in a corner buried under rubble the old god still lies on his face and listens astonished to the words of the priest, and to what today’s faithful sing.”

“Say what you like, Pausanias. You’re clever, and halfway a fool. But you natter so sweetly.”

“My mother told me, Aetheria, that all the way from Italy across to Crete and on past Cyprus, you were the leader of the refugees and pilgrims. I can well imagine it as you stand here before me with the strong arms of a rower, the penetrating gaze of a shepherdess, and the chaste gravity of an Artemis. But one thing my mother was unable to explain: how it was you came to be among the refugees, and what you sought in their midst. Can you tell me?”

She kept silent.

Pausanias: “You’ve told me about your home, about Salerno. I’ve heard from others that you went once to Rome. Now tell me, proud Aetheria, who permits me to call her my friend – and maybe I shall experience that blessed moment when those silent lips call me her friend – what does the man who guides you all, Eusebius, hold against you? I have a suspicion.”

“What do you suspect?”

“That – but I don’t want to make you cross – that you are too lovely for him. He knows no other way to approach you but by scolding and cursing. Why do you look at me like that? It’s just how a simple child of the world sees it.”

“Oh Pausanias, enough of such talk.”

“Why should I not be jocular, my fair Roman empress? How else should I succeed in removing the mask from your face? I see you segregated from the pilgrims, you wrestle with the lion Eusebius. It’s all so enwebbed in mysteries that you can’t help but acknowledge my curiosity. Of all things in the world, what tempest swept away a being such as you, and cast her down among these wretched snivelling pilgrims?”

Aetheria replied: “You see how they want nothing to do with me.”

“Actually, you want nothing to do with them.”

Aetheria: “Maybe. And I hope it becomes ever more obvious, so I can draw a clear line between them and me. I’ve never confided why I came over with them. I didn’t want to stay back there. Something drove me across the sea. And at first, when we set out, it was wonderful. For years I’d never been so happy as on this voyage. I was never frightened of the barbarians. I already bore arms, like my brother.”

“So why did you come over here, to my joy? Just for the voyage?”

Aetheria: “Now I want to go away again. I know all I wanted to know. I’ve seen everything. There are no more novelties to show me. I want to leave.”

“Where to?”

“I’ve been drawn into a trap. Treated so maliciously. They haven’t been frank with me.”

“Who?”



Aetheria: "I didn't want to go to the well. I only went so as not to stand out. They already looked at me askance, because I don't come to their prayer meetings. So I kept aloof and then they pestered me and took me by the hand, and then ..."

Pausanias: "And then?"

Aetheria gnawed her finger: "I was stupid enough to tell them. But only some of it. I should have behaved like those others who said nothing. All I needed to say was that I'd seen nothing." Tears stood in her eyes. "But I did see. I, I alone."

Pausanias: "Don't cry, lovely Aetheria, my Italian goddess, don't cry. Tell me, you can tell me: what did you see? You alone? And why didn't the others? Or did they keep silent because it was too brazen?"

Aetheria, tears still in her eyes, but her face was transfigured, she was changing before his eyes, he had never seen her like this: "They placed a linen cloth on my head, and I looked into the well, down to the bottom where the spring gushes. I didn't want to tell them anything, and I'm glad I revealed so little; it's just between me and the star. But I'll tell it to you, Pausanias, because you mean me well, and I know your mother, and I've seen what joy she has in you."

How lightly she speaks now, all of a sudden, how it does her good to speak.

"Down below, Pausanias, at first it was quite black, and I had no idea why I should be as childish as the others and lie across the cistern's rim and have a cloth on my head and stare down. What was supposed to be down there at the bottom? The walls of the well, and below them the water. And then, as I lay there thinking how childish it was to lie there on the rim in front of everyone, staring into the depths ... down there a light gleamed. And such a sweet feeling came over me. Then it began to shimmer. The light grew stronger. I turned my head aside, thinking the gleam was coming from above, but higher up everything was as before. Black. Only right at the bottom where the spring gushed, down there it was light, and there was this shimmer and a gleam and it spread so wonderfully, so indescribably clear through the water and onto the walls, a beam, a radiant beam, and then climbing out of the water ..."

Pausanias: "What?"

Aetheria, transformed, enraptured: "Such a comforting, warm, lovely little light. It was the little star. It rose to the surface. The light clung to the surface and then the little star lifted itself like a butterfly from the water and glided to the wall. And there it began to spin and circle round and round."

Pausanias: "You saw this?"

Aetheria: "And as it circled and I looked across – oh, I couldn't look away, I could have kept looking to the end of my days, and I heard a humming and chirping and singing, it rose and fell in time with its fluttering and circling, and gradually I made out some words. At first they seemed a foreign language, just at the beginning: words like *modeste*, *modeste*, *venite*, *anapaeste*. It must have been Greek, or Syriac. And then a few words in between that I could make out. The star tried this way, then that way. It changed the language until it found one I could understand. And then it sang out and greeted me and ..." Aetheria sobbed aloud, clapped hands to her face: "It knew my name."

Pausanias reached for her hand, but she moved away: "Who said this to you?"

“Pausanias, listen to everything it said to me. I’ve not been able to tell anyone. It greeted me and spoke to me and was glad I’d come to the well and hadn’t stayed at home. I felt such bliss, such ineffable bliss, that I could speak back to it and didn’t even know its name and just said ‘Little Star’, and it seemed to me like a little child.

And I lifted up my voice, and spoke to the star:  
It was only just now you caught my eye,  
But half an eternity could have gone by.  
And though I pondered from dawn till late,  
I could not pin down  
when it was that I never knew you,  
and when it was I did not yearn for you,  
not just yearn, no, carry you within me,  
and now I see you face to face,  
and can say it to you.  
So now tell me, little star,  
who you are,  
and why you, so lovely, good and sweet,  
do penance in this dark well, down so deep,  
why you dwell in that abyssal lair,  
and yet still your blissful glow can light our air.

And now the star began to hover, circle round,  
as if trapped in water, bobbing up and down,  
and for ages made no sound.

Then I heard: Aetheria, Aetheria, pilgrim child,  
Greetings to you, pilgrim child Aetheria.  
I am the star that long ago  
came to this place from Orient lands.  
Once I rode proud in the canopy of Heaven,  
and spoke with the stars of this and that.  
And then, and then,  
we felt a mighty Sorrow enter in,  
which said: God plans to part from us, and go  
down to humans on the Earth below.  
He must go down for their salvation.

In my terror that I was losing God,  
and would become mortal – one day dead,  
I cried out, begged: Take me along!  
Don’t leave me here with these great Suns!  
Take me along to those poor humans.  
I’ll light your way through storm and calm  
and keep you safe from harm.

The angels and the bigger stars all jeered.  
But God had other plans, as soon appeared.  
He beckoned to me, and explained:

My son – Jesus is his name – will go  
down to the Earth, and show  
himself to those poor humans,  
so mired in sin they are past saving.  
But he shall try to save them.

A Virgin is the chosen one,  
From her womb shall Jesus soon be born  
in accordance with His Divine Will.  
And once the Child is born,  
the people shall not know of it for years.  
But some shall find it out.  
So you, little star, must go, make haste,  
down there, to pious people in the East.  
Show them a sign, lead them on  
out of their Oriental land,  
over river, lake and mountain pass,  
until they come to Bethlehem at last.  
There at a shed, a lowly cattle stall,  
down on their knees they'll fall,  
for my only Son lies there, his cradle a manger,  
and Mary rocks Him, keeps Him from danger,  
and He feeds,  
and she sings Him to a sweet slumber.

Aetheria, in bliss down to Earth I swept,  
just as I was: small, frail, the butt of scorn,  
but I paid no heed to mockery that morn,  
or what the big stars might have thought,  
because my task was of such great import:  
to guide three Moors from eastern lands  
over rivers, lakes and desert sands,  
while those big things would not lift a finger.  
This I did with unbounded joy.

And later, Aetheria, once it was done,  
I lingered a while above that lowly shed,  
from which the three kings had long since departed,  
and was so blissfully glad to think  
of the Jesus Child down there below  
that all desire had drained from me  
to return to my place above the air,  
to Scorpio, to the Great Bear,  
among all those strapping great suns  
where my time until then had run.  
So I stayed, I abided,  
and the Lord decided  
To let me stay.

And I, I lowered myself into the well.  
Mary fetched water.  
I feasted on her face  
that had nothing in common with that starry race.  
And when she vanished, and all came to pass as is known  
– the Son of God already flown  
to Heaven – I resolved  
to keep watch on the place that saw his birth.  
For this place is like no other on the Earth.

Aetheria, Aetheria, pilgrim child,  
I am the star that long ago  
came here from Orient lands  
to show the way to those three kings.  
All is fulfilled, humanity is saved,  
the angels sing Hallelujah,  
Christ the Son of God was here.

Now come to Him and offer paeans  
for all with which He has blessed those humans.  
Hold firm, thou human who hears this word,  
hold firm to that great gift from the Lord thy God.

Oh measureless joy,  
Oh delight and bliss,  
an end to all your sufferings.  
So be no more pilgrim, journey no more,  
now you have at last arrived.  
Aetheria, sister, you are at your goal.  
Oh my sister, accept my greeting!  
Aetheria, Aetheria, accept my greeting!

\*

He listened attentively, his gaze fixed on her all the while. This transformed creature – she's enchanted. A female, lovely woman – who is she?

And what had happened to him?

He shook himself, and averted his gaze.

Now at least I have learned what Christianity is good for. I don't believe any other religion can make such delightful women.

He came closer, and said with a smile: "That was a wonderfully poetic dream, Aetheria, and you remembered it so well. One could believe it lasted a whole night."

She rubbed her arms.

Pausanias: "But at bottom it's all quite harmless, and shouldn't upset you. The little star spoke very amiably, and expressly to you alone. What is there to complain about? It's my belief the others were envious because they saw no light. And if they had seen it, what sort of conversation might it have had with them?"

She kept quite silent. She was still under the spell.

“Fair Aetheria, still in your dream? I shall grow jealous of this star.”

At last she gave a sob, lifted her face and looked at him – recognition came at last. And now she searched his face, her brow furrowed, and when she spoke her tone was uncertain.

He: “Still in your dream, lovely Aetheria?”

She, whispering: “What have I said? Was I talking?”

“You spoke of the little star in the well.”

Unthinking, she sighed: “My little star.”

But already she had turned away. Unhappily she composed her features, uttered a high-pitched wail and rubbed her hands: “But I don’t want this. I never wanted it. Is it never to be enough? What am I to do?”

He laid a hand on her arm. She was trembling from head to toe.

“They made me to come to the well. The star spoke to me, why did the star speak to me? For I am no Christian.” She stammered: “What do they want from me?”

She clung to him: “Oh, Pausanias, I am so afraid. They won’t let go of me.”

“But Aetheria, it was only a dream.”

“It spoke to me, it knew my name.”

“A dream, Aetheria.”

She wrung her hands. “What am I to do? Who sent me this? Was it the Devil?”

Now he saw that caution was needed. She was childlike, a peasant woman.

“Tell me, Pausanias. You know so much. Where did the Christian god come from? Whose son was he? Who cared for him, as our great Mother cared for Zeus?”

He laughed: “Who can find their way among all those gods? Leave them to their own devices. Let’s stick with ours. Stay with me, do.”

She wailed: “If only I’d never gone to Bethlehem. Oh I know, it was him, him.”

“Who?”

“Someone who keeps butting in, he stalks me and thinks he knows all about me, better than I know myself. Already at the harbour he made remarks I couldn’t understand. He wraps himself in mystery, and now he’s nowhere to be seen. He’s a wicked god, this god of the Christians, no?”

Pausanias: “I knew it.”

Aetheria: “No, you haven’t the slightest idea. He goes to such lengths over a single soul? What a miserable greedy thing. Because I once dedicated myself to him, he won’t let go of me. Maybe because I know him all too well, and can say what he’s capable of.”

“Tell me, Aetheria.”

She sat pale and erect, in her eyes an angry gleam.

"I had a husband, his name was Valerio. He was killed in a quarrel. I know who stabbed him. But he didn't mean to kill him, he hadn't wanted to kill him, but my Valerio was dead all the same. God let him die. He was so young, no older than me. I'd become a Christian, like my women friends in the village, and Valerio was the main reason. I loved him so, I can't talk about it. I wanted to protect him, he often went to sea, accidents might happen. I prayed for him to the Christian god. He surely heard me, and knew how devoted I was to Valerio. But still *he* let him die. *He* killed him, Pausanias."

She glared at Pausanias. "And why? No reason, for I was pious. And *he's* wicked. My sin was my devotion to Valerio. *He* didn't like that. And at the time I made the pilgrimage to Rome I still didn't realise. I still didn't understand. I went with the others, and though I wasn't able to hold on to Valerio, I could at least avenge him. He gave me the dagger himself. I prayed and prayed every hour of the night as I lay awake, and every hour of the day, begging the Christian god for the strength to kill Sebastian. Oh how I humbled myself before him, and he despised me and toyed with me."

"You weren't able to kill him, Aetheria?"

"I could tear myself to pieces when I think about it. I stood there with the dagger after all that praying, and couldn't do it. God took away my strength." She shook her head and gazed bitterly into the distance. "What do you think of such a god, Pausanias? He kills my husband, and then he makes me defenceless so that everyone despises me and I despise myself. I've abjured him. He's not my god. I have a god, like everyone else. The Christians bring calamity on our heads when they teach about him and don't say who he really is."

"Oh, Aetheria, he's not as powerful as you think, not so almighty."

"He's a cold, wicked, spiteful god, he betrays his own believers. They all try hard as anything to understand him. But he toys with them, and he's jealous, he's envious. Look at me, Pausanias. I've declared myself free of him, and he can't bear it. So he sends someone else along to cross paths with me."

Pausanias listened to this in astonishment, and had no idea how to respond. So he asked: "What should happen now, Aetheria?"

She sat there rigid, determined. "I shall not go away from this his land, I shall not disappear, I shall stay. As far as I'm concerned he can do away with me as he did away with Valerio. What a triumph for a god, Pausanias, getting the better of some poor human. But he can't twist my arm. I won't follow his path. I shan't humble myself before him. I shan't call his name. Rhea and Hestia are my gods, and he hates them. Oh if only he were human and I could talk to him."

### *Driving out the Devil*

Already during this conversation with Pausanias, she showed she was unwilling to give in.

Soon after she returned from Bethlehem, the following occurred.

As already mentioned, around Jerusalem there was a pious man, a certain Eusebius, who acted as guide and instructor of pilgrims, and found accommodation for them. He was cut from another cloth than venerable wise Ebonius. Eusebius often looked askance at Aetheria, because she seemed to belong to a type of Christian he detested: speakers in tongues, ecstasies. He

clamped down on suspect babblings and jabberings at services. Now an entire gaggle of pilgrims returned from Bethlehem bringing miraculous news of Aetheria and the little star. Such news irritated him intensely. It baffled and enraged him. He could not hold back. This peasant woman from Italy put it about that she saw the star at the bottom of the well. Were it anyone else he would swiftly denounce her as a deceiver, in it only for the fame. But Aetheria did not fit the bill.

He fetched her in, questioned her, and could not let the incredible affair rest. He called all the pilgrims together for a service, men and women, where he read out a certain passage from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians: "Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play... God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Thus the first passage he read out.

