

VALERY ALEFF

ABOUT LOVE

JEALOUSY

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.

Song of Solomon

Les gens faibles sont les troupes légères de l'armée des méchants. Ils font plus de mal que l'armée même, ils infestent et ils ravagent.

Chamfort, Maximes

1

Enter the jurodivi, wearing an iron pot on his head.
Pushkin, *Boris Godunov*

He entered and stayed for twelve years. There was no iron pot on his head. His hair curled about his face like a child's.

2

Everybody thought he was not fit to marry but this premonitory idea, growing in some brains to the size of a conviction to coincide at his demise with the infinity of truth, had not originated in his physical qualities: he was neither old nor ugly. He was thirty at the time and had 'masculine potential', as his mother put it once in the heat of the moment. 'My son has great masculine potential,' she said to her neighbours who, incidentally, were not inclined to contradict her, being ignorant of her son's proficiency in the confidential, almost hermetic realm of sexuality. Besides, they all believed her son was passably handsome, possibly virile, sociable, sensitive, responsive, responsible—'gentle and nice', as *they* expressed it. 'Your son appeals to many girls,' they said to calm her down and thereby extricate themselves from a drawn-out and irksome conversation. 'He's easy to get along with,' they added, realising she was still furious and unconvinced of their sincerity. 'Why then did you say he was unfit to marry?' asked the mother, yearning for her neighbours' unconditional surrender; she thought that her victories over human beings—over her own husband, in particular—might influence her son, contaminate him, as it were. And she knew only too well that, on his way to the paradisiacal future she had mapped out for him in the days of his infancy, or rather during the period of her pregnancy, her son would need to vanquish a lot of people and also himself—his own sloth and indifference towards worldly triumphs.

Her neighbours and relatives often camouflaged their apprehensions behind non-committal and misleading remarks such as: 'Your son will never get used to a female presence in his house.' 'Don't I count?' his mother would inquire, her arms akimbo. 'Hasn't he got used to *my* presence?'

The first question always remained unanswered. And yet a great deal could be said about the obvious lack of femininity for which Boris's mother was renowned in the medical milieu and even outside it. As for the second remark and its far-reaching implications, her interlocutors usually hastened to proclaim that Boris was a loving and grateful son. But how could one get used to a woman whose undeniable propensity for bossing about even those she was hardly acquainted with was also known outside the medical milieu?

Boris was no hero and therefore felt an irrepressible urge to leave the paternal or—as his father was in the habit of saying—the 'maternal' house to start a new life in another district of Moscow,

preferably not within walking distance of his mother's room: to preserve the image of a thrifty, born housewife, his mother stubbornly resented taxis on account of the exorbitant fares laid down by the government, by the omnipresent Politburo. And the preservation of the other myth she had laboriously created in the minds of her neighbours and distant relatives—the myth of wealth and prosperity—demanded that she relinquish the use of public transport.

Boris was aware that his mother could walk and even run for hours on end, which discouraged him from settling down anywhere near the house he had lived in ever since his birth. However, he did not have to move to another city or another country.

There was another possibility of escape: marriage, the foundation of a separate household. What if I marry? he asked himself, blinking and manfully fighting back his tears. But as his mind gradually focused upon the rituals and impedimenta of matrimony he was reminded of his unfortunate relationship with the young lady named Burenkina who had forsaken him for reasons best known to herself. Actually he had never tried to probe into those reasons for fear of lighting upon the truth which was unlikely to be agreeable or profitable: he had no intention of altering his ways and habits, his private rituals.

After Burenkina's flight from the prison of his tenderness he resolved not to leave his bed for a month, which was not very much different from his ordinary behaviour. But he even refused to go to the lavatory so that his mother was obliged to borrow a chamber pot from her newly-married niece. And he would throw his slippers at whoever attempted to obtrude on his privacy. Out of commiseration the intruders always brought the slippers back, carefully putting them within his reach.

'Women!' he shouted sometimes in those days of despair. 'Women! Women!' His neighbours naïvely believed he alluded to his mother.

It is no wonder that everybody was astonished when on June 24, 1981 he married Nina Turantseva who was eleven years his junior and behaved like the little mermaid from Andersen's tale. And she looked like a Fayoum portrait.

They married in the Soviet Union and divorced in Russia.

3

Boris began to practise his future disagreements with mankind at the age of five by openly confronting his mother on the subject of *ribyy gîr* (cod-liver oil) which Soviet infants were supposed to swallow six times a day in order to lubricate the machinery of their metabolisms for the robotic lifestyle of communist adulthood. He often narrated this 'fishy' confrontation to his wife and colleagues, whenever they questioned his tenacity and courage or accused him of indolence. But his mother had no recollection of that childhood revolt. 'Why don't you confront me now?' she shouted. 'Why can't you do *now* what you did in your babyhood?'

Upon hearing these provocative questions Boris habitually left the apartment. His symbolic departures gathered no momentum, however, and, contrary to his wife's ardent hopes, did not develop

into a more spacious, substantial and lasting act—the departure from the hospital where he was working under the command of a famous surgeon, Ruta.

A man lying on a divan likes the divan—all divans, in fact. Boris adored divans. And he lay down on them pretty often, and he slept on them, and he dreamt on them.

Boris loved Ruta, his hospital, his home and Russia. To him Russia was nothing but a large divan on which he had blissfully dozed off in his babyhood—right after leaving his mother's womb in a suburban maternity hospital. One might judiciously presume he was still lying in his cradle, now and then stirred into a rocking movement by his mother's stubby and generous fingers. One might go one step further and conjecture that he was still lying in his mother's womb impervious to threats and rasping sounds from the outside world and consequently to his wife's entreaties. He was permanently in the hazy state of a man daydreaming on some horizontal surface—even in his 'vertical' hours, even during his infrequent outbursts of evil temper. The point is he had no penchant for daydreaming so that many people mistook him for a down-to-earth, active individual prepared to look after the sick round the clock.

Why had Boris become a medical student? His mother was a registered nurse and he had merely succumbed to the allurements of quietism, sharing on that occasion his mother's divan—a praiseworthy feat, considering it was no easy matter to share anything with the stocky registered nurse. Of course there was another divan nearby, his father's. But Boris did not love his father. And his father did not love him, lavishing his entire supply of paternal affection on his second son, Michael.

'I was a sickly child and my parents sent me to a school in the woods,' he said once to Nina. 'Fresh air, you know. A lot of exercise. I had heart problems. I think I'll die very soon. I'm not long for this world.'

'Do you still have heart problems?' Nina asked, bending over his chest.

'That's why I decided to become a doctor—to overcome my weakness. I've struggled all my life against myself and others.'

Romantic diseases, romantic decisions, romantic struggles, romantic woods, Robin Hood, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov who was also a doctor and nursed the destitute in muddy Russian villages—all these images floated before Nina's half-closed eyes as Boris talked to her confidentially from the depths of a divan or from the turbid waters of a bath. He would arouse a multitude of feelings and associations within a short dialogue. In those romantic moments his detractors appeared insignificant and stupid.

Boris had a knack of killing at least a dozen birds with one stone. There were a great many birds above him, around him, inside him. And he appeared to have as many stones at his disposal: his precarious health, his hard work, his professional honesty, his profession as such, his colleagues' professional dishonesty, his colleagues' careerism, his own disinterested nature, his inborn goodness, his inborn shyness, his culinary talent, his attachment to family values, other people's detachment from

family values, his knowledge of Russian poetry, his knowledge of music, his brother's ignorance of music, his knowledge of English...

This gravel was so minuscule and deceitful that whatever he said in vindication of his sloth would be compressed into something one might easily hold in the palm of one's hand—a beach pebble or even a gall-stone. Unfortunately neither his friends nor even his wife were permitted to hold this stone of his: Boris flung it right in their faces.

He often used the expression 'to kill two birds with one stone', anxious as he was to demonstrate his knowledge of English. He would utter it in his mother tongue—and in his mother's tone—so as to guard against the disagreeable remarks that his accent might have elicited from the 'birds'. In a way, the English expression matched his personality far better than its Russian counterpart 'to kill two hares with one shot'—for the simple reason that he did not know how to handle a rifle or indeed any material weapon except stones.

In recent years, weary and frustrated, he did not even bother to pick up stones and throw them all around him: his sloth saved his colleagues, acquaintances and his dear little wife.

He had another immaterial weapon at his disposal. When insulted or provoked by his detractors he would withdraw into himself or just go out. He favoured the latter solution which usually enabled him to interrupt a harmful conversation somewhere in midstream. He would dash downstairs and storm into the street, his arms swinging like mad pendulums.

He *was* surrounded by enemies who did all they could to prevent him from finishing his dissertation and becoming a second Ruta. As a matter of fact, within his mental dictionary, the words 'friends' and 'enemies' were interchangeable, depending largely on the stories he recounted to Nina.

He lied to her whenever something—a nightmare, a noise—shook him into wakefulness. In the first years of his married life he did not yet shirk the drudgery of seducing a beautiful maiden.

4

He loved her, he loved her, he loved her. And he understood at once what kind of man *she* would fall in love with: a romantic yet earnest doctor or teacher fully devoted to his profession. By a stroke of luck his medical 'vocation' suited their romance down to a T: Nina was fed up with artists, pirouettes, ostentatious hobbies, snobs, geniuses, Bohemia.

Nina Turantseva was chiefly brought up by her grandmother who hated the lure of footlights and used to advise her granddaughter to eschew anything connected with artists and their 'filth'. In her opinion all artists were prostitutes, males and females alike; they were also drunkards, unreliable species and doormats. First and foremost, they could not be trusted in family matters. 'He'll betray you!' she shouted when watching television. 'You need a family man. Don't marry *him*! You need an earnest man! You shouldn't marry your father!'

Nina's father was not an artist, strictly speaking, but had a lovely imagination and could not help worshipping the fair sex. For all her hatred of the arts, the grandmother resorted to literary examples

whenever her thoughts turned to her son-in-law; whenever her thoughts were in a position to turn. She called him Eugene Onegin, Don Juan and, strangely enough, Raskolnikov. 'You shouldn't marry Raskolnikov!' was one of her favourite injunctions. In a fit of pique, she would even recall *The Pique Dame* where a young officer murders an old countess with an immaterial bullet and drives her granddaughter to suicide.

Nina was a painter and for two years worked at the Taganka Theatre, which might have been partly responsible for her grandmother's aggressivity towards *la Bohême*. 'One of these fine days I'll go and see your future husbands, your geniuses!' she shouted, bumping into various pieces of furniture.

Once Nina saw her on Taganka Square. The grandmother talked to every male youngster strolling around—every male youngster she could lay her hands on in the literal sense. These young men were quite far from the stage door, from the theatre itself: the grandmother had no idea where the theatre was situated. But she suspected that every young man setting foot on Taganka Square had something to do with the Taganka Theatre, with the theatre world, with arts and crafts, with Hermann, with her granddaughter Nina, with her own future. And she talked to them, and she upbraided them, and she shouted: 'Over my dead body! You will not have my Nina!'

Boris was no artist. And he *was* earnest, serious, sombre, sober, staid, sedate. His face seldom departed from its solemn, omniscient expression scored by a few premature wrinkles which, however, did not make him look older. When asked the typically Russian question: '*Kak nastroyenie*' (How's your mood)? he obstinately answered: '*Rovnoe*' (Steady). What seemed to jar with his traditionally solemn face was his habit of bursting out of the houses where he was criticised or merely underestimated.

It was only on the eve of their divorce that his reactions and movements slowed down to reflect the tranquillity of his face: his sloth had finally reached and drugged his nervous system. Now he went out defiantly, with dignified gravity, or just lay down and dozed off.

At the time of their divorce his whole body and soul found themselves under the thumb of his sloth; every particle of his being was dominated and tyrannised by Sloth with the exception of his love, distributed equally between his soul, body and mind.

5

He loved her madly, deeply, truly. It was love at first sight. And that first sight lasted half-an-hour.

She appeared at the end of a long corridor leading to the bed where her grandmother was lying and snoring. He was on the telephone but his eyes had a neutral, 'impervious' expression which seemed to repulse his own words and the ones trickling into the air from the receiver. 'There's a leak somewhere,' his eyes imparted to a non-existent observer, 'the leak of words...' The corridor offered itself to his eyes and his eyes accepted the offer, for want of anything better.

He spotted her at once. His extramundane glance instantly turned into a purposeful gaze and this gaze followed her to the door beyond which her grandmother was dying. And his body followed her too.

The seventy-eight-year-old woman was dying. Her heart had declined to cope with the twists and turns of Nina's imaginary destiny so that now she was stuck in a kind of no-man's land deprived of artists, husbands, drunkards and prostitutes. The only thing she could still think about was her own death.

'If I don't operate on your grandmother tomorrow, she'll die,' said Boris, his fingers trembling under Nina's very nose. 'Look at my fingers. Everything will be all right.'

The grandmother woke up and refused point blank to go under the knife (*idti pod nozh*). But Boris insisted. He even shouted at the grandmother, hamming it up to exhibit the power of his character and the earnestness of his disposition. And Nina witnessed that historic outburst of creative energy.

She did not witness the operation but visualised it in minute detail: Boris in a mask, Boris with a knife, like Robin Hood or Zorro.

Two days afterwards Boris staged another outburst of creative energy: in the course of a regular morning round he stood up to an influential, sixty-two-year-old surgeon, Guronsky, whom he accused of negligence and indifference. 'You have a marvellous granddaughter,' he said on his way out of the ward. He was so jittery that his mouth uttered these words in the wrong direction—towards a crow perched on an oak tree. But, somehow, the grandmother heard them and appreciated her doctor's good taste. She also appreciated his positive energy which, in the days of her illness, she preferred not to regard as a harbinger of matrimonial quarrels.

Once the operation was over, she recalled her granddaughter's conjugal future and decided that Boris was an eligible young man.

'He is young and earnest,' she said to Nina.

'He is thirty, grandma.'

'He is earnest and serious.'

The grandmother did not remind Nina that Boris was a good doctor. Nor did she touch upon the necessity of having a good doctor at hand—in the same apartment or at least in the family. She cunningly kept these thoughts and projects to herself. But she had to say *something* to carry her projects through. So she added after a momentary pause, 'He is handsome and nice.'

She also recounted the story of the morning round. 'He is a dissident,' thought Nina and in a twinkling of an eye her grandmother's doctor became a Nobel Prize Winner—a hero like Sakharov. 'Do you think he could get the Nobel Prize for Peace?' she asked her grandmother. But her grandmother cared only for *her* peace—her private, inner peace, unmarred by pain.

6

'He is not an artist, so I invited him to dinner,' the grandmother announced a fortnight later.

'When?' asked the granddaughter, furtively touching a fresh pimple.

'He is much better than your Ivanutsky,' answered the grandmother.

While preparing himself for the visit, Boris read *The Book of Quotations* and learnt a few Pasternak poems by heart. He also borrowed a white shirt from his brother.

On the day of the dinner he paid a visit to a schoolmate who patiently sat through a lengthy encomium on Nina's beauty, purity, intelligence and earnestness.

'Her legs grow from her neck (*ot shei rastut*),' Boris rounded off, his fingers trembling on the oilcloth.

'Drink up!' said the schoolmate, handing him a huge glass of vodka.

Boris seldom consumed (*upotreblial*) alcohol: he was neither artist nor drunkard. The glass of vodka put him in good spirits—too good perhaps for his frail constitution. When he finally arrived at Nina's flat the Earth seemed as remote as Mars or Jupiter. And he realised he had forgotten the quotations and Pasternak's lyrics.

So he hardly said anything in the course of the fifty-nine minutes he spent at the white, linen-covered dinner table. Upon entering the living room he apologised in a feeble voice: 'I'm sorry, I'm late. A lot of work, you know,'—the two sentences he had learnt by heart along with the poems and quotations. Why hadn't he forgotten these sentences along with the quotations and poems? He asked himself this question for fifty-seven minutes. Then he stood up, apologised again and said he had a lot of work to do.

'A lot of work to do,' he repeated to make everybody understand what he was talking about. Incidentally, he also desired to understand the meaning of what he was saying to his hostess and future wife. It is a nuisance not to understand one's own words.

'I understand,' said the grandmother. Nina said nothing. She looked at her future husband with admiration.

Boris stormed out into darkness, turned left, began to run, froze in his tracks and leaned against a wall. Within half a minute he managed to empty his body, soul and mind to such an extent that Nina disappeared somewhere along the pavement. And then he found her—somewhere on the curb. 'I'll never let her go again! Never!' he swore inwardly. He tried to take an 'outward' oath and instantly regretted it.

But Nina was inside him and he smiled triumphantly as his body supplied his consciousness with that precious piece of news. Another victory, he said to himself, heroically resisting the temptation of sharing his victory with solitary passers-by. But Nina was also outside him. But she was still within his reach. He played with the 'buts' for almost an hour and suddenly came to an unprecedented decision. I'll have her! he shouted inwardly, his brain vibrating like a loudspeaker. I'll have her! She'll be mine!

During the following week he memorised two Tsvetaeva love poems. Prodded into action by the rhymes and rhythms resounding throughout his ego—sometimes to the detriment of his patient's lives—he even tried his hand at free verse, light-heartedly assuming he would have fewer problems if liberated from the constraints of rhyme and prosodic intricacies. He let his inspiration run its course

unhampered and soon found he was unable to catch up with it or indeed with anything akin to flights of lyricism. His poetry seemed to have been exiled beyond the frontiers of the Soviet Union and he was prevented from writing it down: he had no visa.

One afternoon he realised his wastepaper basket was full to overflowing, whereupon he recalled another schoolmate of his who had died a few months before, bequeathing him a thick notebook. After a frenzied search he turned up that notebook in a pile of rubbish which had not been disposed of through the negligence of his father to whom his wife had assigned the task of cleaning the flat.

His late friend's handwriting proved to be quite different from his own. Never mind, he thought, fiddling with a pen. I'll never write in front of her. I'll never send any letters to her. I'll never write letters to her grandmother. But I should ring her grandmother up.

He did and in the same afternoon the grandmother obligingly persuaded Nina to meet him at the Gorky Park of Hollywood fame.

Nina also wished to change her lifestyle by moving to another, faraway place. She knew that her grandmother had nothing against taxis and their drivers; she consequently envisaged leaving Moscow for good and settling down in one of the Baltic republics. Ivanutsky was from Riga and Nina often stared at the map of the Soviet Union, measuring out the distance between their respective flats. She relied on her grandmother's aversion to planes and in general to whatever might make her lose touch with the Earth. And she regularly reminded her grandmother of the stink one had to endure in Soviet trains.

'This park isn't very far from your flat. My flat is much further from your flat than this park,' said Boris in seductive tones. 'And my family owns a country house which is still further away from here. I mean, from your flat. And my hospital will put a huge apartment at my disposal, which will be even further from your house.' He drew a deep breath as if the words he was going to utter needed a larger quantity of air. 'I like your grandmother. Doctors like the people who they've saved from inevitable death.' His Russian was pompous and somewhat primitive but Nina enjoyed its unconventional touch: so far she had heard only artist's slang and her grandmother's harangues.

'Would you care to have a look at the pages of this notebook?' asked Boris as soon as they sat down on a bench.

'Are these *your* poems?' asked Nina who, like many high-strung women, had a kind of sixth sense.

'I wrote them at school. Even my handwriting has changed. Completely. It's unrecognisable.'

'Do you write any poetry *now*?'

'I wrote a few poems last week. But I can't show them to you. I'm very timid, you know.'

Nina was far more moved by Boris's romantic heart than by the poems themselves. He must be writing much better now, she thought. Even his handwriting has changed. She smiled. Pity. I like *this* handwriting. And she closed the notebook.

Only five years later did he acknowledge his substitution, his poetical theft. Five years later he could afford to tell his wife the truth: she had already got accustomed to him. And he believed in the implacable power of habit. Besides, they had a four-year-old daughter.

7

Boris realised he had wasted too much time on poetry. At their next meeting he audaciously broached the subject of 'serious intentions'.

'I'm an earnest man. I don't think it's nice to go about with girls like that,' he announced.

'Like what?' asked Nina. She sounded like Andersen's mermaid beached on the shore.

'Marriage is the only solution to love problems.'

The following afternoon, anxious to accelerate the tempo of the wedding march, he declared to Nina on the telephone that he was shortly to be sent to Siberia.

'Straightaway!' he corrected himself in a counter-tenor voice.

'Why?' she exclaimed, horror-stricken. 'He *is* a dissident,' flashed through her mind. 'Don't speak of it over the phone!' she shouted.

'What is he speaking of?' shouted the grandmother. 'Is he a dissident?'

'Siberia. If you don't marry me at once,' he said. 'If you do, I won't go.'

'Does it depend on *you*?'

'On *you*,' he answered.

He did not go to Siberia. He would not have gone to Siberia even if Nina had settled down in Riga, in Tallinn. But the image of Chekhov bent over a corpse in some muddy Russian village, amongst bears, wolves and foxes, once again loomed in the rosy mist of Nina's imagination.

What would he have said had she found him out? 'I loved you so dearly...and I was afraid you might...' he said as he elucidated the mystery of his juvenile poetic efforts. She was touched. She forgave him. Even five years after their marriage she was still in love with him.

Did she love him two months *before* their marriage? She was impressed by him. And she was impressed by the fact that he had impressed her grandmother—a feat worthy of an entry in the Guinness Book of Records. Her grandmother had never liked Ivanutsky. And she liked Boris partly because she did not want Nina to marry Ivanutsky or anybody else—her libertine father, for instance.

In the meantime Boris invited Nina to his country house—in his mother's absence. Nina was far more moved by his love for nature and flowers than by the country house itself which turned out to be small and musty and reminded her of the muddy Russian villages she had seen rather often in her medicine-inspired daydreams; but this time there was no Chekhov in the Russian village. After all, she did have the sixth sense that so many high-strung women boast of: there was no Chekhov in the village.

Unfortunately Nina paid no heed to her sixth sense. In the bustle of the forthcoming wedding she even ceased to hearken to her other senses and sensations which had constantly and voluptuously come to the fore in the pre-Boris epoch of her existence.

The bride and bridegroom had an argument on the pockmarked, lesion-distorted road to the country station from which a foul-smelling Soviet train was to convey them back to Moscow. Nina continued to stroll along the road; Boris had an urge to dash out and hurtle down some stairs. But there was no staircase in the neighbourhood; no Chekhov, no stairs. So he merely dropped back, letting Nina face up to the contingencies of the Russian countryside on her own. As if conjured up by the danger-fraught atmosphere of the argument, four teenagers appeared in the distance. Inexorably they advanced towards Nina, now and then jumping in the air; there were flowers in their hands, there were knives in their pockets. Boris did not quicken his pace. Nor did he slacken it. 'Did you notice I hadn't slackened my pace?' he asked Nina on the overcrowded train bringing them back to Moscow—to the mother and the grandmother.

The teenagers were still closing in on her, but Boris did not slacken his pace. 'These flowers are for you, *Mademoiselle*,' said the tallest teenager. He seemed to have forgotten his knife and even his pockets which also contained a knuckle-duster and a few walnuts. Nina stopped and accepted the flowers. Boris continued to walk. He caught up with Nina. 'He likes flowers,' she reflected. 'Even teenagers are docile today. Good omen.'

But for the teenagers' flowers, she might have broken up with him on that country road. So, as things turned out, the knives were drawn after all.

8

'So he recited a few Pasternak poems, didn't he? "But laughed to hear an idiot quote / A verse from Horace learned by rote." Did you see his mother before the wedding?'

'A week before.'

'And you found her...a bit of a rare bird, a *rara avis*?'

'She didn't say a word. On the way to our place Boris told her, "If you so much as open your mouth—"'

"—my lifelong happiness will be ruined." Just another lie. His brother must have done it. I bet Boris kneels down before his mother, silent as the grave—which he certainly is. And a common one at that. And how did he explain *her* silence?'

'He said his mother had a sore throat. He said it wasn't contagious.'

'That type of woman is always contagious.'

'I asked her at the wedding, "How's your throat?"'

'She's never been ill in her life! What else did he tell you while he was at it? That he was a good doctor, a family man, a good lover. I suppose he told you a healthy body makes love once a week and a healthy mind no more than that. Why did nobody tell you *he* was bad for your health?'

'Well, my aunt did say Boris was an unlucky name for our family.'

'Oh, the name only? I see. And how did the exchange of wedding vows go? Did he recall his lines? Was he late for the ceremony because of some selfish cancer-ridden goner?'

9

In the middle of the wedding dinner Boris was summoned to the hospital. On his return he announced to the assembly: 'I've just saved another life.' Whatever he said or whispered or thought sounded like an announcement. Even when he happened not to think at all, the silence inside his head sounded like an announcement. Even his sleep sounded like an announcement, although he was not in the habit of snoring.

He saved yet another life on the train which was carrying them to the skirling, gull-infested skies of their honeymoon. Unable to resist the call of duty he might have bestowed immortality upon the whole population of Georgia, but for Nina's well-grounded fear of dirty old men and libidinous youngsters—anyone, for that matter, who might take advantage of her husband's absence either in or out of doors.

So Boris saved no lives in Georgia which, incidentally, was reputed among the Soviet republics for the uncommonly high life expectancy of its citizens. He swam in the sea and idly, absent-mindedly strolled along the beach in his wife's company—amidst the libidinous males and ugly females. 'No man alive has such a beautiful wife,' he told her every afternoon. 'Not my colleagues anyway. Their wives look ugly beside you. I'd never have married such ugly women.'

They kissed from time to time; they played tennis. Once he grasped the ball and, with an impressive sweep of his arm, hurled it towards a pillar which stood by the tennis-court like a judge, lofty and indifferent. He missed the pillar and said in convincing tones:

'I'll achieve everything!'

'What?' asked Nina. She sincerely believed her husband had already achieved everything except curing the Georgians of all the diseases which prevented them from fulfilling that fondest dream of the ancient Chinese—immortality.

'Everything,' he repeated, searching for the ball.

Soon he abandoned the tennis court where his rivals—Nina's potential assailants—displayed their adroitness and strength for the edification of ugly female tourists. And he went swimming only after dark, when everybody was drunk or asleep. But he continued to pick up pebbles on the beach and on roads—a game in which he had no rivals. And he continued to hurl the pebbles and the balls at pillars, trees and seagulls. And he continued to assure his wife he was a very good doctor. He even vouchsafed to disclose to her what he meant by 'everything': 'I want to become like Ruta.'

By the end of the honeymoon he grew unmistakably restless, flinging the pebbles at the moon and howling almost like a dog. As Nina listened to his telltale howls—at night her love-inspired dreams would turn into hateful nightmares—she realised her husband was longing to resume his work

at the hospital where quite a number of dying individuals had been awaiting him ever since the wedding ceremony. 'I hope they haven't died. So many people are dying around us and we don't even notice it. At least most people don't notice that their neighbours are dying.'

With his back to the beach he stigmatised all those who played cards and sunbathed for hours on end instead of working for the benefit of humankind in some hospital or other. 'How can one rest at all?' he wondered loudly in local restaurants, frightening the waiters and their superiors: they mistook him for a food inspector.

Later on this rhetorical question acquired a sort of musical, counterpoint-like completeness: the subject was joined by the counter-subject. Boris liked music and especially Bach whom Ruta set above Mozart and Tchaikovsky.

'How can one rest?' 'I'm working!' Thus sounded the fugue of their everyday life. 'I'm working!' answered Boris whenever asked a simple, routine question, 'What are you doing now?' 'I'm working!' he answered on the telephone. 'I'm working!' he answered in the kitchen. 'I'm working!' he answered from the bathroom. Even in his sleep he often uttered 'I'm working', as if Nina's dreams, alias her sixth sense or intuition, persistently questioned his capacity for hard work.

10

They interrupted their honeymoon and returned to Moscow, happy and blissfully unaware of the real motives for their premature departure. Nina admired her husband's capacity for hard work and deeply regretted the impossibility of contemplating this hard work at close range: Boris worked only in his intensive care unit (*block*), and Nina could bear neither death rattles nor pools of blood.

'Why don't you come and visit me in the *block*?'

Nina declined the invitation so many times that Boris eventually accused her of indifference towards his vocation—'towards myself,' as he put it. He accused her of being in love with Ivanutsky or some other hysterical, conceited artist sunbathing in Georgia and playing cards with ugly females. 'They'll all end up in my *block*!' he shouted from the divan, his face upturned, his index finger pointing at Nina's painting entitled *The Doctor Resting in a Consulting Room*. 'They'll interrupt their holidays and come to my *block*! They'll all come to *me*! And you'll come too!'

After a long struggle with Sartrean nausea, Nina accepted the invitation to the dance of death, unsuspecting of its striking kinship with Strindberg's masterpiece. She began to practise the dance at home and outdoors. She leafed through the Medical Encyclopaedia; she no longer averted her eyes from the drunkards who lay sprawled in the streets and on trolley buses like corpses or comatose patients; she listened assiduously to the dying confessions of her aunt who had a new imaginary cancer and was eager to share her agony with her neighbours and relatives.

Nina focused her attention on a famous Russian poet whose name sounded exactly like the word for the intensive care unit—Blok. There was something poetical about the building where her husband laboured for the happiness of mankind round the clock, with the exception of the hours he spent at

home—on his favourite divan or in the kitchen. After all, there was something poetical about human blood which might be logically compared to Khvanchkara, the wine of their honeymoon.

As an expressionist Nina was fixated on red. As a faithful wife she respected it.

Once the training period was over, she stuffed the book of Blok's poems in her medium-sized handbag, purchased a bunch of flowers and headed for the hospital which soared into the twilit sky like the frame of a guillotine. She was shown into a consulting room. Why doesn't it look like *my* consulting room? she wondered. Indeed, *his* consulting room bore no resemblance to what she had visualised when working on her husband's picture. Shortly afterwards her husband entered the room in person. He was as large as life, or rather as small as death. Anyway he did not look at all like the character in the picture. He did not even look like an ideal husband, but Nina took no notice of these discrepancies.

She secretly hoped they would stay in the consulting room, which might have enabled her to paint yet another picture on the same subject: there was a huge divan just opposite the window. A beautiful, comfortable divan. But Boris wanted her to see him in action and submissively she followed him through a series of corridors leading to the battleground, to the anti-battleground, as it were, for no death was conceivable within those walls—only resurrection, nothing but resurrection. A perpetual raising from the dead.

At long last they reached the anti-battleground and Nina saw a human figure lying under an enormous, sun-like lamp. There was a small but critical difference between this figure and the drunkards Nina had come across in the streets and on the trolley buses. The drunkards *looked* like corpses; the figure on the anti-battleground *was* a corpse.

She screamed and fainted. Boris deposited her body on a rug and began to harangue his subordinate:

'Why didn't you remove him?'

'I had no time,' answered the subordinate.

'But you washed away the blood. You disobeyed your superior. Why didn't you wheel in the old bag?'

'She's feeling better—'

'Precisely!'

'What should I do with *her*?' asked the subordinate, bending over Nina's body.

'Nothing at all. Let her sleep for a while. She'll forget everything.'

As Nina regained consciousness and was about to come to terms with the surroundings, Boris assured her that the experiment had come off.

'As usual. The patient will join his family next week. He has an ugly wife and a beautiful daughter. It's high time we had children.'

'He died, he died. I saw a corpse.'

'You didn't. It was a nightmare.' Boris yawned and even closed his eyes.

But Nina clung to reality. 'It was a corpse. I saw it.'

'It was somebody else's corpse. The corpse you saw in here wasn't *mine*. Besides, every doctor has his own cemetery,' he specified as Nina shook her head and waved her arms in a desperate endeavour to shake off the nightmare he was forcing on her.

Boris failed to replace a corpse by a living body—a chunk of nightmare by a slice of life, in other words. So, on serious reflection, he adopted the opposite tactic and the anti-battleground reverted to its pristine, blood-and-thunder state—the battleground strewn with corpses. The opposite of failure is success, he said to himself, rummaging for the keys in the hole-riddled pockets of his raincoat. At the time they already had their own apartment situated far away from their relatives' apartments—on the *opposite* side of Moscow.

Nina was trying on a new dress in front of a mirror. She had not yet got used to this secular rite depicted by a great many painters and novelists, so that she enjoyed it and was rather happy despite her recent sojourn in the intensive care unit. Boris instinctively felt that the enchanting maladroitness of her movements would not have induced an eighteenth-century French moralist to compose a maxim about the repetitive and futile nature of society life; and yet he knew nothing about French moralists—about French literature in general. He only knew he had to nip this pernicious activity in the bud, lest it become a mindless ritual and thus a strain on his purse. He had no purse to speak of, but stoutly defended the object in his pocket going by that name against grasping females.

Besides, he still wondered how one could live and even try on a new dress outside his intensive care unit.

What was to be done? Boris might have told his wife she looked better, much better in the nude: beauty needs no attire. Beauty needs no attire. A few days before the wedding ceremony he had jotted this sentence down on the first page of his new, 'marital' notebook—in anticipation of some frivolous expenses.

Shall I use this sentence now? he asked himself. It's not enough. I'll use it later on, as often as necessary. What's to be done?

Boris might have taken part in the ritual. What for? To enjoy it. After all, Nina was his wife. Women are supposed to share their joys and pleasures with their husbands and vice versa.

Boris did take part in the ritual, but he derived no pleasure from it. At least the pleasure he derived from his participation in Nina's futile pastime had nothing to do with *her* pleasure.

He might have gone to bed, pleading exhaustion.

'Do you like this dress?' Nina asked, looking at her husband's reflection in the mirror.

'A wonderful dress,' he answered. And he fiddled with the dress for a while. And he played with it. And he toyed with it. He stroked it as he might have stroked a cat. He did not like cats.

'A wonderful dress,' he repeated. 'By the way, a child died in the *block* last night.'

'Why didn't you divorce him on the spot? There are three types of monster. The first type is pretty harmless. Jack the Ripper seems to be a good specimen. You can run away from Jack the Ripper. Everybody knows he is a monster. He is bound to land in jail. Tartuffe represents the second type. He is nice, gentle and has a noble spirit. *Plein de bons sentiments*, as the French say. At first you've no idea he is a monster. But you may find out...you may catch him red-handed. Your husband. You'll never catch *him* out. Never! He is the third type. He is a real monster. I bet everybody loved him.'

'Not everybody.'

'I know, your mother. But she didn't interfere, did she?'

'She was afraid I would do just the opposite. And then she went back, to the North.'

'The opposite of wisdom is catastrophe. And your grandmother adored him. Do you know why mediocre people are loved by the multitude? They never attempt to go beyond the mental horizon of their listeners. They can't anyway. And they don't get on your nerves with their triumphs and their Nobel Prizes. They never stand in your way. Not because they're delicate or polite or modest. They simply *can't* stand in your way. They can't stand *anywhere*. They're lying on their divans.'

'They don't disturb anyone. They don't contradict.'

'But he did contradict you. A child died in the *block*. He robbed you of your pleasure. He robbed you of your life. Joy is a gift of God.'

'Nobody thought he was mediocre. My mother rang up the hospital—'

'And a middle-aged woman said he was a promising young doctor. Very handsome too! Sweet. Nice, kind, sympathetic, warm-hearted. Our fellow countrywomen never speak about the human brain, about talented people! Did your grandmother advise you to marry a talented person? An earnest family man. And what about the intensity of life and its ever-changing beauty? What about artistic adventures? Only talented people can offer you life! Handsome, amiable, obliging. Mediocrities *are* nice and sympathetic...unless they grow jealous of other people's triumphs and Rolls Royces. Your husband is a resentful mediocrity, a spiteful Akakiy Akakievich. Uriah. "I'm a very umble person." And you're under his thumb. Actually Uriah *is* a spiteful Akakiy Akakievich. I suppose your husband hasn't read Nabokov's book on Gogol. Not likely, eh? The definition of *poshlust*—'

'His colleagues thought he was going to—'

'Ah, they would, wouldn't they? Great expectations! And who are these colleagues, may I ask? Nurses? And what do they think of him *now*?'

'He *is* a failure. But it's not his fault they earn so little money.'

'Soviet doctors? They're Russian doctors now. They can go abroad, they can set up their own—'

'He might do just that.'

'Too late. No longer promising. Even at *that* time it was too late. One can't be a child prodigy at the age of thirty. Did the middle-aged lady say he was a genius?'

'No. But she said he might become...like Ruta. Anyway she said he was a good doctor.'

'A male nurse, more likely. But your grandmother needed a male nurse.'

'Once he was five hours late. He said he'd been delayed at the hospital. He didn't even apologise.'

'He never apologised, I tell you!'

'It was just before our marriage. I wished to break off. He went out. But my grandmother ran after him and brought—'

'You wouldn't have broken off. You were in love with him.'

'Not quite.'

'When did you really fall in love with him?'

'Perhaps on the train...when I saw him save that man's life...'

'What exactly did he do? Give him a Band-Aid or something?'

12

Nina's grandmother adored Boris, but the love she bore him could not be described as absolutely disinterested. Alongside the medical care guaranteed by the marriage bonds and her granddaughter's pristine, long-term beauty he was expected to provide imported pills: Soviet drugs had too bad a reputation to be trusted by old, fragile women. The drugs *he* had access to were either East German or Hungarian, but the grandmother did not bother about their ideological origin. They came from beyond the infinite Soviet frontier and that knowledge allayed her fears to such an extent that she even swallowed the pills and mixtures destined for her granddaughter and great-granddaughter.

'Boris is earnest' was one of her favourite statements over the eight or nine months that followed her operation in the intensive care unit. Then she modified the statement. She modified it with the words protruding from the desert-like surface of her memory. Sands, sands, sands—that is what her memory had become over seventy-eight years. Ashes, ashes, ashes. Now and then something stuck out from the dust of the past...something like the pillar of a destroyed or decayed palace...something like the skull of a long-dead husband...Boris...Boris. And the predicate? What about the predicate? Went to Siberia? No. Boris...Boris...Boris Godunov. Dead child, murder. Boris...Boris...Is stupid, is dull, is lazy, is boring, is dangerous, is a pathological liar.

Boris was no longer earnest, nor honest. Had she forgotten these words? What was the difference between the words she did remember? Did she need them at all? *He* needed them. Boris was somebody or something. Helpless, hopeless, cruel.

'You should divorce him,' she said.

'I'm expecting a child.'

'Divorce him! He'll drive you to suicide. And he'll murder me, your old grandmother. He's got a revolver.'

Once Boris and Nina took a stroll along the Boulevard Ring. Suddenly he dropped back, letting her face up to the contingencies of the nocturnal city.

'Around midnight. He was probably jealous. I don't really—'

'You were pregnant and he abandoned you on a boulevard. A roofless slaughterhouse.'

'He simply disappeared.'

'Sending you like a spring lamb to the slaughter. Did you tell your grandmother about it?'

'I went to her that night. She insisted on our divorce.'

'And you said you were expecting a child. Great expectations.'

'Don't you think Barbara is beautiful? And intelligent?'

'She is, of course she is. Why didn't you have an abortion? Did you really find it necessary to have a child from *him*? From this wash-out?'

'She is his only gift.'

'He has nothing to do with her birth, nothing at all. Just a biological miracle, a physical accident. You couldn't have possibly known she would be intelligent.'

'He is not really stupid. Just lazy.'

'Bone-lazy!'

After the incident on the boulevard Nina spent a fortnight at her grandmother's. And then Boris called her on the phone. And she forgave him.

13

Boris played the role of a loving father to perfection. To heighten the effect of his performance he criticised all other fathers, including his own father and the father of his father. Those innumerable fathers were unable to bring up their children. They did not love their children. They betrayed their children with their mistresses. They betrayed their children with their theses and dissertations. They betrayed their children with vodka and cards. They did not caress their children round the clock. They did not get imported medicine for their children. They let them down. They let them die. And they never resurrected them.

After listening to his tirades one of Nina's colleagues burst into tears and publicly admitted she was a bad, criminal mother. Another colleague of hers spent a whole week at home, incurring the anger and hatred of her boss. And Boris's best friend bought a supply of condoms.

Nina was moved by the way her husband treated her daughter. Often she found miniature dolls in Boris's attaché case: he played with them at the hospital to keep in training for his parental role. He also showed them to nurses and other doctors, which offered him yet another opportunity to speak about the predominance of family values in human existence. He played with dolls while others wrote dissertations.

'What about *your* dissertation?' Nina asked him every other week.

'I'm working on it.'

'Why do you never work at home?'

'Because I work at the hospital. That's quite enough.'

'You could work on your dissertation instead of washing dishes or cooking pilaff.'

'I want to spare you the trouble of—'

Boris also washed his own underwear. And he ironed his shirts and trousers.

Such representatives of the male species—let us call them kitchen-oriented—enjoyed a great vogue in the Soviet Union. They received a lot of publicity on television and in newspapers. One might even surmise that commercials had existed in the Soviet Union well before the advent of free-market policy.

Influenced by television and radio programmes, women unanimously preferred those men to talented scientists or world-renowned musicians who had no time for housework and were therefore despised by a society founded upon so-called 'high principles'.

High principles replaced in Russian tradition the religious morality which had put no stress on talent, on personality—on the uniqueness of humans—obstinately and obstreperously advocating moral strength and mental weakness. But the substitution was not experienced by the population at large: the Russian fondness for mental weakness was likewise embedded in the Soviet doctrine of the ideal communist man. Only the extreme form of this weakness, for which there are neither linguistic nor psychological counterparts in the rest of the world, was somehow frowned upon in Soviet society, perhaps on account of its religious links.

Guided by their inborn penchant for radicalism, the Russians jauntily pushed to its boundaries the biblical notion of 'the poor in spirit', revering the virtual absence of mental life which some individuals, designated by the untranslatable word '*jurodivi*', exhibited throughout the country. 'Man of God', 'simpleton'. These translations bring out only two facets of the authentic '*jurodivi*' who is related neither to Western village idiots nor to Buddhists or Hindus. On the one hand he flaunts a gift for prophecy and his insights into the secrets of the human psyche may occasionally send a shiver down an Emperor's spine; on the other hand he is incapable of grasping a most commonplace idea which would be as clear as day to any village idiot in Europe.

Boris was a pure product of the Soviet regime. With the best will in the world he could not become a hundred-per-cent *jurodivi*. So he became a fifty-per-cent *jurodivi*—a semi-*jurodivi*, as it were.

His powers of foresight did not amount to much, limiting the scope of the future to the confines of his hospital: 'They'll all come to me!' Sometimes the future proved as minuscule as his own body: 'I'll die very soon,' or 'You'll always be in love with me,' or 'You'll never leave me,' or 'You'll never find anybody like me,' or 'I'm bad but others are even worse!'

14

And what about his forays into the human psyche?

'You'll always be in love with me.' 'You won't leave me after so many years of conjugal life.' 'You won't leave me because our family is much more important for you than money.' 'All men are

bad.' 'The world is bad.' 'You don't know the world.' 'You're a child.' 'He's an adventurer.' 'He doesn't know the world as well as I do.' 'She doesn't know anything.' 'She's a child.' 'He's a child.'

Their conjugal life sounded like one interminable word. But even a village idiot would have realised that the word was not interminable—no word is interminable owing to the shortness of human breath. And Nina was already gasping for breath.

Their relationship looked like a hospital where her joys and hopes were dying 'under his knife'. She dreamt once of being a tree on which he was carving his prophecies: 'You'll never leave me', 'You'll always love me'.

He usually woke up at half past seven, did gymnastics, took a shower, made a few telephone calls and lay down on his divan again. He might wake up around noon. Sometimes he got up; sometimes he did not.

He might not wake up around noon. He might not wake up at all as if emulating his patients at the hospital. Or he might fall asleep in the bath.

Two years after their abortive honeymoon he hung his own portrait above the bed to which he directed his attention once a week, mostly on Saturdays or Sundays. The portrait crashed down in the course of the same afternoon, damaging an unfinished picture suggestively entitled *A Friend*. Why had Nina deposited the picture on the bed and not on the rug? Why did her husband's portrait crash down? Was it a question of hammer, nail and string? Or was Boris jealous by nature? Had he, indeed, enough life in him to be jealous? Was the portrait more alive than the model? Had the loving wife endowed the image of her husband with her own energy and hopes?

'Your portrait fell asleep,' commented Nina. But she still loved him in spite of everything.

Who was that friend? Ivanutsky? She often remembered him. Anaesthetised by the coma-like monotony of her existence, she appealed to the generosity of her memories to keep herself wide-awake, to stay alive.

Ivanutsky called on her a few days before the wedding ceremony. She opened the door and he carried her unfaithful body all the way to the bed by which there stood another maiden, her eyes downcast: the latter had been entrusted with the unsavoury task of telling Ivanutsky all about Boris and the forthcoming wedding. Ivanutsky dropped Nina's body on the sheets and straightened up. He heard the story of Nina's betrayal to the bitter end without displaying the traditional signs of wrath and despondency. And then he asked one question; he uttered one word. That word was interminable too: 'Why?'

She hears the question even now, fifteen years later. And she still has no idea as to what answer could match this tiny word 'why?'—a modest echo of Job's cosmic complaint.

Ivanutsky was more handsome than Boris. He was well-read and bursting with creative energy which was conspicuous by its absence in Boris's personality.

Did Boris have any personality at all? Was he born into this world of ours or into some other world, a minus-world? Or was even a minus-world too alive, too intense and substantial for his puny

soul? Was he born at all or did he remain in his mother's womb, half-fluid, half-transparent? Did he die before being born?

But even the dead were more alive than Boris—some of the dead. He was as dead as a beggar thrown into a common grave by an anonymous gravedigger. He was as dead as a stillborn child.

What tale can be told about that stillborn child? His mother was vigorous and peremptory. His father was indulgent and good-natured, on the whole. But what about the child himself? Though stillborn, he was rather tall and appealed to many women on account of his run-of-the-mill physique: beauty is too bizarre and awesome to satisfy the multitude. Actually he might have been acquired from a second hand babyshop, had such a thing existed in the folklore of birth alongside storks and gooseberry bushes.

15

He *was* deprived of all human privileges. He had no talent, no money. But he thought everybody owed him something—a tin of caviar, a hundred roubles.

'He didn't give me anything.'

'Who?'

'Your grandfather.'

Two days later.

'She didn't give me anything.'

'Who?'

'That old bag in the *block*.'

'One of your patients?'

For a while Nina suspected that none of them had ever left the hospital after his intrusion upon the privacy of their diseases: she had never seen any patients of his, except her grandmother who now denied having been operated on by Boris. 'I would have died under the knife of this wretch!' she shouted, brandishing a kitchen knife. 'I wouldn't have allowed him to touch a single cell of my body!'

Now and then Boris produced either a tin of caviar or a bottle of cognac from his attaché-case, and since he had no money in his purse Nina conjectured that some people were claustrophobic enough to recompense her husband for bringing the long, unwholesome illnesses of their loved ones to a rewarding conclusion. She was all the more terrified when he got two tins of caviar and two bottles of cognac, as though the event should be celebrated twice.

Once a patient of his invited them to dinner at his apartment. 'What patient? I thought—You mean a prospective patient?' asked Nina. Boris explained to her that the human being in question had been operated on a month before and was now recovering at home under his benevolent guidance. 'Who operated on him? Do you go and see him often?'

And she asked another question on the way to the patient's apartment: 'Isn't it too early to visit him?'

Boris smiled. 'Do you think I would have suggested our paying him a visit if I had harboured any doubt—' On occasion he might convey his meaning in flowery, orotund language.

The dinner was a success. On the following day the patient died. 'Every doctor has his own cemetery,' said Boris. 'I wonder how huge *your* cemetery is,' thought Nina. At least there was enough room in it for herself and Barbara. Did she still love him at *that* stage of their relationship?

One must not poke fun at a murderer.

16

What can happen to a stillborn child? Something *can* happen to it. *Something* can happen to anything—to a palace, to a stone. A lot happened to the stones that Boris was flinging all around him—at pillars, at people, at the moon. Those stones experienced the feel of his palm, its coolness, its sweat. They might also have had an inkling of his failures, for stones are superior to humans in *some* respects. Blissfully unaware of Boris's plight, his mother continued to pin her hopes on his innumerable gifts and creative energy. Had he been alive he might have become the most remarkable man in the history of humankind. You never can tell.

So what happened to him? Failures, failures, failures. A few stories enlivened the monotony of those failures. And the stories were also failures.

Everything has a story to tell, only not everything has a tongue and human language at its disposal.

He had a tongue and spoke fluent Russian. And he had a smattering of English which allowed him to keep at bay any foreigners asking for help in the Moscow streets. And to shoot birds with a catapult—in pairs.

The stories he told his wife enlivened the monotony of her misery; and yet they only confirmed it, intensifying its immediate impact.

Once he slapped a nurse in the face. He had never slapped Nina's face, but considered she amply deserved it. So, without waiting for the nurse's departure from the room—she was still crying on his favourite divan, her head propped against his favourite cushion—he picked up the receiver and dialled his home number. 'I've just slapped a nurse in the face,' he said to Nina, inflicting a punishment on her by proxy. And he explained to her why he had resorted to such a violent disciplinary measure: 'She's always standing in front of a mirror. She powders her nose instead of working as conscientiously as I do. I'd asked her several times not to powder her nose during working hours. What does she powder her nose for anyway? I never look at her. I look at my patients and my patients look at me. They don't look at her, never ever!' He thought his wife's respect for him was suffering from a sort of coronary occlusion. Why not make her swallow an overdose of words? 'But she didn't listen to me. So I slapped her face. And if she persists in her disrespectful attitude towards me, my patients, our hospital and our medical profession, I'll slap her face once more. As often as necessary. Anyway, her face is not as beautiful as yours. Her face is hideous, as a matter of fact. You can't really disfigure it. She's no great

loss—‘ At that point of the soliloquy the nurse rushed out of the room. Boris had a momentary urge to recapture her fleeing silhouette and destroy the flippancy of her manner through another verbal reprisal, wielding words like a surgical knife designed to disfigure human minds and souls, but thought better of it and merely went on with his speech devoted to the sacredness and Calvinist austerity of the medical profession.

'Why?' asked Nina. There was no other question to ask.

The nurse resigned from the hospital but Nina did not forgive the punishment. There were other punishments to remind her of *that* punishment. And every mirror reminded her of it. And every powder puff. And every human face.

Two years passed. Boris was speaking on the phone. He had just finished doing sit-ups and was about to turn in. 'I'll take care of the flowers,' he said and hung up. 'Another funeral. Another nurse died.'

'Did *you* operate on her?' asked Nina automatically.

'No. She was no longer working at the hospital.'

'But she had worked at the hospital once. So you must have operated on her. Once. You knew her. So you must have operated on her.'

'I didn't. I just slapped her face.'

THE TRIP TO PRAGUE

Boris did not tell this story to Nina. He limited his report to the following remark: 'What a disgusting woman!'

There was a woman somewhere in the hospital area. She was not yet buried at Boris's cemetery but she was acquainted with its owner. And she seemed to appreciate him and a few other doctors whose common feature—a pleasant physique—was the real reason behind the suggestion she made at the end of a cocktail-party: 'Shall we go to Prague for a week or two?'

They all went to Prague for two weeks. Boris returned to Moscow at the end of five days. What had happened in Prague?

The woman was rather influential, judging from the ease with which she crossed the Soviet frontiers in the company of nice-looking doctors, poets, scientists and actors. And power goes hand in hand with money except the power exercised by Boris over his patients both at the hospital and at home. Crime does not pay. It is a pity he was not familiar with the expression.

Boris accompanied that woman in her walks about the city without noticing its mythical, castle-centred architecture. He followed in her footsteps, hoping she would give him enough money to buy a man's suit, a white shirt and a cheap doll for Barbara. He stared at her back and her profile day in day out; he visualised her on the operating table. But the woman was rather healthy, which did not prevent

him from offering his services every time her ears seemed to be attuned to his whisper: 'I'll cure you of everything.'

He thought she might pay him in advance. He tried to persuade her she had angina pectoris. When in need of a mawkish and imploring face, she cast a glance at him. And there was no promise of any kind in her glance.

She gave him no money and he insulted her. How? He could not slap her in the face: she was no nurse. He could not tell her off: she was not his wife. He felt she was in love with him like the other women living in the hospital area—and Moscow is a hospital-centred city—but he did not dare treat her like his wife. He felt his wife was the only woman who did not really love him.

So he just told her, when she innocently asked him why he had not yet invited her to dance, 'I'm not a gigolo.' 'Unlike my mercenary colleagues,' he would have added had he not been afraid of *physical* reprisals.

He hated the woman. He hated all those who had money and did not share it with him, a poor Soviet doctor. He drudged like Chekhov at his hospital that was situated in a muddy Russian village—alias Moscow—and nobody rewarded his efforts *financially*. They fobbed him off with bottles of Armenian or Georgian cognac.

He hated the woman because she did not drudge at his hospital or any other hospital. He hated her because she did not work at all, as he had conjectured. He hated her because she could pick a few nice-looking men out of the Moscow crowd and go with them on a trip to Prague, Budapest or Helsinki. There was only one gap in his hatred and this gap was filled in with commiseration and irony: the woman was not as beautiful as his wife and she was eight years his senior.

The following morning he scoured the city—which had grown Kafkaesque overnight—for cheap gladioli or roses. In desperation he availed himself of the sundry flowers offered to pilferers by flowerbeds.

She did not forgive him.

THE FLOWERS

This is not a story. This is one of his devices—a stratagem to which he resorted twice a week. He might have resorted to this stratagem three or even four times a week had there been more flowerbeds in Moscow.

He thought a bunch of flowers might compensate for his indolence and mediocrity, sparing him the necessity of buying a car or a dress or a washing machine. He thought a bunch of flowers might obliterate the record of his insolence from the slate of anyone's memory. He often presented flowers to men, heedless of equivocal nuances.

He was writing a dissertation. He had promised his wife on their honeymoon: 'We'll live like kings (*kak koroli zazhiviom*), once my dissertation is done and defended.' Three years went by. They lived neither like kings nor even like royal subjects. They lived like poor Soviet citizens.

Every now and then she asked him: 'When will you finish your dissertation?' He answered: 'Patience. Moscow wasn't built in a day.' And he would bring her some flowers.

'When will you finish your dissertation?'

'I'm so preoccupied with my dying patients that I can't get down to research right now. Anyway, what's the use? These days research is strictly for social climbers. The age of earth-shattering medical discoveries is long gone. The last one was penicillin. You can't go one better than that.' And he brought her the flowers given to him by a deceased person's relatives —leftovers from the funeral.

'When will you finish your dissertation? It took Volodya only two years.'

'Volodya is a social climber and an adventurer. He hasn't saved a single human life in his life.' 'Death, death,' resounded in Nina's ears. The following afternoon he brought her some flowers.

'When will you finish your dissertation? You promised—'

'Don't you worry! I'm working on it.' The same afternoon he brought her some flowers.

Six years later.

'When will you finish your dissertation? You promised—'

'We're already living like kings. You've got everything, haven't you? What more do you want? *Ptichie moloko* (Birds' milk)?'

'What *do* I have?'

'A loving husband, a beautiful daughter, flowers. Isn't that enough? *S milim ray i v shalashe*. (Even a hut is Paradise on Earth, provided you live in it with your sweetheart.) And we don't live in a hut. We live in an apartment. It's a small, comfortable apartment. Do you want a bigger apartment? Do you want more money? Is it money you're after? Money? Money? Then marry somebody else. I'll always be a poor doctor. What are you waiting for? Go ahead! I won't stand in your way, I promise.'

One year later.

'When will you finish your dissertation?'

'Stop badgering me—I'll do it when I'm ready.'

Nine months later.

'Aren't you ready yet?'

'Look, I've had a lot of problems. It's not easy to write a dissertation in our country, especially if you're a nurse's son and not a minister's. I do everything myself. And I'm too proud to lick my superiors' boots.' That time he brought her no flowers: his pride had not permitted him to fawn upon a woman.

Six months later.

'When will you finish your dissertation?'

'Money again? I don't want to *buy* your love. If you're incapable of loving a good, poor doctor, then go and marry somebody else. But don't forget the world is awful, just awful. You don't know anything about the world. And I've seen the world. I've been to Prague. Abroad they live exactly as we do here. And they're as bad as we are. Go and settle in Paris, if you wish. Powder your nose!' And he offered her a Bulgarian powder puff.

THE TRIP TO MALAKHOVKA

Nina was not told this story; she lived it.

Boris was very touchy. Even an innocent question such as 'Why are you so late?' might get him all worked up. 'People are dying! And they don't ask *you* whether it's too late to die or not!'

After a less innocent inquiry—'When will you finish your dissertation?'—he was likely to stay outdoors for a fortnight, leaving Nina to her own devices amidst his unwashed underwear.

Nina could not help saying something unpleasant to her husband: inveterate losers grow allergic to words which always let them down as if Adam and the Kabbalists were their sworn enemies.

So he often withdrew into the realm of hurt feelings, boarding the same foul-smelling train which was to convey him to the same dilapidated country house. He went to his hospital every other day and also approached the building where Nina did the washing and painted still lives. He approached it stealthily; he did not enter it.

He would hide beyond snowdrifts and snow-swathed cars, spying on Nina's comings and goings. Shielded by passers-by and columns, he shadowed her in the streets. Once she encountered another man. Not him! Another man.

Ivanutsky. Must be Ivanutsky. She's never loved anybody else. And she married a doctor to meet Ivanutsky on the sly. It's more exciting this way. She married me for stability. Women like sitting in a comfortable armchair, even if it's a small armchair. But you can't trust artists. Their armchairs may be larger and cosier, but you can't trust them at all. They drink, they sleep with prostitutes and actresses. She thought we would live like kings or at least like foreign tourists. Well, she got no money from *me*. And she'll get no money from him either. Looks shabby. Must be a hard-up artistic type.

His interior monologue was finally interrupted by the departure of the man he had mistaken for Ivanutsky. Nina returned home with a small package that she had got from him at the end of their rendezvous.

From him! Not from me! What's in this package, I wonder? Love letters? A bunch of love letters? Why didn't he offer her flowers?

He was doubly offended and took prolonged refuge in his country house, on another favourite divan which was large enough to accommodate both his body and his resentment. Three weeks elapsed in silence and darkness; he saw neither Nina's distant silhouette nor his patients' blood. The

hour hand on his private clock had come full circle, dutifully embarking upon another trip through Time and Space. He went out, heading for the railway station in the middle of which there was a telephone box—the only telephone box in the whole area. He rang up his friend or enemy and asked him to come and visit him. 'I'd like to speak to you about my wife,' he said. 'We had an argument, you know.'

The friend turned traitor, informing his wife about the scheduled meeting. His wife immediately jumped to the conclusion that her husband had concocted a pretext to betray her with some actress. She rang Nina up and suggested they should go to the railway station, which had become a vital link between Boris and her husband, a psychoanalyst of sorts, in order to watch out for the supposed arrival of the latter. 'I'm sure he won't come!' she shouted, swallowing her pride and tears.

Nina refused at first but was literally dragged to Kazansky station by the suspicion-goaded woman. The same foul-smelling train brought them half an hour later to Malakhovka which, being part of Boris's cemetery, was lying dead and buried under the snow.

There was a huge choice of hiding places around the platform. They planted themselves behind a frozen haystack and, stamping their feet—the *pas battu* of the Russian winter-dance—concentrated on the Malakhovka landscape. They stared at the passengers who alighted from their respective trains in a hurry, afraid of being pursued by the smell and squalor. They glanced at the tiny stretch of the road that Boris had so frequently honoured with his bloodstained shoes. 'My legs are more beautiful than yours,' remembered Nina. Boris *was* in the habit of undressing before mirrors and even before strangers: he had to boast about *something*. And he had to humiliate his wife. She *was* far more beautiful than the wives of his colleagues whom he regularly took down a peg to prevent them from mocking him in front of nurses and their mutual patients; but she was *not* beautiful enough to find a rich husband. Or she was too beautiful to fall into the hands of an honest individual: 'Your beauty appeals only to speculators, to Mafiosi.' Nina's beauty was a stone with which he had already killed many birds—far too many. Now he was using this stone as a weapon against herself.

Suddenly Nina saw Boris. His legs were measuring out the distance between his country house and the haystack behind which the two young women had secreted themselves. Boris's legs got closer and closer to Nina's, as if he desired to demonstrate his physical superiority once more—at Malakhovka station, at the core of his wintry cemetery. 'Please, be our judge! By the way, why don't you hitch up your skirt too? I'm sure your legs are nothing near as lovely as mine! Higher! Higher! Are you afraid? Just as I thought. Your legs are even uglier than my wife's. Look at *my* legs. Beautiful, aren't they? Can't you see? Just follow this line! Marvellous, isn't it? You should paint my legs next time. Nina! Did you hear what I told you? Just my legs. Put them on the dinner table, if you wish. You like painting still lives, don't you?'

He did not say anything. But his legs, face and torch got closer and closer to the haystack. His legs came to a halt. His torch and face, however, continued to get closer. As his body leaned forward he began to raise the torch until it was level with Nina's eyebrows. He did not say anything. He merely

swung round and retraced his steps across the Malakhovka landscape, letting both women and his disloyal friend face up to the contingencies of a Malakhovka night.

'Why?' asked Nina when he had finally forgiven her and returned home.

'You came there to spy on my grief!'

17

Boris was sweet and humane. He showed his daughter's photographs even to strangers, let alone his colleagues whose assets and triumphs had to be offset, tarnished and eventually obliterated by the happiness of his domestic life. The first photograph: Nina and Barbara on the divan, under the protection of his portrait hanging over their heads in the background. The second photograph: Barbara kissing him on a clean-shaven, glossy cheek. The third photograph: Barbara kissing him on the lips, her legs dangling, swinging loosely in front of his legs.

'What gorgeous hair you have!' he would say to his daughter in between the kisses. 'Your hair is far more beautiful than your mother's. When you're twenty I'll take you out for dinner. And everybody will say: "What a beautiful young wife!"'

Boris made his living honestly, by the sweat of his brow. And he always went home right after the last sigh of his last patient. He never lingered anywhere except in The Toy Shop. He spent all his money on his daughter, although he had no money for spending or saving. But even the money he did not have was spent on Barbara, on his beautiful daughter, whose hair would have conjured up in his mind the image of the Lorelei had he ever read any German poetry. He played with her round the clock, turning his apartment into a regular doll's house.

As he spent all his money on his daughter, he could not spend much money on his wife who had to borrow skirts and dresses from her colleagues or from the wives of Boris's colleagues. But that did not bother him. He despised the rich who were mostly speculators or Mafiosi—or hysterical artists. And he despised any form of social life. 'Those social morons,' he would say upon awakening. 'I wonder what they're doing now.'

Boris was fond of small victories. He would also have developed a taste for big victories had he been given an opportunity to gauge their effect not only on others, from a distance, but within his own ego. His small victories lasted only a few seconds and they often resulted in big defeats.