The second: "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all; yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." The stern ascetic expanded these notions far beyond the chiding and exhortation of the holy apostle. Concerning Aetheria, who was already agitated by his words, he spoke of his first impression of this lovely, free, outgoing person, and of what he had held back, for he wished only that she emerge from under the depraved pretence of her smooth mask. And now the opportunity had most amply occurred. He preached: "Twitching and babbling and throwing the limbs about during communal services are among the most repellent customs of the heathen, when they, men and women all together, offer themselves to their idols. In their so-called devotions they throw themselves to the ground, and behave like drunkards. They embrace and entwine, and with the names of their idols on their lips they expose themselves and intermingle. They even have idols that they claim are women. One they call Primal Mother, and to her they give the names Rhea and Cybele. Their adherents and believers are those who wander possessed, and rampage in mountains and forests with bells and cymbals calling Attis, Attis – for he was the mortal beloved of that female idol.

"Far too much of these intemperate beings still lives in the soul of many a man and woman, who imagine that, to give oneself to Christ, it suffices to accept holy baptism. You should know: God is Spirit, and does not live in unreason and frenzy, nor in dreams and ecstasies. A devil dwells behind such masks, yes indeed, a devil.

"And if someone were to go about in this land and declare that the star of the three holy kings had been spotted in the well, that this someone had seen it directly, this star that shows itself only to the consecrated, to the gravest, the most serious, the purest of the pure – and to such as these only rarely, for it is a boon beyond compare – then let this someone step forth now, and here in the chapel of God state openly: I did see it. But this someone must engage in self-examination, and think whether perhaps the Devil has set up a deception here. This someone must make an open declaration, here to this gathering of the faithful, so that each of us can show friendly concern and offer our prayers. And this someone must show contrition and undergo chastisement – so that the Devil may be driven out."

The word struck home as soon as Aetheria heard it: devil. She was possessed by a devil. So it was no big deal. The mysterious personage who called out the name 'Jerusalem' and spoke to her at the harbour, and went the whole hog to complete the mockery, shame her in public by leading her to the well – that was a devil. And she'd had to endure the little star's singing, ah

such sweet singing, the words and the music echoed endlessly in her ears and lured her on: I am the star that journeyed here from the East, long ago.

Stern Eusebius had no idea of the effect his sermon had on Aetheria, the sinner. There's a devil in me: she could have heard no lovelier words. How wide her eyes are now; he's so enlightened, this Eusebius. All her fears evaporated. And she'd never suspected! It was all a devil's work, leading her to the well and hiding himself in the well and singing that song about coming here with the three kings, just to bewitch her.

In the little chapel, once Eusebius had made the others leave, she went down on her knees and confessed her sins. She had been baptised, but had never stopped quarrelling with God and his Heaven. A mysterious man kept appearing and speaking to her. He drove her here to the well at Bethlehem, it must have been he who magicked up the light at the bottom of the well and spoke and sang to her.

When Aetheria ended her confession, Eusebius called the other pilgrim women back in. Aetheria had to repeat all her confession. The women screamed in horror. At once Eusebius took Aetheria by the hand and led her, along with two of the women, into the little sacristy. There he locked her in until evening came, when he ordered her to spend the night kneeling on chains, never lying down; and he denied her any food.

Next morning he summoned two lusty women to beat Aetheria with rods on her bare back, shoulders and arms until blood streamed down. But Aetheria uttered not a word. Not a blow was landing on her: every blow landed on that other one, the evil fellow who pestered her, the devil.

The devil in her was stubborn, refused to show himself. So towards noon the women tied Aetheria tight to the door, so tight that she screamed and couldn't move a muscle. They left her there all alone in the tiny room. Several of the faithful stayed day and night in the chapel, praying. At night they were sore afraid the door would open and the Devil would enter to rescue Aetheria.

For five days until Sunday they kept Aetheria tied up. She ate hardly anything, and received in silence the blows they inflicted. When Eusebius showed up once, she tried to kiss his hands, but he pulled away. With joy she offered her back and shoulders to the scourge.

Now she was no longer beautiful, Aetheria. She looked dirty, ugly, dilapidated, her dangling hair sticky with blood, where once she was Aetheria with the lovely raven locks. Though in torment, she never yielded. Away with him, even if I die! Sometimes they heard her scream obsessively, and when she bent under the whiplash and threw herself wholeheartedly into the pain, there arose in her more and more often a dreadful thought, a dreadful or a heavenly thought: Forgive me, I do this for Thee, because nothing else can I give – because I am so bad I accept these blows, for Thee.

She endured. She had to succeed.

Then came the great exorcism, conducted by Eusebius. She was weak and emaciated. She sank to the floor and lay for hours as if dead. Then they gave her food and drink. She was allowed, now clothed and untied, to stand at the door to the chapel and from there take part in the service.

She gave the most heartfelt thanks to Pastor Eusebius, and was allowed to go home.



*Philosophy and love on Earth*

For three hours she dragged herself along, until she reached the house where Pausonias dwelt. He was summoned, and came out. The sight that was Aetheria shocked him. He had searched for her. None of the women revealed where she was being kept.

He had a room prepared for her in the house. He sat by her bed and spoke kindly words. He asked no questions. Then he had to take a trip for a few days, and when he returned she was already able to welcome him standing up, with the calm friendly expression he knew of old. And now he stayed with her. How could he have gone away, Pausanias, when she heaped such good and tender words upon him, when she clung to him so gently, with such affection – when she was courting him.

During that time they had the following conversation:

“What have they done to you, my fair friend Aetheria? Who assaulted you, who beat you? I shall ride at once to Jerusalem and raise a complaint at law.”

“Why ride to Jerusalem, to the court, friend Pausanias, rather than sit here with me, and talk? Why raise a complaint, when I myself am the guilty one, and when nothing can happen to me? Stay here, allow me the pleasure of your company. It does me good to listen to you, and even when you stay silent. That you are here, Pausanias, is balm to my heart.”

“You won’t reveal, Aetheria, what they did to you, and who it was?”

“Does it make you sad, Pausanias?”

“Yes and no. Sad, yes, because you won’t confide in me. And no, because you want me at your side.”

“And so the blows they inflicted on me, Pausanias, have done you good. For I would never have spoken like this to you before.”

“Aetheria, dear friend, who was it who beat you? That this can happen in my country, and I must accept it in silence.”

“Yes, it does you good. Suffering often does good. My suffering has done me so much good, Pausanias, such immense good. And it was lovely how I endured it, this suffering. Must you go to Jerusalem, to Caesarea? Can’t you stay with me a while? I’d be so happy. I no longer go around with those other pilgrims. Stay here and tell me of your world, Pausanias, tell me all you know. I was always a stay-at-home, and even in Rome I knew only Christians. The world, the world, I’d love to know more about the world, and what people everywhere think, and what other people know.”

Pausanias laughed: “My dear Aetheria wants to be a pilgrim again, but in a new manner: what you now propose is a good and sensible pilgrimage. Out into the world, Aetheria. You know so little. Oh, the world is enormously big, who knows where it ends?”

Aetheria: “So what do people think? What do they know? I want to know everything. I don’t want ever to be caught out. I want to have all my answers ready. So tell me, Pausanias.”

Pausanias: “My dear Aetheria the philosopher! Oh, people do so much thinking. There are as many thoughts as there are breaths of air.”

Aetheria: "What do thoughts and air have in common?"

Pausanias: "They are as light and fleeting as a breath, and we cannot live without air, without ever renewed air."

Aetheria, timidly: "But – is there Truth? Or is there no truth amid all those thoughts?"

Pausanias: "Many truths. Various truths. Mixtures of truth, just as air is a mixture of elements. There are countless truths, truths of every kind, in all conceivable phenomena, in the same way there are creatures, but a creature can be ant or frog or butterfly, bird or racehorse. And then plants."

Aetheria winced: "No." She does not follow, cannot follow, but would like to understand.

Pausanias: "Every creature is a truth. Every plant is a truth. Every vision is a truth. You are a truth. I am a truth."

Aetheria, frowning: "And when grass is chewed and trampled by a sheep, where is truth then?"

Pausanias: "The sheep has obtained nourishment."

Aetheria: "Pooh. You are truth, I am truth, a fly is truth, a man is truth, a woman is truth – what nonsense. How can you think that?"

Pausanias: "Better than someone who, when asked about truth, says only 'Zeus' or 'God'. Try what I tell you on someone. Pull back the bolt on your door that you use to lock yourself in, step out into the world – yes, into the world. You want to, actually, and it's a goodly impulse. And it will do you good. My lovely friend, you feel you must keep something secret from me. I won't try to pry it out of you, I respect your decision. I'm happy that you've taken me to you, to me you're a goddess to whom I give myself and from whom I shall be grateful for all I receive. Your worshipper, fair Aetheria, shall now like a washerwoman spread undyed linen in the sunlight, so that it dries and is bleached nice and white. Let me lay out my thoughts before you. And let me sip from the clear mountain spring that is within you."

Aetheria: "The things you say, Pausanias! Are all Greeks like this?"

Pausanias: "All I know is, that when I sit at your side I am no Greek but only Pausanias. Just as you are no pilgrim from Salerno but the truth taken on by a female figure whom I adore, I know not how or why, and who is now my goddess and calls herself Aetheria until such time as I find another name for her."

Aetheria, trembling, distraught: "Kiss me, Pausanias."

She lingered at his lips, then grew calmer. Then she asked him to tell her whatever he liked.

Pausanias: "So much has changed, my sweet friend, in the last few seconds, the last half-minute, ever since you said 'Kiss me, Pausanias', that I must first contemplate how to restore the world to order. Let me think."

Aetheria: "Talk to me!"

Pausanias: "In these parts are great cities that once were famed and powerful. Mighty militarised Rome became the master of Greece, Athens is no longer Athens, Corinth no longer Corinth. But still they are Athens and Corinth. When I lived there and for a while had time on my hands, I often went to the Forum and strolled about the city, and every time it did me

enormous good, and perked me up when I fell into doubt and confusion, unable to find my feet amid all the truths that surrounded and pressed in on me. Sometimes as I did so I even lost sight of myself. In Athens I'd go to the Forum and hear the philosophers. Oh, it was wonderful, Aetheria. There are so many philosophers, and each one knows everything. That's good, I said to myself. But the problem with philosophy is that philosophers refute each other's claims. Philosophy should be condensed into just one person, and be declared out of bounds to the rest of us. A Law Commission should be established to control the Forum, backed up by armed force, to eradicate all philosophers except one.

"I chatted with a few philosophers, and my plan was well received. Each sage showed great enthusiasm for my doctrine, and confided that he'd reached the same conclusion long ago. I was advised to go to the authorities and arrange suitable measures for eliminating the other philosophers. But then, after such a happy and promising start, a tiny, seemingly insignificant glitch presented itself: how to put it into practice? Easy enough to get rid of people – but who was to be left alive? The City Council suggested: Get rid of them all, then? In the interest of Truth, which is the highest good, I replied somewhat troubled: 'There is no alternative'.

"Then we called a meeting of all the philosophers we came across at the Forum, and even those who sat quietly at home, ones I'd met with and questioned in great secrecy. And I was now tasked by the City Council to present my charitable proposal to them, and to the good citizens of Athens. Without exception, every single philosopher was enthusiastic. They all agreed that this was what they'd all been waiting for. Our next step was an immediate secret ballot: who was to be eliminated? And we found when the votes were scrutinised: every last philosopher was to be eliminated, except for the one who had cast the ballot!

"So there was no way to implement my plan. And then I realised, enriched by this experience, where the problem lay. Not with the philosophers, but with me. I was asking too much. I was annoyed by the multiplicity of philosophers. But this was unjust. I noticed in my head, in my heart, an unease, a dreadful unease. My head had a right to pose questions. But the questions it posed were bad, childish."

Aetheria: "So what did you do then, Pausanias?"

Pausanias: "During my strolls I noticed not just philosophers, but ordinary people too. They set about all kinds of tasks. Once I watched a man remove the roof, the damaged roof, from his house, and timbers and stones came tumbling down. I contemplated this scene most attentively, being in search of answers, and I profited from it. Look at that stone, Pausanias, I said to myself. How does it behave? What does it intend? With regard to itself, and to other stones? That's the kind of question philosophers pose with regard to human beings and the state, the community. But what does the stone do? It tumbles down. Whatever the circumstances. With ineffable challenging certitude. Such unambiguity, clarity, purpose, such consistency, and, for all its simplicity, such courage and self-assurance. Then, Aetheria, I compared the stone to human beings, and I found: it has not so much to do with humans."

Aetheria: "That would be the case with cripples, who can't move by themselves, or the dead, when they're laid out flat and all they are is a dead weight and they're left as an offering to dampness and worms, and then they'd be the wisest, the real sages."

Pausanias: "You've said it, Aetheria! Yes, at the end, at the very end, every living thing realises, however hard its brain resists the thought: it did not create itself. This is the grandeur, the glory,

the divine in the world: that in the end it has dominion over our brain, our myriad thoughts, and calls them to order. In the end there's nothing but heavy and damp, or dry."

Aetheria: "So that's what you discovered on your strolls through those big cities Athens and Corinth, friend Pausanias. And it seems, since my friend is telling me of it, that he still holds to it. And what does my worldly-wise friend say of the men and women who came with me into this land to pray? What does he think of Christians? They know what God teaches."

Pausanias: "Who knows it? There are many gods. I can't choose among them, and so I grant all of them their validity and revere them all. One god, of course, is the greatest!"

Aetheria: "Which one?"

Pausanias: "The Moment."

Aetheria: "Explain."

Pausanias: "The moment contains everything. It bestows truth on all things, and that truth disappears with the moment. The moment has a dreadful foe, it stalks like a lion and brings it down. That foe is Time. Think what a moment is, what it gives and is: Truth, and then how Time lurks in the dark and as soon as it appears the lion pounces and bites it in the neck and kills it, oh Aetheria. By the way, how I love the sound of your name! It's almost the same as Hetaira."

Aetheria: "Meaning?"

Pausanias: "A female companion, a beloved."

Aetheria: "I see you're so worldly-wise, too much so, and now you'd like to relax – me too. That's why you now touch on love."

Pausanias: "And where is love? In the moment. Yes, it's the answer to every question, it settles every question before you even ask. It is there. It allows no doubt to arise. Now what is grass? All that the alien litany knows is that 'grass withers'. But what is withering against the Moment of existence? The millions of years that triumph so detestably over generations of grasses are incapable of bringing forth even one blade of grass."

She sighed.

Pausanias: "You don't understand? How about this?" He kisses her hand.

"Yes."

Pausanias: "Is it sweet?" – Aetheria: "Yes."

Pausanias: "Is sweetness something that gladdens and soothes?"

Aetheria: "It's sweet ... because ..." – Pausanias: "Because ...?"

Aetheria: "Because I would really like something in the world to be sweet."

Pausanias: "And If I place an arm around your waist and draw you closer, does the sweetness in you, the gladness in you, grow?"

Aetheria: "And if I place my lips to your ear and snuggle closer to you and say: you, my dear Pausanias, are a rascal, a deceiver, a seducer, does the sweetness in you grow?"

Pausanias: "And if I then heave a sigh and have nothing more to say except Aetheria, beloved ..."

Aetheria: "Then we'd better break off now."

Pausanias: "Why? What for?" – Aetheria: "So we can go on learning."

Pausanias: "The highest joy requires no instruction. It grows in trees like the smile on your lips. Like sweet cream rising to the top of the milk, it gathers there as all good things gather at the surface when they are ripe, so they may enter into existence. And so I hold you and sip the cream I'm allowed to sip. And now you're looking at me. What are you thinking, Aetheria?"

Aetheria: "Leave me for a little while, Pausanias."

Pausanias: "Memories? Time, I said, is our arch-enemy. Memory his accomplice. How Time promises everything so as to weaken the Moment. He covers our soul with a layer of mould."

Aetheria, shivering: "To be as rigid as a stone?" – Pausanias: "So bitter, Aetheria."

Aetheria: "I'd like to be everything, anything a human being can ask for, just only not thinking, not knowing."