He might say to a woman tidying her hair before a mirror: 'No use. You don't have enough hair for *any* hairdo.' He might aim a kick at a newly-painted picture of his hostess, Nina's colleague, only because his hostess lived in a spacious house and not in a small comfortable apartment. And he said to the judge in the courtroom: 'I'm going to live with a woman who has a small child.'

'Does she really have a child, that woman?' asked Nina as she came out of the courtroom, enfranchised from the sacred bonds of marriage.

'Of course not.'

'Why did you say it then?'

'Just for the hell of it.'

Boris adored solitude and often spent days on end in a cubby-hole at his parents' country house. Gradually he modelled his life upon that cubby-hole. And there was no room for a friend in his cubby-hole.

Nobody suspected he would ever have a go at conjugal life: there was no room for a double bed in his cubby-hole. But he fell in love with a nineteen-year-old girl. He was insanely jealous of Ivanutsky who was the same age as his wife and seemed adventurous enough to contrive an elopement. So he speeded up the preparations for the wedding and they got married within a month, leaving aside the most significant aspect of official and unofficial betrothals—Time.

They did not get to know each other properly. Nina thought her husband was sweet and humane. She thought he was an earnest man and an honest doctor. She thought he was engrossed in his work, writing a dissertation and saving human lives, one after another. Later on it dawned upon her that only an infinitesimal number of his patients could be put back on their feet again; but the spectre of death, perpetually hovering over the operating table and the bodies lying on it, rendered his work at the hospital even more hectic and unrewarding.

She thought he was a solid family man incapable of betraying her with other women. Actually he betrayed her only once or twice, not more—owing, in large part, to his invincible sloth.

Boris thought Nina would believe him till her dying day and even after her death on his operating table—within his cemetery walls. He painted nice images before her mental eye and she was supposed to admire them both as a wife and a painter. He built a lot of castles in the air and she was requested to live in those castles like a queen. And she lived in those castles for a while, seldom going out. There was nothing to do outside. There was nobody to meet outside except the man who supplied her with painting equipment. There was nothing to buy except the fur coats she could not afford. Besides, it was cold outside, in the winter and in the autumn. And in the spring.

Boris thought she would stay indoors all her life and also after her death. But she went out rather often now. Nine years had elapsed since the wedding ceremony. She would not stay indoors. It was cold outside; it was even colder indoors. She realised she was living with a snowman.

18

She had an urge to talk to somebody about her predicament. 'It is important to have someone you can confide in,' she said to herself every morning. Reluctant to wash her or rather *his* dirty linen in public, she turned to her near relatives who would exclaim in astonishment and almost in unison: '*Mne bī tvoi zaboī*' (I wish I had your worries)!'

'Boris has no personality.'

'I wish I had your worries.'

'Boris either sleeps or watches television.'

'But he gets *so* tired at the hospital. Did you ever see a dying man? Do you know how tiring it is to sit by a dying man? And Boris can't even sit down. Always standing erect or bending over—'

'Boris only reads detective stories.'

'So he reads, does he? You said he did nothing but sleep and watch television.'

'Detective stories—'

'To give his mind a rest.'

'That's what *he* says.'

'And he's telling the truth. Why do you accuse him of lying to you?'

'Detective stories and *The Kreutzer Sonata*. He didn't accept a post abroad. We might have lived much better.'

'Money? I would never leave my husband for *that*.'

'He feels insulted because I never appreciate—I don't thank him for the potatoes he brings me from his country house. He brought a whole sack of them last Tuesday.'

'Do you know what *we* ate during the war?'

'He abandons me for weeks—'

'I wish I had your worries.'

19

Boris relied too much on the soothing, drug-like force of matrimonial habits which are liable to make people forget their youthful aspirations and the luxury in which their acquaintances wallow day and night. He thought his wife would get accustomed to his divans and his castles in the air and his flying carpets.

It occurred to him that his diagnosis was wrong and that the cure he had selected might bring about the death of a human being—himself.

His wife was going to forsake him because she had not relinquished her pernicious idea of modifying her lifestyle in accordance with the fashion parades which were shown now on Soviet television to the detriment of cultural programmes. 'It's simply scandalous,' he muttered. 'Disgraceful!'

And how could he cure *himself* of the jealousy he nourished towards Nina's future husband?

He decided to cure her relatives of all diseases and worries, imaginary and real, hoping thereby to ensure their participation in the taming ritual. His shrew of a wife had to turn to *somebody* for counsel and she was not likely to pour her heart out *beyond* the family circle. What a pity she doesn't suffer from cardiac insufficiency, he thought, producing a stethoscope. There would have been nothing to pour out.

Boris cured some of her relatives; for a while he rested on his laurels, his interior monologue jogging along as he leafed through his notebooks and *The Book of Quotations*: 'What a pity her father doesn't live in her grandmother's flat. He might already have told her I am a family man.' Boris did not succeed in curing Nina's grandmother.

'She's forgotten me,' he told his wife. 'That's why she calls my mother to say I'm a complete nonentity. She doesn't recall the operation and my skill. She would have died ten years ago. She takes me for somebody else. For your stepbrother!'

'My mother is coming tomorrow,' said Nina.

'Have you written to her?' he shouted.

'Yes, I've written to her,' answered Nina.

Boris disconnected the telephone and hid all the keys in the secret cavity behind his portrait: it was too late to cure Nina's mother. Upon awakening he saw Nina crouching by the entrance door. Shortly afterwards she refused to join him in the bed to which he had unwillingly shifted his sleep-laden body. With a grunt of resignation he got up, extracted the keys from behind the portrait and opened the door. Outside, on the landing, Nina's mother stood like Mozart's father in the film *Amadeus*.

He thought his wife would never return home from the encounter over which he had no control whatsoever. He was therefore prepared to hold their daughter hostage: her seclusion might be instrumental in luring his wife back to the joys of family life.

'You won't go to school this week,' he said to Barbara. 'Happy? I'll play with you all the time. Your mother has betrayed us. She's with another man now. She's walking around the city with another man. They're walking hand in hand, arm in arm. And they're kissing behind columns, under porches. Do you like my stroking your skin? That's what *he* does, the man. All the time, round the clock. And he'll become her husband, your mother's husband. And she'll have a daughter or a son with that man. But you don't want to have a stepsister or a stepbrother, do you? You want to be alone in our family, don't you? Our only child, our only treasure. Our only bliss. Why should you share your mother's love with another child, with another man?'

In the evening he adopted the opposite tactic. 'Let her stay with that man, your future stepfather. She pretended she loved me. She didn't. She pretended she loved *you*. But she betrayed you with a man. Let her marry him. Let her go to Paris, if she wants. We'll live alone, together, in this apartment. It's big enough for two people. And when you're eighteen I'll take you to a restaurant, to the most luxurious restaurant in Moscow. We'll drink champagne and eat ice cream, mountains of ice cream. And everybody will look at us and envy your father. They'll all envy me. Even Ruta will envy me. You don't want to become the daughter of another man, do you? He won't love you as much as I do. You see, you're not *his* daughter, not his own flesh and blood. And people only like their own flesh and blood, nothing else in the whole world. He'll hate you because he's already got a little daughter. No man can love two daughters. Or a daughter and a son. So he'll mistreat you. He'll physically abuse you. He'll molest you. Do you know what "child molestation" means?'

Half an hour later Nina returned home.

Boris was aware that the contents of his notebooks had grown outmoded in the light of recent events: Nina was no longer likely to believe his tall stories. Of course he attempted as usual to steer their conversations towards family values and the much-vaunted stability which, in his opinion, all women desired even more than money or fame. But, as if in mocking acknowledgement of his influence over her, Nina resorted now to *his* stratagem, leaving the apartment before he could so much as pronounce one of the key-words with which he traditionally peppered his speeches: 'love', 'human life', 'death', 'daughter', 'work', 'cards', 'domino', 'vodka', 'artist', 'unreliable', 'reliable'...

One afternoon, as her elongated, vein-streaked hand was about to bang the entrance door, she burst out at him from the landing: 'Do you know that, during the Occupation, the French authorities collaborated with Hitler? Their motto was "Work, family, motherland."'

Who told her that? Was she going to settle down in France, as he had presumed during the delirious outburst of his jealousy? Who was her future husband? A Frenchman? A Russian émigré? He spied on her more than ever, but the number of snowdrifts and columns seemed to decrease as he shadowed her across the streets, along boulevards. She spotted him several times in open, cemetery-like spaces and he ran away from her, loath to own up to the deadly sin of jealousy which is deadly indeed, though not officially listed by the Church among the worst human vices.

Jealousy is cruel as the grave. Where does it come from? *The Vindictive Story of the Footsteps that Ran* by Dorothy Sayers.

Again and again he assured Nina he would not put a spoke in her wheel if she decided to search for another husband. 'On the contrary, I'd be happy. Your happiness is my happiness.' She seemed to listen. She did not make a dash for the door. By suggesting she should found another family he kept her by his side and effectively diverted her thoughts from the idea of a new marital union: she was not going to act upon *his* suggestion. He hoped to put her off that idea by espousing it.

When expressed by *him*, the idea sounded appalling. He hoped to breed in his wife's bosom a colossal, omnipresent revulsion so as to smother, to choke—to squash through its expansion the very idea of a new marital union.

But he was not sure this stratagem of his would come off and chain Nina once and for all to the wall on which his portrait hung so magnificently. He could not use his stethoscope to auscultate her revulsion, to gauge its depth and authenticity.

So he appealed once more to her humane, merciful nature: 'I'll die very soon. I'm not long for this world. I know, I'm a doctor. My heart is weak. You'll re-marry after my death. You won't even have to divorce me. It's rather disagreeable, the whole ritual...judges and all. Your mother must have told you. Didn't you suffer when your parents—I'm sorry. That's no concern of mine. But we should spare our daughter unhealthy emotions. Let Barbara believe her parents were always happy together.'

Again the stethoscope proved powerless: Nina was unable to gauge the veracity of his words by listening to the systole and diastole of his heart.

Another year elapsed. Boris had not died. He seemed to have forgotten his promise, his speech for the defence in Nina's court of justice. He slept and watched television. And he worked at the hospital.

Once he opened his apartment door and saw Nina's mother sitting on his divan. 'It's my apartment, my divan!' shouted his brain. His heart was shouting too, and shouting was bad for his heart.

He apologised and asked Nina's mother to leave the divan that he needed both as a doctor and as a patient. Nina's mother, his divan. As soon as the divan had recovered its identity—*his* identity—Boris lay down on it, moaning like a dying man. Nina cautiously inquired after his health or his illness. 'You know everything in minute detail,' he answered. 'Why ask me this question?'

Nina headed for the kitchen. Her mother cast a glance at her daughter's back and smiled ironically. She also went to the kitchen, disinclined to attend a professional performance of agony. She continued to smile on her way to the kitchen as though the mere memory of Boris's outstretched body could make her laugh inwardly. Or had she preserved her smile for her daughter's sake?

She continued to smile in the kitchen: her daughter had already lined up a few small bottles on the dinner table. She was about to mix the contents of those small bottles in a huge beer mug presented to Boris by his East German patient when her mother grasped her hands and held them until there were two identical smiles in the kitchen.

21

Boris had no choice. Of course his brand-new stratagem was desperate and could succeed only under the auspices of Rilke's angels or Shakespearean witches, but he had no choice. He had tried everything within his power. Now he needed somebody else's power, a weakness in disguise—the weakness of a man he would choose for her. A man both powerful and weak. All men are weak and bad, but some of them are gifted. Some of them are artists. Nina admired artists. She seemed to have forgotten her grandmother's injunctions and admonitions. And her grandmother had forgotten Boris.

He decided to search for his wife's future husband. A talented man, a musician preferably. Nina had played the piano in her childhood. A pianist. 'She must find out on her own how unreliable and hysterical all artists are,' he wrote down in his notebook. He paused for a second, struck out the word 'artists' and replaced it with the word 'men'. He paused again, struck out the word 'men' and replaced it with 'human beings'. 'I must choose the best artist, the very best. If he is bad, everybody is bad. Everybody is even worse. That's what she'll think. She'll be disappointed for ever. She'll remember her family, her husband, her daughter. She'll burst into tears and come back to us. She'll stay for ever. She'll never write to her mother. She'll have me sit for another portrait. She'll never complain. She'll never speak to me about my dissertation. She'll never think about money.'

Boris had one friend in the artistic milieu; by sheer chance that friend of his was a pianist. But he was hardly powerful. Besides, he had a wife and even a son whose hair and figure were far less

beautiful than Barbara's. In fact Boris rang him up only because he hoped a second-rate pianist could help him find a first-rate one—powerful and wealthy enough to become Nina's new husband.

At the very outset of their meeting Boris announced his intention of divorcing his wife.

'Men don't divorce women like that,' said Nicholas.

'I do,' said Boris, gaining another small victory over humanity. 'But I must see to it that she marries someone worthy of her beauty, intelligence and angelic disposition. I feel duty bound—'

'You'll regret it,' cut in Nicholas. 'Men don't—'

'But I'm not a man,' answered Boris. 'I'm a blind mouse. I'm just running somewhere. Please help me to run.'

'You should divorce her first. I never supply lovers to married women.'

A few days later Boris started divorce proceedings. He could not, however, bring himself to break the news to his wife who, disposed to forsake him at any moment, had no inkling of what was going on behind her back. Her husband had forestalled her departure, winning the long-distance race of their conjugal life.

'Why don't you invite a few friends?' he suggested. 'You haven't seen many of them for years—'

'*All* of them! *All* of them!'

And Nina invited *all* her friends to dinner. She had very few friends now. Some of them had been discarded and forgotten on account of their disrespectful attitudes towards her husband; others had disappeared themselves, on their own. Those who did attend the party were rather keen on Boris and believed he was worthy of his wife's intelligence and beauty.

'I've started divorce proceedings,' said Boris somewhere around midnight. Nina's friends laughed; so did Nina. Eleven years before she would have prided herself once again on his innate sense of humour. She might even have rung up a few former friends of hers to parade yet another specimen of her husband's wit.

She laughed. And she asked him after her friends' departure, 'Why did you make such a joke?'

'It wasn't a joke.'

He wrapped his underwear in a brownish, fish-smelling piece of newspaper, slipped on two turtlenecks and left the apartment.

The following afternoon he told Nicholas over the phone that he had started divorce proceedings.

22

Once in a while he paid her a visit. To fetch a pair of trousers or a statuette. To ask some idle questions and give misleading answers to *her* idle questions which grew more and more idle and finally stopped altogether. They were replaced by a smile. He wondered why she could not mingle her questions and her smile: they were not incompatible.

That smile of hers had nothing in common with her mother's ironical smile. Her new smile was her old smile, in fact—the one he had seen throughout the years of their love. We were happy together! he said to himself and to the entire world. And to his daughter.

'We were happy together!' he told Nina. 'Sometimes I get the feeling we haven't parted. Not for a single moment. You sit opposite me round—'

'That's exactly what *I* feel when he goes on his concert tours.'

Nicholas informed Boris that he had arranged a meeting between Nina and a famous violinist.

'Why a violinist?' Boris remembered *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Tolstoy—all the more easy to remember since he had never stopped reading it. No Proustian effort was required: he read the story twice a year.

'Because you wanted me to introduce a violinist—'

'A pianist!'

Nicholas stuck to his story.

23

Was it love at first sight? So quickly? A few days after my departure? Why are you smiling like that? It's *my* smile. This smile is mine. Even your face betrays me. It's *my* face. What is he doing in my apartment? Has Barbara seen him? Have you already desecrated my apartment? Or do you meet at *his* place? You think I'll spy on you. I won't! You don't deserve it. I spied on you when you were my wife. My wife deserved it. Why don't you come? I'll wait for you at the station. I'm waiting for you behind our haystack. The trains are as old as your smile.'

He talked to her in his cubby-hole and from behind the haystack which experienced the warmth of her body. And he talked about her to a nurse.

'I knew she would leave me sooner or later. I'm not rich enough for her. She adores money. She doesn't admit it of course. She doesn't admit it even to herself. But I could see it. Every time I said the word "money" a dreamy look came into her eyes and she smiled to herself—yes, she smiled to herself! And it's just a word, a vibration of the air. Money! Money! At this very instant a tremor of pleasure runs through her body. I can see it. I can feel it. She's got money *now*. That's why she smiles with such insolence. I didn't want her to love me for money. Besides, I didn't have any.'

'Do you have money *now*?' asked the nurse with a nonchalant movement of her limbs.

'Of course I don't. I want her to love me for what I am—for my body and soul, for my independence and honesty. Why should I lick my superiors' boots? Do you know the song: "Only the sabre is a soldier's friend, only freedom is a soldier's wife, only the steppes are a soldier's house"? Freedom is more precious than precious stones. But I told her she was free to marry somebody else—Paul, for instance. I was lying on her path like a felled tree, blocking her way—to happiness! He is rich, handsome and young.'

'Who? Paul?' asked the nurse, her body taut like a violin string on which one could play in case of emergency.

'The violinist! An ambitious young careerist who does everything to please journalists and television viewers. No wonder he's famous. Human beings should be modest. They should work by the sweat of their brows without boasting about their achievements. And he brags about them all the time. Everywhere! On the radio, on television, in newspapers. He brags about them before my wife and her grandmother. He has no time to work. And I work very hard. But my salary is low, very low indeed. Is it my fault? Is it my fault that I love her? Is it my fault that I set family values above everything else? Is it my fault that I can't buy expensive toys for my daughter? We played blind man's buff every week but I couldn't give her expensive presents. Whose fault was this? And who didn't buy her fur coats?'

At that point a dying woman usurped the nurse's place by Boris's side, unceremoniously butting into the conversation. She dutifully died two hours after and the nurse resumed her posture on the operating table with the following, echo-like remark: 'You didn't buy your wife a fur coat.'

'Only ugly women need expensive clothes to hide their ugliness and decrepitude. She could go around naked.'

'It's cold in wintertime,' said the nurse with a shiver.

'In summertime, then. And all those well-to-do ladies would have envied her. And I would have been proud of her. Nobody had such a beautiful wife. Even her clothes didn't spoil her physique. On the contrary, they *enhanced* her beauty! She was poorly dressed, but how beautiful she was! This "but" is very important. This "but" made her look more beautiful than ever. She was beautiful *despite* her clothes. So she was doubly beautiful! And now she's only beautiful, just plain beautiful. And he shuts her in and contemplates her naked body—her breasts, her legs, her buttocks.'

The nurse was fidgeting about on the operating table. Boris interrupted his description of Nina's body, glanced at the nurse and decided to take her to the movies. He had no intention of showing her to his enemies, but he hoped there would be no enemies of his at the cinema. And he relied on the lambent penumbra to soften the ugliness of his subordinate all the while allowing him to paw her to his heart's content.

'She goes out every night, wasting her time in clubs and restaurants. I thought she hated cocktail parties and small talk. She was *dreaming* about them. Blah, blah, blah. Blah, blah, blah. Why doesn't she read Tolstoy instead? Tolstoy is more interesting than her violinists and pianists. And Tolstoy was also poor. At least he wanted to become poor. He wanted to sell his estate. He wanted to give it to the poor, to his serfs. And he abandoned his wife. But he was a genius! And his wife had nothing to put on. Nothing! And his wife didn't complain about her living conditions. She was proud of her husband's honesty and integrity. And *my* wife said I was lazy, poor and mediocre. Why didn't she boast about *my* integrity and moral purity? What counts is our inner selves, not our smiles. Did she ever take the trouble to probe into my mysteries?'

The nurse shook her head.

'Do you think I have none? No money, no mysteries?'

'You're mysterious,' said the nurse.

'What will she do with his Mercedes? She doesn't even have a driving license. Does she want to have an accident?'

'The violinist must have a private chauffeur,' said the nurse, shifting her gaze towards the window beyond which stood the BMW of her wealthiest patient. Why has he come to our hospital? she thought disapprovingly. He must have enough money to go to the States. They'd cure him of his cancer in no time at all.

'No, she wants to have a Mercedes, or a Rolls Royce,' continued Boris, paying no heed to the nurse's meditation. 'That's why I abandoned her. Like Tolstoy. I don't need a wife like that. Neither did Tolstoy. And he never regretted it. He thought women were erotic beasts for men to tame and exterminate.'

The nurse suspended her meditation and looked at her superior. *You* should be lying on the operating table, she thought.

'She was fed up with her existence, with *my* existence. Was her life so awful? A dog's life, a cat's life? I am good and kind. Isn't that enough? I love our daughter. Isn't that enough? I love the mother of our daughter. Isn't that enough? I even love my mother-in-law. What else does she need? I don't play dominoes after working hours. Does she want me to play dominoes with my colleagues? Will *that* make her happy? I can play cards too. Or shall I have a game of billiards somewhere? What would make *you* happy? Okay, I'm a penniless crackpot. What of it? I'm not the only penniless crackpot in the world. There are many of us. And we're human beings—don't forget that! And we're honest! Honest! And we're free like a Russian soldier lost in the immensity of the steppes. But we're not lost. On the contrary, we've found ourselves. We meditate on our divans, looking for our authentic natures. We don't sleep. We look for God in ourselves. Everything is inside us. Your dresses are inside you. Your happiness is inside you. Why don't you withdraw into yourself? I'm waiting for you—inside! You won't run into this violinist within your inner self. He's always outside. He's even outside himself, outside his own soul. You've not betrayed me so far. And I'm sure you'll never leave me. You would already have divorced me hundreds of times if you had desired it. Now it's too late. You've got used to me. You've got used to my inner self. You're inside me, in my heart of hearts, in my soul of souls. And you love me. You love your penniless crackpot. You love your fool, your imbecile. You love your good-for-nothing. But I'm good-hearted. You know I'm good-hearted, don't you? And you love me, don't you? Don't you? Don't you love me?'

Thus he spoke to Nina at the hospital.

The violinist found Nina beautiful and intelligent. He was surprised to hear that such a gorgeous specimen of the female species had been married to an ordinary doctor for more than a decade, living with him and their daughter Barbara in a small apartment on the outskirts of Moscow.

'Why did you marry him?' he asked. 'Is he handsome?'

'His hair curls about his face like a child's. But he isn't really handsome. Rather sweet.'

'Is he an unrecognised genius of any kind? A poet, a painter?'

By way of an answer Nina told him about the poems that her husband had purloined from a dead friend—the notebook covered with the unfamiliar handwriting. The violinist was outraged. 'How could you marry him after *that*?' he asked. And he asked the same question again upon learning about Boris's cowardly behaviour on the road to the Malakhovka station. 'Those teenagers had knives in their pockets. And probably guns. And God know what else,' he declared in authoritative tones.

At first he poked fun at Boris; and he asked questions. 'Why did you dream of marrying an honest worker? At nineteen young ladies usually dream about Prince Charming. Did fairy tales count less in your life than communist propaganda?'

'My grandmother counted more in my life than anybody else,' answered Nina.

'But your grandmother wanted you to divorce him, didn't she?'

'It was too late. I had a child.'

'You married too early anyway. So you were seduced by his...greyness. And by that *jurodivi* touch he displayed when opposed or contradicted. Have you noticed how gently our compatriots deal with motionless drunkards—on the streets, on trolley buses? In any other country the police would be called!'

At his request Nina showed him some of Boris's photographs. 'Makes me think of a lackadaisical locksmith,' he remarked. 'Not handsome in the least. I'm sure his sexual potential—By the way, how did he account for *that*? For his weakness I mean? Put it down, I imagine, to the hereditary insufficiency of his sexual glands. And assured you, of course, it was perfectly all right. From a medical point of view. Even better, much better.'

They continued to talk and leaf through Nina's family albums. The violinist continued to poke fun at Boris and at Nina's naïveté. Gradually his irony and mockery took on macabre nuances; at that stage of his jealousy Nina might have painted him within cemetery walls grimly coloured by the approach of a Shakespearean tempest. It was as if he had retrospectively experienced the torments of Ivanutsky, exiled thirteen years before to a sort of desert island: in Nina's absence the world undoubtedly looked like a desert island.

'You say your husband is the jealous type,' he pontificated. 'He isn't a type really. Just a pie with nothing inside (*pirojok ni s chem*). Worse than humble pie. Dante's Hell would have refused him. "*Né lo profondo inferno gli riceve!*" He lived without infamy and without praise. In other words, he did not live at all! He was lying on his divan. He was *lukewarm*. Not all the dead are stone-cold. "So then

because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." An empty pie can't be jealous!'

'He is capable of two things only: jealousy and love,' answered Nina.

'It's one and the same thing! Two things would be too much for his puny—'

'I'm not sure you love me,' said Nina.

'*He* never loved you. He went through the motions! He was just tossing around on his divan!'

At Christmas the violinist suggested they should invite Boris to a luxurious restaurant. 'He's always denounced the beauty of life without knowing it. Let him see it for a few hours. Let him see for himself what kind of life you deserve. He turned you into the barefoot Cinderella, my dear—a Cinderella who'll never lose her slipper. He was your stepmother. And your stepsister. And he claimed to be your father and husband. Let him compare real beauty to his little attentions, flowers and suchlike.'

'He might think you're worried...you're jealous because I still love him...'

'You're right. The invitation would only make your jellyfish of a quack as pleased as Punch—which he certainly is. Incidentally, why was he always so pleased with himself? Any particular reason?'

In the course of the same afternoon the violinist hit upon another idea which he expounded at the dinner table, after swallowing a slice of smoked sturgeon: 'Put on the Ungaro trouser suit, the mink coat and go to his private cemetery. He wanted you to admire him at work, in the *block*, didn't he?'

'He might think I still remember him.'

'But there's little chance of his being able to admire your Lacroix dress over the phone! Well, just tell your amoeba of a husband I've dubbed him a "lackadaisical locksmith". Next time he calls you.'

'Last time he told me all women looked alike (*na odno litso*).'

'Nowadays he probably shares his divan with an ugly nurse or a homeless slut. Has to vindicate his choice. Just remind him of his former attitude towards women and their beauty. Next time he calls.'

'He doesn't call me any more.'

'Why don't *you* call him then? And don't forget to tell him I've brought Barbara many books from Paris and London. And I've made a list of Russian books she should read and study. He did nothing of the kind, did he? Played with dolls, didn't he? To keep his hand in. *You* were his doll. Barbara was his doll. His patients—'

'He doesn't spy on me any more.'

'Pity. He would see your love. Let's kiss more often outdoors. Just in case.'

Nina smiled. Boris had already seen that smile of hers. And that smile had far more importance for him than a thousand kisses.

He knew she was in love. Once again.

She opened her closet, exposing her Parisian dresses, skirts and blouses. The last time he called on her. 'Money assists love!' he shouted and ran away, his footsteps resounding along the corridor: he knew she had a witty rejoinder to any remark.

He did not call on her any more.

And he did not spy on her. He was afraid of seeing into her life.

And he had no desire to ring her up. He was afraid he would hear her smile instead of her voice.

She was for ever deprived of a chance to refute his assumption, his assertion, his *thesis*. Money assists love. Money assists love.

He often picked Barbara up at school. As he waited for her by the school gate, his right shoe playing with a lump of snow or a clump of thistles, he scrutinised the faces around him. All those mothers looked happy as if perpetually stealing their moods and sentiments from his wife, from his former wife. All women are happy, he thought. They fall in love so quickly. As soon as their husbands abandon them they fall in love with their future husbands.

He did not question his daughter on the subject of her mother's happiness. She also seemed to borrow her moods from his wife, from his former wife. She looked happy herself as if she had also fallen in love. Had she fallen in love with her future father?

'Does he stroke your hair?' he asked in a tram one afternoon. She did not answer. She smiled, she laughed. 'You've grown so tall. You're taller than your mother.'

'I'm almost as tall as you,' she said and he kissed her on the forehead, happy that she had compared herself to him, to her former father. It was his last link with his past—Barbara's comparisons. It was *his* happiness. She was not just a child for whom he waited now and then at the school gate together with other people. She was his past, the only past he could boast of. And that past had already betrayed him. And that past continued to betray him, spreading its virus over the present in which he was trying to live, to forgive, to love. He still loved Nina because he hoped she would return to him, begging his forgiveness. He did not want to be in love with a treacherous, unrepentant woman. She was on the point of coming back. Because he loved her. She was neither unrepentant nor treacherous. Because he loved her.

He waited for her telephone call. He did not want to ring up a treacherous, unrepentant woman.

He put his divan by the telephone. His mother often bumped into it on her way to the bathroom.

His body was lying on the divan in expectation of a telephone call. His body was lying on the operating table and he stood over it, looking at his heart, at his shameful love. He could operate on his heart and destroy his love, if necessary. 'Once I lose all hope of her coming back, I'll destroy my love,' he wrote in his notebook. 'I'm waiting for her call.' Six months later he struck the last sentence out.

His daughter did not look disappointed. She smiled. How could she be happy when *he* was unhappy, her father, her only father?

The present seemed to have fallen in love with his wife's betrayal. Everybody was in love, everything was in love. Even the present was happy. The present smiled. How could the present be happy when there was an unhappy man in it? Can't one unhappy man destroy the happiness of the present? For ever?

He decided to kill her. To kill her present. To kill the present. Without Nina the present was nothing but the past.

'He is too indolent to kill you or anybody else,' said the violinist when Nina had voiced her fears.

'*The Kreutzer Sonata* is his bedside book! He re-reads *The Kreutzer Sonata* every month!'

'I've never played the piece. Don't you worry!'

He decided to kill her in public. To prove once and for all he was a family man. He chose the Big Conservatory Hall. The day of *his* concert.

Boris decided to kill her after the concert. Backstage, in *his* room.

The *Spring Sonata* was on the programme. Even Beethoven had become happy at last. How could such a piece of music be performed when there was an unhappy man in the audience? One unhappy man.

Nina was sitting in the director's box. She was too far away from him. He saw only one third of her profile. He hoped there was no smile on her face. He hoped she was still his wife. He did not want to kill somebody else's wife. Why should *he* kill the wife of another man?

After the concert he proceeded backstage. There was a queue in front of the door to *his* room. What are they queuing for? he asked himself. To kill my wife? To kill *him*?

There were as many as twelve wounds on his body. A murder, on the train. The blood-smelling train. *Murder on the Orient Express*. Twelve people queuing to murder one man. They all bore a grudge against him. He was a murderer himself. Like *them*. They *are* murderers. She's my murderer. He's my murderer. Daisy found slain. They must be dead by now, both of them. My murderers. So many people have left the room already. Do all these people share in my grief? Of course. Otherwise they wouldn't stand here, backstage. Should I stab her dead body? Symbolically? She's dead. That's enough, I'm *not* a murderer.

He went downstairs and opened two doors leading to the open air. But the air was closed now. He continued to open doors, one after another. The air was still closed.

He tottered up the street, opening doors. Where's *my* door? he wondered aloud.

He opened a door and saw a church in front of him. *This* is my door, he muttered. Because she's dead, my wife's dead. And I need somebody alive. What a pity you died. I wouldn't have stood in your way. I might have blessed you, both of you.

Slowly he made the sign of the Cross, took a few steps and saw a garden.

There was a swing in the garden and he sat down on the swing. He could no longer walk, but he could have a go on the swing.

Smoothly the church soared up.

There was no bench in the garden. So he remained on the swing.

Nobody touched his body until the following afternoon.