\*

Aetheria lay enchanted on the beach at Caesarea, on hot sand. That man said grass and sand were Truth, and there was no truth apart from these: truth a sunbeam, a flash of lightning.

As she lay there she was no longer real. She hovered among various beings. The Earth was populated by them, air and sky too, by these invisible beings, active, and they were all there and much else along with them.

Pausanias: "What's going on, Aetheria? I've sat an hour here at your side, watching you."

Aetheria: "So?"

Pausanias: "You were dreaming. Something caught hold of you."

Aetheria: "Caught hold? Me?"

And again it came to her. Humming and jingling, words wafted past that the shepherd had sung, back there at the cistern; cherubim exulting.

She sat up. Oh I do not want this. Release me. She flung herself at Pausanias' breast. What sin have I committed that they pursue me so. And she told him more about the mysterious being that kept stalking her.

She groaned: "Someone's bewitching me. It's Satan. Protect me, Pausanias. Promise me you'll hold me tight, stand by me."

Pausanias laughed: "Patience, my anxious dreaming Aetheria. You'll soon find out which is stronger, this god, or mine: the Moment."

Then, when he was about to go on a trip inland, she asked him to take her with him. She did not want to be his wife. He was glad she wasn't leaving him.

\*

On various trips, shorter and longer, Aetheria saw and heard a great deal, and paid attention to many things.

Everything happens at different levels, it seemed to her. Day follows day, sunrise, sunset. Plants and trees grow, new plants appear, new animals too. This was a placid, friendly level.

Then big, slow, all-pervasive things. People, states, the nations that build cities, wage wars, make peace. This was a very exalted level, very different from plants and animals and stars.

And then individual human beings. They are driven along, embedded in the course of the stars and the general growing, blooming, withering. Actually they're lost amid it all, but they can't exist without it, and it gives them little peace.

And then the invisible, so much is invisible, nameless entities, ghosts, demons, angels.

Tall as a palm tree the angel stood over Aetheria and enveloped her as in a cloak. She did as she wanted, but never abandoned the blue cloak. She moved as if in a bell jar, never leaving its protection. It allowed nourishment to flow into her soul. For if her body received nourishment from the earth, what was it that nourished her soul? People looked only down at the earth, soil, crops, at trees bearing fruit, at vines, at animals and cool springs. The teeth wanted to bite, the mouth wanted to swallow, the stomach wanted to be full. But at the same time other nourishment flowed to them.

They never saw nor heard what room they occupied, or what table they dined at. Such endless bustle, such music that their ears never perceived.

Once when Pausanias and his pretty Italian friend were trekking through a place in the mountains, a monk came into their field of vision. He went his way in silence. People avoided him. He hiked up onto the mountain where he dwelled alone.

Aetheria spotted him long before Pausanias pointed him out.

"How do you like that fellow, Aetheria?"

"Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"There are many who come from Egypt, or Syria. Many dwell in the desert. Many hide away in forests. They find it's not enough to worship a god on the martyr's cross, they have to martyr themselves. They detest human flesh. The moment and what it offers means nothing to them."

The monk limped. He dragged himself along the path with his staff, beneath a harsh sun. Over his left shoulder lay a filthy pelt. Flies swarmed overhead.

Aetheria closed her eyes. What a country. Poor, filled with ruins. But people came here from far and wide.

She was shocked. Her heart quivered. The angel was silent. Pausanias wanted to take her to Corinth. She pleaded: "Leave me here."

Pausanias: "I thought so. What will you do here? You asked me to protect you. I don't want to leave you like this. Don't you love me any more?"

Aetheria: "I'm still fond of you. Maybe I'll love you even more. Leave me here."

Pausanias: "You'll busy yourself with these fools here. Is it good for you, Aetheria? They'll tell you nothing new. Look at me. Are you toying with the idea of becoming Christian again?"

She cried out: "No, No!"

He held her hand: "You're right, a thousand times right. You won't listen to these people any more. You've found out what they're like. You are and always will be Aetheria, and I am Pausanias. For our brief lives, that's enough."

She whispered: "You are right. I know it."

Pausanias: "Let the world go to pot. We didn't make it, and we didn't create ourselves. We lead our lives as best we can. And that's why my god is the Moment."

Aetheria: "Oh, now I understand it very well."

Pausanias: "Come with me. Don't let thoughts devour you."

Aetheira: "But I must stay here. You'll be back. I shan't forget you. I cannot come with you, Pausanias. I was called to Jerusalem. No, I shall not flee."

She was resolute, he could see.

Pausanias: "I see my beloved Aetheria wavering. It grieves me.

Aetheria: "Why, Pausanias?"

Pausanias stares at the ground: "I've had so much from you that does me good. It seems to me that with your help I've become a different person, better. I know what they'll say about me at Corinth. They'll say: Our good Pausanias is going to join the Christian faith, someone's been instructing him, it must be a woman."

Aetheria hid her face in his breast.

### Part 3: The Noble Syrian

#### *A pair of halfwits*

Pausanias had left on his travels. Aetheria had no idea where to. In Caesarea two men took an interest in her.

Aetheria had to keep them at bay. One was a clever chap who posed as a man of education, the other was a peasant. She had a feeling she would soon go on another voyage, whither she did not yet know.

These two kept a jealous eye on one another. In order to know what the other was up to, they hired a strapping peasant lass from a mountain village. She had to keep herself busy in the house in which both of them lived, and now Aetheria too, and generally help out. Every evening when they returned home, she ran to meet them and make a report.

Eleutherios, the clever of the two, had heard all sorts of things, and had a notion that Aetheria needed to be put right. The instruction he offered his innamorata, this woman he courted, was well meant and childish. Aetheria had come here with a load of Christian pilgrims, so he told her what enlightened people hereabouts thought of the world and creation.

First, God gave his thunder-locks a shake and then, when people grew wicked, started hurling down his thunderbolts as an incentive to offer more sacrifices and practice less deceit. When God was at his wits' end with regard to humans and had to send down a Deluge, he called naturally enough on his brother Poseidon to help with this great waterworks; Poseidon appeared at once with his iron trident, ready to jab dreadful great holes in the Earth, whereat waters would spurt forth from below; God himself would manage the water from above.

As for the Ark in which humanity preserved itself for forty days, it was constantly attended by nereids and huge schools of blowing dolphins that had to drive away mighty sea creatures –

whales and sharks and the like. The Ark was made of wood, and easy to capsize. But God had provided pious Noah with full instructions concerning length, breadth and height. The actual construction was overseen by Vulcan the Smith, who knew all about ironworking, nails and soldering. Now at last, times have changed, he's able to do some sensible and serious work that will go down in history, not just hammer out those very artistic shields and helmets so eloquently described by Homer. All that stuff was of no consequence, for who knows anything these days about Achilles' shield and helmet, though once they were so renowned?

On the other hand, the salvation of humanity – that's something else. Oh, by that time the gods had long since ceased to play any great role; their sphere of activity had shrunk; they were exhausted by deeds of love and heroism, and had done all that could be done. Now the world was on a different footing, and that meant the salvation of humanity, and first of all the saving of Noah and his family.

Thus did Eleutherios natter away and enlighten the pretty peasant woman from Italy, and she seemed all ears.

Vulcan completed his Ark commission in the shortest time imaginable. But now a difficulty arose. Noah didn't want to leave dry land and his beloved vineyards. Poseidon raged and reminded Vulcan of the deadline by which he would absolutely have to dig those prescribed holes in the earth, whether Noah turned up or not. Human beings, even in these days, should not have any fancy notion that he, a superannuated worn-out under-god, can just stand around waiting for Mister Noah to sleep off his hangover. God calmed him down, and everything proceeded according to plan, and even more smoothly than any of the participants had dared to expect. It rained, waters came from above and below, they were afloat, they were in the Ark well supplied with all their needs, and looked forward to several peaceful weeks without needing to work.

Such foolish tales from her admirers entertained and distracted Aetheria. Mostly she let her imagination roam. Then the clever Greek came along with another chapter of which he was very proud, but which fell totally flat. It concerned angels and their role in the world. As little as he knew of this topic, the more he babbled of it to his faithful Italian beauty. And so, having brought Noah back to a normal life, he made an elegant leap to the mighty angel Bacchus and his friend Dionysus, who went about mostly on billy-goats. But Aetheria would have none of it; she yawned as he nattered on about the exploits of Dionysus, and called him a windbag. And she entirely lost patience when he called Dionysus an angel who was one of Christ's followers. She was so annoyed by his foolish talk that he could not make amends.

The other man, the simple peasant, was puzzled how best to approach her. He listened as Eleutherios entertained their mutual friend. And he came upon the notion of telling her what he knew of those hermits, the monks from Syria and Egypt who dwelled in the vicinity. She expressed a desire to be taken to them, so he went about and made enquiries.

\*

A roar: "Aetheria".

It came again.

Then not a sound.



The roar was accompanied by a confused din, as if the voice rose out of a crowd of people approaching, a mob.

It came no closer, but the uproar continued.

Now a bugle-call ripped the air. To arms! To arms!

When Aetheria rose from her bed and ran to the door and peered anxiously out, she realised: it was – the Other. She ran back inside. Then something she did not understand was spoken into her ear. “She replied: “I am no warrior. Summon soldiers.”

“You are no warrior? So who was it who bragged ‘I shall not follow, I won’t give up, I can defend myself?’”

“Since you ask: yes, it was I.”

“It was you.” – “Yes.”

“And you are not a Christian?” – “Not everyone has to be a Christian.”

“Now you are shameless.”

“Don’t think that you, staying invisible and hiding yourself away somewhere, can scold me like this. Come, show yourself.”

“I am here. If you can’t see me, that’s down to your own eyes. Say, Aetheria: am I here?”

She hugged herself tight and muttered: “Yes.”

“To arms! Present yourself. I am not the little star in the well at Bethlehem that spoke so tenderly to you. It spoke so gently and you could not help but listen to it. It told you of the long journey it undertook in olden times to bring people to Christ, so they could adore Him when he appeared, even in the crib. Why did the star speak? You should do the same. That’s why! Instead, instead ...”

The voice grew incoherent with anger, unintelligible. And then: “Instead. Instead.” There were many voices. A terrible clamour, as if a huge mob of people approached. She buried her head in the pillow.

And again: “Instead, instead.”

Later she pulled herself together and began to speak: “My eyes cannot see you, you know this. You are angry with me. But I’m not afraid of you. Are you there?”

“Beside you, over you, around you.”

“I know you can do anything. I’ll answer you only because you spoke of the well and the star. I don’t understand, you mysterious being that stands over me with a whip and is in league with the Christian God, how is it you can speak of the star that showed itself to me at the well – to me, and no one else? Do you know who I am? You say you’re beside me, around me, in me. But I’d like to see you, see what manner of being you are. Tell me, who sent the star to me? Who let me see and hear the star, but doesn’t know who I am and I haven’t been a Christian for a long while now? For years, ever since I was in Rome, I’ve no longer been a Christian. When I set off from Portosa with the others on the way to Rome, I was a Christian. Then no more. Now you say nothing. You no longer roar To arms, to arms. You don’t ask why, Aetheria, why did you stop being a Christian? Because you already know the answer. And then I’m still not left in peace

and I'm not allowed to go my own road. I was lured there to the star. I'm not pure, I'm not pious, I'm not good. I'm a murderess, whether or not I committed the act on Sebastian back in Rome. I wanted him dead. And if Sebastian hadn't hit me and knocked me to the floor, I would have done what I set out to do and would be a murderess in everyone's eyes. So why was the star allowed to speak to me, when a hundred pilgrims were there, pious men and women not as wicked as me, and they were never shown the light."

Tumult: "To arms! To arms!"

Aetheria was furious: "Yes, to arms, do battle against me, but I've long known how you fight, your evil way of fighting. You want to weaken me so I skip along behind you like a meek little lamb. You won't rest until I fall into despair and beg you: Do this or that to me, do whatever you want. To arms, to arms – you against a helpless woman. Because I can't see you, because human eyes can't see you invisible beings, you can do this to us. I am simply Aetheria. But ever since I've known God, that hard unjust God, I know I shall remain steadfast and what you're trying to do to me will be all in vain."

"Silence."

"Why don't you call out, To arms? Why do you call out anything? I'm easy enough to be done away with."

"God is courting you."

"God is my enemy. God is toying with me."

"Serpent, slaving serpent, will you be silent, before someone kicks your head to pieces."

This sounded so uncannily stupid that she crumpled.

"Bend down. But bend down not your flesh only, your sinful limbs. Bend down your soul. Serpent that slavers and thinks to dare this! It won't be long before you throw yourself into the slough of despond. You will worship that moment. But you will be devoured by Nothingness. Aetheria, Aetheria, what have you tried already as you seek to withdraw from God? You let them whip you half to death in the chapel. Because you saw the star, and it spoke kindly to you and tasked you to tell of it and act like it, you have put yourself under a curse."

She muttered: "I am what I am. I am not pious. Why does the star speak to me, why am I to go about telling of it?"

"I shall not answer that, because you deserve no answer. You shall stand up now. The peasant shall lead you into the mountains. You shall stand before the hermit, and you shall do whatever he tells you."

And again that awful shout, that tumult: "To arms! To arms!"

### *The Hermit*

Aetheria was led by the peasant to a spring, and there she encountered the hermit. She had to be patient: the pious man kept walking by, eyes downcast. Once when she made a move and he deigned to notice her, he threatened her with his staff. When she doggedly kept talking, he turned his back, and commanded her to retreat into the bushes and direct her questions at him from there.

He was an ascetic, a follower of John the Baptist. He lived in a cave above the spring. She often heard sounds of flagellation, whipping. When he appeared at the spring early in the morning, sunlight was just touching the woodland floor, and from the bushes she observed the little man, emaciated, just skin and bone. His hair was a lion's mane, the white-grey beard hung tangled down his chest. His bare skinny legs were scored with long bloody scratches. He drank from the spring and poured cold water over arms, chest and legs, and stood in the sun to dry.

Once she sat by the spring, and as he came down he shouted at her from a distance to clear off. She hid in the bushes. But when he had drunk and splashed himself and stood there silent, she gathered her courage and posed her question:

"Venerable Father, the Saint John that you follow was a teacher. Will you teach me?" Then she said: "John wore a garment of camel hair, and his sustenance was grasshoppers and wild honey. He called on people to repent."

The ascetic: "He was the Precursor. This is a Precursor-world. Every tree that fails to bear good fruit shall be felled and cast into fire."

Aetheria: "I have heard it said that Christ came and healed the sick. You inflict wounds on your body."

"Because I am no Christ, but a wretched sinner, like you. My body must obey me and keep silent when I think, and must not make me its servant."

He groaned, turned about without another word, and clambered back up to his cave. Soon she heard him groan, groan louder, utter wild sobs and words she could not make out, and then the crack of a whip.

Now Aetheria went down into the woods and broke off some willow twigs. She secreted herself deep in the scrub and bared her upper body and her legs. Up there in the ascetic's cave, all was silent. She took a slender bundle of twigs in her hand, and began to belabour herself.

As she lashed out, tears came. She screamed and wept. She wept aloud, louder, groaned and sobbed in a frenzy and could not stop and had to keep lashing herself, but the pain was unable to quash her torment and her fear: Abandoned and cast out, that's me, no one can protect me, for me there's no salvation.

Blood trickled from her shoulders. If only she could feel more pain. She raged blindly against herself, at first only with twigs, then with fists and fingernails, until consciousness departed and she collapsed.

She came to during the night, under cold air. Her wounds throbbed and burned. She crawled through silence to the spring, and washed. She drank. She noticed she was hungry. She plucked some leaves, chewed.

Towards morning the hermit came down, saw bloodstains by the spring, looked about him and heard her groaning and moving about in the scrub. He said a prayer out loud and asked who was there. She said her name. He asked: "Did someone attack you?" When she made no reply, he commanded her to show herself. He approached her.