MEMORIES AND TOMBS

I feel great pity and sympathy for those poor Americans who, being mistaken for sex maniacs, defend themselves on television against the accusations levelled at their overflowing masculinity by demure-looking girls, their supposed victims. A word is often misconstrued and blown up like the photograph in Antonioni's famous film which ambiguously tackles the problem of invisible murder—invisible and non-existent sexual harassment, in the present case. Whatever those burly Americans might have done in their lawyer-governed motherland, my rape *is* invisible and non-existent, unless an epistolary declaration of love can be considered harmful to the body of the female addressee who tears it to pieces near her letterbox or above her secretaire, all the while explaining to her father the reason for her cruel response: 'This man has been pestering me for two years.' And her father shakes his head and suggests they should call the police so as to grasp my 'criminal' hand through the intermediary of some dexterous police officer and imprison it once and for all in a handcuff which, anyway, would be no impediment to letter-writing and outpourings of the heart. Odd as it might seem in the light of what I have already confessed in my memoirs, I have nothing against the metal embrace of a handcuff which is inanimate enough not to remind me of human beings and the sweat of their passions and deceptions.

You must suspect I harbour a secret in my bosom—a psychoanalytical motive which has precluded me so far from seeking any corporeal relationship with the young lady depicted so vividly and beautifully in the course of the previous paragraph. But every self-respecting secret should remain in the bosom of its owner as long as the so-called suspense does not wear the reader out, keeping him, on the contrary, spellbound and eager for a forthcoming revelation. In her capacity as a reader she must also wonder why I have never posted myself in front of her apartment door, waiting for her to collide and collapse with me on the landing which might already have witnessed an outburst of my desire—an onslaught of my tenderness, in other words—had I been able to bear the sight of her flesh-and-blood appearance. The letters she tears to pieces with merciless regularity contain nothing even remotely indicative of any intention on my part to take her out to the theatre or, God forbid, to dinner: I could not so much as swallow a spoonful of caviar in her presence. My letters are wholly disinterested and can in no way incriminate their author who writes them only with a view to expressing his love for a snapshot printed once in a local newspaper—the habitual burden of letterboxes.

One afternoon, after my frugal yet exquisite lunch, I found that newspaper in my letterbox and was about to throw it into a small rubbish bin provided by the postman himself when I noticed, with a shiver of erotic, Peeping-Tom delight, the aforementioned snapshot—a young lady in a bathing suit. Immediately I rang the editorial office up, asking to speak to the editor himself who, after a token hesitation punctuated by a few businesslike asides, promised to send me the name and address of the bathing beauty in exchange for a small financial contribution to the development of journalism. I lost no time in sending a cheque to the newspaper which had enabled me to make the photographic, almost

pornographic, acquaintance of the young lady—the object of my epistolary verve—and received by return of post the data I needed to launch my amorous enterprise.

I launched it immediately, writing day and night to the dictation of my desire which swelled and bloomed and boomed in my bosom at the expense of the feelings I still nourished towards the late N.I., designated here by her initials for the sake of mystery and decorum. I told the bathing beauty, who will likewise remain incognito throughout my narrative, that I greatly appreciated her wonderful silhouette—the very embodiment of grace and femininity in our masculine, muscle-shaped world. I described as best I could the undulations and modulations of my dawning love which, as I went on with my descriptions and confessions, gradually took on the tints of my former, cinema-inspired, television-consolidated lust. It occurred to me that my new love had not come out of the blue, as might have been hastily presumed by someone acquainted only with the story of the snapshot, which I recounted in the previous paragraph of my narrative. Nothing comes out of the blue, for everything is deeply, ineradicably rooted in our egos which, in accordance with Leibniz's hypothesis, were determined once and for all at the hour of the Creation by the Creator Himself who was reluctant to deal with imponderables in the course of human history.

So I must begin at the beginning and tell you the story of my first love as exhaustively as I can, missing no nuances, however distasteful, holding back no clues that all lead, I suppose, to the predicament in which I found myself as my eyes alighted on the bathing beauty frozen death-like on the back page of our regional newspaper. I was in love with an actress once and, although I saw that actress only on a television screen, not even in our local movie-house, as the Americans would say, her body awakened in my soul a multitude of hitherto inexperienced feelings which are usually identified by psychiatrists as sexual longings. I went so far as to touch the screen where she appeared and disappeared to the accompaniment of her own voice which, frankly speaking, added nothing whatsoever to my desire so that, after a while, my exacting nature discarded it altogether: I would turn the sound off whenever she was about to speak. The screen was always cool and therefore displayed no characteristics of the human body which is never cool—never, unless the spirit warming it from the inside departs and soars upwards to take refuge in the glacial body of heaven, on the television screen of stars, of God.

I wonder whether I shall ever be allowed to pierce with my body the canopy of heaven, making love to God who might be dead, for all I know—dead and thus accessible to humans whose fear of the living God has often precluded the communication between the Creator and His creatures. Who indeed is bold enough to make love to the living God capable of destroying the thinnest hair on one's curl-haloed head, let alone television sets, local newspapers and other sources of lust without which human existence has no meaning, no attraction? And nothing short of the sexual act would satisfy the living God, whereas the dead One does not care about our consideration or caresses, dwelling as He does within the television set of the universe—a mere semiconductor prepared to endure whatever damage we might deem proper to inflict upon it.

So I succumbed to the ethereal charms of the actress who, in the final analysis, was even less than a semiconductor in my television set—the treasure-house of her gestures and moods—for I could not rub her between my fingers or put her in my mouth. I could write a letter to her and write a letter to her I did, pouring my heart out and asking permission to see her at close range, within my reach, which might have resulted in a sexual union devoid of any link with the other world, be it a lump of clay or the hoot of an owl. I might have taken possession of her body in the manner of the innumerable lovers she hugged to her breast and to other parts of her magnificent, dress-impaired body on my television screen which, incidentally, remained as cool as an indifferent husband. And I would have done so in my own way and on my bed, not on a television screen, had she answered me either through epistolary channels or over the telephone: I noted down my address and telephone number in red, revealing the blood-suffused colour of my desire.

She did not answer my letter and I wrote her another letter and yet another, using exclusively the red ink with which I had filled a crystal vase, a reminder of my late grandmother: she had given me that colossal inkstand for my eighteenth birthday, on the 'day of manhood'. I slowly immersed a blank sheet of paper into the meaningful, symbol-saturated liquid that shared my love and was called upon to express it better than words, even better than rhymes and iambic tetrameter. The mere sight of my colourful missives sent my beloved into transports of erotic ecstasy and so persistent was the impact, the momentum of my sexual drive, that I detected its remnants in her performance of Desdemona some years later—in her performance of Desdemona's corpse, to be exact. How beautiful she looked on that couch, on those shroud-like sheets surrounded on every side by astounded onlookers who dared not bend over her corpse, touch her skin or kiss her neck where Othello's fingers and lips had left their visible marks! I bent over her and touched her and kissed her many, many times, thanks to my video player which had immobilised or rather *killed* her body, thereby offering its outlines to my greediness long before her actual demise, long before our love was consummated.

I also admired her in the part of Ophelia, and yet I have no liking for water which seems to dilute my sensations, emotions, thoughts and stratagems as my body unwillingly imitates a clumsy, half-dead fish in some sea or lake, under an indifferent sky. For nothing in the world would I make love to somebody—and my Ophelia is no exception to this draconian rule—in a river or in a bathroom, and even the Red Sea does not tempt my senses, for all its licentious, expressionist appeal. So I erased the death of Ophelia from the video tape, from my sexual entertainments, and reverted to the sequences I cherished so much as to become the most ardent television viewer on Earth despite the hatred I nourish towards television and our modern world in general.

Only the dead satisfy my requirements and once again I shift my glance towards our local cemetery where some decent people lie or turn in their tombs, as the case may be, while awaiting some tokens of appreciation and gratitude from the living. I often stroll around our cemetery and kneel down by this or that tomb, doing my best to merge with the past and the world of eternal repose where, undisturbed and unhindered, my venerable corpses continue their Socratic dialogues—far away from

American soap operas, aerobics, etc. I am often armed with my spade which allows me to get closer and closer to my beloved heroes of the past as I dig holes outside the cemetery to keep my hand in without infringing the well-known, protectionist law and infuriating the caretaker.

I did not kill the aforementioned actress, my life-long idol, contrary to what one might think when perusing these pages on which I disclose my inner and outer conflicts with unconstrained outspokenness and almost uncontrollable meticulousness. Long words as well as long, orotund sentences are likely to land one in a mess, to put it mildly, and this particularity of the human condition accounts, if only in part, for the brevity of contemporary speech which models its style on computerspeak and on the sounds produced by domestic animals and wild beasts: nowadays people bark, mew, roar and howl rather than communicate by means of *human* languages. And I have no alternative but to open a book by Walter Pater and let my eyes and thoughts meander through the mazes of his word-overgrown English garden—a prodigious cemetery in the bosom of which many an artist was buried with the honours due to his rank and genius. Nobody writes like Walter Pater nowadays, for the younger generation yielded to the doubtful, deceptive comfort of simplicity which reduces human relations to a number of optimistic clichés such as: 'Terrific!' 'Fantastic!' 'Great!' 'Gee!' 'Hey!' 'Huh!' 'Yeah!' 'I can't believe it!' 'How are you today?' People have no idea how you felt yesterday or last month, but still they smile and ask: 'How are you today?' in expectation of the answers they have heard so many times before: 'Fine!' 'Much better!' 'Much better than yesterday!' And yesterday they would have answered: 'Much better than yesterday!' so that one might surmise they were fatally ill at their births—worse still, they were dead at their births but, owing to some 'new' treatment or merely to their willpower, they have recovered and now feel much, much better than in their mothers' wombs.

My actress died a natural death in her prime and as the black-and-white funeral procession meandered across my television screen I cogitated, shattered and depressed, on Walter Pater's literary style and his way of violating the tombs of illustrious painters and poets. I ought to have rejoiced at her premature demise which was as a matter of fact instrumental in bringing our bodies together; yet I was shattered like a lover losing for ever a flesh-and-blood mistress whose fragrance still reigns unchallenged in his room, not only in his remembrance. I cried and sobbed as if unmindful of the nocturnal, raincoat-and-spade escapade which was to metamorphose my lonely life into a fairy-tale worthy of Stevenson's quill and Nabokov's pencil—a Gothic story and an Arcadian romance blended in the intimacy of a midsummer night. I waited for a few days in order to let the visitors to her tomb calm down and stop haunting her spirit at the very place where her body had so unexpectedly found its eternal peace, and then I put my jacket on, slipped my spade, a pair of pincers, a hammer and a coil of rope into a huge plastic bag and slunk into the deserted street.

Unfortunately her body lived now at a distant cemetery of which I had no knowledge: neither as a bereaved relative nor as an ardent explorer of the Hereafter had I ever visited it, being ignorant of my favourite actress's geographical attachments. I seldom leave my town and even the limelight of

London does not beckon any longer to my theatrical curiosity, tarnished as it is by the new-fangled American environment which I hate much more than New York or Los Angeles: duplicates cannot but accentuate the shortcomings of originals. And I have no intention of travelling as far as the rural and industrial areas of England unless another beautiful actress springs into existence on my television screen and subsequently dies in a hospital somewhere, designating a small provincial town where she had been born and brought up as her burial location.

My actress was buried on the outskirts of her home town and I took a train and then a bus, heading for her young, earth-smelling tomb which, upon my arrival, welcomed and presently received me into its bosom where I found what I had been striving for throughout my life—perfect harmony and understanding. Of course the presence of a caretaker was to be considered and dealt with as promptly and silently as possible, in full accordance with the rules of the *métier*, so that even before setting out on my journey I had elaborated a plan to get round that foreseeable hindrance and my plan worked to perfection, I am proud to say. Lulled to a heavy sleep by my alcohol-administered drug, the caretaker snored in his cot as the night proceeded on its heavenly path to the light and bustle of the day, taking no notice of my tools and my impatient fervour which often interfered with the smooth regularity of the resurrection-like ritual.

At last my spade knocked against something 'human' and gradually the coffin appeared at the bottom of the grave which turned out to be deeper than I had anticipated as if its contents, alias my darling of an actress, were trying to run away from my concupiscence. But she could no longer dodge my caresses for, on the borderline between the Hereafter and the so-called reality where I had been marooned over the last forty years, I was her only lover and master whom she had to obey like a marionette. Inebriated by my absolute power over her body, I prised the lid off and she became my marionette, my mistress and my wife in no time at all, given that my consciousness—the breeding ground for Time and Space—was now usurped by love and lust. I took advantage of my being alive and subjected her body to a variety of erotic and sexual tests that I invented on the spur of the moment, in the heat of our posthumous exchange of marriage vows. Deprived by death of its stage-acquired arrogance and pride, her body could not choose but obey my tiniest gestures and enthusiastically I propped it up against a nearby tree, immobilised it with the rope and receded a few steps to admire its curves in the moonlight. It is a pity she was unable to perform a regular striptease for the sake of my desire which, at the undiluted sight of her stark-naked body leaning in the moonlight against the oak tree, skipped all the stages of sexual arousal, blurred all the landscapes of the sexual journey, being put at once into top gear, as it were.

Once my soul had its fill of the large-as-death television star, I untied her compliant, all-purpose body and made it strike another nonchalant posture with the aid of the rope I had brought to the 'scene of the crime' in my plastic bag. That new relief of her nakedness elicited a different response from my libido: instead of an innocuous, almost virginal contemplation, I was driven to what might be called 'tangibility' which first manifested itself through a series of omnipresent, juicy kisses and then through

a massage-like pawing. The smell of her decaying skin all but obliterated the olfactory events of my childhood, and the feel of her material envelope, inside which her sinews and veins formed a delicate criss-cross structure, was so incomparable as to put me off any further molecular contact with living creatures. Even an ordinary handshake bursts with aggressiveness whenever the living are concerned, for they either repel you like the opposite pole of a magnet, resisting your imaginary advances, or on the contrary grasp your fingers with such force as to suggest you are already under their thumb. And their jobs and passions deposit such a layer of clammy substances on their skins that the smell reaching your nostrils makes you flee civilisation and seek refuge in mountains and woods or in your own house which you can fill up with the perfumes dear to your memory.

I continued to fiddle with her body almost until dawn which introduced itself to my benumbed, love-crammed consciousness through a suspicious alteration of colours: I noticed that the body of my beloved no longer bathed in the moonlight-sea, in the star-river, in the night-ocean. I straightened up, glanced around, contemplated for a while the inanimate world, admiring the forbearance of trees, the complicity of Time, the patience of the Almighty, and dragged my beloved as far as the wide-open tomb which awaited her body without any sign of jealousy or displeasure. I picked up my hammer and shed a few scorching tears as once again the earth embraced her body with the ardour of a lover who, for all his solicitude and care, does not mind sharing the death-pampered body of his victim with world-disillusioned aliens.

I wish I could trample the sun underfoot, smothering its light and the vulgar, gaudily-patterned world engendered by the circular movement of the sun which pushes the hands of our clocks and Time itself forward and forward—further and further away from the past, from the moonlit, corpse-strewn past.

On my television screen, occasionally raised from the dead by numerous, corpse-stuffed video cassettes, she looks alive and therefore very much akin to other actresses or, worse still, to pedestrians interviewed in the streets by prying, boorish journalists. She joins the sun-world where even her shadow was out of my reach, for I was not permitted to walk by her side, to step on her capricious shadow, to caress it with the soles of my shoes, transmitting to her soul my love-signals: the rhythm of my walk would have faithfully reproduced the beating of my heart. On my television screen, in the outside sunlit world, she despised me and categorically refused to lend an ear to the caresses of my voice and words, to my declarations of love couched in a *recherché* English which no-one speaks any more, neither natives of the British Empire nor unmusical, business-minded foreigners. A large consignment, delivery dates, discounts, wholesale terms, customs duty, a huge demand, insurance, devaluation, to place an order, the possibilities for expansion, to raise new capital, a reduced dividend—and so on and so forth. 'A reduced dividend might well discourage new investment' is all they are capable of within the province of the English language and, as a result of this forcible striptease, Joyce, Conrad and Yeats have found themselves in some attic—like discarded, moth-ruined clothes. Let me at this point of my narrative quote just one sentence from Walter Pater's essay on

Joachim du Bellay: 'He recognised of what force the music and dignity of languages are, how they enter into the inmost part of things; and in pleading for the cultivation of the French language, he is pleading for no merely scholastic interest, but for freedom, impulse, reality, not in literature only, but in daily communication of the speech.'

I am a foreigner in this insular land, yet I like the English language as if it were my great-grandmother's tongue, as if I were Adam enjoined to distribute English words and idioms among trees and bushes, among birds and animals, among lakes and rivers, among fishes and corpses. And I hate local television programmes which daily put on display an impressive number of suburban, cockney-sounding individuals entangled in a number of unimpressive dramatic situations or comic predicaments, the latter seasoned with an impressive number of laughter's nuances and dynamics. I hate those invisible, pre-recorded laughter-choirs which seem to hide somewhere in your own room, ready to pounce upon you and point their mocking or accusing fingers at your face, at your clothes, at your lifestyle, at the corpse hidden in your cellar. So I killed my television set and even buried in my attic some of the video cassettes; they used to discompose and confuse my memory, the everyday life of my wonderful memory keeping afresh whatever I store in it: nights, trees, star-rivers, film stars, etc.

But I have no intention of killing or otherwise destroying our local newspapers which are liable to furnish me with another future remembrance in the shape of a photograph inducing me to write many a heartfelt missive to whoever is depicted on it. That is precisely what I have been doing over the last two years and, I can assure you, my life resembles a huge crystal vase filled to the brim with the red ink into which I am now dipping my pen in order to write the first chapter of my *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. I count on my readers and their force of persuasion which must and will disseminate my cemeteries all over the world and even encroach upon the future, preserving it from health-boasting barbarism, from speedy, one-syllable immortality.

Let me repeat: I advocate and idolise death only to stress the importance of the past in which I might have adored the living creatures, their gestures, smiles and smells, instead of flying at their approach and quashing their wriggly silhouettes on my television screen. In the past I might have brought the sun to a standstill overhead, in the sky, not in the underworld where it dwells now, listening to how my floor creaks and squeaks as I pace up and down my room in the hope of chancing upon a persuasive metaphor, an embrace-like rhyme. But the present engulfs me once again and, in my endeavour to escape from it uninjured, I memorise a Browning poem or dig another hole under the walls of our local cemetery; and that hole leads me to the past or at least gets me closer to those times in which I would have walked among humans without covering my eyes and nostrils with both hands. Whenever in need of self-flattery, self-respect and narcissistic love, I descend into my newly-made hole and lie down in it, stretching my limbs out and waiting for my body to turn into a corpse—a decadent, love-deserving corpse. And I dig myself out and deposit my breathing corpse on the moonlight-painted grass where, shortly afterwards, my lips meet my own lips and my hands clasp my own hands, and those four hands of mine touch and knead my double-body with a frenzy unknown to

ordinary lovers. And all the while the wind of the past plays with my hair, sweeping the present off my brow, and the moon mocks the sun from the vantage point of heaven as it tenderly inlays my skin with moonstones so that I end up looking like a painting by Gustave Moreau or by Klimt—by nocturnal, blue-dominated Klimt. And I even tie myself to trees or columns, exposing my nudity to my own curiosity and voyeurism, which results in a double pleasure: I enjoy being gazed upon and I also revel in the contemplation of my self-assertive nudity.

And presently I return home, shake my jacket off, fill the crystal vase with blue ink and sit down at my writing desk which has witnessed and absorbed so many declarations of love that it can compose my letters on its own while I fiddle with moonstones and tombstones. And so it does, now and then, greeting me with a pile of letters which parade my handwriting and speak in my tone of voice about the beauty of Atlantis and its inhabitants, about my underground search for lost time, about my love for photographs and human immobility. I send some of these letters to the girl I love and desire, but I wisely keep in my room the descriptions of my nocturnal escapades which, if revealed to her with undue haste and without an appropriate commentary, might frighten her parents, putting them on guard against my body and soul. It might occur to them that I propose to kill their daughter and subsequently avail myself of her posthumous beauty in the intimacy of my bedroom which is spacious enough to accommodate two or even three people, in case I set my heart upon a three-way sexual embrace—her corpse and my double-body. But I have no intention of doing away with the girl whose photograph I spotted in our local paper unless she lives too long on the surface of the Earth and thus endangers her beauty by becoming a mistress of Time and a plaything of Space. What if she takes it into her head to leave our city, England, Europe, our as-old-as-love civilisation and to settle down in New York or in some other American city to which I will never direct my steps, whatever body may await me under the roots of skyscrapers, under the soles of sneakers?

Invented by the ancient Greeks and sustained by our anxiety, Fate has a penchant for parting human beings in love, and it is my sacred duty to use either a paper-transmissible poison or some other clandestine, remote-control weapon to thwart its devastating manoeuvres. By standing up to Fate's foibles and frolics I can transform our history's uphill climb—so-called technological and humanitarian progress—into a sheer descent, dragging the present and the future down to the nineteenth, eighteenth and other low-lying centuries—down to the bottom of human graves, to our authentic history. Down and ever down we plummet, hurtling past the Second World War and its eternal shame, reducing to dust the Russian Revolution and raising from the dead its victims, for it is better to live in coffins than in skyscrapers which, despite their elongated geometry, have nothing to do with coffins—not even with vertical coffins, whatever they are. Anyway the surface of our planet is poisoned already and I might as well wait for that ecological, infallible poison to reach the dinner table or the bed cabinet of my new beloved instead of soaking my letters in potassium cyanide or other black-dominated liquids.

But I am tired of waiting and the sooner I press her corpse against my body, the easier I shall endure the vicissitudes of the open air and the erratic, hurly-burly movements of hugger-mugger, life-precipitated molecules which are as unpredictable as flesh-and-blood actresses. In a sense, those television-born creatures are predictable enough, but the female variety of determinism avails you not: as long as their blood pirouettes in their bodies they are sure to spurn your love and destroy your letters. You have no alternative therefore but to calm their blood down, eventually bringing it to a standstill, or to dry it up altogether by means of invisible weapons and sorcery: one cannot always rely on fatal diseases, on bugs, on thugs, on trucks, as the Americans would say, on Big Macs which are nothing but slow-acting poison, etc. My new beloved has not become an actress yet, according to our local newspaper; but all she can ever do is imitate film stars—in particular their propensity for despising those who are not famous or rich and do not even hobnob with the famous and the rich, being far more absorbed in literature and the past than in show business and the present.

Speaking of show business and its representatives, let me dwell for a while on fashion models whose ugliness churns my blood, spurs me out of my room and urges me to kill the young women in whom I have not the slightest erotic interest, with whom I have no spiritual affinities and can in no wise share the echo-like richness of the past. I often wonder why those young hags, those unpromising, irremediable ugly ducklings, who resemble neither Helen of Troy nor even Vivien Leigh and Greta Garbo, have been chosen to represent the female species at the end of the twentieth century? Why does nobody make a protest against that television-diffused and magazine-circulated ugliness which is sure to influence beautiful maidens strutting around beaches and yacht decks in their bathing suits—a gratifying prey to omnipresent photographers? Easily swayed by fads and frauds in every domain, those bathing beauties might alter and intentionally mutilate their looks and physiques beyond all recognition—beyond my love, desire and poisons, beyond my letters and cemeteries. Will only ugly ducklings walk around the future, leaving the imprints of their sneakers on its pavements and curbs? Will only ugly actresses drive through steel-and-glass avenues, scoffing at us from their Cadillacs?

Is she still beautiful? How often does she watch television? When will she become irremediably ugly? Shall I write letters to nine-year-old girls? To five-year-old girls? When are they taught to read nowadays? Do they read at all? Are they acquainted only with computer-generated images? Have their aerobics and other workouts already made them immortal, impervious to my poisons?

Are all youngsters batmen and superwomen? Not yet. I have just switched my television on. There are still some men on Earth. And they still fight against batmen and superwomen.

Squeezed, squashed and crushed by our memories and anxiety, the present hardly exists in the dead calm of our bedrooms—such philosophical meditations often console me in the intimacy of my bathroom and even appease my anger, making me condone the criminals who demolish the beauty-built, tradition-concatenated world of ours. But the future continues to worry me. What kind of deplorable effect do those ugliness parades produce in the minds of male youngsters?

Another fashion parade. I had better kill my immortal television once more. What will its next incarnation look like?

Why do men still present their wives with mottled, elegant, sophisticated dresses which have already been contaminated, poisoned by the androgynous women insolently wearing them during fashion parades? Why can't we boycott those frocks discredited once and for all by the necks and heads sticking out of them like scarecrows?

Alas, those living and moving scarecrows frighten only Botticelli-dressed angels who recoil, fly off and forsake the Earth, giving up the very idea of our salvation, for the way to salvation lies through beauty and not through commercial prettiness admired by indiscriminate teenagers.

Do angels ever die in the Garden of Eden? Can they be assassinated during their missions to Hades? Are they buried on Earth, on stars, in the air, in clouds? Angels must be far more beautiful and fragrant than the Almighty.

Shall I ever make love to God? Even His *dead* body, 'the Almighty's corpse' in Nietzschean jargon, is likely to spurn and snub me in the alleys of the Hereafter.

I propose that all representatives of the younger generation should be forbidden to procreate, to beget poisoned children—to multiply and replenish the earth, if nothing is done before the advent of the twenty-first century; if ugliness is not replaced by something redolent of olden times.

I would much prefer to walk around the deserted squares of rat-swarming cities, occasionally stumbling over the corpse-like bodies of drug addicts whom I do not mind, as a matter of fact: in their opium-coloured moments they might catch a glimpse of authentic, archetypal beauty. Indeed, by shutting themselves away from the world, drug addicts swiftly descend into a subconscious which is truly identical to the consciousness of our forefathers, for our forefathers dwelt in a kind of opium-world and had no need to conjure up its beauty with dirty syringes.

The world will lose its human population and, for want of living companions in misfortune, those remaining on the surface of the Earth will seek solace and encouragement in books, in the past and in the underworld, raising Homer, Virgil, the Buddha and Julius Caesar from the dead. And I shall leave my house at last and venture into the streets and encounter Helen of Troy or Aphrodite with whom I might spend a candle-illuminated night in my harem, in my photograph-strewn, letter-littered harem, alias my flat, where I am sitting now alone, alone, alone, alone, alone—like King Lear bending over the corpse of his beloved Cordelia.

Am I the only survivor of an atomic war or an epidemic?

Has the world population died of ugliness?

THE QUEEN

[Nino] mortuo Samiramis uxor successit...haec, libidine ardens, sanguinem sitiens, inter incessabilia et stupra et homicidia, cum omnes quos regie arcessitos, meretricie habitos concubitu oblectasset occideret, tandem filio flagitiose concepto, impie exposito, inceste cognito privatam ignominiam publico scelere obtexit. praecepit enim, ut inter parentes ac filios nulla delata reverentia naturae de coniugiis adpetendis ut cuique libitum esset liberum fieret.

Orosius, *Hist.* I, iv, 4, 7-8

Why is my mother so repulsively ugly, as ugly as the seven deadly sins? She is as ugly as the crime of infanticide. I have no murders on my conscience, large though it is, large and hospitable, but whenever my eye falls upon my mother I feel as if my hands had throttled a dozen nurselings. It is not a question of taste and aesthetic outlook for, in the matter of ugliness, physical reactions prevail over analyses and references. Physical reactions. Nausea and stiffness of the body. Everyone in the area finds my mother ugly and repulsive, judging from the stiffness of those who walk day and night around our house, around her prostrated carcass. Child murderers, all of them. How many children have they murdered already? And they are itching to murder my mother, I suppose, because she looks and behaves like a child now. Like my child. To wipe ugliness out. That is what they wish to murder her for. My mother, my only child. To efface ugliness from the beauty of nature. They still assume nature is beautiful and innocuous. Their bodies relax in the bosoms of landscapes, provided my mother is not around, hiding behind a bush or climbing up a tree. Why do they wave their branches, those trees over there? To whom are they saying farewell, I wonder? Am I never to see them again?

In her adulthood my mother was good at gymnastics, and even in her forties she could hide herself on a treetop like a goddess surveying humans from on high. We used to play hide-and-seek every other day. She was so ugly I did my best to hide myself for ever round an impenetrable corner, far more impenetrable than any wall or house. Or I hid in a sort of one-way street. While looking for me she walked along that street in the wrong direction and I often arrested her and put her in prison. I still remember how voluptuously I turned the key in the lock of her cell, thinking, I'll have another mother, I'll have another mother now. I'll have a beautiful, young mother. That is what I thought when depriving her of food, water and pastries. Or else the water I gave her was undrinkable. How many times did I poison my mother in my childhood? I kept a number of poisons in my closet and every other day I examined them and enhanced their potency. I'd better leave my impenetrable corner and start walking towards my mother, I thought. I'll walk along my street in the right direction. I'll run into her at the end of my street and I'll ask her to open her mouth. And she'll open it. And I'll drop two or three poisons into her stomach. I'll lose the game but I'll win a new mother, perhaps Yves' mother.

Yes, I loved her. I loved Yves' mother more than myself, more than my toys and poisons. She was very beautiful and I waited for her under the trees my mother used as a war engine to pounce on me and devour my body. My mother was a lynx, a wild cat, a new Gorgon. She is still a Gorgon and can kill any neighbour of ours by her glance alone. But she cannot devour me any longer, not while she sleeps under her thick, heavy blanket. Under her blankets, my blankets. And she sleeps a lot nowadays

as if afraid of the room where I stand beside her bed and bend over her body and even approach her mouth, her voracious mouth. Is she afraid I might stuff a poisonous pill into her mouth, into her throat?

I loved Yves' mother. I even suggested we should swap mothers, although I knew only too well it would not be a fair swap. So I offered him my water pistol in addition to my mother and all her dresses. And he accepted my offer, blind as he was to his own mother's charms and sex appeal. Immediately we went over to his place and I told his mother, You're *my* mother now. But she did not believe me. She did not believe I had come out of her womb exactly as her son had done a few years before. At that point I seemed to recall her womb. I actually recalled how I had been lying curled up in her womb, inside her beautiful body. Don't you remember me? I asked her. Don't you remember my movements, my blows? She saw the reflection of her beauty in my rapturous glance and smiled and laughed and ridiculed my love until I departed in tears. From that day on I followed in her footsteps around Versailles.

I loved her legs and the way she walked along the façades of our city which seemed to have been created for her, only for her, for her silhouette, for her shadow, for her feet. She rebuilt the city every time she ventured outdoors where I was lying in wait for her, patiently, desperately. The boulevards had no meaning without her shadow. The Boulevard de la Reine was a meaningless meadow without her shadow. I was trying to step on her shadow prostrated at my feet. I would have contented myself with her shadow had she offered it to me in a fit of generosity. I wished to prove to her I was her son. Only her son could follow her with such obstinacy, a son or a lover. But I wished to become her son, not her lover, for children are allowed to curl up in their mothers' laps and their mothers rock them to sleep, moving their hands and knees ever so gently, with motherly tenderness and softness. Women are softer with their children than with their lovers. Besides, I was her lover already. I undressed her so often that her husband would have envied me had he been alive and in a position to appreciate his wife's nudity. Yves' father had passed away even earlier than mine.

My father must have been disgusted by the colour and touch of my mother's skin. Why did he marry her, I wonder? She was not rich. She is rich now thanks to my perseverance and flair, but her riches will not profit her. Not at her age. I have given her a lot of money over the last fifteen years and she is always counting my money by the window as if to share her mercenary delight with our neighbours. Why don't you count my money in the streets? I ask her now and then. Everybody will admire you. Everybody will find you beautiful. You might re-marry, mother. Don't you want to marry a lusty young lad? It is an old story, as old as the world. Children give money to their mothers and their mothers marry young devils whose only purpose in life is to steal mothers from children and to dig deeper, larger graves for fathers. Why do they disturb our fathers in their graves, those young upstarts?