She lay on the ground, face down. Her lacerated back was bare, her right hand held tight to the twig bundle. The grass around was sprinkled with blood.

"You were ambushed, woman?"

“I beat myself.”

He stood for a while, silent. Then he said: “Go to the spring, and wash. Then call me.”

She did so. He came and she told him she had lashed herself and would keep lashing herself even if it killed her. He replied: “Don’t you dare to kill yourself.”

“Why is suicide not permitted, when doing penance might kill you?”

“Because you must do even more penance. That is why you may not discard your body that serves your penance.”

\*

Days passed. Weeks passed. She kept alive in the forest, and found a cave below the spring where she sat and lay and waited. Emptiness, fear and repugnance in her.

The voice that used to come to her no longer spoke.

The hermit came down to the spring day after day, clambered silently back up.

Her mouth was shut tight. She had no idea what to ask him. Into what abyss had she plunged. She was weary of life, disgusted with herself. No hope; hour after hour nothing but torment and despair.

But care was taken that she should not collapse utterly. The angel watched over her close by, as she lay asleep. He was at her side when she stood and reached for the twigs. Pain made her stronger. The angel nudged her to seek food. But blackness would not leave her soul.

\*

After Aetheria had spent months in the woods by the spring, alone, tormented, and the only words she spoke were down on the road to beg for food, she was no longer Aetheria the strong pretty peasant woman who once lived at Portosa by Salerno, who made a pilgrimage to Rome and departed from Rome proud and defiant; Aetheria who voyaged across the sea and saw nothing but joy all about her – fleeing all the while from God, but guarded by his angels.

She was a wan silent female, and now, even without falling into ecstatic raptures, she had the pale tender transparent beauty that befitted her name Aetheria. She prayed a lot, silently, not knowing what she did. It came from her, she was not accountable. All she saw as she glanced about her was changed. She watched animals in the forest for a while, how they hid and kept a furtive lookout. She listened for hours to birdcalls and responses. And when once she wandered deeper into the village – the place she herself had come from – she was amazed.

For this was a place she knew, where those two, the clever man and the peasant, had courted her. Towards evening they passed her by, one after the other, and failed to recognise the beggar woman. She sat on a rock in the dusty street, silent, hand outstretched.

What did they do, the people here? She had lost all conception of them. She fled distraught back to her woods. She felt safer in her cave. She wanted never to go back among people.

She wanted to hide away, like the hermit.

\*

She was freezing, in bright sunshine. For hours she lay listless and without thought in her cave. Then she grew tormented and restless. But tears never came.

This dragged on a long while. And in her, week by week, tension grew. She wished it would lead to death. Her thoughts played this way and that, and never arrived. She no longer understood her past, her self. It occurred to her: I have become a dumb beast that breathes, eats, drinks. It is my punishment. But she could not hold on even to this thought.

Once she heard in the night: "You wanted to find distraction in the world. You wanted to empty yourself out. But you should curl yourself back into yourself."

The emptiness was so dreadful that in terror she had no idea how to save herself: It's Satan, Satan has me in his claws. He's dragging me down to Hell.

In terror she ran to the spring and lay groaning for so long that the hermit appeared: "What are you doing?"

"I cannot live. Satan has me in his grasp."

The hermit gave a little laugh. It was the first time she had heard him titter: "That's right." And then: "Did you think he'd leave us unscathed here in the woods, in our caves? He knows where to find us."

"Help me, so help me, please."

"Don't call on me. Call on God. Pray."

"I cannot pray."

Again the titter: "That's right, that's right."

\*

So she lay for hours afraid, not moving, in the scrub. The hermit came to fetch water, she kept quite still. And suddenly, as he left, she was mysteriously immersed in the words of the Song of Songs:

"I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not.

"The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?

"It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth."

Anyone with human eyes – a woodcutter, say, or a bird-catcher, or even a hermit – could see tree trunks in the forest and piles of dead leaves, and here and there heaps of earth. He could drink at the spring and notice how the water runs clear and ice-cold. At morning he could see the forest catch fire with the rising of the sun, and later the golden glow become brightness and dark shadows, and as evening falls the darkness swallows colour after colour until the rich resonant forest with all its creatures is melted into darkness, and shut away in its cupboard.

Aetheria's angel no longer brought warcries to her ears – To arms! To arms! – and no longer threatened her – Instead, instead.

It conversed with the higher angels that are closer to the wellspring of life, blessedness and grace. It spoke and sang with them. And more strength, a deeper joy penetrated into the being that called itself Aetheria, into the cavern of her tormented mortal body.

\*

Aetheria wore a belt of thorns around her waist, but there was no more flagellation.

She sat at the foot of the mountain in the shade of an olive tree. A camel caravan was approaching. She heard the voice of the man who rode on the lead camel.

Aetheria retreated farther into shadow. She sighed: "I am the game, God is the hunter."

The man on the camel said: "He's a good gardener. He watches over his plants."

When she stepped out of the shadow, the words were in her. Someone had spoken to her.

*See him sitting there, Aetheria*

See him sitting there, Pilgrim Aetheria. Hour after hour he sits unmoving in the pavilion before the house.

In the evening when it grows cool he drags himself up the hill. A servant supports him. He speaks to no one.

"He is a nobleman from Syria. Have you noticed him, Aetheria?"

"I have not gone near to him. The sight of him chokes me. Let go of me."

"So do not go and do not stay, proud Aetheria, but gaze on people as if they are pictures. He is letting himself slide into the abyss."

"What am I? What can I offer him?"

"You do not know what you have, just as you do not know who you are. Yesterday you were a seed, today you are leaf and stem, tomorrow buds will show brown."

"What are you saying?"

"The swimmer is emerging from the water. Now he lifts his head, now the face, now the throat, shoulders, chest, now he stands on his feet and gives a shake."

"What on earth...?"

"One thing follows another. Go to him, Aetheria. This is no longer a time for you to sit in a cave and curl into yourself. You must move now, you already see more than your eyes show. All will become clear. Go to him. You have tears."

"Longing, and grief. What more is to happen to me? Am I still not at the end? Oh, what have I done, how have I sinned? If only I were back in Portosa, on my little field. If only I had stayed there. If only I'd never gone as a pilgrim ..."

"Aetheria, do you shrink back in fear? Why does the sight of him oppress you?"

"It's my fault, I am guilty. We were young, Valerio and me. He loved me, and I egged him on. I toyed with him that first time. He was poor and I was poor, and I told him I wanted to go all made up, glorious in silks like Salerno women. I said it. But did I want it? I was just egging him on."

"And?"

"So he went off to Salerno and brought back silk. I never told him to go to Salerno and bring me silk. I was just blurting out words."

“When he wanted the first kiss from you.”

“Yes, he loved me so inordinately, just as I loved him later. So he came back with the silk.”

“In Salerno a man lay stabbed.”

“He confessed to me. I never drove him to it.”

“Speak.”

“Then there was no holding me back. I don’t know why, I don’t know why, I don’t know. I flung myself at Valerio like fire in dry undergrowth. We burned as if the blood he had spilled kindled our love. In the village they said we were so happy, blissful as only young lovers can be.”

“And when he attacked the Greek merchant convoy?”

“By then the fire in me was fading. Valerio didn’t want it to go out. He looked around for more kindling. He kept begging, begging. I understood him very well. I loved him more fiercely when he begged like that. But I trembled for him.”

“Then they brought him back, to Aetheria. Now, Aetheria, you speak otherwise than you spoke in Rome, with Ebonius. Back then you raised complaints against God. Stop rubbing your eyes, Aetheria, they have wept enough. Take a good look at him, sitting there in the pavilion, not moving. He’s about to slide into the abyss.”

“What am I to do? What can I do for him? Does he want my blood? I’ll gladly give it him.”

“You are to be cleansed. You are a guilty person. Mercy keeps good hold of you. The bridegroom has stood up. What was it you sang earlier? Say it.”

“Have you seen the one  
That my soul loves ...?  
Hardly had I passed by the watchmen  
When I found the one that my soul loves.”

“That’s what I sang. Oh how you draw me on. There’s something heavenly about you.”

And if there were nothing heavenly in Aetheria herself, if she would not rejoice as I stroke her hair, puff breath on her eyes. I part her lips, so that she can speak and give out what is in her. See how he sits there, the nobleman from Syria.

“What should I say to him?”

“Approach him. Speak. You’ll know it all.”

\*

Angels do not play like children in that distant Heaven. They raise up fallen humankind broken under a monstrous burden. The name of that burden is Sin and Guilt.

They contend for people, for their brothers and sisters of yesterday and tomorrow.

\*

Long did she hesitate, the pilgrim Aetheria, before that sad unmoving man.

“Must I wander forever, always a pilgrim? Never able at last to forget, to be snuffed out?”

The angel urged: “Get moving. Why are you idle? You think God lets you sit and stare?”

"I bow down, I regret what I have done. Do with me what you will."

"You hypocrite, always the hypocrite."

"What am I to do? What can I do, other than submit to mercy and disgrace? You succeeded in making me talk like this, at least. Isn't it enough? Demand of me what you will. Kill me."

"You'd like that. I have to drag you, I have to trample you, I want to be rid of you. You've got yourself into a tangle."

The angel stood in the sun in front of her, a vertical beam of light. She cowered back into shadow. He pursued her, stared into her face, and laughed:

"Such a lovely life you lead, that you cannot bear to put it behind you! Look, Aetheria, I've prepared a great big treasure chest for you, it contains wonderful things, many I can't describe. But no silk, this time. Some adornments are lovelier, more glamorous than silk. When you are clad in these adornments, the ladies of Salerno will regard their own garments as rags. And no one has to steal these marvels for you. You will find them for yourself. Come, Aetheria, open up the treasure chest."

"Where is it?"

"With him who sits sad and immobile beneath the canopy. He is sitting on the chest. When he stands up and returns home hale and hearty, the chest will be yours. Aetheria, you sang me a little song. Sing one to him as well. What song is sounding in your ears? What song, Aetheria, Aetheria, pilgrim?"

"About the little star that guided the kings from the Orient to Bethlehem."

"Sing."

"Long, long ago I was the star  
that came from Orient afar.  
In his crib the Christ Child lay,  
I shine, so all can find the way."

### *The noble Syrian*

Simri lived a long while at the court of the Syrian princeling Hadad Djori. In Syrian lands he was famous. He devised tunes, wrote poems, and sang. Then he vanished for a time from the court, came back, and carried on as before. As always he was a treat to look at: the huge beard, coal-black in the old days, now shot through with grey and white, his movements less boisterous than before, the smiles less frequent. The prince rewarded him, and Simri listened eagerly to reports of all that had happened during his absence, here in the prince's city, and in Syria, and in the Roman Empire – everything important and trivial, public and private. He talked with the new men, listened to songs of the younger poets, lavished praise.

He brought nothing back with him from his venture into seclusion. In conversation those times were skated over. He must have opened up to the prince, for after his return Hadad Djori, who was the same age and had grown up with him, granted him lengthy audiences. The two men debated during their long walks.



Two years passed, and it was time for Simri, a constant fixture in the prince's entourage, to vanish without a word, leaving puzzlement behind. He seems not even to have confided in his princely friend, for every day following this second disappearance a place for him was still made ready at table, and Hadad Djori delayed the start of the meal. Music played again and again, alluring, songs written by Simri, set to music by him.

But he had vanished. And this time he stayed away. The prince had enquiries made in villages and towns, as far afield as Antioch. He seemed to keep an open mind: had Simri been recruited by the Romans, had he been killed in a quarrel, was he imprisoned in some dungeon?

The prince grieved for his friend. Others thought: Maybe he ran off with a fair lady.

And so year after year passed. At court his name was never mentioned now. Too many in those days were passing from the land of the living.

Then one night the prince was accosted by a dreadful apparition. It was soon after midnight. The prince was fast asleep, suddenly he sat up in a daze, eyes wide open, heart pounding. For something was descending from the ceiling, a black thing, coiling and uncoiling; its body smooth and slender and clad in flapping fabric. It pounced on the prince and tried to strangle him.

Hadad Djori screamed like a madman: "Help! Help!" It was a ghost. It was Simri. The prince sat up and beat about him. He punched at the black fluttering flapping mass as it retreated to a corner of the room and up to the ceiling, where it vanished.

People entered. The prince was lying across the edge of his bed, on his stomach, still flailing blindly about him, over his head, into the corner, until they set him upright and laid him back down on the bed.

Candles were brought. He was offered wine, he grabbed at it, swallowed it at a gulp and asked for more. He pointed to the corner: It was Simri.

They realised he'd been dreaming. Awaiting orders, they stood for a while quietly in the room. The candles burned brightly, driving back all darkness, the prince glared around suspiciously at the others. They'd better stay in the room. And he went back to sleep.

In the morning he summoned his chancellor: Simri is dead, his ghost came to me in the night. What should I do? Did he try to kill me? He gave details. The chancellor had already heard. Hadad Djori seemed to accept the advice of his trusted counsellors, but the fear never left him. A week later he knew with certainty: he must hurry to Simri's aid.

No pleas from his mother, no supplications from his counsellors held him back.

Hadad Djori set off in the company of just two riders. Where he should head to he had no idea, and did not say.

For seven months they crisscrossed the hot lands. Long mountain chains, a valley in between that was called Hollow Syria. To the east, mountains rise like a wall, in the west they drop steeply to the sea. They looked for Simri in Baalbek, city of temples, on the green plains of Hems and Hama; they followed the Orontes River; wandered past Mount Hermon, its dome dazzling with snow. They were led to the Jordan, to lakes and swamps, the sea of Tiberias. They sought him in the valley of Jericho, among date palms and lemon trees.

Hadad Djori thought of sending envoys to Rome, to conduct searches there and save his friend and himself. Then a brighter, more friendly day came. The two riders were trotting ahead. People were toiling in a vineyard. Hadad Djori felt a compulsion to look back, and there, bent, haggard, with slow hobbled steps, carrying a rake and a knife, was Simri, climbing up to the vineyard.

Hadad Djori, overcome with pity, grief and joy, was unable to dismount. When the riders noticed that he'd come to a stop, they turned back and helped him down from the horse. He told them to wait. They saw him head slowly towards the vineyard, where an old man had just started work on the vines. Hadad Djori stood behind him. The peasant turned and moved aside to let him pass, but the prince stayed put. Then they regarded one another, the prince stretched out his arms and laid them on the old man's shoulders. Tenderly his face approached the old man's wizened face.

The puzzled riders below watched as the prince wept and wept on the old man's neck, how his knees trembled and the peasant let him slide slowly to the ground. At that moment the peasant motioned to the riders, beckoned them. Hadad Djori was to be carried to the nearby toolshed. Then they learned: he is Simri, once a famous singer, the prince's friend.

Not far from the vineyard, an hour's ride, were some ancient castle-like walls inhabited by locals. Hadad Djori took himself off to this place. He would not leave his friend. They stayed until the onset of winter, and conversed.

\*

Hadad Djori, the prince: "You do not want to dwell in the city, in my entourage. I understand. You were besieged by too many people. People asked too much of you. I granted you leave of absence. You'd already had one long absence, but you came back, and I never reproached you. You are a free man. We've been friends since childhood, and if you are seized by a wanderlust and would be happy to go travelling, then go."

Simri: "What do you mean?"

Prince: "You know. All can be done in friendship. When you came back last time, I questioned you and you answered, and you spoke of moods. I was happy to have you back. But now you have entirely kept away. You were missing from me, and I had to go in search of you, and now I've found you."

Simri: "May I answer in my own way? I have no lute here, but may I sing, a suggestion of a song?"

Prince: "So long as you answer."

Simri: "A swallow lost her way, a swallow flew in circles and could not find her nest. Why did she not turn her head? Why did she not descend and listen for the chirping of her young ones in the nest? Always in circles and then higher and again in circles. Had she lost her memory? Did she want to go back, what did she want, did she want anything? The swallow flew, soared high and swooped in circles. She circled through the air like a screw, whirled and bobbed. She dived, turned, climbed again."

Hadad Djori: "And then?"

Simri: "Nothing."

Prince: "May I say what I wish to say?"

Simri: "My prince."

Hadad Djori: "Here I am, face to face with you. I had to ride all this way to the frontier to find you, and when I ask why you slipped away from me, you answer: I'm flying, I'm flying."

Simri: "And you, why don't you do the same? I rode alone on the highway. Across mountains. I rode until I came to a region where no one had heard of me. I wore different clothes, I wanted no more songs. Only later did it occur to me that I bore no one a grudge for my situation."

Hadad Djori: "Which was ...?"

Simri: "I was growing old, ever older. I had grown old. I was fleeing from old age, my prince. Red is red and blue is blue, but only now. The sun shines on my roof, through my window, but only now. Delightful how the Moon casts its light upon clouds, delightful the moonlight on my bed, but already it is gone, already it has turned away, where is the light, the glow, where is the delight? You young lady, you rejoice over silver dancing shoes, and you wear a princess' train borne by four ladies, two to right, two to left, how you rejoice in the morning, your delight at evening, your memories. What is that? A blazing torch in the night, it goes out, the blink of a glow-worm in a dark forest, on a tree trunk."

Hadad Djori: "We know, everything is transient."

Simri: "Knowing is not enough. It's just a word: people say it and don't know it. Only slowly does knowledge come."

\*

Hadid Djori rode away. Simri had promised to keep him informed of his whereabouts.

### *Greetings, strange man*

Aetheria: "Greetings, stranger. I see you day after day. You sit alone, sad, not moving. When it grows dark you get to your feet and go slowly on your way up to the cypresses, on the arm of your servant."

Simri says nothing.

Aetheria: "Greetings, stranger. I see you day after day, and now stand before you. I'm told I must not stand mute before you and stare at you as if at a picture. I am to speak to you."

Simri says nothing.

Aetheria: "I never tried to speak to you, because you're a nobleman and I'm a simple woman. I come from Portosa near Salerno and I'm on a pilgrimage. And they've told me I mustn't approach you without saying something."

Simri says nothing.

Aetheria: "I asked the one who told me to speak to you: what should I say? He said that as soon as I stand here I shall know. But I don't know."

Simri: "Pilgrim, I am no Christian."

Aetheria: "Greetings, stranger. I'm glad you can hear me. You are sad, and suffer – like me. That's why I was uneasy, and wanted to pass you by. But I am to stand face to face with you, that's what they told me. I shall know what I have to say once I stand here."

Simri: "Pilgrim whom I do not know and who does not know me: who was it who told you to speak to me?"

Aetheria: "I'm glad you can hear me. I don't know him, either by name or anything else. I've never seen him with my own eyes. He's one of the Invisibles."

Simri: "Come closer, pilgrim. My eyes are weak, and I should like to study your face. Closer now. Sit with me. I should like to know who you are, coming so close and telling such curious stories."

Aetheria: "I'm the pilgrim Aetheria. I come from Portosa near Salerno. I'm on a pilgrimage."

Simri: "Pilgrim Aetheria, I am no Christian."

Aetheria: "The one who told me to speak with you never told me your name, or what gods you pray to. But he commanded me never to pass you by."

Simri: "He's one of the Invisibles, you say."

Aetheria: "Yes."

Simri: "My name is Simri, young pilgrim. I spent my life in the palace of Prince Hadad Djori. I have travelled all across Syria and even down to Egypt. I never came across an Invisible."

Aetheria: "Maybe you just never noticed. He'll have seen you. He pointed you out to me."

Simri: "If he has no form and you cannot see him, how does he make himself known?"

Aetheria: "He speaks. He appears in all sorts of ways. He goes past when you least expect it, and lets a word drop and then another word, and only after you've pondered the words do you realise: that was him."

Simri: "Speak closer into my ear, young pilgrim. I cannot move without pain. Place your hand in my hand, so that I can feel you when you speak."

Aetheria: "Your hand is freezing, noble Simri. Let me take it in both my hands."

Simri: "Now you hold my hand and warm it. It does me good. Now look, young pilgrim: the Invisible who directed you here has revealed a truth to you. He promised that you would know what to say once you were face to face with me. The words your hands speak are clever and convincing. I should like to hear more from them."

Aetheria: "Well then, noble Simri, give me your other hand."

Simri: "What gifts you bestow. Now tell me in words, wonderful Christian. This Invisible you consort with, the one who has seen me and yet I've never come across him, what did he tell you about me?"

Aetheria: "Oh, don't say you don't know him! He's seen you and you've encountered him, him and others – there are lots. They appear in many guises, they make themselves noticed in many ways. I've known them since I was a child. But I had no idea of their powers."

Simri: "The Invisible you speak of knows much and can do much. He knew you'd be able to speak to me. Yes, he knows about me. Young pilgrim, what message do you bring? Going about the region and talking of your Invisible. Is he a god? The god the Christians believe in?"

Aetheria: "He's been talking to me since I was a child. Sometimes in words, sometimes without words. He fusses about me in all sorts of ways, never lets go of me, never goes from me ... He's not God, but someone sent by God."

Simri: "He knows a little about me. He must say it to my face. I have to know it. What does he know? I am unsettled by this. Do not leave me, pilgrim woman, before you reveal to me who he is, this one who knows about me, so that I may learn from him more about myself and my life. For I am someone, after all. I *exist*, after all."

Aetheria: "What do you mean, noble Simri? Here you sit in front of me. You exist, you're not dreaming."

Simri: "Pilgrim, I am not dreaming. I would like to get to know this Invisible, this one who has seen me, so that he can tell me what he knows of me."

Aetheria: "Noble Simri, of course you existed before, in your former life, of course you were there."

Simri drew his hand back. He gave her fingers a squeeze, and his stiffened lips tried to smile. "Help me. It seems you can do this. Yes, I existed, and I thought: I am. I thought: I am Simri, and nobody you might ask in my home town would dispute that Simri existed. Back there you can hear my songs. There'll tell you how I lived in the prince's palace. He was my friend, he still is, he searched for me, every month he sent messages asking me to return. But I don't want to go back there, to the place from which I came and where my poems and songs are still alive. All that was, like myself, in the process of melting away, and still is. And because it melts away it was not real, and is not. ... You stare so, pilgrim. What has shocked you?"

Aetheria: "Back in your own land, were you a human being like the rest of us? Did a wife, a mistress, a beloved live with you?"

Simri: "I was Simri the minstrel. Back in my own land they can tell you of me. Sometimes women lived with me."

Aetheria: "You loved, and it was nothing?"

Simri: "The moment was fulfilled, it was so full that I sang of it, how there could be nothing more true, more genuine."

Aetheria: "Oh so true, noble Simri."

Simri: "How your eyes gleam, pilgrim woman. You too have loved. You were not always a pilgrim."

Aetheria: "How can you complain that it was nothing, you were nothing? Why would you dismiss your love, and yet you know what it was."

Simri: "When I hear your voice and see your eyes and how your lips pout with longing, I recall how blessed I felt to have such love. Pilgrim, you have awakened in me how it all was, all that I called Life and Being. Across our land came soothsayers and prophets, who implored us to renounce love, pleasures, deceptions of every kind. But why? Pour away the cup when you are

thirsty? I knew only that my thoughts, my songs praised the abundance of joy. What I turned into song was women, beauty and love. For every one of us, Heaven has strewn our path with blessings. I wandered tirelessly along those paths, as far as my feet would carry me. Pilgrim, there are men and women who drink and smoke and must always be intoxicated. I was an addict, always thirsting for more pleasures, love and beauty. Oh, I never want to renounce them. You have found the same, Aetheria, you are radiant. How you stretch yourself, you are changing. There is much in you that is yet to blossom.”

Aetheria: “I have known love. I’ve never forgotten. Ever since I lost it I’m an empty husk.”

Simri: “Pilgrim, my sister, my young sister. How to thank the Invisible that sent you to me?”

Aetheria: “He didn’t send me here to talk about my loves. He said I had to talk. I don’t think he’s enjoying this. But he can’t stop me from talking the way I do. Oh, it does me so much good to talk to you, to someone who can share my feelings.”

Simri: “Sister, did you bless your love, your pleasures, the joy?”

Aetheria: “Yes, yes and yes.”

Simri: “And you bless them still? But then you became a pilgrim.”

Aetheria: “Because I was robbed of my love, because it was not granted me.”

Simri: “Who ...?”

Aetheria: “The same one, the one that sent me to you.”

Simri: “No.”

Aetheria: “You think he’s not cruel. What do you think? We are the game, God the hunter.”

Simri: “You want to help me, but you yourself are suffering.”

Aetheria: “You will understand me. Oh, I’m so happy, noble Simri, that I’ve found you and can talk with you. The Invisible granted me at least this much.”

Simri: “I am unsettled. You have stood up. You’re about to leave.”

Aetheria: “For now.”

*I cannot see her, I am waiting for her*

Simri: She was here, some days ago. I cannot see her. I am waiting for her.

It is evening. The afternoon has gone by. I shall not forget these hours. Even though they are bygone, even though they can never return, dark and heavy, dead and enveloped in decay. It is not over, yet.

I sit, I lie, overcome with pains, my hands, heavy and thick, are open. They radiate pain. Empty word: pain. Thorns outside and tensions within, as if about to explode. It trickles from the shoulders, up from the neck, at the back of the neck is a fountain of torment, a never-ending shower. How heavy my legs are. I lift them, they are heavy as a pump handle. And when I put my feet on the ground they are like wax, the soles squeak but I cannot feel them. Once they were my feet, my legs. They have separated from me.

I sit and lie in fire. Fire from an oven. Once some people turned up in my town, they told of pious youths, I am not one of them.

I sit, I lie; no end to the pain. And I'm surrounded by such a terribly happy, green, warm, joy-brimming world. Sunlight on the curtain in my room. A table before me, and chairs. Flowers on the table; sweet music wafts in. But as if I have died already, I cannot grasp the melody. I lie in a cave and am paralysed and nobody comes to my aid, and nothing helps. And I cannot reach my self. And I think: there must be something that can help and save. But I cannot even lift my arms to pray. I'm paralysed inside and out, I have been stolen from me.

I lie here and burn. Outside is the deceiving green of trees. How falsely the leaves play on the breeze. If only I were already burned, ashes to ashes.

\*

Now the bad hour has passed. It came to an end at last. Fire trickles still over my arms. But inside I feel nothing now, it's exhausted, has given up. It has also yielded some of its torpor. No sunlight now on my curtain. The room is darkening. Things come at me. At least things still accept me. We look at one another. Maybe they're in the same way. And I am only a thing.

The battle is over. I was able to pray and give thanks, to whomever.

\*

Simri: "I was waiting for you, pilgrim. Thank you for not forgetting me."

Aetheria: "You keep your eyes closed. Are you weary?"

Simri: "We spoke of the fever, of youth and joy and intoxication. You were robbed of your love. Now look at me. I've been robbed of everything. Let me tell you about myself.

"I must keep control of my heart, and not slide into the abyss. For I know now what it is that seeks to overpower me, Aetheria my sister. I know now at whose table it was I supped for all those decades. I felt contentment, and went about brisk and upright. I did what I wanted. That was the sap and the blood of my body, my solidity, my strength. They're in ruins now, the solidity and the strength. I enjoyed them and never thought to pass them off as my self and take pride in them. When they brought forth something beautiful and praiseworthy I never hesitated to place myself to the fore, and sing my own praises.

"At this table where I had my place, and it was always, in some puzzling taken-for-granted manner, so wonderfully laden that I sat and felt contentment. I never thought it would end. An ending never entered my head.

"Now the servants no longer set my place at the table. Now in the evenings I lay down as always on my cot and draw a blanket over me. I sleep and in the morning I arise. But the body I clothe every morning is not the one that moved about earlier, of which I believed myself the mover. I can still remember that body, and know how easily and without strain the muscles obeyed my will and my joints flexed. I was able to command them and they did everything I wanted. They were swift as my thoughts. Now – another body has been inflicted on me. I must clothe a carcass I do not recognise. I must move about in a different carcass.

"When I look in a mirror and have doubts, lo, it is still my face, and I recognise it and can laugh at myself. But it's merely an illusion, the face deceives, within me all is changed. This

house has been stripped bare, a new owner has moved in, and behind my back has installed all his own things. It is old age.

“In youth I wanted to live, and felt all was well with me, and said: this is me. I accepted this youth and this adulthood and deceived myself when I thought I saw myself reflected in them. In heaviness, in weariness, in pain, in my sombre grief I must now see myself mirrored.

“I want to be master of my heart, and not slide into the abyss.

“These two things are you: ripeness, and old age. Now open your eyes – you too, sister Aetheria, and learn what you have lost. Was it you who became lost? You have said yes to the beginning and the middle. Now you must say yes to the end.”

Aetheria: “What awful things you say, Simri.”

Simri: “Let me speak truth, insofar as I know it. Let me complain. I am a nation that has been conquered. There is no justice, no law. Barbarians march in, ride in whenever they want. They do with me what they will. I am their prey.

“If I move, if I stand up, if I am resolute, sometimes there’s a change. For a while they leave the ground clear, but they always return.

“I have to remove myself from my body, remove myself from the whole world, in order to pull myself together. For what do I pine? For what do I pine? To take myself off to where my life is. How should I draw near to it? I have thoughts; but they are thoughts, what can they achieve? They come and go. Where do they come from? Can I trust them? And my will, my feelings, are they anything other than smoke from a fire within me? What sort of fire? Can I entrust myself to them? My body, oh, this structure so wonderfully built and designed – what has happened to it? Give it a couple of sips: they intoxicate, already a heaven arches over its head, its feet become lighter, it grows tipsy, we are drunk, I have to sing. My will, my thoughts, my feelings – what are they?

“Whom should I trust, to whom should I entrust myself, so that I can become what I must be: the flame that rises straight up to Life, to Truth? I must go in search of myself, and withdraw from all the world.

“Oh, Aetheria, everything decays. Whatever is filled with glory, it all decays. Down at the foot of this hill is a little house and behind it, up the slope, is a hut. Sunlight falls bright on the hill. The house and the hut for a while have a ruddy glow. For a while they stand in the light, which then pales. The sunlight fades. The green hills grow dark. The sky still holds some blue, white clouds reflect light.

“But this happens with everything in the world, with me too. When I think, when I feel, and how I think and feel – what sun’s rays are passing over me? A torment to think that I do not live, but – am lived.

“I sat in my room there, Aetheria, and looked out of the window. A youngish woman was in the garden, bending over a child. When she straightened up, I saw lines in her healthy face.

“You know nothing of yourself, you fade. You care for the child. And soon it will as big as you, a child will stand there and your back will be bent. Lines appear in the face. It all drains away so fast, in only a moment. And what is it that calls itself Life? Enough to make you weep. What is it meant to be, what does it want? Bright happy days, a myriad green leaves emerge



from shrubs and bushes, and drink in air and sunlight. At first all was frozen and black. Now it plays in light. Shapes emerge all at once from these growing things. There's no stopping, it's begun and must run its course. And at the same times birds are there, they live off the greenery. Worms crawl about and nibble at roots. To think what must be mobilised to implement all this, what was initiated by the showers of rain this week. For a while it is to blaze out, and then turn brown and fragile. And Earth covers herself in dead leaves. That's how it goes, how it blazes, and that is life, and is what it is, filled with grief and lamenting, with pleasures and yearning."