Why do *I* think about my father today? Why can't I leave him in peace? His peace is far from eternal, for I punctuate it with my thoughts and memories. I make holes in the canvas of his peace.

My mother has left me in peace at last. She does not blackmail me any more. She cannot stand by the window, nor can she open it. Not in her present state of health. She cannot. Or she does not love me any longer. Does her illness denote indifference?

How important it is to have a beautiful mother. There are so many keyholes in every house and a child does not even have to squat down in order to catch a glimpse of what might become an inexhaustible source of his wildest nocturnal fantasies. His mother's nudity. Doors are so submissive and co-operative. They open on their own, noiselessly, invitingly. And you see your mother standing in front of a mirror, turning this way and that as she admires her reflection and inadvertently gives you an anatomy lesson. With no less skill than enthusiasm. A double anatomy lesson. Mothers undress all the time. They rock their babies and change their clothes. They have nothing else to do. And they take showers. And droplets glisten on their breasts. You can lick those droplets off, if you wish.

You can also crawl for hours and hours under a dinner table, searching for a spoon or a fork or a knife. You drop something and go down on your knees like a worshipper in a pagan temple. And you can hide yourself in your mother's room, behind a Chinese screen. And you can finger your mother's clothes, reading them like a book, leafing through them, so to speak. And you can run your fingers over your mother's underwear. And you can wear your mother's underwear. In front of the same mirror you will become as beautiful as your mother. And you can make love to your mother's underwear. And enjoy the smell of her blanket and pillow. And you can ensconce yourself in your mother's blanket and doze off on your mother's sheets, dreaming your mother's dreams, screaming in your mother's nightmares. What a nightmare to have an ugly mother.

I used to shut my eyes whenever my mother was in sight, within my field of vision. Unfortunately I have another field of vision, right behind my eyelids, on *this* side of the world, on *my* side of reality. My mother seemed to dwell in my eyeballs. I saw her everywhere, even when she was far from home, far from the streets where I shadowed Yves' mother. To tell the truth she was never too far from home. *My* mother. She liked her bed. And she liked *my* bed. More than her own.

She lies in her bed all the time, even when I am not at home. It is not on account of her illness that she lies in her bed now. Not only on account of her illness. She is waiting for me. She wants me to seduce her in her own room, thinking the time has come for me to repay her visits. I am a gentleman now, not only her child. I am more than a child now. I am a man. So I must come to her room.

You should not excuse yourself if your leg touches a female under a dinner table. You should not say, I'm sorry. Otherwise the female will be offended. She thought you had been courting her. And you had just moved your leg. Inadvertently, unintentionally. You apologised and thus intimated she was not worthy of your attention, of the slightest movement of your leg or foot. In other words, you told her in plain French she was ugly, as ugly as the seven deadly sins. As ugly as the eight deadly sins. Or nine. Or ten. You actually went so far as to augment the number of deadly sins to hurt her profoundly, to make her look even uglier than she was.

I am not supposed to apologise if I unduly approach or touch my mother. I am not supposed to knock on the door before entering her room. She might take offence if I entered her room with a polite, warning cough. She might have a heart attack if I apologised when removing her blankets.

She used to usurp *my* bed during the so-called halcyon years of my childhood. She would install herself in my bed as if it was *her* bed, her legal bed allotted to her by the law. Is there any law allowing mothers to sleep in their children's beds? Why doesn't she sleep in my bed *now*? She wants me to seduce her, to come to her, to bow to her, to kneel down before her.

My mother does not leave her bed now. With the passing of the years everyone finds his own niche looking exactly like his mother's womb. As for myself, all my life I have been walking away from my mother's womb. I was walking along the streets where other mothers stalked like Queens in semi-transparent dresses. And the sun pierced, probed those dresses, its rays fondling and cuddling those mothers' hips. I witnessed the sun's caresses as I walked away from my mother, further and further away from my mother's legs, dresses and perfume. The whole city smelt of my mother. Even cigarette smoke smelt of my mother. And I pictured to myself the bonfire on which my mother might be burnt to death like Joan of Arc, notwithstanding the thickness of her skin. She is still burning on my bonfire. And my bonfire grows higher and higher, reaching up to the canopy of heaven, lighting up the stars. What do I see at night except my mother's flames, her seven deadly sins, her myriad sins? The stars must also smell of my mother.

She moved about without grace, and yet she belonged to the same species as Yves' mother. Do you like Yves' mother? I asked her once. Why don't you move about like her? Why don't you strut about Versailles like a Queen?

How easily I might have removed her dress, exposing her body to the avidity of my glances and fingers, had she been like a Queen or at least like Pierre's mother.

I might have seated myself on the bidet and looked at her, looked at her, looked at her, filling my eyeballs with her beauty. I would have licked the soapsuds off her navel.

I was disgusted by everything remotely related to my mother. One day I flung all her dresses out of the window. For a moment they floated in the air like flying carpets. But they did not fly away, contradicting my impressions and conclusions. Then they covered the pavement, the pavement put them on, in a manner of speaking, and passers-by began to look upward. I hid myself beneath the windowsill, beside a warm radiator. Its warmth reminded me of my mother's body. There was something cold in that warmth, something extramundane. Suddenly I dashed out and ran downstairs, obeying an uncontrollable, uncomfortable impulse. I picked up the dresses which had already been profaned by curious hands and carried the foul-smelling heap up the stairs, as far as my mother's room.

Cowering down in my impenetrable corner, I hoped my mother would not find me. But she always found me, paying unexpected visits to my room whenever I was about to discover and conquer another world. *My* world. So many worlds might have opened up before me, but for my mother's untimely intrusions. All her intrusions were untimely. Everything she did looked like an intrusion. She intruded upon my leisure by entering my room, her head thrust upward. She intruded upon my soul by touching my body. She thought she was doing her duty, her motherly duty. I would have exempted her from that duty had she consulted me before entering my room and running her fingers through my hair. But she never put me in the picture about her duties and whimsies. And I always awaited her intrusion as one might await the twelve strokes of midnight. Who awaits the twelve strokes of midnight? Ghosts? My mother did. Quite often, too often. Outrageously often. To verify if I was not indulging in self-absorption or self-abuse, call it what you will. The solitary pleasure.

Do I really need a mother? Not at *this* stage of my earthly existence. It is too late to be born in this life of mine and I am not yet prepared for another life, for a next incarnation. Will I need a mother to be reborn? And what if I become a mere rivulet, a seed of my desire, the highest and purest expression of my innermost nature? All my life I have been spurting out of myself, spasmodically, intermittently. All my life I have been flowing out of myself, eager to create another mother, to give birth to another mother, beautiful, understanding and soft.

Am I to blame for my mother's physique and manners? One is not answerable for what nature can produce in her eternal blindness. She supplies us with mothers, with ourselves. We are not allowed to choose our face or our way of thinking. Or a mother emerging from our body.

I fell in love at the age of fourteen. There were some other people in my life, not only mothers. I had a father. And a beloved. And a wife.

Could I marry Yves' mother? I asked my mother. Married women are not allowed to marry once again without divorcing their legal husbands, she answered. The law doesn't tolerate such procedures, she added.

The law is too narrow and one cannot squeeze through it so as to reach the so-called never-never land where there is no law, only one's desires and their fulfilment. The matrimonial law is an impenetrable corner. You cannot reach it by walking as far as the end of the street. There are no crossings, no intersections in the City of Law. Only one-way streets flanked by walls on both sides. Perhaps mothers are at the origin of the Law.

Why has the law tolerated my mother? Why hasn't it torn my mother to pieces? Why hasn't it thrown my mother's body to vultures? Why has nobody ever spat in my mother's face? Because she is a woman? Because she is a mother?

You are not allowed to kill your own mother. You might try and kill somebody else, if you feel like it. You are sure to find a suitable explanation for your deed. Afterwards. Self-defence, for instance. Or crime of passion. But even in self-defence you are not allowed to kill your own mother. Even if she herself makes an attempt to kill you. Even if she molests you. Even if she comes to you in the dead of night and lies down on you as if you were her bed or her sheets. Even if she kisses you with such hysterical frenzy that your lips and gums start bleeding. The taste of blood always reminds me of my mother.

Even if she licks your blood off like a cat. Your blood is your mother's milk. It is your mother who suckles you, not the other way round.

Why are they so unjust in courts of justice? Why do they always accuse fathers? Why never their wives, our mothers? Do only fathers rape their children? Do they think mothers are too feeble to overcome the resistance of their sons? Do those judges know our mothers at all? Do they have mothers or were they born in test tubes? All of them? Or were they born in the air, from the air? Is the air their true mother? The air caresses them twenty-four hours a day. The air penetrates their lungs and blood, raping them from the inside, as it were. Why are they so unconcerned about *our* mothers?

She was thirteen. I phoned her one afternoon. I heard a click on the line and realised my mother had picked up the second receiver. A few days before a second telephone had been installed in our house, in my mother's room. And I had already heard the click. My mother had already interrupted one of my telephone conversations.

I heard my mother's breathing. She did not say anything but she might have said something at any moment. I apologised and hung up. My mother did not let me out that afternoon.

The following day I phoned her from a telephone box. There were no clicks during our conversation. Obviously my mother's telephone had not been connected to the one I was using. My mother had no control over public telephones. My mother was not omnipresent.

As it turned out, she was. She knew we were having a date. She got up from her armchair as I got out of our house. I heard the front door bang and vibrate in my wake. So I returned to our house, to my room. My mother also returned to my room, a few minutes later.

I apologised once more. We fixed another date. I was waiting for her in the park. My mother was also waiting for her in the park, but I did not know it. I was not as omniscient as my mother. Hidden behind a statue, my mother spied on our movements. Soon our shadows blended in sunshine, my mother's shadow and our shadows. And thus we all proceeded about the city. My mother went with us to the cinema and watched the film she was likely to hate as much as she hated the girl. Hatred was in the air and the air was everywhere, as usual. The world had not changed overnight on account of my love or my mother's brand-new hatred. The air was my mother's hatred. And that hatred of hers penetrated my lungs and molested my heart, my sinews. My mother did not approach us. Nor did she slap me in the face, as had always been her habit. She was watching the film. And molesting me viciously.

My mother did not say anything when I got home, my eyes downcast, my body shivering in anticipation of her retribution. She might have ordered me not to leave my room for a fortnight. She might have posted herself before the front door with a whip, cracking it in the air from time to time. She did nothing of the sort. For two nights, for two long sleepless nights, she did not come to my room. And when she did come again, she knocked on the door three times.

She knocked on my door and I said, Yes, yes, yes. I always said 'yes' to my mother, and yet I was longing to hide under my bed and bite her hand which was sure to reach for my face like a cat's paw. My face still bears an imprint of that paw and, if need be, I can show my face to any judge, however prejudiced against sons and their allergy to ugly mothers. Our mothers are killing us! I would shout in his face. Is their mission on Earth to destroy their own babies?

Once I crawled out from under my bed and looked around in expectation of a caress or a scratch. It amounts to the same thing, as far as my mother is concerned. There was nobody in my room and I sprang to my feet, drunk with happiness. Freedom seemed to have descended upon me from the stars.

The stars are not as free as I am, I thought. They can't move around. They can only get loose and crash down to Earth, spraying pedestrians with their light. I can move around and go to the pictures with Julie or anybody else. And nobody will pursue our shadows and hunt us down because my mother died in her room, under her own bed. My mother knew her death was coming and she hid herself under the bed, hoping death wouldn't find her. But death went down on his knees, reached his hand out and grabbed my mother's shoulder. And my mother was forced to leave her hiding place, her impenetrable corner, and unceremoniously death pushed my mother towards the window. My mother plummeted down like a shooting star.

I should not compare my mother to the stars. The stars are indifferent and therefore kind, humane, philanthropic. They do not interfere with my desires, being too far away. And shooting stars never fall on my sheets. They never caress me, never.

Parents are supposed to take care of their children as if their children could not take care of themselves.

Human beings are powerless in the face of dangers lurking everywhere, behind bushes, up in the sky, under floorboards. And in beds, under blankets. No parental hand will ever protect us from earthquakes and suchlike. Even God's hand is too short to protect us from the heavy breathing of the Earth. And God's hand does not interpose between mothers' bodies and our bodies, between mothers' tongues and our lips. Perhaps God loves mothers and helps them conquer and subject their children. Only earthquakes can rip our bodies apart. Only earthquakes can separate us from our mothers.

Why aren't we born by ourselves, in a field, in a meadow, on the grass? Winds would have taken care of us. Winds would have borne us beyond the horizon, far away from our mothers and their intrusions. We might have saluted our mothers from a distance. We would have waved our handkerchiefs.

Orphans are often pitied and taken care of. Not by winds, birds and sunbeams. By institutions, by substitutes. Other mothers are found for them. It is believed that nobody can survive without a mother. It is just the opposite. The truth is at the other end of the street, in topographical terms. Over there. But everybody stands here. A crowd, humanity. The history of mankind lies on the dark side of the truth.

I grew up alone, complains a criminal. My mother died when I was four. My father abandoned me when I was eight. Nobody stroked my hair. Nobody listened to my tales of woe. No hand lay on my shoulder. No lips touched my cheeks. Nobody wiped off my tears. I had to wipe them off myself. The criminal cries and gets off scot-free. The judge does not realise the criminal was the happiest child in the world. He could go out whenever he wished. He could stay outdoors as long as he desired. Nobody

waited for him behind the front door. Nobody harangued him at the dinner table. And when he was delayed by a game or a flirt no-one called the police. He was not searched for throughout Paris, in hospitals and mortuaries. Nobody phoned his friends to ask *them* where he was and what he was doing. Nobody mocked him at school the following morning, during weeks and months, for years and years. Why had he become a criminal, I wonder? He ought to have caressed his fellow creatures day and night. He ought to have stroked their hair.

Mothers are useless, all of them. Except faraway mothers, shadowy mothers. Beautiful mothers igniting your imagination and sustaining your interest in women. My mother has killed women in my body, in my blood.

What a paradox it is. All women are mothers. They kill women in us and they raise them from the dead. Is that what the expression 'love-hate relationship' means? There is no womanhood without motherhood.

You are never brought up correctly in your own family whose members pursue their private goals and pay little or no attention to your desires. They need to immortalise themselves through their offspring and accordingly they do their best to imprint their own thoughts on your mind and their own physiques on your body. They imprison you within themselves or wear you like a garment. This jacket will have to be altered at the neck, they say with a sigh. And they clutch your neck with a murderous grip. Open your mouth! Open your mouth! they shout. And they stuff their words into your mouth, their outdated, decaying, poisonous words. And you feel *their* breaths in your lungs, *their* lives in your heart.

I wish my mother were mute. I can endure her caresses, not her words.

Your mother cannot outgrow her interest in dolls. She needs another doll, a clone of the toy she used to dress and undress in her childhood. In those days, in those bygone days, your mother had no *real* power over her doll for the simple reason that it took no notice of anything she said. She could drop it on the floor or throw it out of the window. But it did not *obey* her either consciously or unconsciously. And *you* are supposed to obey your mother both consciously and unconsciously. And it is your unconscious she specifically aims at, your unconscious, your complexes. Your doll complex. Your guilt-persecution complex.

What would you do without your mother? Why do they ask me this question? What will you do if your mother breathes her last? I shall breathe my first, in a manner of speaking. I shall do everything. Everything. And even more, much more.

After my mother's death I might expand the laws of life and violate the frontiers of mind. I might become immortal. Why do they repeat these questions?

I must try and remember other things, other people, doing justice to my father, for example. I must look out of the window more often. There are other worlds beyond the window. And one of those worlds might be mine. My future world.

My father was younger than my mother. Once my classmate said, Your father betrays your mother with other women. Your father is handsome and young. He was. He was always young and handsome. But he was faithful to my mother, strange as it may seem. My father loved my mother and he died of his love as one dies of starvation. Love is nourished and sustained by beauty.

My father gave me a lot of presents. He always returned from his business trips with presents in his suitcase. And he would turn his suitcase upside down. And the presents fell on the floor like the petals of a dying flower. And another flower would spread its petals on the floor. And I picked up that flower, crawling on all fours around my father's feet. My mother would wrench the presents from my hands and lock them somewhere. Sometimes she flung them out of the window. You're spoiling your son, she said. He must work. He thinks bread grows on trees.

I thought bread grew on oak trees. Everything seemed to grow on trees in those days. Even my mother grew on a tree, on a treetop. Earth was generous to a fault and generated a great many Trees of Love. Why did my mother take the Earth away from me?

And my mind? What about my mind? The fountains of my mind have been drained. My Tree of Knowledge is barren. My Tree of Love sprouts no leaves of desire.

My father died when I was eleven. You should look after your mother, he told me on his deathbed. He reached for my mother's hand and pulled her towards him as if my mother, his wife, could shield his body from death. As if my mother were an impenetrable wall. I already knew that death passes through walls, through wives and mothers. My mother went down on her knees, but she did not pray for my father, as might have been expected. She kissed his hand, applying her lips now to the wrist, now to the palm. She bent over him and my father asked me to leave the room, to leave them alone, in other words. There were no other words to describe the situation. Alone. I shut the door and immediately crouched behind it. They paid no notice to my manoeuvres, being wholly absorbed in what they were doing with their own bodies. My father asked my mother to undress in his presence for the last time. I want to see you for the last time, he said in a husky voice denoting not the closeness of death but lust, only lust. I opened the door, determined to interfere, and froze on the threshold. I froze

on the threshold of the room. I must have looked like an icicle. I was cold and could not move at all. Under the circumstances I could only melt, deliquesce into indeterminate forms. My mother was dancing in the middle of the room as she removed her clothes one by one, throwing them pell-mell on my father's blanket. And my father snatched the clothes from where they had finished their flight, brought them up to his face and smelt them, smelt them blissfully. And my mother danced on both sides of my father's bed. And she ended by wrapping my father's neck in her underwear. Her legs continued to move and stamp on the floor. My father's neck was enveloped in my mother's bra. He could hardly breathe, but he laughed and laughed until the laughter replaced the air in his throat. And then he started to cough atrociously, as only dying people can cough. He was coughing his life away. My mother continued to dance around him, above him, inside him. Once the dance was over she lay down on my father. It was the last stage of her dance, the last page of his life. She had no desire to stand in for him at the approach of death. She merely wanted him to make love to her. From where I stood I saw everything. My mother's legs continued to move. She continued to dance. It was the last stage but not the last page of her dance. There were many pages left and I leafed through them. What is more, I read them.

And my mother danced naked around my father's coffin. She kissed the corpse and sobbed hysterically. I had never seen my mother cry before. I had always been sure there were no tears behind her eyes.

After the funeral she took me by the hand and brought me to the Jardin du Luxembourg. For two hours we sat on a bench in the evening drizzle. Bare-headed, as if in front of a corpse. She stared at me and talked all the while touching my forehead and pressing her thumbs against my temples. She talked to me about the people I did not know. She talked about the people *he* had known, my father. And she asked me what I thought about their latest arrangements or ideas. I answered I knew neither those people nor their arrangements. You're a liar, she said. How can you lie to me? Haven't we lived together long enough? Haven't you always been honest with me? You've never betrayed me, have you? I've always found *my* perfume and the smell of *my* skin on your body. I've always found myself on your body, in your body. As she talked and asked these questions her feet executed a dance on the sand, a queer hysterical dance.

She talked to me for hours on end. And she dined with me for hours on end, as she did with my father. I drank his wine and I was supposed to drink it the way *he* had drunk it. She showed me the right way and shouted at me whenever I forgot I was not a child any more. I was no longer a child of eleven. Who was I? My mother knew who I was and I left it to my mother to tackle the identity problem. Another mistake of mine. How many mistakes have I committed in my mother's presence? What does 'my mother's absence' mean?

And she read out to me the books my father had venerated. And her voice wormed its way into them. My mother insinuated herself into those books, disfiguring their characters. Madame Bovary turned out to be an ugly peasant girl, a spinster. I would have poisoned her myself had I been her husband or Flaubert.

I learnt a lot about my father in those days, but those days are gone now. I am her son again, my mother's son. And she is my little daughter, my ward, my darling of a niece. She is in my power now, not only on account of her illness. She is in my power because I am stronger and older. I have outstayed my father, destroying him in my mother's body.

She began to come to my room. I was her husband in those days. For the first time it happened a fortnight after my father's funeral. I heard the door creaking and expected to see my father's ghost, for only ghosts could moon around at that ungodly hour. I knew what he would tell me, the ghost of my father. It is your mother who killed me, my former wife. Avenge your father. Adieu, adieu. It is my mother who slipped into my room while I was sleeping and dreaming. But she was no dream. She looked like her own ghost, especially when she started to remove her clothes, one by one, one by one. It was dark in my room, but I still thought there was too much light at the spot where my mother was peeling her clothes off. I wished I could extinguish the lights in the whole universe. Even the stars were to be switched off without delay. Even the stars were a nuisance in the course of my mother's striptease.

I did not react to her show of self-assurance. She believed she was attractive enough to extend her sex appeal beyond my father's grave. The following day I spoke to her about Yves's mother, but it did not put her off. Nothing could put her off, not even my nausea.

She came to my room on the following night. Days and nights followed each other like the pages of a book. There was only one word in that book despite its size: 'Mother'.

The following night she came in rather noisily. Her desire to awaken me was strengthened by my utter impassivity. How noisome she was. I could smell her so-called perfume at a distance, while she was still beyond my door, wallowing in the mud of her erotic dreams. Her high-heeled shoes clattered on the floor like horseshoes as she entered my room after midnight. Even ghosts were fast asleep at that diabolical hour. She was not. She was no ghost. She was too real. Her clothes were real too. She threw them on my blanket, that time. She wanted me to touch them. She said so in a whisper. I pretended not to hear her whispering voice. I pretended not to see her breasts hanging over my face like a pair of huge stalactites. How cold her breasts must have been on that night.

The following night she came in with a candle. She was holding a candle in her right hand, but she needed her right hand to undress with elegance and dignity. So she put the burning candle down on a chair and flourished her right hand like a sword, prepared to fight my indifference, my drowsiness. As usual she began to undress rather ponderously, gathering momentum as her fingers unbuttoned whatever there was to unbutton in my room. She might as well have unbuttoned *my* clothes had I been fully dressed instead of lying stark naked under my blanket. By that time she had already hidden all my pyjamas. She might have invited me to a dance had I stood stark naked in the middle of my room, by her side, within her reach. We might have danced far into the night, until dawn perhaps, had I known how to dance her dances. Now I know how to dance and we compete on equal terms.

She woke me around 3 a.m., made me sit up and brought the candle level with my eyebrows. She was kneeling down before my bed as if asking my forgiveness for what lay in store for me. The candle was burning between our faces, but no candle, no bonfire could protect me from my mother's cupidity. She had no fear of fire. She would not have burnt on Joan of Arc's bonfire, enduring the flames. She would have become a flame, reached up to heaven and burnt it. She would have burnt the Almighty at the stake had the Almighty allowed it.

The candle was burning between us. I could no longer pretend to be asleep. Do you see me? she asked. Do you see my face? Do you see me as your father did? Do you? It's our bed, isn't it? And she pushed me towards the edge of the bed. And she lay down by my side, the candle in her hand, the lust in her eyes. Lying fully dressed on my blanket, she was still afraid of the sin. She still feared God. God was not still burning in the sky, at the stake. Neither were the stars. Nothing burnt in heaven that night.

Again she talked to me about the people I did not know, but those people seemed to know me pretty well. Again it was a one-way street. And we were striding up that street, those people and I. They were walking behind me so that I could not see them. But they could see me. They laughed at me behind my back, poking my back with their umbrellas. A nightmare, I whispered. I must have fallen asleep in my mother's presence. Why didn't she wake me at once? She was still afraid of herself. She still stood on *this* side of the law.

Her visits were as regular as the swinging of a pendulum, as the downward movement of Edgar Allan Poe's pendulum. What are you doing in my bed? I asked her once. She blew out the candle but I still felt her glance, her eye-rays on my face. Her eye-rays were cold. Can't I stay in your bed if I want to? she asked me in her turn. And she removed her blouse. The feel of her skin gave me the creeps. You do feel me, don't you? she asked. *N'est-ce pas, n'est-ce pas?* She repeated it very often. Didn't you love your father? Didn't he set a good example to us all? Didn't you want to imitate him? Even his

colleagues imitated him. Aren't you his son? Don't you pity me? Why don't you console me? Why are you so callous? It's so easy, isn't it? *N'est-ce pas, n'est-ce pas?* So easy. Why don't you take pity on your own mother? Haven't I deserved it? Have I been a bad mother to you? She began to cry. It was one of her lucid moments. I had not seen her cry since my father's funeral. For once she expressed herself with lucidity. It was as if she had suddenly switched on all the lights in our house. Yet I could not see her face. I only felt it. I felt her skin and her glance.

I tried to run away. She ran after me and I returned to my bed, repentant and submissive. The candle was still burning. I had not run far away, judging from the candle. Unless it was another candle, another flame, another light. Was there another light in the universe?

How many candles did she burn in the course of our nights? I am bad at mathematics and my body does not remember anything. On purpose. My body balks at this remembrance. My body has been trying to forget the story of my life. Why do I remind it of those nights and lights? Why do I press my mother's hand against my skin as I kneel down by her bedside? Isn't my own skin enough for my pleasures? Do I mistrust my own hands?

Is my mother dying, dying at last? Shall I ask her forgiveness? For what? I have not killed her, have I?

My mother looks at me and I read too many things into her glance. A few more orders. A few more denials. What can she deny me now? The right to approach her body?

I was not locked in. I was not imprisoned in my father's house, like the child I read about the other day. In France, in Versailles. For seven years. Subsisting on biscuits and water.

I was allowed to go out, to leave the paternal house and have a walk in the streets. Not only on Sundays, contrary to what might have been expected in the light of my narrative. In the darkness of my tale. I was allowed to play the game of hide-and-seek with my mother.

I was allowed to go out alone, unaccompanied, unhindered, as far as my desires were concerned. I could turn right or left instead of going up or down some one-way street. And I turned right and left. But, however often I might turn in any direction, I was bound to go in circles. I was bound to come back to my mother sitting on my bed with a candle or empty-handed, as the case might be. I had no money at the time. And I was timorous and apprehensive of solitude.

I met some people in the course of my strolls along the impenetrable walls of Versailles. What was going on behind those walls? Why were they so impenetrable? Why couldn't any of those doors be

opened without codes? Why were they guarded by *concierges*? What did all those people have to hide from me, from the world, from the Almighty? Did they all molest their children? And the pedestrians I came across in the course of my strolls? Did they all direct their steps towards the beds where their children awaited them with a shiver? I was not acquainted with those pedestrians, but they had never been my father's colleagues or friends. And that was enough for me. I was running away from my father.

At home I often took my clothes off so as not to resemble my father, the image of my father in my mother's tenacious, daily updated memory. My mother had forced me to wear his clothes, after having altered them to fit me. When naked, I did not look like my father. Nor did I look like myself any more. His clothes seemed to have altered my physique beyond all recognition. Or had my mother altered the mirrors as well? She could not make me believe I was her husband. But at least she had succeeded in making me forget myself. It was the first stage of my metamorphosis, of her long-term plan. I was to become her husband, if not my own father. And husbands can go out from time to time. They should, as a matter of fact. They have to work in order to shower their wives with jewels. That is why my mother let me walk around the city.

We picked up two girls, my friend and I.

The girl I had fallen in love with was inaccessible to my lust, for unexpectedly she had taken a liking to my friend.

My mother must have spoken to the girl, I said to myself. My mother must have spoken to my friend. The girl and my friend were hand in glove with my mother. My mother must have bribed them with the money she had inherited from my father.

We met again several years later. My friend was not around.

What had happened during the years of her absence? Nothing. Nothing at all except that I looked more and more like my mother's husband. Did I still look like her son? There were no more candles. The candles were replaced by other things. Actually my mother adored light. She hated darkness or penumbra because she wanted to see my face during the process. And she forbade me to shut my eyes, shouting at me whenever I tried to get rid of her face. Look at me! she shouted. I'm Yves' mother, can't you see? I'm not your mother! My mother. She had no more lucid intervals.

We met several years later. I had not forgotten her. I was already nineteen. Now she loved me. She had always loved me, for her love looked like an old love, an old, mature sentiment. Her love seemed

to have spread its roots throughout her body, but I could not invite her to a hotel. I still had no money. My mother had gone so far as to stitch up my pockets, my father's pockets. So we could not spend an afternoon at a hotel and I was busy at night-time. Anyway we could not spend a night at a hotel because I still had no money. So I invited her to my place. I had no choice. My mother was about to go on a trip. Was she lying? Did she really intend to leave me alone in our house, in my bed? Was my bed to become mine at last?

My mother was going to spend a fortnight in Australia. I could not believe my eyes when she showed me the ticket. 'Sydney' was printed on it. Why Australia? I've always dreamt of this country, she said.

I also began to dream of Australia, of my mother's stay in Australia. My mother bought a book on Australia and showed it to me, together with the ticket. The ticket was lying on the cover of the book. Later on it served as a bookmark. We read the book in the course of the following week. We read the book in my bed. The lights were on. What were we doing in my bed? Reading and discussing what we read. That is what my mother would probably have answered in the court of justice, when asked by the judge what she was doing in her son's bed every night. We were reading books. We read Flaubert and Stendhal. And Céline. No, I would have said to the judge. We read a book on Australia. The whole process took us only one week. The rest of the time we spent differently. It was another process and I might describe the other process in great detail. During the trial. I hope my mother's trial will not last as long as Kafka's novel. I hope they will send her to the guillotine in no time at all.

The ticket was lying either in the book or on the blanket. And the ticket was in my mother's handbag on the day of her departure. I saw her to the airport. And I saw her check in her luggage and go through passport control. Before going through she gave me some money. She wanted me to take a taxi back home. I felt her money in the palm of my hand. Did she counterfeit these banknotes? I asked myself, bewildered. Why did she part so easily with her money, with my father's money? Why did she depart at all, leaving me alone or rather in the arms of the girl I was in love with?

I stared at the banknotes. Did she want me to land in prison? Taxi drivers are good at finding forgers out. They finger your banknotes for a while, crumple them, smooth them out, hold them up to the nearest source of light and straightaway drive you to the nearest police station.

Why did my mother want me to go to prison? How did she intend to spend her nights in my absence? Was she eager to find another husband? Where, if I may make so bold as to inquire? Where on earth could she find another husband? Who could bear her presence on the same sheets, under the same blanket, under the same roof?

Was she planning to come to prison every night? To sleep in the same cell, under the same ceiling? Was she planning to bribe her way into my cell, into my cot? I would have denounced her to the authorities. I would have carried her body as far as the director's office and deposited it on the director's writing desk. And I would have introduced my mother to the director. And I would have told him everything. And she would have taken my place in the prison.

I took an airport coach. At home I looked at the banknotes once again, trying to detect the forgery. Then I began to tidy up my room, my mother's room. Over the last eight years my room has become my mother's room, I thought. I was an intruder, in a way. In my own room I intruded upon my mother's memories.

I phoned my beloved but did not invite her on the same day. I wished to lie in my own bed undisturbed. For a while, for a few hours. Without my mother, without anybody.