As noble Simri lamented old age, the pilgrim Aetheria listened closely: "You talk so strangely, noble Simri. You lament, and then provide your own response. We grow old, and older, and at last we die. That's nature, it's our fate and the fate of every plant, every creature."

Simri: "I lament this fate. I suffer under the fate of humankind."

Aetheria: "Your suffering, noble Simri, troubles me, and I should like to help you. I know about herbs, and shall look for some. But I cannot understand why you lament our human fate. It only makes your pain worse. It will abate if you just accept it. It will grow milder, like a dog that growls and bites when you annoy it, but then lies down when you say a kind word and show it a bone. Oh, we are not eternal, noble Simri, we grow old and have to die."

Simri: "This I lament."

Aetheria: "Who wants to live forever? We do our work, but gradually our hands lose their skill. How can anyone lament this, instead of praising the years when we could live and work."

Simri: "I lament this. How humiliating, to be a human."

Aetheria: "Back in my country we lived by the sea. A cliff soared up from the water, jagged and hard. If a boat hit the cliff, the hull would be holed. The boat would sink. That's how hard and strong the cliff is. But if you look out over the water, you see other cliffs nearby. They don't soar so high, they've already lost, some are crumbling. Water and sun work away at them, the action of waves and heat gradually wears the cliff away. And at last all you need is a little nudge with an oar to knock them over. That's how it goes with rocky cliffs, noble Simri."

Simri: "I am not a cliff, I am Simri. I feel the shame of being human, that I have to grow old to feel this shame. Woe on our pride, our glory. All that our songs sing about heroes. Weep, tear ourselves apart, go hide – that's what we should do."

Simri said no more. He laid his brow against a pillar and groaned. He ignored Aetheria. A servant came, put an arm around Simri's shoulder, led him into the house.

Aetheria stayed, sat all alone.

To be human: what a humiliation. Weep, tear oneself apart, hide away. For this I had to approach him, and talk with him. Simri is my mirror. Yes, we are mocked. The fate of humankind – I had never seen it like that.

### *Aetheria's response*

Simri: "You regard me so gravely, pilgrim Aetheria."

Aetheria: "Yes. You are my brother, you suffer and won't accept advice. You refuse to submit to what is inflicted on you. And the more I listen to you, it becomes ever more clear that you

speak well. I had already grown weak, but your words have strengthened me. See how mischievously they toy with us. Look, noble Simri, here we are by the roadside; here am I, and I was robbed of my life's sweetness and told I must be happy; and there you are, you were granted a life and now they present you with the bill. Justice, noble Simri, justice."

Simri: "Love and pleasure are showered on us, we dance, merry and carefree. All is deception and lies. Behind it lurks old age and pain, infirmity, sickness."

Aetheria: "Oh brother Simri, what have they done to you, and what to me, in the name of justice. Ah, to think I was about to kiss those hands of iron."

Simri: "Look at me. I lie at the end of a road that you must take. Don't complain if at the very start you are summoned back. But tell me, who is this unknown personage, this Invisible, I've asked you time and again, Aetheria: the one who speaks to you and stalks you in so many guises? It is he who led you to me. He has seen me. I have to withdraw from the world, and that is why I must know what he knows, and what he wants. Oh, don't be sore, Aetheria. I'd like to hear from him. Anyone as sick as I am will try any medicine. Say: how did you first meet him? And what has he done to you?"

Aetheria: "I've been stalked by him a hundred times. I know who he is. He won't help us, he's not on our side."

Simri: "Sweet Aetheria, let us call out together for him to explain himself, to me as well. If someone is putting us on trial, there's no trial if the other side may not speak."

Aetheria: "So you want to question him. He'll be glad to have you come and complain, it'll make his day. That's his way, and the way of the one who sends him. Look at me. He, and the one who sent him, have made of me, of a woman who used to live in bliss and love, what you see before you now, on this road. He noticed me once, saw my joy, and swooped like a falcon. Why? What had I done? Am I some animal, to become his prey? I was happy, but I wasn't allowed to be happy. And if you're young, you have to grow old. And if you're healthy and stride along, you'll grow lame and fall apart. He heard me laugh and sing. He saw I was in love, and who I was in love with, who was my all, my very self, my heart, my god. He couldn't, wouldn't let it go on. You can have no god but him, you are to love only him, the jealous, wicked one. And because he's almighty – and truly he is, I found that out myself – he can destroy and raise up at his own whim. He can cast you down into any misery he likes. And Simri, he's so mighty, so almighty, so supreme, he can say that whatever he does is right."

Aetheria paused. But she continued: "That's why *he* threw the one I loved to the ground, like a stone idol, and let him die. One morning, still full of love, he went from me to where I can't reach him any more. That's *his* doing, it proved his dominion over us. Once he'd done that, and I still didn't realise who had done it, I prayed to him all unsuspecting to give me the strength to avenge the dead man, the murdered man. At the very least I wanted to scatter the murderer's blood on his grave. And it was Valerio who gave me the dagger. Simri, I couldn't."

Simri: "Why?"

Aetheria: "He took away my strength. *He* can do anything. He's almighty. I'd gone off to Rome to find the murderer and kill him. *He* wouldn't allow it."

Simri: "Who?"

Aetheria: “The god behind the Invisible, the almighty god. Simri, he gave my husband to me, and he took him away.”

She broke out onto sobs, kicked with her legs. Quickly removed her hands from her face.

Aetheria: “And now I’m supposed to say: ‘The name of the Lord be praised’. The name of him who robbed us of happiness. Won’t do it – to the very end of my days I won’t do it. Because *he* knows this, he’s set his emissary the Invisible at my heels. Like the Furies going after criminals, he hunts me down. I’m a fugitive from god, brother Simri. I hide away and beat about me, I’ve already done so much to save myself. He won’t leave me alone. Oh, brother Simri, everything in me is shattered. Send me away now, my good Simri.”

She ran head over heels down the road.

Simri: “There’s still something magical about her coming to me. Magic in her seeing me and standing before me. A mystery that told her to speak to me, she the young pilgrim woman, to an old sick man in the land of Syria. I cannot rest until I have found out what this is.

“She brought a wicker basket to my house; I circle around it and want to open it. I tremble inwardly, but am not afraid. She has already done me good, but she doesn’t know it. It goes beyond her. Wonderful vessel, this pilgrim woman, this simple young person. I miss her. I long to see her and receive her tidings.”

### *Blessings, Aetheria!*

For days Aetheria’s hackles were up; then she had to rouse herself and go back to Simri.

He saw her approach. In his joy he thought to walk towards her – and was able to do so!

“Why clutch your breast, sister Aetheria? Because I come to greet you? But I’ve been waiting, day after day.”

“You’re walking towards me. You can walk, you don’t need your servant’s help.”

“Are you shocked? And you slump onto the bench. What is it, my sister?”

“Nothing, noble Simri, nothing.”

She sat up straight and stared at him. “You see what he’s capable of.”

Simri: ‘What you’re capable of.’

Aetheria: “No.”

Simri: “And this is why you clap hands to your face? Why, dear sister? When I feel so much better. You’re mumbling, I can’t make out what you’re saying.”

Aetheria: “You see how powerful he is.”

Simri: “I bless the hour, sister Aetheria, when you found me and stepped into my pavilion and said: Greetings, noble Simri! I bless too the one who sent you, whether visible or invisible.”

## Part 4: Defeat and Victory

### *Triumph*

“I sit down beside you, sister, and if you would grant me this favour, tell me at last more about him and what he has done to you. You say the Invisible took away your beloved husband and would not let you take revenge on the murderer. Indeed, he commanded you to love the one who took your husband.”

Aetheria: “As if I were a slave, a wretched despicable nonentity.”

Simri: “But if he is good, this mighty one?”

Aetheria: “Oh.”

And now she began to tell him and show him all that had happened to her and all she had had to endure from the Invisible who would not let her get away.

But Simri sat at her side, and the sense of joy came again over him, and as if under a spell he felt more relaxed and free of pain. And when she paused in her tale, he felt for her hand and implored her to be calm and not slander the Invisible, no, she must not slander him, she misjudges him, does him injustice.

Taken aback, she fell silent. He asked her to listen to him. As she sat there stiff and mute, he begged and insisted that she open her eyes, and soften her heart.

This he said quietly, and it flashed into her like lightning. She stood up and moved away. Her back pressed against the wall, she was shaking, staring at Simri as if at a ghost. Then she uttered little panicked cries and fled to the pavilion. He followed her slowly with sad pleading words. She hid her face in an arm. He heard her whisper: Stay, Simri, don't go away, I'm afraid, afraid for you too. Now he's out to grab you. You don't know it. You don't notice. Oh my dear friend Simri, if only you knew him. You think it's you speaking, but he puts words in your mouth. That's his secret style. He does it in such a way we never realise he's ordering us about and making us obey unresisting. Oh, I've known him through and through, since years ago. He can't fool me any more. I can be soft or hard, whatever he likes. Oh, listen to me. Come, Simri, come. Be careful. Take my advice, pull free, my brother, my friend.

Simri came. She took him by the hands and pulled him close. She laid her cheek against his. A salt tear trickled from her eye to his lips. But once again he was overtaken by an ineffable sense of joy. She moved her head and turned her eyes on him. He had a look of bliss.

She let go: so the Invisible has laid hands on him. So this is what the Invisible, my adversary, arranged, what he was after when he made her run from Simri.

Then her knees gave way.

She swayed. Everything collapsed in on her. Facing her was a human being in the flesh – what has happened to him – it is her doing. He is changed. He was unable to move, he suffered horribly, complained all the time, wanted to slide into the abyss.

And now something's happened to him, it's her doing, hers, pitiful Aetheria from Portosa. She stared in disbelief. She couldn't bear it. She had to leave.

But that afternoon she returned. She wanted confirmation. She must be mistaken. Surely he'll be complaining again.

But the horror – there he stood by the pavilion, in the light, and came to meet her, standing tall, his face calm and joyful.

She couldn't accept this. It could not be. She came to a stop, clapped hands to her face, she did not want to see that smile. He had to hold her up. She pulled her hands away. Oh that she had allowed herself to speak to him, against her will. Falling into this trap. He was shocked by her menacing glare. He asked why she was angry. She confronted him, arms crossed: "You're in league. You've betrayed me."

His shoulders lifted in puzzlement. He forced her to stay. Once she was seated she whimpered: "Now you see for yourself, Simri, what I've gone through. I can do nothing. I am nothing. He's all-powerful. He's the only one with power. I am nothing. Aetheria is nothing. Aetheria is a dog. There is no Aetheria."

To his horror she kept repeating this. And then she roused herself, ripped her gown at the breast, pulled at her hair. He couldn't restrain her. He wrestled with her. She overturned the bench. Her face was closed, she ground her teeth. The words she uttered were confused, unclear. Now he heard: "Simri, you don't know what I've done. You'd better know who you're dealing with here. I am cursed. I am Satan."

Now came a wild flood of speech. She would not look at him as she spoke of Bethlehem, how she had gone to the priest there and accused herself, she'd had to accuse herself because she was evil, she was possessed by the Devil. And the one she'd caused to be whipped, that wasn't the Devil. All the while the priest was having her whipped, she'd borne it with pleasure, because the victim was actually no devil.

"The devil was – me."

She stabbed fingers into her eyes. She threw herself down. She raged. Simri summoned his servant to help. He never left her side. He had her brought into the house. She'd better stay here, I'm afraid she'll do herself harm.

She threw herself onto the cot, groaned, screamed and cursed herself. Simri had a woman come and tend to her. She kept it up for three nights and three days. She clenched her teeth and let not a crumb pass her lips.

Simri was the pained spectator of this lamentable performance. He saw her honest face, now grey and twisted, her dreadfully dull and bloodshot eyes.

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Three days and three nights she raged against herself. Then she fell asleep. At first she groaned. Then for long hours she slept the sleep of the dead, well into bright day. Late one afternoon she sat up unaided and began to sing in a resounding voice, clear and enthusiastic. She praised and adored in the words of the Psalms the one eternal almighty all bountiful Creator of the world, the father of humankind.

Simri in his pavilion heard the singing. He came in and sat by her. She brooked no interruption to her song of praise. At last she rose from the cot, knelt, bowed her back, touched her forehead to the floor, and in heartrending words, sobbing, begged God to be merciful and forgive her terrible sins, remove from her this burden of sin. Time after time she cried sobbing: "You'll do it, you'll do it, you'll do it, I am a sinner."

She said: "I know you'll do it." The phrase had come to her as she slept, in a dream. A sinner who repents is worth more than a hundred righteous people.

Her singing and talking gradually grew incoherent. Incomprehensible words came from her mouth. They were mere cries and a mishmash of repeated syllables. She grew increasingly agitated. She was in a frenzy.

Up till now she had knelt and then stood up, hands raised above her head, rocking her upper body back and forth. Now her bare feet shuffled strangely forward, one before the other, she made little dancing steps, swayed from the hips, and now began to twirl about herself.

Several men and women had come running from their homes at the sound of her singing. They stood silently by the wall, watched and listened. Now Aetheria looked at them as she tripped by, stretched arms out to them and drew them in. They came one after the other, followed her movements, and lifted up their voices. They circled hand in hand with Aetheria.

Noble Simri stood entranced. And now Aetheria right beside him, singing: "Where are you? Where has my brother Simri got to?"

She grabbed him and pulled him close. He took two steps, two very slow constrained steps. She flung both arms around his chest, and he had no idea what she was up to. But his mouth opened to sing along with Aetheria. This was the first time in years that the great Syrian singer had sung, he whose songs, merry or lamenting, resounded in every street and lane. Now he sang a new unfamiliar song. For a long time he had not heard his voice, he thought it was ruined. But it emerged from his chest like one returned from the dead, who pushes up the coffin lid and in amazement sucks in big breaths. As Simri's mouth opened, his feet grew lighter, his legs no longer dragged at him, they flexed and stretched at the joints. In Aetheria's embrace this rigid mass came to itself, loosened up and became lively – gained new life. Aetheria, eyes radiant as the sun, spun around with him. His deep full masculine voice rumbled beneath the high jubilant voice of the woman.

They let go of one another, the men and the women, then fell into each other's arms. How blissfully Aetheria gazed about her and sighed. Her voice was calm and tender. She was back from a long journey.

Then she sat down.

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The dance in noble Simri's pavilion was attended by heavenly angels. No one down below had noticed them. Heavenly music had not reached the ears of the dancing couples.

While Aetheria knelt and endlessly sang God's praises and thanked Him – for she was defeated and admitted defeat – she had to lay down her arms and was able to lay down her arms, she had to turn herself in to God's custody and was pardoned – and while she tripped about with little steps and span around and uttered incomprehensible words, in her words and her singing were mingled jubilant angel-cries, and she tried to make them out and incorporate them in her human utterances.

The angels crowed, and thought of the words spoken by their Lord and King – whose name is the most blissful of all names – about a woman, a poor woman, who had ten drachmas and lost one, and went searching until she found the lost coin. And she called friends and neighbours together and said: "Rejoice with me, for I have found the drachma that I lost." And the angels knew also of the man who had a hundred sheep, but he lost one and abandoned the ninety-nine in the meadow to go after and find the one lost sheep, and how he never stopped searching until

he found Aetheria, the woman from Portosa. “Rejoice,” he cried, “for I have found my lost sheep.” And as Aetheria began to move and turn with Simri in his pavilion, as his joints lost their stiffness, his muscles relaxed and an old, young, triumphant voice emerged from his chest – then they rejoiced, those angels who restored strength to his limbs and loosened his bonds.

At last the jubilant angels had managed to come near to Aetheria, and take up a place in her soul. And at their urging the little star had climbed from the well. Aetheria was the first to spot him, and that is why she began to move about the floor and spin around and gladly follow the star’s bobbing.