I was myself again. I recognised my own skin. My skin was my own once again. I recognised my feelings as well. I recognised my mirrors. I drank a bottle of wine, two bottles of wine. My father's wine. Oddly enough, the wine did not remind me of my father. Nor of my mother. The wine reminded me of my beloved, of my freedom. I drank a toast to my freedom.

I danced. But my dance had nothing in common with my mother's dance. My dance was mine.

I had *my* dreams. Yet I dreamt of my mother. In that dream my mother was mine. She was merely my mother, nobody else. She was neither my wife nor my mistress. She was my mother. And she was beautiful, for once. Very beautiful.

I woke up early in the morning and began to put away my books. I saw the book on Australia and visualised my mother in the company of a stewardess. She was still on the plane, wasn't she? How did she spend last night? Did she sleep well? I thought about my mother the whole morning.

And the whole afternoon. I phoned my beloved in the afternoon but did not invite her to my place. To my mother's place. I wished to stay with my mother for a while.

I opened a bottle of wine and drank yet another toast to my freedom. Not to my mother. My mother had already been forgotten. She was already in Australia and Australia is the land of oblivion. Those going to Australia sink into oblivion, sink into the Earth. They sink into the Earth and come out on the opposite side. In Australia. Nobody remembers them any more.

That night I did not dream of my mother. I dreamt of myself.

The following day I put all her dresses away. I burnt some of them. And I also burnt the book on Australia because it was my mother's book. I sprayed *my* house with the perfume I had bought the day before. My mother's money, my father's money. Those banknotes were not forged after all.

And I phoned my beloved. I told her I was alone in my house, alone. I did not mention Australia. The name of that continent was too imbued with my mother and her belongings. I said I was waiting for her. Not for my mother, for my beloved. *Ma bien-aimée*. I often repeated these words in my mind and sometimes they leaked out of my mind and impregnated the air around me, the air of my father's house. There was nobody in this house any more except my beloved and myself.

She said, Yes. I was waiting for her now. While waiting I opened three bottles of wine and decanted one of them. I burnt another dress of my mother's. The smell of my mother's ashes impregnated the room. My mother was again in my room, in my house, in my soul. I sprayed everything down to my soul with the perfume I had purchased a few days before in *Le Printemps*. Even the perfume reminded me of my mother. Did she ever use this perfume? I asked myself with insistence. Perhaps in one of her former lives. Did she molest me in her former lives? Was I born with the sole purpose of being molested by my mother? Was my immortal soul attached to my mother's genitals? Is that what umbilical cord means? Does this umbilical cord span human history?

She came around 6 p.m. I had been waiting for her by the front door for almost two hours. I did not undress her at once, thinking I should pave the way to her striptease. I had no idea how the way to anything could be paved under the circumstances, but I was afraid of frightening her out of her wits. And I thought she might run away, if frightened out of her wits. Even if I double-lock all doors, I thought. So I decided to drag my feet.

We drank a bottle of wine. Do you dance? I asked her. Somehow dancing was associated in my mind with the removal of all clothes. So I asked her, Do you dance? She did not understand the allusion. So I began to dance myself. I even removed my turtleneck to emphasise the link between my dance and her nudity.

Darkness pervaded the living room. Has something been burning in here? she asked. No, I answered, striking a match. I lit three candles and put them on the upright piano. I switched off the light. I burnt up my past, I said. What are you doing? she asked. She neither danced nor removed her clothes. What are *you* doing? I asked. Nothing, she answered. My mother isn't coming back, I said all of a sudden. Where's your mother? she asked. In Australia. When is she coming back? she asked. I said my mother

would come back in a fortnight. We have plenty of time, I added. She laughed. I leaned forward and blew one candle out. She laughed again.

What were we drinking to? I kissed her. I kissed her several times, letting my wine spill all over my shirt. She yielded at last to my caresses. My fingers danced on her blouse, on her bra. Not here, she said. I got on my feet and pulled her up as gently as I could.

The doorbell rang stridently, like an alarm clock. Who is it? I asked her in a whisper. Are you expecting anyone? she asked me, dropping her glass. Was it the doorbell or did you just drop your glass? I asked in a whisper.

The doorbell rang once again. What is it? she asked. Who is it?

I heard my mother's voice. My mother, I said. The chain, I thought. The latch. She could not open the door on her own, but she could talk and shout. And she could abuse us to her heart's content.

She was already knocking on the door. And she shouted at the top of her voice. She threatened to call the police. What about the ticket? I asked myself. I saw it, didn't I? I saw my mother go through passport control. Didn't I? Didn't I? You're in Australia, mother! I shouted in my turn. But apparently it was not my turn. My mother continued to shout without a break. And we both listened to what she screamed at us.

I won't let you in! I shouted. Again she threatened to call the police. What are you doing? In my house? she shouted at the top of her voice. Her voice could not have sounded louder. Nobody's voice could. Even the door was unable to cope with her voice. The door's molecules did not deaden her voice. I wondered if my mother's voice had not pierced a few holes in the front door. She might squeeze herself through those holes, I thought.

We were still lying in bed, paralysed with fear and disgust. But I did not touch her any more. I dared not touch her in my mother's presence.

Suddenly she stopped. My mother stopped shouting. And I stopped breathing so as to hear all the nuances of the silence she had created. There seemed to be no-one behind the front door, not a soul alive in the capital of France, in the whole world. Such was my mother's silence and slyness.

I made a mistake. I knew I would make a mistake sooner or later, I had known it all along. But I could not help it, could I? I was drawn by that silence towards the door, towards my mother. Vacuum-like,

the silence sucked me in. I got up, tiptoed down the stairs and pressed my ear against the door, expecting to hear my mother's breath, the beating of her hideous heart. And I opened the door to see what I could neither hear nor bear. My mother stood before me. And I stood before my mother stark naked as if inviting her for a dance, for our customary dance.

I had no time to bang the door shut. My mother had plenty of time to push her way into the house.

Once inside she took her time as she busied herself with the suitcases. She even brought me a gift. From Australia? I asked automatically as I undid the knot. Your favourite chocolate, she said. Do they really sell this chocolate in Australia? I asked.

Presumably she was not curious to know who was hiding in my room. She seemed in no mood for another round of hide-and-seek. But she was bound to win anyway.

Help yourself to the chocolate, she said. Shall we drink something? A bottle of champagne? In your room?

She asked me to go and fetch a bottle of champagne in the cellar. Do put my raincoat on, she said suavely. You'll catch your death of cold.

I put her raincoat on and headed for my room. First to the cellar, my mother reminded me. Do hurry up, my darling.

I went down to the cellar, found a bottle of champagne and returned to my mother. She was preening herself in front of a mirror. Am I beautiful tonight? she asked. How do you find me? You may take the raincoat off. It's rather warm in the kitchen, isn't it? Go and fetch the champagne bucket. And some ice cubes of course. And two champagne glasses.

I took the raincoat off and went to the kitchen. I opened the window and looked down. The earth was near at hand. Could she escape through the window? I asked myself as I looked up and saw the window of my room. It was shut. Why doesn't she open it and jump down? I asked myself.

I returned to my mother and we silently proceeded up the stairs.

Is she hiding under the bed or behind the curtains? my mother asked as we entered my room. My mother would have lain in my bed for a whole week had she found out that my beloved was under my bed, under her body, under her control, in her power. She would have slaughtered my beloved cold-

bloodedly. She would have drawn a long kitchen knife out of her décolleté and run it through the mattress several times, every time getting deeper and deeper into it, into my beloved's body. And she would have licked her blood off the floor.

I knelt down and glanced under the bed. Then I straightened up and drew the curtains apart. She was standing in front of the window. Why didn't you jump out of the window? I asked. We were both stark naked.

My mother opened the bottle and handed us the glasses. Drink up, she said. We obeyed her order. May I put on my clothes, please? asked the girl. No, answered my mother. You can't make love with your clothes on, can you? Are we going to make love? I asked. What *were* you going to do? my mother asked suavely. Suit yourself! Don't let me keep you from enjoying your rendezvous.

The girl began to cry. Kiss him, said my mother. The girl made no move. Do you hear me? asked my mother. Kiss him tenderly. Tenderly. The girl kissed me on the shoulder. On the lips, said my mother. Tenderly. The girl kissed me on the lips. Her lips were limp and listless. Your kiss lacks conviction, said my mother. Don't you love my son? Don't you find him handsome and virile? Why have you come to my house then? Do kiss him once more.

The girl kissed me once more. Tenderly, said my mother. Tenderly and passionately. Embrace him, first. The girl embraced me. Kiss him now, my mother said. Passionately. The girl kissed me once more. Her tears imprinted themselves on my cheeks. Don't cry, I said. Too late. Don't cry.

She was ugly. The girl was ugly. My mother was beautiful.

Rub your bodies against each other, my mother said. Place one of your feet on my son's foot and the other foot on his thigh, pass one of your arms round his neck and put the other arm on his shoulder. As if you wished to climb on him. You should prepare yourself for the lovemaking, you know.

The preparations took around an hour. There was an alarm clock on my bedside table. The girl continued to cry. I said nothing at all. My own silence frightened me even more than my mother's silence. But I could not help it, could I? I could not speak. I only acted. I did what my mother was telling me to do. I was an obedient son. I was my mother's son.

We were lying in bed now. My mother refilled our glasses and handed them to us, spilling the champagne on our bodies. Drink to your happiness, she said. Drink up!

She took the glasses from our hands and bade us make love. You're ready now, she said. Don't you think you're ready? Are you up to the task? she asked me. She is very beautiful, you know. I like her. I adore her. You have my blessing, *mes enfants*.

Cheer up! Don't you find her beautiful? Very sexy too! You don't seem to be up to your usual standards. What's the matter? Kiss her. Things are warming up, I daresay. Kiss her warmly.

She brought another bottle of champagne. We were paralysed. She drank alone now. I'm drinking to your love, she said. I'm drinking to your young bride. How beautiful she is! You've made a wonderful choice. I'm very proud of you, my son. I approve of your taste. Cheer up! Cheer up! Don't you worry! We've got plenty of time. It's Sunday tomorrow, isn't it?

I apologised to the girl. She continued to cry. I apologised to my mother.

We spent the whole night in bed. None of us slept as if sleeping had been outlawed in my room.

And we did not budge in the morning. I dozed off in the morning. My mother woke me up. You haven't made love to her yet, she reminded me reproachfully. Do behave like a gentleman! Your bride looks offended and disappointed. I'm disappointed too. Aren't you forgetting your manners? Try again. Have a go at it *now*. You seem to be on top form. Right now!

Shame on you! You're a disgrace to France!

Tea or coffee? How do you like your eggs? my mother asked the girl. Your future husband is rather fond of an English breakfast. So am I. How about you?

She brought up the teapot and three teacups. She had no objection to drinking tea in the presence of an ugly woman. Do you like your tea with milk? she asked the girl. I made some celery juice for you, she told me. It's an aphrodisiac.

We spent the whole morning in bed. And the whole afternoon. The girl cried no more. She seemed to have no more tears behind her eyes. My mother was sleeping in an armchair. You'll let me know, won't you? If something crops up, she said before falling asleep.

We did not wake her. We too fell asleep. My mother had not locked the door of my room. Nor had she hidden the key to the front door. But we had no intention of running away. We could not run away.

We parted in the evening. I'm sorry, my mother told her. My son has been working very hard since April. You must excuse him. You do excuse him, don't you? It's not *his* fault. Better luck next time! When are you coming, by the way? Shall we meet tomorrow? Or the day after tomorrow? We'll drink another bottle of champagne. You like champagne, I trust. Or do you prefer red wine? Do you? Bordeaux or Burgundy? I like you very much. I do. I'll see you to the door. Don't forget your raincoat.

My mother saw her to the door. Upon her return to my room I began to cry. She wiped my tears off and removed her clothes. Am I beautiful today? she asked.

I read about birds, the other day. About turkey mothers who are fierce protectors of their young, like my mother. Those mothers protect their children against nest marauders, against weasels and scavenging rats. They attack anything that moves unless it makes a noise similar to the cry of a baby turkey. An Austrian zoologist made this discovery. I don't remember his name. What does it matter? I still remember the name of my mother. And her body. And her soul. That Austrian zoologist owned a mother turkey that ruthlessly killed all her babies. Why? Because she was deaf. In her conscious and unconscious mind, in her body and soul, predators were defined as moving objects that did not emit a baby's cry. These baby turkeys, though looking and moving like baby turkeys, fell victim to their mother's definition of a 'predator', to their mother's conviction. In a way, she was protecting her children against themselves.

Was my mother deaf? Why didn't she hear my cries? She should have protected me against her lust, against my trust in her.

Once, at the height of a party I attempted to make love to another girl. I was not in love with her, but she was sexually attractive and we seemed to hit it off well together, under the influence of alcohol. We took refuge in a tiny room and installed ourselves on a worn-out, lumpy couch. I switched off the light. Darkness is an ideal breeding ground for erotic ghosts. I attempted to visualise Yves' mother, her body and her gait, her legs and her breasts. I succeeded and I failed. I failed miserably. Even Yves' mother was no help under the circumstances. I said I was in less than full control of my faculties and switched on the light. She reached out for her blouse. I switched off the light and she switched it on, after a minute or two. I quoted Rabelais: 'Carnal concupiscence is cooled and quelled by the means of wine.'

Outside, there was a stampede for the keyhole, and as I struggled into my jersey two girls got the giggles.

One of the eavesdroppers, a violinist and womanizer, wrote me a letter: 'We congregated near the door, for even those who have no ear for music can appreciate sexual consonances and dissonances. I pricked up my ears in the hope of a miracle, of a C Major of heterosexual ecstasy. Alas, all I could hear was a succession of D-Minor chords—Mozart's *Requiem*, not *Don Giovanni*. Indeed the young lady's shouts turned out to be far more suitable for some provincial performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* than for the soundtrack of an X-rated movie.'

My soul came to be reflected in the mirror of my terror.

Once again I confided in my mother. Whom else could I turn to? I had only my mother to lean upon.

My poor little child, she said. You've suffered a lot over the last few months. I'll help you. I'm your mother after all.

And she took me to a psychiatrist.

I was asked to visualise myself respectively talking to a beautiful girl 1) in a crowded street 2) in a deserted street 3) in a back street by night-time 4) in her flat with her parents around 5) in my empty kitchen 6) in my bedroom beside the window 7) on my bed's blanket.

In the afternoon I was permitted to strip her clothes off, to embrace and kiss her first on the cheek and then on the mouth. Eventually I switched the light off and indulged in what was called 'preliminary sex play', producing, in accordance with the psychiatrist's poetic suggestion, a mysterious, silk-like rustling of sheets and skin.

Next morning I found a card on which quite a number of photographs had been picturesquely pasted. These women are sexually attractive! shouted the psychiatrist from behind the wall. I looked at them for a while and presently opened a window. Are you excited? shouted the psychiatrist. Try to adjust your excitement to what you're going to hear. And he put on a record of a female vocalist. Her performance is generally recognised as 'sexy'! he shouted. Don't you feel it? Don't you feel it?

The second psychiatrist joined my mother in condemning his colleague's methods. Said he: Not only his eyes and ears but his bowels too ought to be involved in the process. He asked me to strip off. My mother departed as if she had never seen me in the nude. Said the psychiatrist: Just before reaching orgasm knock on the wall. And he went to the adjacent room, leaving the door ajar.

I followed his instructions and soon afterwards a paper towel was handed to me through the crack, from the adjacent room. As I let the first drops of beatitude fall on the paper towel the light went on, illuminating the picture of a scantily dressed, sexually appealing brunette. Not bad, that broad! shouted the psychiatrist, walking into the room. With what looked like forceps he squeamishly picked up the towel and without so much as a cursory inspection suggested our repeating the experiment. In half an hour, he said.

We did. The light was extinguished and switched on again, revealing a buxom blonde. Even better! shouted the psychiatrist. I was offered a second towel. And a third one. Much better! shouted the psychiatrist. The last female happened to be my former beloved. Where had my mother lighted on her photograph?

The towels were picked up with the forceps and thrown in the wastepaper basket. The towels and female nudity were replaced, around four in the afternoon, by an intramuscular injection.

According to the medical report, my physical condition remained excellent. Apparently I had not become dehydrated through repeated vomiting.

My poor little child, my mother said. How sad, how disappointing. What are we going to do? Will you ever leave me alone! I shouted. I tried to imitate her own shouting, her voice's timbre and strength, and I succeeded, it seems to me. I must have succeeded in terms of imitation, only she was not scared to death upon hearing me shout. She neither cringed nor crawled away from me like a wounded animal. She laughed and I was unable to imitate her laughter, try as I might. I did not even try, I am sorry to say. I was in no mood for laughing or trying anything new.

I'll go to Australia, she said. She was serious this time, dead serious. She spoke in earnest. She did not screw up her eyes. She showed me the ticket. I threw it out of the window, shouting, You won't go, you're lying, you won't go! I had learnt to shout but to no effect. She went out and picked up the ticket lying under the window, under her bedroom window. Where was the wind that afternoon? Somewhere inside, I presume. Tick-tock, said the grandfather clock. I began to hear clocks, even inaudible ones. Are there inaudible clocks? Time was closing in upon me. Even Time was hand in glove with my mother.

She left for the airport and I locked the door behind her. I did not see her to the airport, for I had learnt from bitter experience that such a precaution was pointless and ludicrous. My mother could go through passport control and come back to my room as many times as she wished. She could also leave the

plane and return to Versailles on foot, walking on air, which is far more difficult than walking on water, mind you. Water is thicker than air, isn't it? And blood is thicker than water.

Why did I double-lock the door? Passing through doors and impenetrable walls is easier than walking on water. Doors and walls are made by men. And men are weak.

So my mother was flying to Australia. She was on the plane now. Could I believe it? Yes, I could. In reality I did not. I could have done many things. I did nothing. I took no advantage of my solitude. I experienced no feeling of solitude, strange as it might seem. People complain of solitude and write books about it to make other people pity them and give them money. I failed to become lonely. It is the biggest failure in my life. Perhaps I was paid for being pushed around by my mother. Is it a profession? I have become a millionaire.

My mother was in Australia. And I was in my room. Alone. I drank no toasts to my freedom. I waited. I was lying in wait for my mother. I was awaiting her behind the front door. I stared at the door, waiting for it to split in two and let my mother in. I would have let her in anyway, had she knocked on the door. It was more like her, knocking on doors. She had no liking for doorbells.

My mother did not come in through the door. Nor did she climb in through the window. And the ceiling remained as quiet as usual. The ceiling behaved itself.

My mother knew I was alone. So I decided to invite somebody to her house. I wished to provoke her into action.

I invited somebody. I do not even remember whom I invited to my mother's house during that period. That person stayed for a week or so. Where's your mother? she asked. I don't know, I answered. I did not lie to her. At that point I really did not know where my mother was. Now I know. My mother had forsaken me.

I felt my mother's presence in the room. What about the ticket? I asked myself. I saw it, didn't I? But I did not see my mother go through passport control.

I switched all the lights on. My mother was not in the living room. She was not sitting with us on the divan.

I picked up a glass and dropped it. At that point I just needed the sound of broken glass.

I went to the kitchen cupboard and took out another champagne glass.

The doorbell rang. It did not. The sound of another glass. She had clinked her glass against mine. How did she dare?

My mother was with us. We were drinking to my mother. I told her how wonderful my mother was. I showed her my mother's photographs and letters. I told her about my mother's habit of entering my room all of a sudden, without knocking. She knocks only when doors are locked, I pointed out. What are you doing? my mother shouts. What are you thinking about? My mother interrupts my life, I told her. And I'm grateful to my mother for these interruptions. Why? she asked. She did not seem to understand that my life needed to be interrupted at all costs, however temporarily. But she kissed me as if she had understood anything. Everything. She dared kiss me in my mother's house.

On the second day we still sat in the living room. We had slept in the living room. We had not even lain down. I was still holding the same empty glass in my hand.

On the following night we slept in different rooms. I slept in my mother's room, inhaling my mother's air. Why did that person remain with me for a week in my mother's house? Was she in love with me? Has anybody ever been in love with me except my mother? Is my mother in love with me now?

My mother returned two weeks later. She saw at once that I had not betrayed her. I had not diluted our blood. She laughed, so did I. I had learnt how to laugh at last. Everything happens in the end, but that was not the end yet. My mother was neither ill nor too old.

A few years elapsed. One night she did not come to my room. In the long run she had grown indifferent to my caresses. She no longer needed me. She even suggested I should start a family, which was the last thing I intended to do. Don't you want to have children? she asked with resignation. Children? Should our blood flow through the future? Let it flow only through our room, I said. Then something unexpected happened, something that moved me to tears. My mother asked my forgiveness. She kissed my hand and asked my forgiveness. I've destroyed you, she said.

I married. To please my mother. My wife lived in the same house, in our house. My mother was no longer jealous. She looked after my wife with tenderness and sympathy. I was jealous and furious. And I punished my wife to avenge myself. I locked my wife in my room so that my mother could not lavish her care on a stranger, on an intruder. And I forbade my mother to talk to my wife through the double-locked door. The door of my room is impenetrable, I said. It was, it was. Even I had no desire to open it.

I stayed in my mother's room now, all day long. And I slept in the living room. We drank champagne with my mother now and then. But nobody stood behind the curtains. We were alone, my mother and I. My wife was in my room. My wife was crying in my room. My door let the sounds out. It was not impenetrable, after all.

Will you dance for me, mother? Will you dance with me? Shall we dance?

My mother stopped dancing and her immobility struck a note of warning. Immobility was her real illness and that illness of hers was contagious. She could still move in and out of the house, but she was immobile inside her body and I felt it. I experienced it personally. Her blood had coagulated, in a manner of speaking. There were clots of blood throughout her body and they hampered the flow of her blood, of our blood. I was no longer inside her. I no longer flowed along her arteries. Nor did I flirt with her heart. I no longer heard the beating of her hideous heart which, a few years before, had resounded throughout our house. Her ugliness was outside me now. I often put my mother in my lap and rocked her to sleep like a puppet. But I still could not hear the beating of her heart. She *was* a puppet, a wooden puppet.

Mother, why don't you come to my room any more? She could not hear me. Even in her waking hours she no longer heard me. Did she hear my wife depart? I do not remember when I started divorce proceedings.

Don't you want to have children? Too late, I answer. *You* are my child now. And I'll take care of you.

Only mothers belong to us. Even dead mothers are more caring than living creatures, living strangers. Even when they cannot hear us. Our mothers. They still hear us. Their inner ear always hears us.

She lies in her bed now. And counts my money, turning her head towards the window. Do you think it's enough? Will it last my lifetime? she asks me. I grasp her head and turn her face towards my face. Can you see me, mother? I ask.

Once she came to my room. She came up to my bed as if she had remembered something, everything. Her illness had not precluded her from coming to my room. No illness, nothing could stand in our way.

She did it on her own. I had not pushed her. I had not dragged her as far as my bed. She looked at me and recognised my body. And she covered my body with my blanket. And she caressed my face. But

her caress was different now. She had become my old mother at last. And again she asked my forgiveness. I've forgiven you, mother, I said. She did not hear me. She must still think I am angry with her. How could I ever put my thoughts into her head? Does she understand my fingers, the language of my fingers?

Yesterday I began to talk to her with my fingers. She counted my fingers first, and then she read them. She read them slowly, like a child learning the alphabet. Do you understand what I'm telling you? I asked her. And my fingers grasped her shoulder. And then again I grasped her head and turned her face towards me. Why does she always avert her face? Does she still have a guilty conscience? Does she still remember her crime?

She interrupts my monologue and clutches my neck. Does she still aspire to destroy me? All mothers are child murderesses.

Her loss of appetite.

She would devour my body if I let her do what she aspires to do. She no longer caresses my body, but she still aspires to devour me. All mothers prefer to keep their children inside them. We are prisoners of their bodies. For ever. We simply cannot be born.

She opens her mouth. She aspires to devour me. She devours the air instead. She is gasping for breath. Her breath comes in gasps. I put my index finger into her mouth. Do you understand what I'm telling you? I ask in a confidential tone of voice. She is still gasping for breath. After a while she begins to suck my finger. You *are* my child, I tell her. Our blood is already flowing through the future.

She tries to speak to me. Fingers, mother, I tell her. Say whatever you wish with your fingers. She does not understand. Caress me, mother. And I caress her. What a pity you can't dance. I talk to her through my caresses. She interrupts me by falling asleep. Do I bore her? Do I bore her to death? I am not killing my mother, am I?

I bury my mother under several blankets and she wakes up, afraid of her grave and of my embrace. Don't you like your tomb, mother? I ask her. Aren't you warm enough in your tomb? And I put another blanket on her body. How ugly you are, I tell her, running my fingers through her hair, through her thin sparse hair. But I find you beautiful. All mothers are beautiful, for there is nothing else on Earth. And the Earth cannot be ugly. Our mother Earth cannot be ugly.

She danced this afternoon. Her fingers danced on the blanket. Or was she simply counting her money? I put a few banknotes on the blanket and she fingered the banknotes.

Around 3 a.m. she spat out blood. I recognised it. I recognised her blood. I soaked my fingers in her blood. What shall I say to the judge, I wondered? They are bound to recognise my mother's blood. All they have to do is draw some blood from my veins and compare my blood with the blood trickling, dripping from my fingers. Drip-drop, tick-tock. My new clock.

I didn't kill her, I shall say to the judge. I loved her. I loved her more than my wife, more than my beloved. Your mother was repugnant and revolting, the judge will tell me. Why did you love her? I hated her as well, I shall answer him. A love-hate relationship? the judge will ask with a smile. Perhaps he will laugh too. But he will not laugh like my mother. It is I who shall laugh like my mother. And I shall laugh a jolly good laugh. Like my mother.

I've got no children. Isn't that proof enough I loved my mother?

I seldom leave her room. And I never go outdoors. What would I do outdoors? Yves' mother must be dead by now. She cannot outlive *my* mother. Nobody can outlive my mother, for everybody lives in my mother, inside her body.

There is no window in my mother's room. There are several windows outside my mother's room, but I cannot open them. What do I need those windows for?

I cannot open the front door. Has my mother swallowed the key? I open my mother's mouth and look inside. How many things I've stuffed in your mouth! I exclaim. Why don't you eat now? Have you gone on hunger strike? What are you displeased with? My treatment of your body? Do you want me to remove these blankets?

And I remove the blankets, one by one. And I look at my mother's body. And she feels my glance. Her body shivers. My mother can shiver, I say to myself. And she hears what I say to myself. She cannot hear what I say to *her*, but her ear is still attuned to what I say to myself. She still loves me, I say to myself. And my mother smiles. And I kiss her smile.

Why should I eat if my mother does not eat? I am growing lighter and lighter. I still cannot walk on the air, nor do I walk on the floor any longer. My mother does not seem to feel the weight of my body.

Somebody knocked on the door. The touch was gentle and musical. I opened the door. It was not locked. A child stood on the threshold of our house. What do you want? I asked him. He shook his head. Did you bring us something to eat? I asked him. Did you bring some pastries for my mother? My mother is dying of starvation. The child gave me some pastries and left in a hurry as if late for another appointment.

Another child came this afternoon. Did you lose your mother? I asked. Where is she? Shall I take you to her? I grasped his hand and took him to my mother's room. All mothers are alike, aren't they? All children are alike. My mother seemed to recognise the child. She seemed to ask his forgiveness. Again and again. Her tongue moved for a while, licking the air.

The front door was not locked, so I opened it and went outside. My mother was sleeping under her blankets. I was outdoors. There was nobody in the streets but I did not feel lonely. I walked along the Avenue de Saint-Cloud and listened to my own footfalls. For some reason my body had become heavy again. My footfalls resounded throughout the city. A child was playing on the pavement, yet another child. I halted to watch his game, his movements. I did not know the game. What kind of game is it? I asked. Are you playing hide-and-seek? I've found you. And I touched his shoulder. He looked up at me, and he seemed to recognise me. At least he did not cry. Nor did he push me away. You must have lost your mother, I said to him. Your mother must have died. Do you want me to take care of you? I can become your father, you know. It depends on you. Do you choose me? He grasped my hand and we proceeded towards the Château. The weather was fine and I saw everything clearly. Even my mother would have seen everything had she been able to free herself. I first showed him around the Château and then we explored the park. We walked through the flowerbeds, destroying their geometry and neatness. I'll show you the Queen's hut, I said. Have you heard of Marie-Antoinette? He did not seem to hear. Can you hear me? I asked. He was running around me. He had picked up some flowers. Stop running, I said. Listen to me. Don't forget I'm your father. Did you love your mother? He did not answer my question. I continued to question him about his mother. And I told him about Marie-Antoinette. She also had children, I said to him. She was killed. She was beheaded. Off with her head, said the child. So you hear me, don't you? I asked him. Why didn't you say so before? Do you see that house over there? And I pointed towards the Queen's hut. But he was still running around me. I felt dizzy and nauseous. Stop running, I said. Marie-Antoinette used to come here. She used to dress up as a shepherdess. Do you see these carps? They saw the Queen. And these trees saw the Queen as well. They live very long, carps and trees. Longer than Queens. Do you climb trees from time to time? I did when I was a child like you. Again he did not seem to hear me. I continued to talk about Marie-Antoinette. She said a few words during her trial, I said to him. I appeal to all mothers, she said. She addressed the court and the people of France. Off with her head, said the child. What an odd way to talk, I said. You should be sorry for the Queen. He continued to run. He was no longer running around

my body. He was running around the hut. Don't run away, I said. I felt lonely all of a sudden. Don't leave me, I said. Where are you? Stop playing hide-and-seek. I've already found you. I've won for the first time in my life. I've always been a lousy player. There are no impenetrable corners. All doors are open, all of them. And mothers enter through these doors.

The child appeared from behind the hut. I've found you again, I said. He approached and looked up at me. It's a very sad spot, isn't it? I said. Isn't it? The child was laughing.

HAPPINESS

I have no idea what I see in front of my body or behind it: I may have eyes everywhere as many deities did, eager to see the world from every angle imaginable and unimaginable. So I wonder whether I'm not imagining whatever I see or think about or hear, although I had better distinguish between what I see and hear and what I imagine, visualise, picture to myself. Or just hear within my brain that has its own ears, eyes, minds. I should take them into consideration, whatever nonsense I stumble upon as I plunge headlong or otherwise into my brain. I can walk towards it on tiptoe, doing my utmost to respect its independence. But whatever I do, feel or hear, I am submerged by myriads of pictures, sounds and other exterior or interior phenomena over which I have no control.

What I see in front of my body and my eyes that seem to live outside my body, at least from time to time, does not look like a group of human beings, a pile of human corpses. Sooner or later you are bound to realise there are only corpses on Earth, corpses and corpses, and animals roam around these corpses, wander among the human corpses they see around them. My eyes are about to take a walk in the outside world that does not belong in my body, thank God, *Gott sei dank*. Apparently God speaks only one language, and no one knows which language we should use when addressing God – or anybody, as a matter of fact. There are only God and the gods in our midst because we are His or their images, their dead spits. Actually we are images, and I am not inclined to pursue this train of thought or argument to its logical conclusion because there is no logic in the world where I found myself on one of those days. Those days are no longer there, *Dieu soit loué*. They are not even within what is called 'yore'. At least we say 'in days of yore', and I must admit that I no longer have either yore or days, and even the minutes I spend in my own company do not count any more, even if I begin to count them. Incidentally, people used to ask me, 'Why do you speak of God so often? Every day, as a matter of fact. Do you really believe in Him?' 'Why do you speak of beer?' (My retort.) 'Why do you drink it every two hours? And you speak of pubs, of other beer-drinkers, of other beer-bellies. To each man his mythology.'