### *Simri’s Song*

Simri, embraced and led by Aetheria, sang:

Noble Simri sang, at Aetheria’s breast.  
Her breath wafted about the face of this man –  
Hadad Djori’s friend from childhood –  
He sang as Aetheria held him up,  
Aetheria, the woman from Italy,  
A young woman come over from Italy  
With pilgrims of the Christian faith,  
With a horde of refugees, fleeing from barbarians.

Simri sang:

If I have lived this moment,  
If this moment has come to me, to dead Simri,  
Who dying fled from Hadad Djori’s palace,  
And had to leave behind his dear lord and protector,  
Then I am not Simri,  
I have not stepped foot in another land,  
In another existence;  
For in this existence my limbs no longer moved,  
And in this one I was racked by aches and pains  
That showed to me  
That I lay on the spit where lies the sacrificial beast.  
I had stepped into another existence,  
That I had not expected  
And not imagined,  
And not made into poetry.  
Never once dreamed of,  
Was never even able to conceive in dream,  
Of which our Ancients too had never spoken,  
For I had learned all of what they said,  
But this lay hidden from them  
And so was never handed down.  
  
For a great wall extends across this land,  
It plunges steep towards the East  
And sinks towards the West

And nestles down on the Euphrates.  
With hills and meadows and mountains  
Like a woman in big loose baggy garments  
At the feast.

Smooth and wide the river flows on by  
On which I was so often borne  
In my lord Hadad Djori's boat.

But on those mountains, where they soar up highest,  
On a mountain radiant Baalbek stood,  
Baalbek, temple city, which enchanted me,  
Temple city, rubble now, where I learned and taught  
And where I was fed and formed  
And where the one called Simri gained his education,  
Where Simri grew up, nourished on the milk of gods,  
As he moved through the gardens and fields  
And rode in boats on the Leontes  
In the region of the holy temple he never forsook,  
And never trembled in awe  
At the holy region of the Temple of Baalbek  
When from afar he glimpsed the walls and ruins of Baalbek,  
The silent groves –  
What had they bestowed on me,  
And Thou, Baal, burning in the sky,  
Sun God,  
Ashteroth, stern and chaste,  
Ashera, for whom young maidens give themselves beneath poplars,  
Adonis, who blesses and forsakes us,  
I prayed to you all and worshipped,  
Even when I dwelt in princely halls,  
And sang frivolous songs that my people never forgot.  
And the cruel Fire God, Moloch too, I venerated,  
The one who delights in human death-cries,  
He who chews us up in his hot jaws.  
His might is great, so great.

But now I can no longer worship you, Great Gods,  
And I beg you to release me from your service.  
For one greater, mightier than you, summoned me  
When sufferings and old age came with their oppression,  
When I was parched and withering.

You gods of Baalbek,  
I must go to where my heart and my learning lead me.  
You all are mighty, but there is one mightier still.  
I beseeched you all to help me.  
You were unable to stand by me.  
Oh, what was I to you,



What value had my prayers and pleas.  
I came into this foreign land; you all saw me.  
You let me wander on, left me lying in this pavilion,  
In sultry air, in haze and mist, and in sandstorms.  
Either you could not see me,  
Or you were feasting on my suffering.

And then this foreigner Aetheria came,  
And then she came to me,  
Fleeing from her god  
Who for love of her would not let her go.  
Pursued by her god she tried to escape,  
Tried to hide away from him.  
But he sees everything, and he tracked her down,  
My helper Aetheria, who became my saviour  
At the moment when he tracked her down.  
He tracked her down,  
And I was the spear he cast at her.

For how did he bag his prey?  
Not as the hunter stalks the deer,  
So he can haul it back to his domestic hearth  
And make a meal for his wife and all his children.  
He did not kill her, and then gobble her up.

What did he do to bag her, this God of all gods?  
He saw me in my pavilion,  
This man who crawled here from a foreign land.  
He saw where pain and suffering prevailed.  
And I was the spear he cast at her.  
And yet he did not make a spear of me,  
Did not turn me into wood.

To bag his prey, to bag Aetheria,  
He took this wretched man,  
This abandoned creature,  
That she might heal him, and be healed herself.  
In so doing he honoured me. He pulled me free  
Out of the crowd of Moloch-worshippers,  
I who sang of Baal, a friend of Astaroth, of Adonis,  
In order that I grasp the poverty of my life.  
She he took in his embrace: Aetheria,  
Kissed her, raised her up,  
And now  
She dances  
And I lie on her breast, her breath wafts over me,  
He won't have me burned in sacrifice,

See now, gods of my homeland,  
How He wakens me and enriches me.

I feel no pain,  
I bend my knees,  
I lift my arms,  
I no longer stumble, no longer sway.  
I walk on my own two feet,  
And my throat has opened wide  
To sing praises to this Divinity,  
The true Divinity,  
The Invisible,  
The True,  
The only One.

### *Aetheria's report*

Once again, in the middle of a conversation, Aetheria broke out into a dance of jubilation. Then the wildness dissipated.

She went about in solemn fervour, inwardly preoccupied. Simri kept her with him.

No voice spoke to her, the Invisible never announced himself. She sat quietly by the hearth and took comfort in the fire.

Oh, to think this could happen, that she had found this, that this was granted her. No memory of former days troubled her. The flower had bloomed. She gave no thought to buds or leaves, to stem, to roots. Was she actually still a plant, or a butterfly flitting above the flower?

She spoke of many things in a slow, searching way. Simri, recalled by her to life, sat at her feet, his life renewed, he quivered with excitement when she began to speak. Just look: here the poet learns of Dream and Truth, and how they find one another.

She pondered, reflected, and when she knew and tried to speak it out, it seemed not she who spoke, but like someone who reaches for a beaker, like a connoisseur who rolls the wine on his tongue in little sips. She listened to the words that she herself was speaking.

She never spoke of what she had experienced, but of thoughts and dreamlike distant things. She sat by Simri on her chair, grave, seeking the right words, waiting for the words that she would speak.

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Thoughts are like fields, said Aetheria. Lots of fields are left unploughed, untended. So plants grow all mixed together, only a few good ones are there. Everything's smothered in weeds. Anyone poking around here must deal with thorns and nettles. It's the same with our thoughts. You'd like to speak out, but it's no use. You come up with empty false words and lies, nothing but lies and false words. They pretend to be good seed. You never arrive at truth.

Such remarks were woven through all Aetheria's conversations. She was constantly brought to a stop, struggled to arrive at the wonderful things pressing in on her.

One of her themes was the little star at Bethlehem. So many angels are sent down to people, countless angels, but nobody notices or pays attention. People mistake their presence and their intentions. God strews angels all over humankind. He knows why, and the angels know it: they are to further the work of the Saviour, our Lord.

Oh, she sighs, how high the weeds grow! Lies swarm like locusts across the world. Lies don't come into the world all by themselves. They could never persist so long if they weren't set up and directed by someone. They fill the air with their discordant clamour, so you can't hear anything else. And so people grow confused and unsure. Vanity, lechery and vengeance take root. So people become vain and covetous. So much sinning. So much viciousness. And the lie says: that's who you are, it has to be. Nothing else can be expected of human nature. Nothing else is granted to you, and so the world can never look different. And that's why people sometimes fall into despair, they run away from home and curse themselves and say: I'd rather go my own way, at the very least it is my way.

But where do all these weeds come from? They don't grow by themselves, the wind wafts them onto the field, and they drift in the air for as long as winds blow. Simri, there are devils among us. When not rampaging out there, they rampage within us. They can make us their instruments. They're shameless and mighty enough to look on the Earth as their abode, and treat us like domesticated beasts. We look at them and don't know who we're dealing with, just like dumb animals and the farmer. These devils take control of people and feed on them

Simri sat with her and tried to follow. She was sent to him as he sat among thorns and nettles, wasting his life away. Someone sits here who was obviously sent by Heaven, and so her name was not unknown to Heaven. Now he can hold the hand that once pulled back – a little lizard trying to slip away and hide beneath a stone. But I'm holding you, you'll stay with me, and her hand lay quietly in his and steered him towards Aetheria's thoughts.

Simri suggested that the world was no doubt a game played by God and Satan, and so amounted to nothing. "But tell me, Aetheria, why actually does God allow this, and why does he not keep the whole thing in check, as he does the details?"

Noble Simri thought Aetheria possessed some great knowledge, and held the key to all the world's mysteries. Aetheria pondered, her brow furrowed, and she said: "I don't know. And it's not good to ask this question, Simri. Why do you want to know what the Almighty wants? You don't even know the most trivial things, such as why the wind has changed direction since yesterday, why it blows stronger today than on previous days, why in one year the skies let so much rain fall that we have floods, and in another year we have droughts. You don't know why. And neither do you know what it means when we dream. And whatever you do understand is by no means all there is. Why do you want to know it all? Because you can't control the world by yourself. Do you mean to offer advice to God? To Him who created you in your body, on the Earth that he created? He asks us so many questions, and we never listen."

When Simri never stopped with his questioning, during these days when he was so excited and wide awake, she responded:

“If you want to find your place in the world, don’t start with the world, but with the heavenly Father. That he created us and our world is the beginning of all wisdom. Ask our good Father what you need to ask. You will know the answer.

“The angels in Heaven know us humans and tell us what we really need to know. Ever since God’s Son came down to us, the angels find nothing so enticing as us humans. Christ laid himself on the Cross and his blood flowed across all of Heaven – every angel carries a drop of his blood on its wings. Angels big and small try to follow in his footsteps, they do as Jesus did, in order to guide people – their brothers and sisters gone astray – back to the right path. Many are at work, Simri, believe me. They lay siege to humankind; but how can they approach people embedded in thorns and nettles? We’re stuck in a mineshaft, buried alive. For a while the miners have a little bit to eat and drink, they live and breathe and imagine it’ll last a while longer, and they no longer hear the rescuers knocking.

“Awaken, soul, bestir yourself. Stand up, give yourself a shake. Lament, liberate yourself.”

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At that time an emissary of the Syrian princeling Hadad Djori turned up, bearing gifts and a letter. Will Simri, his friend, please return. He, Hadad Djori, the prince, lies sick, will Simri please come.

“Go to him,” Aetheria advised when he couldn’t make up his mind. “Bring peace to him.”

Day after day Simri delayed his departure. For hours he sat by Aetheria in the pavilion where he had first encountered her, where the angels had first seen him, where he first spoke with her. See the fellow sitting there, he doesn’t move, see how sad he looks.

Simri sighed: “It’ll all start up again, the sadness, the lassitude, the pain.”

“Go, brother Simri, have no fear. You are no longer the Simri who sat and suffered and I had to approach and start talking to him.”

She hugged him. He dropped at her feet. She was horrified. But she had to lay her hand on his head and bless him. She pleaded: “What are you doing to me, good Simri. God forgive me.”

Then he said his farewells to everyone in the house. Aetheria had to give him a strip of her headcloth. He was able to mount up on a horse.

She waved as he rode away.

“What has happened to me,” he asked himself in amazement as he rode slowly along, with the servant alongside. “I’m under a spell. It’s not possible, not possible.” But the strip from Aetheria’s headcloth hung at his breast. He felt in his insides the heat that it gave off.

“I shall soon find new songs, truer and more lovely than before, my loveliest, most authentic songs.”

*Where should I go?*

Where should I go? Aetheria asked. What is to become of me?

She turned towards Jerusalem.

She drew near to this holy place. But when she made a stop at Emmaus, at the place to which the crucified Saviour, once the fetters of death were broken, brought his disciples and spoke to them until they recognised him, a fog descended on her. Her spirit was enveloped in fog; she could not get rid of it. It grew denser and darker, until she could no longer stand straight but sank down in open air. She fell into a deep sleep. Goats gathered about her, dogs ran up and barked. Shepherds lifted her up and carried her to their shack. They thought she must be dehydrated, and gave her water. She swallowed some, and woke up. Then they led her a little way along the road.

Oh, she said when they had walked for a while, I cannot live in this country. Can't you feel it? It's like no other land. My body dies here, my body cannot hold together here.

She walked on. The Holy Land. Women and mules again, meek, silent, expectant. Now Aetheria did not go among them in order to lead them. She walked alone. What is to become of me, where should I go? Palms, Tiberias, the Sea of Gennesaret. Women with infants by their tents, Shiloh, Kidron Valley.

Jerusalem, lofty city. Here I am again. Heathens have overrun your heritage. Lord, they have desecrated your holy places and made of Jerusalem a heap of rubble. All around Jerusalem blood has been spilled like water. See Jerusalem, see me: The Lord cast his eye on me. He gave me a reprieve. I was a sinner, but my heart changed. I bowed down, my heart turned, I no longer have a heart, I no longer want a heart.

Some pilgrim men and women recognised her. Their pitiable condition was a shock. But she was glad.

She saw stern Eusebius and attended devotions. He kept a sharp eye on her. She prayed and knelt calmly, no twitching, no speaking in tongues.

When glances from Aetheria and the great Elder crossed, she thought: I've made you complicit in my guilt. You had me whipped. I never betrayed to you who else it was you should be whipping. I was a criminal. But here I am, Eusebius, have no fear, I have not been damned as I deserved. You must draw no lesson from this, Eusebius. It's not your fault. I won't place this burden on you. If I found grace, all the more so did you.

The brain-fog lifted. Aetheria moved in a steady joyful calm. All things, people, places presented themselves as if for the first time. She accepted all she saw and encountered, as if tame beasts thronged about her looking for kind words and a gentle patting.

Thus did she wander with the pilgrims. Where to? To the coast. She was taken to Pausanias.

At last he had found her. She had changed, grown older, even her voice sounded different. But Pausanias recognised her instantly. And he had longed for her too fiercely to keep his composure when she approached and gazed at him. He broke down.

"Pausanias, my life," she consoled him, she hugged and kissed him, she wept, she did not hold back. "Pausanias, my beloved life." Oh that this too is granted me.

When he grew calmer she sat at his side, an arm on his shoulder. His breathing was steadier: "Is it all back where it was before, Aetheria, before we separated, or even better, a thousand times better?"

The refugee was his again. He told how he had searched, wandered far and wide – until a few days ago it became clear she was still in this country, on the way back to Italy, and would soon be lost to him. So he redoubled his efforts, rode this way and that, made enquiries at various ports. Kept an eye on several ships awaiting pilgrims, and now – here she is. He was restored, his old self. All as before, and even better! She made no reply, he expected none.

He clung to her. He pestered her. When she came to his lodging and was alone with him, she was repelled, horrified by the way he behaved, he the educated Greek. He embraced her, fell to his knees, talked, jabbered, he wept and laughed. He pressed her to him and called her every sweet name he could find. She had to fend him off until his frenzy abated.

Then she sat with him in a blend of fear and sorrow. Her cajoling words brought him to his senses. Every day she had to swear not to leave him. How she fascinated him, how he clung to her. He couldn't assure her often enough: I waited for you with longing.

Aetheria: "You are very much changed, my friend. What has happened to you? You're not so cheerful and free as once you were."

"After I parted from you, my beloved Aetheria, I couldn't settle down. Back then I imagined I was enriching you with the wisdom of my country. But it must have been like this: I emptied myself out before you like a sack, you went, and left me empty and confused. I had nothing left. How did it happen?"

She rubbed her brow. "It's not me, it wasn't me."

Pausanias: "Soon after you went, I felt unsure of myself, as if I'd been exposed. That was your doing. My beloved Aetheria. Love is so powerful. And the longer you stayed away, the greater my torment. At first I thought: I'm so consumed with blazing love for this lovely pilgrim woman, and that may be the case, and love can for sure rob us of our reason. But it didn't help. Who are you, lovely pilgrim, my beloved Aetheria, are you devil or goddess, what are you doing to me?"