When you say (I learnt this truth several days ago): 'This chair doesn't exist,' and yet you see this chair right in front of you, you create something out of nothing; or rather out of this chair. (When philosophers want to comment on material existence, why is it always 'This chair'? Never 'this lamp' or 'this gun' or 'this bicycle'!) You say, 'Here's a chair. In this room where I'm sitting on a chair there's another chair. And this second chair can be found and used in this room, not far from my eyes, body and soul.' So what? Any dimwit can supply this information, and from this point of view I prefer slightly abnormal entities – let us exclude 'man' and 'woman' from our vocabulary – and even mentally deranged objects can be regarded as carriers of novelty, as creators of universes which spring into existence every second. All right, I recognise that my perception informs me about this particular chair's presence in my room. What is more, I can spend the whole evening in this chair, reading a newspaper or a philosophical treatise. But I prefer *not* to read anything, not to *sit* on any seat. I should rather *lie on the floor*, creating the absence of this chair, creating the void out of which yet another

world of mine may come to the fore instead of staying in the wings of Creation forever. I know that the void thus created is teeming with opportunities and swarming with the entities I shall name as I go around this world or anti-world – call it what you wish. I shall call it ‘my world’ and I am not likely to have a change of heart; in the near future, at least. In the distant future I might call it ‘*her* world’ if I happen to create a woman sufficiently worthy of my aspirations and inclinations. In the long run this woman may become my wife, but let us not waste our time on probabilities, given that there are so many entities, substances and beings within our reach. And none of them – I am happy to acknowledge this truth – belongs to the human species, that special species I can no longer stand, whatever shapes or sizes it adopts as it crosses my field of vision. It no longer dares to do it, I am happy to declare, so that once again I am on my own, keeping company with my visions, worlds and their derivatives, whatever they are. If there are no derivatives at my disposal, I sit brooding in my room all day, for it is not enough to detest human beings. But I am aware that ‘detestable’ is a derivative of ‘detest’, and so I say again and again: ‘They’re detestable, these obnoxious creatures, detestable, detestable, detestable.’ And then I rise from my chair and go to my garden to pick a few roses and also their thorns. Apparently St Paul kept saying, ‘They’re a thorn in my flesh,’ and no one ever knew what he meant by ‘they’ in this context. The theory advanced by some sex maniacs insists upon St Paul’s incapacity to spend time with men or women – in bed, of all places. In other words, this thorn was located at the spot where children are born – a mysterious sentence. They (our theologians) could not bring themselves to name the objects we always have in mind when speaking about sexual games such as the Kama Sutra, Tantric Exercises, and so on. Penis, in other words or word. So, instead of saying a ‘rose’ or a ‘thorn’, you say ‘a penis’, bringing the discussion to a close or rather to your penis, to the sexual game you are about to perform with your partner or partners. All discussions are traditionally rounded off in beds or on carpets or in bathrooms.

So there are no humans in my room and in my world where only entities or tities or creatures with no names or titles live, disappear, come back or never come back as if disappointed or even disgusted by our conversations, our exchange of niceties. I comment upon their doctrines and fairy tales of which they are extremely fond, and in this respect they resemble children and halfwits. In other respects, however, they may be likened to twowits, threewits – in comparison with humans who seldom exceed the limits of halves, even if some of them crack jokes round the clock. They change their identities on a regular basis so it is pointless to endow them with names; and anyway I am neither Adam nor a loving father. Nor a priest to whose omniscience and counsel they often resort when in doubt about their offspring’s future identities. People are associated with their names to such an extent that whenever you say, ‘Peter,’ you see him enter your room; and yet you have never so much as glanced at him. Or if you always opt for women, when in need of sexual excitement, you utter the name of Helene and Helene in person appears in the doorway, saluting you tenderly and wholeheartedly. Then you say, ‘Helene, please remove your clothes which have outstayed their welcome,’

whereupon the name performs an exemplary striptease. And your hands perform an exemplary applause, even if you do not ask them to do so with gusto and panache.

One may ask what I see or feel or both when talking to these creatures I have never invited to my place; or anywhere else, for that matter. I don't think *that* really matters – being invited or repulsed, thrown out, into a gutter. What counts is their presence and sometimes I just perceive a few colours unaccompanied by bodies or souls of any kind. Perhaps these colours *are* souls, in disguise or in the nude: we have no idea what souls look like, sound like, and we had better leave Mozart out of their harmonies. So I am in their presence, and this presence does not weigh heavy on me. And I am sure that even if all of them were put on my back, I would not feel anything; I would not fall on my face, first on my face, then on my stomach. They would neither flatten nor squash me, as any steamroller would do in no time at all. Actually steamrollers carry out this ritual slowly, taking their time and space, so that you first experience the demise of your legs; or of your head; or of your ribs, left arm. I wonder if you hear any crunches, when it comes to the crunch. But the creatures I am talking about can on no account be likened to steamrollers, and their size or content has nothing to do with their opposition (conscious or not) to steamrollers. In the course of my life, of my present life – let us leave my former lives in peace – I have often encountered human steamrollers who do not even have to *swing* into action. They are always rolling somewhere, and even in their absence one can feel their presence, their rolling-stone common essence. Humans often say to me at this point, 'You're a steamroller yourself – not a rolling stone, mind you. Your works are so heavy-going one gets the feeling they don't go at all. One has to plough through their dung, to put it mildly.' 'I've nothing against cattle and horses,' I answer.

What about the creatures under discussion? Waiting for our discussion, for my attention. Standing all around me – in a circle, one might say. Almost transparent, as transparent as my thoughts or the drops of rain I watch as they glide down my windows, my mirrors, my cheeks and neck. Or my turtle-neck. We all must have a common ground, otherwise it would never have worked; not even with the rain and the raindrops I like so much – to distraction, one might say. They distract me from my detractors and also from those people I have no idea of; probably because they have no ideas in their heads and bodies. (Nowadays scientists do their best to convince us that our bodies are full of ideas, inspirations and poems, let alone equations.) What kind of common ground do we have? I am also almost transparent as if I were my own thoughts or feelings, their insubstantiality; their diagonality, I was going to write. They are diagonal in relation to the world where I live – like Liza Doolittle, as I pointed out somewhere. (In the street where she lives.) I am perhaps Liza Doolittle, in my lost moments, *mes moments perdus*; when I feel lost, for instance. At the present moment or instant, for instance. I feel lost; and yet I am in my room, in one of the rooms of my house. And even the moment, the lost moment I am talking about, is not lost: I am holding it in the palm of my right hand and have no wish to squash it; and the rest of my moments, my inches. I am Liza Doolittle or the seagull from the play where the heroine repeats the following sentence, 'I am a seagull, I am a seagull. No, I am

not. It's not that.' What is it, then? Who are you? Liza Doolittle? It is just the following sentence or the preceding one. Or no sentence at all.

Upon which sentence do we intend to focus our forthcoming discussion? In the following sentences – and sentences and verdicts – I shall always be I, whatever moods and identities happen to usurp the time I am allotted to deal with our questions, answers, predicaments and disappearances. The longer the word you write down, the longer you live, as they used to say in Ancient Greece and also in India, in Russia. I never say I was thrown into the world that may try to reject me as a foreign body, sooner or later. But I do affirm that someone just put me gently, tenderly, onto the surface of the Earth, on the grass, into a lake where I began to swim: and yet I did not know how to swim. I was already half-human, half-animal, and most animals know how to swim. In Moscow I saw a cat whose capacity in this field was immeasurable, unimaginable. You might have mistaken her for a dog, and often she overtook dogs as she endeavoured to reach the opposite shore of whatever river or lake she was swimming in. The matter did not stand differently with my body so I might say my first acquaintance was water and its element; and the air I inhaled was playing hide-and-seek in my lungs and the rest of my body. There was a world or utter chaos all around me and probably inside my tissues and organs. Yet everything functioned somehow, and I concluded there was a force, a diagonal force perhaps, which had left us a certain amount of freedom. Now they call it 'free will', but it concerns all other aspects of our being – our substance-quality, to put it philosophically. So I wonder when I shall be allowed to grow a pair of wings which might be instrumental in whisking me away from this evil kingdom they used to call the Earth. And my creatures, my interlocutors will say to each other, 'We only had half an hour to see her before she was whisked off to some exotic location.' And another group of participants will say to their guardian angels, 'We only had half a minute to see *him* before he was whisked off to some exotic location.' I wonder what location they are talking about so eloquently and mysteriously, for using the word 'exotic' speaks volumes about my estrangement from this human world. We know every nook and cranny of the Earth and so we are unlikely to say to our friends, 'We spent our holiday on some exotic beaches,' for fear of receiving a stern rebuke from them or their elders. 'What are you talking about? *Those* beaches? We know them by heart. They're no longer exotic. They're ours, ours, ours. Didn't you see our bottles of beer on these beaches? Our empty bottles? Do you have any idea of the identities of those who emptied these bottles? Do you want us to say exactly how many bottles of beer we emptied on those islands and their beaches? If you swim around those islands, you're sure to find myriads of bottles carrying our messages to other earthlings and also to our extra-terrestrial foes and friends.'

When talking about human steamrollers, I mostly think about people whose unbearable and unswerving devotion to their own will-to-power will put an end to your wills, powers, and freedom of thought – in the twinkling of an eye. And they will say about you (supported by their friends and colleagues): 'He was immediately flattened by a single punch to the head.' Or by a single punch to the will – to the will-to-live, among other wills. I am dreaming about a pair of wings because no spaceship

is ever devoid of human presence; even sputniks are inhabited nowadays. Everything is measured and done in accordance with human nature and structure. They say that even God was created in our image (not in mine, not in mine), let alone flora and fauna. Every leaf of grass bears our stigmata; as if we were crucified on this blade of grass. All right, we *are* created in God's image and so, wherever you cast your glance, you see and analyse different versions of Jesus Christ: you do not really have to worry your little heads about crosses and suchlike contraptions. When you come across such an image, you are bound to draw the following conclusion, 'I'm not safe, far from it. I'm damned. I'm already hanging everywhere, my eyes wide open, my mouth wide open, my belly wide open. Why has everyone forsaken me?' Forsake me if you wish. I want you to forsake me for your own good. For *my* own good as well. If you really insist upon my hanging myself, I promise, I swear I'll do it – on another planet. This do-it-yourself ritual suits me perfectly. To tell the truth, I've practised it assiduously for many years – ever since my birth, to tell the truth. 'Why do you always talk about Jesus Christ?' they ask. 'Why do you always talk about beer, pubs and beer bellies?' I retort.

Everything begins with Liza Doolittle, with her cockney version that makes one think of the primordial chaos. This chaos awaits our organisation, the structure imposed upon it by the human mind or by an animal that walks around it in search of flowers, bones or butterflies. And then butterflies make their appearance as if answering the call of the animal. That is how the world may set in motion and one wonders if it should really move, turn around the sun or any other magnet. What for? What for? And the answer comes in due time, assuming that time is eager to interfere with immobility and silence; and my concentration. After all, I am creating another world, more just, more akin to what they call 'fair play' or something along these lines. At the beginning there were mist and snow, and a lot of myths on which I shall base my narrative, the discussions I had with the creatures of other worlds, other words. So we start with objectivity which is always messy, even if we bring God up and say He created this mess not only once upon a time, but many times. And we crawl on all fours towards subjectivity, our own self, our selfishness and illusory bliss, often based on our belief in Paradise and its governors. If we knew how often this notion (Paradise, on earth or in heaven) crops up in our brains and also in our tendons and sinews, we would relinquish the very idea of it, on the grounds that all this is sheer nonsense. In retrospect we realise we have never lived in Paradise, not even when our private Helen of Troy yielded to our caresses and entreaties. Not a single moment, come to think of it; neither in bed, not during a magnificent *obed* (dinner, in Russian).

Let us pass on to our discussion: all the participants are in front of me and even behind me. But I do not have to turn my head or anything else to hear what they say, assuming they say anything at all. Sometimes they do not say anything, but I hear their words and write their nonsense somewhere, not necessarily in this book of mine, if you wish to call it a book. You can call it a 'nook' or a 'cranny' or even a 'crazy', if that is the impression you get when you go along your way of life and stumble upon this and that – without falling, collapsing and dying once and for all. So my opponent or colleague is about to speak, and I have to lend him or her or everything the floor they always touch

upon, when talking about conferences and other meetings of no importance whatsoever. I do not know his name or his credentials – or even the size of his or her body, or the size of their souls, and their contents, and their hearts' contents, and the spells they harbour somewhere, probably in their feet. And if I happen to be under their spell, I shall say, 'I'm under their feet,' which does not mean anything; and all the rest goes in the direction of 'no meaning'.

So the discussion starts. As usual it starts *ab ovo*: my guest feels like talking about his origins which coincide – as if by mere chance – with those of the world we all find ourselves in, whenever we deign to open our eyes and brains and souls. As I pointed out earlier, I don't care about names, and I don't even wonder if they care about me or not; if this attitude is reciprocal or one-sided. So I just bestow a name upon this entity or diversity – for the heck of it. Let us call it Lilomat. Why not? Is there anything to contradict my statement, if any? It is not a statement, just a name. There are so many of them on the surface of the Earth and even in the clouds! Why should I bother about names, the Earth and her clouds? I do not even give a damn about the Earth's mouth; and yet she speaks from time to time to impart a number of home truths to us. But we have no idea where our homes are so the Earth's truths are always wide of the mark, and we hear nothing except our interior monologues or the cries we emit to convey our suffering to the world.

I: Are you Lilomat?

LILOMAT: I am, because you say I am Lilomat. I don't care, as a matter of fact.

I: What can you tell us about your life and identity?

LILOMAT: I began my life somewhere. At some point I realised I was somewhere and this somewhere was rolling.

I: A rolling stone?

LILOMAT: Not at all. I don't like to spend my times within stones.

I: Do you have this kind of experience?

LILOMAT: No. But I spent the first years of my life in an egg.

I: Was this egg produced by a hen?

LILOMAT: By God, for God's sake.

I: What does your God look like?

LILOMAT: My God is my God, end of story.

I: But what is your story?

LILOMAT: I was somewhere. And this somewhere was rolling, rolling, rolling. At the time I didn't know it was rolling. I just knew there was something inside which I was enclosed like a precious parcel, like a jewel designed for the crown of a king.

I: What king did you have in mind?

LILOMAT: No king in particular. I was just rolling, rolling, going with the stream.

I: What kind of stream?

LILOMAT: Leave me alone, will you?

Now Lilomat is alone: I removed my body and my questions from the room where they all took place and time, for I was really keen on hearing the answers of this entity which was not an entity, properly speaking. It was probably just tity or something of the kind. Or mat, or lilo. Not Lilia, mind you. You never know to whom you speak unless all the participants in your discussions say, 'I am Liliput, I am Liliwhat, I am Abendrot.' And then you know you are talking to Abendrot or Morgenrot or just to Rot, nothing but Rot. But this Liliput of mine told me he was rolling and rolling like a stone; and yet he did not know – he did not know this phenomenon at the time – that what usually rolls, at least in the English language, are stones. They roll and roll and gather nothing at all, as if unconcerned with what can be gathered on Earth, in our world which is not utterly devoid of objects and subjects. You can even gather a subject – a woman, for instance – and say, 'She is my spouse. At least I'd like to marry her at the earliest opportunity. Where's this opportunity? Could you please convey me to the nearest church? Or just remove the church from where it has stood for centuries, if not for millennia, and put it in front of my feet so I could enter it, singing a hymn or Bruckner's *Te Deum*. And then I'll kiss my bride, my wife-to-be, and we'll live happily ever after or in the Hereafter. I don't mind living in the Hereafter, provided I'm allowed to kill my partner and our partnership day in day out, night in night out. What else do you need? What other days, nights and outs do you need, I wonder?'

So my Lily or Willy was rolling in his or her stone; I think I was dealing with a man or at least with an androgyne, not with a woman. Of course feminists might say I do not know women, their habits, manners and odours –not to the point of being allowed to maintain I know female beauty, all its recesses and resources. All right, I know that I know nothing about women. But I might add that they (the women I am talking about) know nothing about me either, about my structure, substance-quality, or just the qualities such as my genius and so on. What *do* they know about my genius? Let me question them on the subject immediately: no point in wasting our time on trifles. Well, my dear ladies, could you please tell me what exactly you know about my genius? Of course you must be aware of the undeniable fact that I am a genius. Do you have any wish to deny this fact? If I may be so bold as to ask you how many wishes you have in your head and particularly in your body? I may be mistaken, but in my opinion most women's wishes are located in their bodies, not elsewhere – not in their souls, to the best of my knowledge. Of course some women are likely to point out that my knowledge, or whatever I present as such, is not the best knowledge on the market. It is not even second-rate, according to those women. But for the moment I think we could discard their opinions, views and attitudes – *quitte à y revenir plus tard*.

So, as far as I caught the meaning of my previous guest, he was enclosed in an egg without giving any thought to the creation he was about to operate or carry out – literally. The creation, our world with all its attributes was enclosed within this egg, and this creature of mine was literally holding this creation in his hands. He then rose to his feet, found a hole in the egg – some god was

about to eat his breakfast, armed with a knife and fork— and he walked out, carrying the creation in the palms of his hands; on in his teeth. The God whose breakfast was thereby interrupted (most rudely, one must admit) received this present without so much as a smile on his part, on the part of his face and its muscles. He did not ask the intruder, ‘What is it? What are you giving me as a Christmas present?’ Nor did he appeal to a superior deity. And if this is the deity we have to obey and adore and worship, I think His breakfast should be as sumptuous as a Bruckner symphony – *The Eighth*, for instance. However, I asked another question, being curious to the point of neglecting my private duties such as going to the bathroom and other rooms where my rituals awaited me rather impatiently.

I: If I understood you rightly –

LILOMAT: Wrongly.

I: You were in charge of this egg of yours.

LILOMAT: It wasn’t *my* egg.

I: Whose egg was it?

LILOMAT: None of your business.

I: I’m very busy, you know, so I have no time for your prevarications.

LILOMAT: I’m on vacation and so I don’t have to pay attention to your silly inquiries.

Incidentally, I am not sure I was talking to the same person: they undergo all sorts of metamorphoses, these creatures of mine. Sometimes they are *these* creatures, sometimes they are *those* creatures. Whenever they come into my room, I cannot greet them traditionally, saying, ‘Hello, Peter, Paul, Lilliputian.’ And if I do, they answer me thus, ‘I’m neither Peter, nor Paul, nor Lilliputian.’ ‘Are you Gulliver then?’ I ask. ‘I’m neither Gulliver nor Bolivar.’ But some of them travelled for a while inside dozens of eggs, eager as they were either to create a world or to discover it, its nooks and crannies, its Niagara Falls and the fellows who presided over mills and also over Schubert’s *lieder* that sings about Miller’s daughter, unless I confuse her and him and them with Pushkin. It is no easy task to tamper with the world you have under your feet and in your hands. You do not really know what to do with it. Of course you are tempted to put it into your mouth and swallow it, after munching on it for quite a while. And after this ritual of sorts you rush towards the nearest bathroom, lavatory, toilet and discharge this charge so as not to bother any longer about the world and its inhabitants.

Well, the egg is in our possession, and we might eat it, for all I know – without undergoing a major crisis; a bout of indigestion, I mean. But why should we eat the Creation, those bigs, bangs, frills and flounces? LILOMAT insists upon the point I am reluctant to concede: in any discussion, however frivolous, there are points to which you stick as if they were *your* points, *your* toes and fingers. These allow you to proceed to your destination without any further ado, without hitches and snags. And on the way to this destination of yours you are served snacks and even wine, good champagne, unless you are on the wrong track and are about to die ignominiously in a foreign land,

ignominiously and anonymously. And if someone asks (some of those Lilliputians): ‘Who is this creature? Why is it dying? Does it belong to a living species?’ we may answer, ‘He’s dying because he belongs to a species. End of story. End of glory.’ ‘Is it the end of the world?’ ‘End of story.’ ‘Isn’t your story about the world?’ ‘It is not, it is not.’ ‘What is it about, then?’ ‘It is about “not”. As usual.’

But we are still inside the egg and Lilimut or someone else begins to ask himself all sorts of questions; and all these questions are of sorts. He does not care. He does not yet know what ‘care’ means because he is not completely incarnated. So if you offer him a carnation (a middle-aged woman might do this) he would not accept the gift: he is not acquainted with the greater part of the world that they (or this lady) offer him. With what is he or she acquainted? Actually he is it at the moment, and I am not sure it will ever become he or she or even a middle-aged lady. What can you do with ‘it’ unless it is a diamond you can sell at the earliest opportunity? Anyway or be it as it may (it is the month of May, by the way) the egg goes on rolling across all the creations it finds on its way to the, to some of the thes we are always dreaming about so as not to commit suicide. The egg goes on rolling, and so does the ego of the entity that seems to inhabit it, until further notice. This notice comes and says, ‘I agree with the state of affairs we are involved in. Let the egg roll, and let this journey take its toll on the creature sitting inside the egg. Hasn’t it (the journey) taken its toll on the creature’s health? There are shadows beneath its eyes.’

But let us not forget that these shadows set off the brilliancy of the creature’s glance that I avail myself of, whenever the creature deigns to answer my questions. Here is my question number six: ‘Do you know that you’re rolling and not standing stock-still for eternity or even for a moment?’

LALADO: I’m rolling, I’m rolling, I’m rolling.

I: Where to? Where to?

LALADO: Are you a taxi driver?

I: I’m not. I’m just your friend, your host. You’re part of my programme.

LALADO: What programme, Mum?

I: I’m not your Mum.

LALADO: Are you my Daddy?

I: No. But let’s have a quick tidy-up before mum gets home.

The point is our discussions are often fruitless so you would waste your time waiting for the fruits we are supposed to cover the Earth with, if only to please a few landowners. But the egg that Laladu happens to tame, in a manner of speaking, is different: it is a vehicle designed to convey its owner somewhere, not necessarily to Paradise or just a luminous thought. As you submit yourself to its movement, you are bound to realise it is also your own movement – your *destiny*, to some extent; to any extent, whatever its extension. And then you ask yourself if it is worth your while to travel in this spaceship (or whatever it is) without landing somewhere, without saying to yourself, ‘I am a being in

myself. I was born and I have to accomplish several tasks and wear several masks, considering the number of viruses I am to confront in this so-called world or in this Virus.' At some point you inevitably ask yourself why you are somewhere, in this egg, among other things – there are other things beyond this egg and you begin to feel their presence – and the main question remains the same, for years and years, 'Why am I somewhere?' And then another question crops up, and you begin to wonder why you move instead of standing still or still standing. You begin to play with words and that is how your brain sets into motion so that now you have two motions to cope with, unless you are dead already. You may be dead, but if you are not buried you can go on thinking about your predicament and the differential calculus you are sure to tackle in the near future, if your life has a meaning, a goal, and some light to which all creatures reach out their hands.

You are rolling, you are mewling. And you ask yourself if you should not put a stop to the movement that interferes with your train. (And this train is designed to put you in the right place and also in the right time.) You are at the very beginning of creation, of indication – of whatever it can be in this series of shocks and bangs and discoveries. Well, you ask yourself whether you are moving or not. You answer your own question thus: 'Yes, I'm moving because my cups of tea fall regularly from my table.' So you say to yourself you should do your best to stop this movement that interferes with your moods, rituals and never-ending meditation. What do you meditate upon, you wonder? You meditate upon the movement as such which reminds you of rivers, although you are neither a swimmer nor a sportsman who, armed with a few instruments unknown to neophytes, continues to dispossess *poisson volant* and other fish of their natural habitat. He makes a gesture and a fish leaves its home and relatives for the sake of a meal it knows nothing about; for the sake of a frying pan and vegetables and the mouth of its conqueror. He munches on the fish, swallows it and says to himself and others, 'I thank the Almighty for the taste of the fish I've just swallowed for the glory of God.'

Is it better to move or not? Should we accept whatever happens to us, without stirring or doing anything with our eyebrows? What *can* we do with our bushy eyebrows? We can lift them, lower them, cover our eyes with them, (Brezhnev *could* do it) determined not to see the world anymore; the world and its horrors. Our eyebrows hide the world from us and we feel like Snow White who spends her holidays in the 14th heaven where she finds 14 dwarfs, every day; at her dinner table, to put it mildly. Let us put everything mildly: life would be mild, if we put everything mildly every day, upon awakening, upon dying, praying and eating. But what about our thoughts and their trains? Of course a train presupposes movement. But does our mental process (whatever it is) match the movement of the egg? Let us not forget that the egg I am talking about is not part of our breakfast ritual: we are not yet born, for God's sake. What *do* we do for God's sake, I wonder? We stay (perhaps forever) in a rolling egg, and we ask ourselves if movement is better than stillness which might allow us to probe our thoughts and listen to music instead of hearing the noise of the wheels. But there are other questions and so we realise – whoever we are – that questions are harbingers of existence and perhaps this is what they call almost unanimously a 'bad omen'. You question yourself, you question the egg in

which you travel as if, once upon a time, you had embarked upon a sea voyage or a journey to the moon. The point is a cosmic egg can also travel in space, and usually spaceships look like eggs: it is enough to watch a science-fiction film based upon space journeys, voyages or white holes. You are inside an egg which, in its turn, finds itself inside a white hole leading it towards a number of distant stars where life is much better than on Earth. Sure enough, living in the midst of stars (even if you cannot really land on them, for they have no land) is an exciting experience that every traveller or even walker dreams about, especially if he or she or a little child is fed up with the life bestowed upon us by earthly powers.

Well, as we can see, many questions are crowding round the creature's brain. I am still talking about the egg-imprisoned entity. Suddenly I remember that this creature, entity or inhuman being already quitted the egg and even encountered a god on its way to freedom, free will and permanent unhappiness. But I wonder if she is entitled to wander around the world, whatever world we are talking about: you may get lost in no time at all if you do not answer a certain number of questions. I remember an episode recounted by the Mahabharata and its authors, and I even partly re-read the episode this morning as I drank my ritual cup of tea. A hero (or an anti-hero) is questioned by a lake-god. He is thirsty, but he will never touch a single drop of the water one can see all over the lake, in its cavity, unless he answers the questions. But we are not in the woods, not on a lakeshore where you may hear voices, questions and threats: 'If you don't answer my questions, you'll die of thirst. And if you procrastinate, prevaricate and do not die on the spot, I'll throttle you.' What is more (or less, as I often say now), we are probably still in the egg because we know neither its speed nor its whereabouts. They call it 'uncertainty' and I might call it 'death' if I was not a born optimist whose rosy views engulf the spaces that open up as soon as one wakes up and looks around. Where to? Where to? Our first conscious thought seems to be related to our final destination. And this destination and the obstacles we might come across in the course of our journey depend on our trajectory; and this trajectory depends on the egg and its itinerary.

So our brain comes up with a few solutions to our problem, and these solutions are filled up to the brim with figures of all kinds. Of course we see a circle, a triangle. And then a sort of revelation comes, although no angel is yet about to pay us a visit to announce the birth of our son or daughter or a mysterious beast, as Pushkin put it in one of his fairytales. Let us not jump to hasty conclusions in relation to this beast: it is not the Devil in the flesh. It is neither the Devil's flesh nor his mind. And yet I would not mind meeting and studying the Devil's mind: the problem of evil is still preying upon *my* mind; and my body, to some extent. (When I feel a sharp pain in my leg, for instance.) One mind is concerned with this problem and the second mind (that of the Devil) encloses a solution to this problem. And once again we light upon the Gnostics and their Demiurge whose presence presupposes the existence of two gods or entities or nonentities, considering that the world, and also the other world, whatever it is, are so chaotic, nonsensical and merciless that we inevitably jump to the following conclusion: all this is awful, terrifying and weird. Let us get out of here at the earliest

opportunity. But to invite this opportunity and greet it ceremoniously, without undue familiarity, we have to answer the egg's or god's questions. And I had better answer these questions through an intermediary. After all, it is a question of life or death and one of my creatures (Lulumba or someone else) will certainly agree to act as an intermediary between the gods or demiurges and my substance. I have no wish to carry the can. Let Lulumba die of thirst. Let him be hanged on one of the trees I can see around the lake.

I: Do you think that happiness lies inside the egg or in the woods?

LULUMBA: Happiness is everywhere – inside the egg, in the woods, in the sea.

I: Do you wish to travel in circles or along the straight line?

LULUMBA: Along the straight line. My thoughts are clear. I know my duty and the goal I'll always pursue.

I: Is your goal identical to happiness?

LULUMBA: I agree with Aristotle.

I: Do you know that the straight line often leads to death?

LULUMBA: I am eternal.

I: Don't you mind dragging your karma around till doomsday?

LULUMBA: I'll drag myself around. It is worth my while seeing the world and its miracles.

I: Don't you *dream* about the outside world? Why are you determined to stay in the egg?

LULUMBA: I am inside and outside. So is the egg – it is inside me and also in the woods.

I: Do you think that life is aimless? As aimless as the wind?

LULUMBA: When the large cog wheel engages with the smaller one, the mill stone will start to go round. It is the wind that turns the millstone.

I: What about water?

LULUMBA: I drink it.

I: What do you eat?

LULUMBA: I eat the egg I'm sitting in.

I: Why haven't you already eaten it up? Is it as eternal as your substance-quality?

LULUMBA: Everything is eternal except karma.

There are many travel agencies in the world and also outside it, and some of those agencies take care of our mental life, of our spirituality and salvation. What itinerary to choose? Once again you close your eyes and point your finger at whatever happens in the room or egg where you find yourself. If there is a window in the space you are surrounded with, you can point at the sky, which does not mean you will settle in Paradise in no time at all: time certainly counts in these matters. Some prefer to move in circles, hoping to chance upon the doctrine of eternal recurrence, or rather on its realisation. 'I wish to relive every moment of my former lives. I've always been happy in spite of my numerous cancers.'

Some opt for triangles because they never content themselves with one partner only: they need the third man or woman or animal. A horse, for example. I think that Catherine the Great was fond of horses to the point of sleeping with them in their stables; or in her palaces or hamlets. Unless I am confusing her with Marie-Antoinette.

Anyway, zigzags are not out of fashion and therefore many creatures zigzag through their lives, claiming to enjoy themselves to the utmost thanks to the nooks and crannies they are allowed to explore assiduously instead of rushing towards death without further ado. They often install their chairs and tables (and stables) in some nook or other and open two or three bottles of Claret to endow their meals with an additional dimension that is not mentioned in science-fiction works and scientific treatises. Only in your soul can you stumble upon such bliss. You stumble, collapse and spend a few hours on the grass, relishing the prospect of sucking the leaves of grass abundantly depicted by many poets, not only by Walt Whitman who, incidentally, never speaks of our *déjeuners sur l'herbe*.

When you see a grown-up person suck a blade of grass or a finger, you might conclude it is a zigzag-person you are dealing with; or someone whose second childhood is already on the agenda. This kind of thing can happen to anybody – down to middle-aged persons, mind you. You just open your diary and see the following entry: ‘A blade of grass. Sucking to my heart’s content.’ It can also be a knot in your hanky, for all I know. You sucked on a blade of grass last week, and you intend to repeat the experience in the near future; in the course of the hours to come.