She saw this ardent blissful terrible love, Valerio and me. Aetheria, the dear little plant. Yesterday you were a seed, today a stem with little leaves, soon buds will appear, flowers with their colour and scent, all in due course. You carry this in you. Don't take fright, don't fight against it, you are not alone. There's a lot looking down on you. You mustn't stay seed and root forever, nor even flower. The uncovering, unfolding! Like someone climbing from the bath. Like a swimmer emerging from the river. First the head with its breathing mouth is lifted to the air, then neck, shoulders, an arm break through the water's surface, shred the transparent sheet. The river won't let go of the swimmer yet. And now he's found his footing, no longer needs the water. His feet support him. He climbs ashore. The river is behind him.

Pausanias spoke: "Recently at the market I saw a teacher from this country. He told stories, and praised a great hero called Samson. Everyone knew of him: his strength lay in his hair, and when scissors got to work on his hair, his strength was gone. He had a wife. She was from another tribe. She wheedled the secret out of him, and one night she cut off all Samson's hair, her own husband. Then her relations and friends were able to bind him and blind him. You have taken away my strength, Aetheria. Oh, did I deserve this, because of you?"

"I never did anything to you, my friend. Don't accuse me, don't frighten me. It makes me so sad that I wasn't good for you."

Pausanias: "I just wanted to show you how it is. It didn't hit me all at once, but in the way a man at harvest-time goes slowly with his scythe, reaches far out to left and right, and mows and opens up a path. That's how it came over me, slowly."

Aetheria: "What kind of path?"

Pausanias: "What path? As soon as I met you, oh friend of my heart, beloved Aetheria, I had a feeling you should not skip across my path like a sweet joy. Something jangled and quaked inside me, right from the first time you put your hand in mine."

She clapped hands over her ears. "Pausanias, speak of something else."

Pausanias: "Why do you hold back, Aetheria. Are you not a woman? You have gone back to the Christian faith, I won't ask why. But are you any less of a woman for that? My Aetheria looks out on the world so strangely. What happened to you? Were you ill?"

"Nothing."

Pausanias: "If you can't answer, at least give me a kiss."

Now she inwardly praised God and commended her soul to him: Thou hast sent me this. Whatsoever Thou doest, whatever Thou hangest over me, I accept.

She closed her eyes, flung her arms about his neck, she kissed him, let him kiss her. He uttered a cry of joy and pressed her to him, until she asked him to let her go.

Afterwards she sat dejected and gazed vacantly out to sea. Anxiously he suggested: "You want to take the next boat, and abandon me?"

Aetheria: "I will not abandon you, believe me, I won't abandon you."

His anxiety persisted, it was a love-sickness. It could not remain so. Every night he lay sleepless. I can't let her go, I sense she will abandon me, I can't let her go out into the world and know she's out there and is forever torn from me."

And when Aetheria saw and heard him, she was fully swayed. Who am I, she asked herself, why do I still resist? I must sacrifice myself. I must plead with God to lend me the strength.

She promised to go with him to Greece. He had friends in the town. He ran about as if enchanted, and made preparations for the betrothal feast.

Must I sacrifice myself, she asked. I will do it all, I shall endure it all.

\*

And then there she was in her room, she confessed all to her angel, called out passionately.

"What do you want?" the angel asked. "You are a woman. Why won't you follow him, in accordance with the laws of your people? Are you no woman just because you are a Christian?"

"But must I? I do acknowledge the law."

"Why won't you follow Pausanias?"

"Because I am a prisoner of God."

She waited for the voice. A long while passed. She lay down and called out silently. She wrung her hands.

“What do you want?” came the voice again.

“I implore you, unbind me from that law.”

“And what path shall the tender pilgrim Aetheria take?”

“I wanted Valerio and my love, it almost cost me my life. Ever since I’ve known God’s love, I only want to be the sinful woman who kissed the feet of his Son and bathed him with her tears and soothed his skin. Ah, you Invisible, how should I follow the law of women?”

She heard distant voices: “We await you with yearning. Aetheria, come.” For the whole night they sang out: “Come.”

In the morning, the deeper voice of the Invisible joined in. At last she could hear it clear as a bell. It told her: “Your time of struggle is over, Aetheria. It ended long ago. Now you know what lies before you.”

She kept silent.

The voice: “You have heard me, now you want something more.”

Aetheria: “Yes. That you remove a burden from me. I don’t want to hurt him.”

How sternly the Invisible had spoken before, like a teacher, a judge. Now the voice was gentle, tender, and brought tears to her eyes. It spoke like a brother, or even a lover.

“Aetheria, he shall not suffer, you will leave him a gift behind you. Go by night to his room. He will be asleep. Touch his hand lightly. He shall visit in his dream all that he knew of you before he sought you at the harbour.”

“And why did I have to meet him again this time?”

“To know that you are saying goodbye.”

Aetheria: “I am grateful that you take me to him one last time.”

And softly she began a song of praise to God.

The angel joined in. She praised all the miracles in the world, including love between man and woman. The angel stroked her cheek.

\*

Pausanias dreamed of her, in great delight. When he awoke next morning he felt it was no mortal joy, but something unearthly. He got up. Aetheria has gone. Aetheria has abandoned me. He grieved mightily. He lamented all day long. But he no longer went looking for her.

Soon he set out for Greece. The bliss he felt in his dream glowed and blossomed within him. He was able to speak of it with a philosopher; he told of the pilgrim woman he had met, had found again, about her second disappearance. But he betrayed nothing of the unfading unfathomable bliss that filled him at the thought of her.

\*

I want to go to Rome. I must go to Rome.

When morning came she ran from the house. Where to? Down to the harbour. A ship was making ready to sail. Oh, I’m going back, across the sea.



Misty heaving sea. She disregarded it. At the harbour of Brindisi she spoke to no one. And now to Portosa, to Valerio's grave.

Valerio, it's you, my own flesh. You've lain so long in the earth. You dear, blessed man. What I'm looking for still on this Earth? Nothing, I look for nothing. I'm simply here. Angels called out all night long: Come, come.

Her brother looked at her and said: "I know you want to go to Rome. Don't deny it. What will you do there?"

"I will go to Rome because Valerio, as you know, sent me there. I must seek out the Elder, venerable Ebonius, and tell him: now I can say what you insist I say. I couldn't, back then."

"I don't understand. The emperor persecutes Christians."

"I know. We must render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's."

"What will you render unto Caesar?"

"If he demands it, my life."

"You're crazy, Aetheria."

"And I will render my sinful soul unto God. I want to stand at the steps to His throne and praise Him along with all the angels. I shall be happy."

"Sister Aetheria, you will not go to Rome."

Julia, the brother's wife, walked with her in the garden. "Aetheria my dear, you were away so long, you were in Jerusalem, you've travelled enough. You've done all a pilgrim can do. Stay with us, and rest."

Now Aetheria wept and stayed unhappily with them. Her brother took pity on her: "Sister, I have you to thank for my still being alive. If you hadn't come to Rome that time, they would have killed me. Should I let you travel back there alone, so they can arrest you?"

She covered her face and groaned. The brother knew she would not agree to his plan. He said: "Well then, all I can do is keep you here against your will. I must tie you up so you can't run away."

They kept watch on Aetheria all day, at evening went with her to her room and tied her up. She implored them to let her go. But they kept her there, and she had to endure it. In the morning they untied her. By day she could walk about freely, at evening they took her to her room, and tied her up. By the third day she no longer resisted. She offered her hands, laid herself down and let them tie her feet. But when she woke in the night and stretched her arms, the rope slid down. And when she sat up and reached for her ankles: the rope lay already loose against her shins. She rose from the cot, went down on her knees, and said a humble prayer of thanks. Dressed quickly, then across the field, through the wood and on her way.

\*

These were the same roads she walked along with the five women, after that paradisaical moonlit night that began it all. Now Aetheria pilgrimed alone. She often hid away so as not to be seen. Back then she was torn asunder by grief, filled with hatred and vengeance, now she yearned. Back then she had two prayers, now only one. Ardent love set wings to her feet.

My God, tell me what you have in store for me? Do you have some command for me? Am I your instrument, your pliable instrument? Can I actually be one? Have you set me a task? My God, you have done so much to me, what do you still have in store?

Come, reverberated in her, and like an echo: Come. Come. You need only come.

She rejoiced: I am on my way.

\*

Mountain slopes loomed bright yellow. Gorse bushes were in bloom. Back then the women made camp here and sang: they had human bodies and wore human clothing, lived on bread and fish and fruit. But already they sang of Heaven, of Christ who died on the cross, and of Mary his mother.

In their twittering and whoops of joy, they resembled birds rocking on branches.

The long journey, long flight, heat and cold. At last the broad military road, army posts, strange peoples. She went unremarked. And here is Rome, great by no means feared by no means mighty Rome.

And where to find Eubonius, the venerable man? For this is why I've pilgrimed here to Rome, to ask after him, back then you set me a task to utter three sentences. I've come to greet you, and thank you, and tell you that I've learned them. It took an awfully long time. Praised be the name of the Lord: this sentence I shall utter constantly. And because my body is so weak and refuses to do what I must do, Eubonius, well, I no longer want my stupid rotten body. I don't want to perch like a bird in a tree and hop around on branches and enjoy myself.

She hurried to Psittakos' house. She once lived there a long while with his family, his wife and children. Others now occupied the house. And when she asked for Psittakos a man invited her in, questioned her: when had she got to know him? He's gone away, to another region. She replied: I knew him and his family, and once lived in this house.

"So you must be a Christian?"

She said: "Yes."

The man went to the door and called his wife. He gave her a sign as she stood in the doorway, and invited Aetheria to sit with them and take refreshment. And would she tell them all about her visit to Rome, and who she used to meet at this house.

Now Aetheria realised she had fallen into the hands of the emperor's informants and rounders-up. She shuddered. Her heart contracted, but only for a moment. Then she stood, and ignoring the others she lifted both arms into the air and praised God, and His Son Jesus Christ who stands by us in all our mortal perils, and shall redeem us. She gave no indication that she had seen through the man and his wife. She nodded to the wife when she excused herself to just pop out for a moment and fetch a melon from the next street. The wife left. Aetheria sat silently facing the man.

Has it come to this? Tell me, tell me clearly, that it will soon be enough.

When the wife returned with two soldiers of the watch, Aetheria kept her eyes closed. The soldiers stood right in front of her and bombarded her with questions: Where do you come from? What are you up to here?

She told them she was from Portosa near Salerno, and wanted to speak to Psittakos, she had lived here with his family years ago. Aetheria asked the soldiers: "Where is Psittakos?"

The soldiers grinned: "We'll take you to him. His dwelling place is just a few paces from here, ten feet under the ground."

Aetheria replied: "Psittakos does not dwell there. For he was a pious Christian. Even if the emperor has taken his life."

They punched her in the chest. "And you knew old Ebonius, with the beard? You'll meet him tomorrow."

\*

Next morning she was taken to the place of execution along with Ebonius. As they walked, Ebonius rejoiced and sang and thanked mighty God who had sacrificed his Son for us – what meagre thanks if we give our lives for Him.

Aetheria did not sing. She was wrapped in a cloud. Her gait was unsteady, drunken. She could not control her head, it wobbled like a loose flower. She tripped and stumbled. The guards dragged her back up and laughed at the distorted enraptured expressions on the delinquent faces.

Now the little bird can twitter no more. No more will you travel the stony highway, no more will you traipse up hill down dale along the coast. Aetheria, sisterly face, raise your eyes, look at us, speak to us. Greetings, sister Aetheria.

Profound streaming joy. Against a dark background a silver spinning top spins, flashes, vanishes in white sparks.

And now very close to her throat the voice of the Invisible, the words cloudy, an echo back and forth. Aetheria strained to understand.

"You show yourself again at last, Invisible? Will you reveal yourself?"

He called her name.

She nodded.

"Now you are free. Are you not afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Have you no sense of –?"

"Of what?"

"Of fear?"

"Only longing. What should I call you, my companion, my true friend? Am I not worthy to know your name?"

"You may speak to me."

And he whispered a name to her. She lifted her head and laughed: "That's my name!"

"Mine too."

Aetheria was astonished.

“Then you are my sister?”

The angel laughed.

He kissed her neck. He took her to himself.

As she knelt at the place of execution, she was already past the final step.

\*

Did Earth’s gravity, did Earth’s gravity still press down on Aetheria?

Turbid and confused was she, like someone who has suffered a heavy blow. What was stuck to her, squeezing her together? She tried to ask: where am I? But the question vanished even before it was formed. Thoughts fluttered from her like scraps of paper. She felt that much had happened, and much more was happening.

\*

What grew in her was longing. Such longing grew within her.

Who am I? What am I?

Until it happened: terror, shock, and she fell apart.

The husk torn from her.

Darkness dissolved in light.

Invisibles, such a tumult, surrounded her, welcomed her.

They rejoiced with her.

They adorned her, led her on.

Sister, such a hard journey you’ve had.

Now you have come, such a long pilgrimage.

And kisses, tears,.

Oh sister, how long have we waited for you.

How you struggled against our God.

She has entered upon a new life.

Such throngs, such whirring about here,

Such motion, like an ocean current.

But longing, longing grew within her.

The current tumbled her along.

Dull cries, crackling, rumbling.

Voices from afar, calling to each other, calling to her,

Angels calling:

Aetheria, stay with us,

Sister, how you’ve been abused.

We spoke so often to you.

We’ve called out to you since you were a child.

Since you were a child you have answered us,

You sang and laughed and laughed with us,

And yet you would not come.

They held Aetheria,

And now such kisses, tears, embracings.

Was it hours? Days?  
Years? Centuries?  
In motion, or just standing still?  
At rest, or flying?

Here was no day, no high road,  
Not above, not below, not left, not right.  
The millrace flowed on.

Aetheria pulled herself free.  
She surfaced.  
She loosened and swelled and freed herself.  
Aetheria, how you tremble.  
Vanished, sunken Rome.  
The village of Portosa near Salerno,  
Vesuvius dissolved in smoke.  
And the port of Brindisi.

Voices fading: "Instead of that, instead of that."  
On the vast black carpet sparks were scattered  
And as if she were nothing  
She freed herself.

Angels cried: Stay with us! Sister, stay!  
Help us to consummate Christ's work of salvation.

But she – already having journeyed so long,  
Pilgrimed so long –  
She had to reach her goal.

And after the struggling and whirling,  
After the spinning tumbling,  
Her longing, longing  
Sped her high like an arrow.  
Arrow-swift she shot up high  
Into whiteness, the unfathomable.  
Into radiance, golden, irremovable.  
Into the irremovable, the expectant,  
Into a gold like the honey of bees,  
Irremovable, expectant –  
Into sweetness, honey-sweet,  
That flowed all about her, hot sweetness  
That dissolved her, elevated her,  
Exploding in bliss.

Now I am come.  
Now I am here.  
And I am nothing now,  
And have only Thee,  
The sea of all seas,

The One of all Ones.  
And all I have is Thee.  
Just a little drop in Thine ocean  
And in Thy bliss,  
Breaking on Thy shore  
And shattering like spray before Thee.

So much had happened to her  
That she broke and scattered like droplets of spray  
As she approached the golden honey  
In silence, flying  
– Aleino, Uleino –  
And now the stem, the stem  
Could no longer hold the sap.  
Sap broke free from leaf and bud.  
From every pore like amber from fir tree.  
Longing broke free from Aetheria,  
And was transformed to blessedness.

And thirsting, entreating, and giving thanks,  
– Aleino, Uleino, Eia –  
And gentle sighing, until she gave in  
And the blue carpet unrolled  
And she glided over it.

\*

And so this is what happened to Aetheria.

She had wriggled free of heavenly grace.  
But now below God's throne is her resting place.

THE END