Our teachers always talk to us about virtue that is in charge of hatred and other negative tendencies we harbour in our body and soul and psyche. (And in our astral body as well.) But if your life is tightly circumscribed – you suck on a blade of grass or meditate in your personal egg – you are not tempted to insult anybody. And even if you happen to hate the blade of grass you are sucking on, this blade and all the trees you have in your garden will not hear your four-letter words. They will not hear any word of yours, be it an eight-letter monster or something identical, or more or less similar. And even if they happen to hear one or two letters, they will take no notice of them: they have their lives to live either in your mouth or outside it. They have to cope with the wind, rain and pain they might feel now and then: the whole universe suffers, whatever we might think about its insensitivity. And our teachers go on driving the point home so that we listen to the word ‘virtue’ day in, day out. We are not supposed to say nasty things not only to our neighbours, our brothers and sisters, but also to utter strangers. An “unwarranted outburst of unkindness or spitefulness”, as our teachers put it now and then or all the time; when they feel like it. (And they are always in the mood for talking about virtue, hatred, love and indifference.) But suppose you are still inside your personal egg, and nothing can induce you to leave it, if only for a breath of fresh air. You like your egg and you rightly presume that the outside world is much worse than your voluntary confinement. From time to time, you insult your egg and say, ‘You’re a scoundrel. And you’re really a dimwit: you understand neither Kant nor Aristotle. Have you ever heard about their categories? Have you ever heard about any category, any theory, any solution to any problem?’

You are not *always* in the mood for stroking your egg, its walls and ceiling that you can touch without rising from your comfortable armchair. But now and then you do rise from your armchair and touch the ceiling with your body, determined to rub your shoulders with it. In response to your tenderness, the ceiling may go so far as to purr, whereupon you are bound to realise there are only cats around you, in your private world. And you need nothing, nobody else in your life. And the purr you listen to is as magnificent as Webern's cantatas or Schoenberg's op. 15. But today you do not compare anything to anything or anybody else: every creature, however insignificant, has a life of its own. And yet I cannot bear the people who always say, 'Every human being is unique and so we must preserve human life whenever we discover it somewhere.' As a matter of fact, we do not have to *discover* human life: it is everywhere, I'm afraid. Behind every tree there is a human being either with a rifle or a gun; or just with a pair of fists. But you are prepared to protect even a gunman from other guns or machine guns, and so you shield his body from other guns, bullets and cannonballs; sometimes at the cost of your own life. And all your teachers and other Socrates-infatuated philosophers applaud your deed as they bend over your body and decide (on the spur of the moment) to bury you with military honours. Hindus also applaud you and you end up rising from your tomb or just from your death to salute all those whose admiration knows no bounds. You bow to your audience and pass a dozen sandwiches round to recompense your fans, saying, 'It's such fun to rise from one's tomb with a dozen sandwiches on a silver plate.'

But suppose it is a boy (or a girl) you shield from bullets, rubbing shoulders with him in the attempt to save his life. His parents would notice only your shoulder, and the rubbing is prohibited in all civilised countries. You can rub shoulders with your wife or mistress, not with children, let alone with babies. You can rub any part of your body against the corresponding part of your wife's anatomy – on condition that she consents to your wish, on condition that you have not manufactured this consent – but if you touch a woman or a boy, his body and soul, you provoke a public outcry and are justifiably punished by means of the electric chair. You have nothing against the punishment inflicted on your structure, and you keep asking their forgiveness – even when your skin begins to burn so the members of the audience say to each other, 'There's a smell of burning.' Well, you just extend your hand towards a boy whose smile suggests he worships sweets.

'Do you have a sweet tooth?' asks a paedophile.

'Yes,' answers the boy.

'Could you show me this tooth?'

'Why should I?'

'Because if you don't, I won't give you a bar of chocolate.'

The boy shows the tooth in question to the paedophile; the latter touches it, caresses it to his heart's content. (To his fingers' content, rather.) And then he hears a noise associated in his mind with two hard objects rubbing together. By rubbing together, they produce a grating noise that grates on every criminal – on every paedophile, under the circumstances. He realises at once it is the electric

chair and the floor along which they convey this piece of electrified furniture to the scene of the crime: paedophiles should be executed *on the spot*, even if the spot is located in the midst of shrubbery. Now, in the midst of the same shrubbery, you can see a lot of wires, and they (the executioners) plug the chair into one of their sockets. Incidentally, their Black Maria's covered with sockets, which reminds one of Argus and his eyes. Those who spent their childhood and youth in the country where dictators or just dishonest and greedy officials held sway and bullied their fellow-citizens, see Argus almost everywhere: they believe they are watched round the clock as if taking part in Orwell's second-rate stuff. They take a step and hear a voice announcing to the human race, 'She walked slowly with tottering steps.' You say, 'I'm hungry,' and you hear the same voice that warns your president or prime minister, 'He is about to devour you and the regime you imposed upon this country of ours.' And then you see an eye that falls on you from the ceiling and you realise it is examining your private parts (all of them, all of them) as it rolls to and fro for an hour at least.

As long as you remain inside your egg, you do not have to worry about spies and their spouses who are often even worse than their husbands. But sooner or later you will have to forsake your hiding place, your house, your private world (not your private parts, *Dieu soit loué*). Either someone will break the shell with a view to eating the yolk and also you as if you were an officer in the White Army which yielded to the Reds' pressure and phony enthusiasm in the early Twenties; or even earlier. But you are sure to fight the big eater to the utmost of your abilities, biting his tongue, kicking his gums and teeth, his taste buds. And he will end up letting you jump out of his mouth and crawl to your liberty across the table and the floor. Anyway, you had better sound Action Stations as soon as you hear, 'I like eggs lightly cooked so that the yolk is still runny.' Instead of repeating over and over again, 'And what about me? What about me? Will I be runny when he breaks the shell and removes me from my armchair?' But first you should endure the boiling water, if only for three minutes. All this is unpredictable, but one thing is certain: even the boiling water is better than the world into which you might crawl, after escaping from the eater's mouth.

2

Anarchy is frowned upon because in our disciplined minds it is associated with chaos, with people screaming and running helter-skelter down the steps to escape the flames. Where did the flames come from? we ask ourselves, and we invariably answer, 'Flames and bombs come from terrorists, alias anarchists. They go for their walks, bombs hidden in their pockets, and we take no notice either of them or their bombs. And yet these bombs protrude from their pockets so anyone can see them with the naked eye. You don't have to resort to opera glasses or even to ordinary glasses (unless you are very short-sighted) to spot these bombs and realise how dangerous and fatal the pockets you see in front of you are and will be in a few minutes. You do not even have to turn your head to establish these bombs' whereabouts: they are in front of you, within your reach. At least they are within walking distance, but you are too lazy or cowardly to walk towards the terrorist or anarchist, resolved

to remove the bomb from his (or her) pocket, saying, 'Get lost, you scoundrel! This kind of bomb was destined for Russian tsars. But they're no longer on our agenda. No agendas in the world display their names, crowns and the atrocities they triggered off.' No, we just continue our walk, going either to a zoo – our children are eager to renew their passing acquaintance with elephants – and a few minutes later the prophecy is fulfilled and the bomb explodes near the Royal Palace, killing several guards and tourists. Their bodies are blown to pieces and other guards are now carrying those pieces to the nearest cemetery, making their way through a crowd of onlookers some of whom seem to be crying or even sobbing. Other onlookers pull their handkerchiefs out of their pockets and hand them to the moved-to-tears tourists who keep saying under their breaths, 'We didn't come to this country to witness such atrocities associated in our minds with Russian tsars, their stooges and princes. We thought this country was civilised to the point of excluding from its territory both anarchists and terrorists whose propensity for striking terror into the whole population is widely and justly known. Let them strike terror into your population, your fellow citizens, but leave us alone, leave tourists alone. Let them leave your country at the earliest opportunity.' And they call airports and railways stations to find out when they could set foot in a safe, almost sterilised country where neither terrorists nor wasps – let alone a single pit-bull – can be found; even with the lantern (or torch) of Diogenes fame.

But no one or nothing prevents you from being seduced by anarchists and their doctrines which are meant to liberate us from the tyranny of the state and its officials. If you open their books – Kropotkin and Bakunin are crossing my mind – you realise that if you follow their instructions, you will no longer pay taxes or spend your time in prisons and camps designed for anarchists, terrorists and other innocent citizens. The state points its finger at Boris or Gleb and both of them go not only to Siberia but also to the Pacific where they are mercilessly drowned by another bunch of guards who are always on their guard, needless to say. So if you wish to kill them with a kitchen knife, they immediately hang you on a birch tree, saying, 'You deserve a jejune Russian chastisement. Every Russian child knows that criminals should be hung on birch trees, in accordance with Ivan the Terrible's law. By the way, that's why birch trees are the most renowned symbol of Russia. But a birch tree doesn't deserve its appellation if there's no body hanging amidst its branches, or from one of its branches.' So you pay neither taxes nor fines. In pre-anarchic countries our judges used to say, 'This fine would serve as a warning to other motorists who drove without due care.' Nowadays, in our anarchist land, there are no judges, no laws, no prisons and fines. Fine, isn't it? as our anarchists point out and repeat, driving the point home. Happy ending, isn't it? Other motorists (and also the same motorists) drive without due or undue care and attention, flouting all conventions, all decisions, fine or otherwise. That is why we see so many corpses around our cities and squares, all along our streets, thoroughfares, motorways and driveways. Some of these corpses rise from the dead to say a few words to the quick; a sort of last will or testament. They say, 'Never lend an ear to anarchists. They don't know what they're doing. They don't know what they're driving at. They don't know how to drive their vehicles around our country.'

Eggs or no eggs, we are bound to open our eyes, and both our eyes and ears light upon the order which claims to epitomise light and its advantages. Harmony, light – that is what our dictators (be they the gods or just nots, nots, nots; or notes) affirm, whenever they feel like driving their points home. Haven't you noticed that our houses are filled to the brim with their points? Or rather orders? Anarchists also drive their point home so that everything, not only our houses, bathrooms and tennis courts, is swarming with points. They move around, put spokes in our wheels, deprive us of our wheels and meals, whereupon we might realise we need a revolution or at least a revolt to get rid of our governors, governments and tsars, queens and their ladies-in-waiting. 'Let us wait no longer,' shout our anarchists, showing us a multitude of bombs some of which are atomic, judging from the mushroom clouds we see on our screens. We look at all these weapons and say to our anarchists, our fellow citizens, terrorists and bad boys, 'All right, all right, you made some interesting points in your speech. What's more, you drove these points home. In our world there are only points and bombs, nothing else, nobody else.'

'It's not true,' object the anarchists. 'There are many people in this world, and some of them are tyrants and their stooges.'

'All right, all right, there are tyrants, their stooges and the stages where the tragedy of our lives has been performed for millennia. But why should we go too far? Are there no benefactors of humanity in our midst, among our species and their members? Why should we drop your bombs on all and sundry? Aren't you afraid of collateral damage?'

'The elect will be saved. No bomb will ever harm a hair on any of our partisans' heads. We'll show you our partisans, and you'll have enough time to examine their hair – after the revolution.'

'And what about Tolstoy? What about Gandhi? Why can't we adopt *their* methods?'

'What methods? Sitting on the rails in India? Mowing the grass at Yasnaya Polyana?'

'Let us say to each other, "I stopped short of dropping the atom bomb on humanity, but only just." *Only just* is very important within the framework of our conversation.'

According to their opponents, terrorists are prepared to drop bombs on innocent pedestrians and bushes and plants that have every right to live and prosper in the world where pollution and bombs seem to thrive to the detriment of organic food, organic life, the organic way of thinking. 'Your thinking is not organic,' say the anarchists I am talking and writing about. 'Laws, punishments and other restrictions are chemicals that should be avoided and destroyed for the sake of human prosperity. And you think they should be preserved.' Actually the opponents do not take issue with what some of them call 'the utter destruction of humanity'. They say that high officials, presidents and prime ministers should be *threatened*: you just touch the bomb lying on your writing desk, but you forbear to fling it at the queen or her aunt or uncle. You touch the bomb and say on the radio, 'No more laws, no more taxes. We're fed up with your soft power and soft tyranny. Live and let live. We'll spare your bodies and souls, but in exchange for our magnanimity you should leave us alone – without your commandments and handcuffs.' What do they suggest, these anarchists? What method or way do they

advocate? Not the middle way, needless to say. And even when talking, when telling you a few home truths, they never stop in the middle of nowhere. They follow their ideas through, and their ideas come to a standstill – or their train of thoughts – only when a dozen atomic bombs explode throughout several continents. ‘Throughout’ and ‘through’ are the keywords of their doctrine and maxims.

Well, after a series of explosions, they begin to rebuild the world in accordance with their ideas which are habitually centred on communities that communicate with each other either through vibrations or via the Internet. Every anarchist has at least three computers and these computers convey the news and the ruins, their photographs, to newborn anarchists and to anarchists-to-be. Old anarchists call these past or future recruits ‘our brides,’ and outsiders are usually astounded by their complete disregard for the sexes. What counts is a bomb one can carry in one’s pocket or in one’s glove compartment. And they often prefer females to males – perhaps in homage to Sophia Perovskaya (or just to Sophia) – who assassinated Alexander II of Russia. According to Kropotkin, most ‘progressive’ Russians admired Perovskaya, taking no notice of the quantity of blood she had shed while carrying out her revolutionary ritual. ‘Emperors’ blood is thinner than water,’ those Russians used to say, when questioned on the subject by their relatives or colleagues. Recently I overheard an exotic discussion – inside my egg or my brain which is identical to my egg; and vice versa.

LILIMOT: Why should you expropriate my estate and picture gallery?

LILIWANT: You spend too much money on trifles. And we’re starving to death.

LILIMOT: Not to death – to the Hereafter.

LILIWANT: It amounts to the same horror.

LILIMOT: Are you sure you’ll go to Hell?

LILIWANT: God is on your side. If I throw a bomb at the mayor of Petersburg – and I will, I will – I’ll go to Hell. As sure as eggs is eggs.

LILIMOT: My egg is not your egg.

LILIWANT: All eggs should be equal. All gods should be equal too.

LILIMOT: Out of the question. Zeus and the Creator are superior to other gods.

LILIWANT: Then we should overthrow them.

LILIMOT: By overloading your spaceships with bombs?

LILIWANT: Exactly. But first we’ll get rid of you and people like you.

LILIMOT: Can’t I stay in my estate, eating and drinking? And having a game of billiards, from time to time?

LILIWANT: We need your billiard balls for our cannons.

Theoreticians of this movement (and of adjacent tendencies) affirm that the only solution to our universal problems lies in a network of communities created either on the spur of the moment or in the

course of a long evolution. After much soul-searching you call your friends, send them a lot of emails and eventually you meet and discuss the problem; and all other problems into the bargain. As a result of your meeting, hope stirs within your hearts and you set about working on your programme, slogans, agenda and the menu of the inaugural dinner. You say to yourself and your comrades-in-arms that the future is already on the horizon and no government will ever again perturb your lives to the point of disrupting them altogether. From now on you will be at the helm, but some of your comrades-in-ideas begin to wonder where this helm is situated and whether you will be able to take it without dropping a few bombs on your enemies' heads. A member of your community raises his hand and says, 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs so let's drop a dozen bombs and break the eggs.' But then you begin to meditate upon the whereabouts of these eggs: you cannot see any of them in the neighbourhood or even in the distance unless the passers-by you spot from your window (they all have heads) are egg-bearers in their own right. All right, all right, as you say as often as you can to boost your self-esteem and ego. And so do your comrades-in-doctrine. But before dropping bombs on *their* heads, you question yourself as to their adherence to your *party*: such a possibility cannot be excluded from the history of humankind. Kropotkin means that the crowds you see in churches and at charity balls are liable to join you: side-changing is a common feature of human personality as such. So you open your window and shout, 'The revolution is next week, so you'll have to come down on one side of the fence or other by then. And if you come down on the other side of the fence, I'll kill you either with my bullets or a Molotov cocktail.'

As we can see, community-creating can cause problems, for problems are everywhere and you jump or come to this conclusion as soon you squeeze out of your egg. Governments and their laws are unbearable, but so are the discussions you engage in with other people who do not always know the word 'community'. You embark upon your speech and say, 'Com –' whereupon you hear a few voices that cut in on your forthcoming speech. 'Gmail.com?' 'Communism?' 'What?' 'What?' You explain that the communities you have in mind hark back to Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages when cities were more or less independent entities which, however, could communicate with each other, when in need of help or timely advice. 'They were free, those cities,' you go on. 'And their freedom allowed them to fulfil their own expectations.'

'Great expectations?' you are asked by the same voices.

'What do you call great expectations?'

'They didn't even have airports, helicopters and satellites. They didn't even have cars, trains and washing machines. They had no machines at all,' proclaims a female voice.

'And their scholastic philosophy was much inferior to ours inaugurated by Descartes,' says a male voice.

These speeches are eternal; you can put them in the present tense because they will never come to a close – for two reasons. *Primo*, you will never relinquish the idea of preparing the ground for a better world where everybody can work and play and be happy ever after, even if there is no ever and

no after either here or on the other side. You still believe there is a lot of green grass everywhere, on your side, on the other side. Sometimes this grass is just green; sometimes it is greener, much greener; sometimes it is *greenissima*. And your grass, according to your eyes and reason, is not green enough; it is almost yellow as if submitted to merciless sunbeams or atomic radiation. So you leave your egg after knocking on it for several days and nights. You thought your guardian angel would open a secret door and let you out. While staying in your egg, you realised there was a world outside, somewhere, right beyond the shell on which you knock from time to time, out of impatience and curiosity. And this world is not unstructured, whatever some of them might say; Kant, among other philosophers and thinkers and tinkers. It is *badly* structured, although it displays rigorous order; but not harmony, far from it.

No, I think I am mistaken: it is easy to confuse all these creatures who are endowed with reason and powers of argumentation. I think that Kant said just the opposite, namely: 'The process whereby there is experience is a process from subjectivity to apparent objectivity.' And the philosophy of organism inverts this analysis, putting inverted commas here and there, clouding the issue. So you convene an assembly meant to prepare the ground for the glorious future of mankind and the Earth in general, and then someone stands up and says, 'You're wrong. Kant thought just the opposite.' And if you ask this person where this opposite is located, this person just sits down or leaves the assembly without so much as a by-your-leave. Of course you do not have to analyse either Kant or Spinoza, even if you are tempted to lean on his (Kant's) categorical imperative in the course of your forthcoming speech. But this speech will never come, you might say to yourself as you listen to the debate in which you cannot take part: the participants talk at cross-purposes or rather to no purpose at all. And after a while you forget the purpose of the meeting and even that of the world, as they say. In other words, grammatically speaking, the world has no purpose and you had better return to your egg once and for all; no more departures, no more fellow creatures.

Apparently the revolution to whose advent our anarchists inexorably lead us should start in villages, in huts where simple folk live and starve to death. They have no clothes, no bread and butter; nor do they have brioches and margarine and sandwiches where you habitually find a slice of pork or beef or tuna. Those people are hungry enough to trigger off an earthquake, shaking governments, leaders of all kinds, unkind laws and *tutti quanti*. The intelligentsia always errs on the side of caution. Intellectuals cannot bring themselves to pick up a thousand axes and destroy 10,000 palaces either overnight or at least within a week. Philosophers think they are in a position to create a lawful society simply at the stroke of a pen. They talk to us about their categories and imperatives as if we did not have enough shackles around us and also on our bodies and in our souls. They are unable to realise we need an unlawful society that scholars call 'open work'. But let us not bring up 'open society' which might lead us astray. Free countries or open societies are as oppressive as the Soviet Union and its satellites; and China and North Korea and Turkey. What we really need may be defined as a 'closed society' – the egg inside which you can do whatever you like. And our communities also belong to

this category on account of their self-efficiency and self-sufficiency. And before creating such communities we should decide whether strangers or outsiders will ever be allowed to cross their borders. So a few debates should be devoted to the meaning of the word ‘open’ because no one will ever cross our borders if we close them once and for all. All right, we might open them once in a while, on condition that such an occurrence takes place only once a month or twice a year. In this case, we are doomed to live in a half-closed or half-open society. The point is you should devote at least three discussions to these halves and thirds: third-open, fourth-open. Of course you can say, ‘We should banish both autocracy and bureaucracy from our community! End of story.’ Alas, it is not enough to utter the word ‘end’ to put an end to discussions, points of view, arguments and imperatives.

And what about the second reason, about *secundo*? *Primo* concerns a radiant future, a number of radiant and unconstrained smiles floating over pavements and floors, all along the streets of our City of Anarchy. *Secundo* concerns the impossibility of its birth. There is such a thing as the birth of a nation, but anarchy is not a nation, although it can affect the lives of human beings who belong to this nation. Even if we rely on peasants and workers, on down-and-outs, we shall never achieve any result in anarchical fields because these down-and-outs are lazybones: they grow weary of their revolutions long before their triumphant final chord. (You can hear this chord in Beethoven’s *Ninth*.) As for intellectuals, they are often eager to create an unlawful or anarchical society. What is more, they know that such a society cannot be created simply at the stroke of a pen. Well and good: they are armed with pens, not with axes and pikes. And these pens trace a lot of letters not only in the air but also on sheets of paper, in notebooks. And the meaning of these letters boils down to the word ‘anarchy’; at least at the outset of the undertaking. But with the passing of the years, the strokes grow shorter and shorter, reducing the scope of the writers’ initiatives and daring projects. Finally the pens come to a standstill and we have no alternative but to contemplate a dot – a rigid, narrow-minded dot that looks like a law or a church or a prison cell.

The proletariat and even peasants grow weary, and ministers give them toys as if they were in their second or first childhood. Workmen and workwomen play with toys and smile whenever given a stick of celery which, as we all know, does not provide much sustenance. But these people are content with a modicum of sustenance and it is not true that young people on the dole are often bored and frustrated. Generally speaking, down-and-outs, the old and the young are happy when they have to go on the dole. Often they sigh and say to their relatives and mere acquaintances, ‘I wish I could go on the dole right now.’

‘And what about axes?’ asks an old soldier, a former revolutionary, a virtual anarchist.

‘What axes are you talking about? Do you want us to fell a tree?’

‘I want you to fell the tree of life, *their* tree of life.’

‘Whose tree of life are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about your oppressors, our aggressors.’

‘Who are they? Where could they be found?’

‘In palaces of justice, in parliaments, among landowners.’

‘Aren’t we supposed to fell the Tree of Death?’

An open community which differs from an open society in more than one respect is open to abuse or contamination. When someone says to you, ‘My car leaked oil all over your drive,’ you visualise your beautiful drive and the oil covering it from one end to another; a foul-looking, foul-smelling oil. Of course you are likely to kick your visitor out, after pointing out he is no longer welcome in your house and garden. ‘Even if you buy a Rolls Royce,’ you may add to make sure the visitor will never dare approach your estate; not even in a hot-air balloon. The visitor’s oil is nothing in comparison with what so-called aliens can smuggle into your community whose fundamental virginity has always been a great source of civic pride. You open your walls or rather the door that enables those aliens to enter your privacy and shamelessly violate it – not only with their foul smells, but also their words, their music and even their kisses. How dare they kiss you, giving you a big bear hug? And their words, their sentences. For instance, they are capable of uttering something along the lines of: ‘There were a couple of fellas leaning on the bar.’ It is pointless to discuss any point with them: they turn a deaf ear and a blankstare to your arguments, to whatever you say or sing. (They have no ear for Bach and Offenbach.) You say to them, ‘I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I misunderstood your meaning. What did you actually mean?’

‘There were a couple of fellas leaning on the bar.’

‘Do you mean to say there were two middle-aged men in a three-star restaurant?’

‘In a bar, in a bar. A couple of fellas.’

‘All right. There were two gentlemen in a two-star restaurant. There was a bottle of Richbourg on their table.’

‘Two pints of beer.’

‘They were partaking of ducks and pigeons, I suppose.’

‘Cashew nuts.’

As soon as you leave your egg you are bound to come across poisons, even if there are no Bulgarian umbrellas in the area you happen to traverse. Every umbrella is poisonous, be it Dutch or Italian or Serbian or Croatian. You leave the egg because you assume it is not a rainy day and so people are not likely to carry umbrellas either in their bags or in their pockets. And suddenly you realise – I must have seen it in a Magritte painting – you see only umbrellas around you. Everything and everybody looks and feels like an umbrella, and this umbrella stings you as you walk along an innocent-looking street. And then you realise the street you are thinking about is also an umbrella because it stings you like a wasp. But it is not a wasp, a harmless, almost humane wasp: it is a human carrying an umbrella, aiming the umbrella at your thighs, buttocks, at your neck and left eye. This also reminds me of Shakespeare, of Falstaff’s predicament. How does it go? ‘Oh, I’m pricked, I’m kicked. Yet another prick, yet another kick. Where do all these umbrellas come from? Why does Mrs Ford own so many umbrellas? Is she really allergic to rain? Or is she afraid of rainy days? But her husband

is rather rich, as far as I know. Anyway, the only thing I do know is I'm attacked, pricked and kicked. I wish I could know that I know nothing. Only this knowledge doesn't expose one to suffering, to eternal torments.'

And if you shut your community's frontiers, they put their cars beyond your locks and switch on their radios, their pop music. And you cannot bear their music, for all your indulgence and pluralism about which you are in the habit of boasting now and then. So you say to yourself, 'The Great Wall of China would be a useful add-on.' Or do they call it 'The Great Wall of America'? But even The Great Wall of America (of great America) does not protect you from hostile sounds emitted by your enemies, their radios, their machines and wives who scream, whenever a sexual act is on the agenda. They scream and quarrel with their partners, and their partners ask you to analyse the situation you cannot help witnessing from where you sit ensconced in your armchair. And then they ask, 'What's your verdict? Who is right, I or that woman?' And now and then there are no men or women beyond the wall you erected on the spur of the moment, hoping it would protect you from entities or nonentities. You thought that no umbrella would ever pierce this wall, eager to prick and poison you in broad daylight; in broad nightlight, as extraterrestrials put it, staring at their upside-down world.

No wall can ever protect you from entities and their private lives, their brawls, scuffles and sociological problems. Even in the world of neutral entities you come across both males and females, and their rights should be protected, as they shout from behind the wall. And you hear a number of slaps that might involve cheeks, bellies, necks and even private parts. And your anarchical views may undergo a surgical operation: you thought that in your community you would enjoy only peace and quiet. Of course your peace is annihilated by another community, but that community is part and parcel of your anarchical views which cannot circumscribe events, feelings and love to what happens only within *your* Great Chinese Wall. There are other sentiments, other loves, other communities where they quarrel, brawl and beat each other fair and square; or unfair and unsquare. And they ask you to judge their imbroglios because, according to their views and certitudes, you all belong to the same species. And they also ask you to lend them money or send a general through the hole you drilled in the Wall, for they have no generals in their midst. Of course they can pick up some picks and shovels, but they do not know the first thing about armies, about Chinese tactics, their withdrawals, attacks and sieges. 'We are peaceful and battles, wars and famine are not our cup of tea. We can give you money, if your brotherhood is on its last legs and consequently the feeling of cooperation no longer palpitates in your breasts and hearts.'

'What palpitation? What cooperation?' you ask them, speaking at the top of your voice and drilling yet another hole in the Great Wall of America.

'We need a general.'

'If your community goes to war you'll have to face the fact that many people will die. And our general may become your dictator, as a result of his victory. And you'll have a government and a set of laws.'

‘You’re mistaken. We’ll kick your general out after the end of the battle. Our horses will trample their soldiers to death and your general will get a medal for his bravery and Chinese tactics. Apparently he read the famous Chinese treatise where battles, attacks and retreats are literally anatomised. So we can’t be vanquished, and our triumph will assert itself all the more easily since our enemies don’t read Chinese books on the subject. They just know Lao-tse, that’s all. And that’s not enough.’

You doubt your vocation, the sacrifice you made for the sake of anarchy and Kropotkin’s views. When did you make this sacrifice? Many years ago, upon reading his books and realising that the taxes you pay to the government of your country are not proportional to your income and your style of life. You thought you would never again hear the word ‘war’ because the city-states he talks about lived rather peacefully, enjoying bread and butter, beer and schnapps, mozzarella and Gouda. And now you are asked to select a general from your midst and send him through a hole in the wall into another community, determined to vanquish its neighbours. Of course they have no wish to *appropriate* their territory: such a thing is not done either in the kingdom of anarchy or in the Middle Ages about which Kropotkin spoke so eloquently, with gusto and delight. Why do we have to triumph over our enemies? We are not allowed to appropriate their territory, their money, their wives and children. Even their cats are beyond our control. ‘What are your intentions?’ we ask our neighbours, the members of the beyond-the-wall community.

‘We intend to convince them that our good nature was bestowed upon us by superior forces – by God, if you wish.’

‘We have no intention of uttering the word “God” or “Lord” Whom we don’t need, as a matter of fact.’

‘How so?’

‘Our goodness and humanness stem from our bodies and souls where they originated in days of yore, in the days of dinosaurs. God has nothing to do with our inborn virtues and ethical beauty.’

Ideological debates animated not only early Christianity, but also the city-states that are depicted in books on Paradise as one of its constituents; at least on the surface of the Earth. But we should not forget that brawls and scuffles were their characteristic features without which no city-state is conceivable, let alone realistic, materialistic or spiritualistic. In those times, there were many prophets and some of them announced the advent of Luther and Protestantism. His theses circulated in several communities at once so he had many adherents in the Middle Ages, well before his actual reform took place and conquered a part of the Christian world. But among the inhabitants of those cities and times were money-haters (not money-grubbers or -launderers) and we might call them socialists, if we were prepared to flout time-bound conventions; if anachronism were admitted and applauded in our midst. They said, ‘Luther would wreak havoc in our medieval world because his doctrine would give rise to capitalism, to a money-oriented society. We are used to turning away from money. Of course we never go so far as St Francis who asked his followers to cover money with their

excrement. It is said there were no toilets in *their* community. What's more, they weren't allowed to pee or poo if there were no coins, no gold in sight. This self-imposed constipation used to shorten their lives considerably, if our books don't deviate from reality and truth. So some monk would rise from his seat or rather from a tuft of grass and say, "I'm going to get a water-closet, whether I have to beg, borrow or steal one." Two hours later, the monk would come back, carrying a suitcase. Hidden in the suitcase were wads of banknotes. He would open the suitcase, scatter the banknotes all over the courtyard where St Francis and his disciples prayed and took their meals, and all of them would strip their clothes off. St Francis' admirers often saw the members of his community crawl on all fours and carry the banknotes in their teeth. And they wondered whether they were witnessing a dinner-ceremony or a tea-ceremony. Had the banknotes been exposed only to the monks' urine?

Some tourists spoke about the city-states from this point of view, taking into consideration our excrement and brawls. So if you read in these books, 'Unrest broke out in the city,' you realise that once again they disagreed on the quantity of excrement found in their streets, on banknotes, gold and jewels. The virtual capitalists seldom left their houses unarmed, but their weapons were not as lethal as what we encounter in our world where our fellow creatures are never seen without revolvers, pistols, bombs and Kalashnikovs. Those citizens, the inhabitants of the proverbial city-states, always carried brooms and brushes in their bags. They literally cleaned the streets (there were other tools in their pockets and attaché cases), removing excrement from jewels and other valuables. After a session of ideological cleansing, they usually pocketed the valuables and, whatever historians say about this everyday occurrence or ritual, capitalism began its ascension to the top of human priorities in *those* cities, for all their camaraderie and support services.

Whenever a new inhabitant of Paradise is conveyed to his or her eternal dwelling place, he or she pulls a broom out of whatever he or she carries and begins to sweep away the precious stones from St John's celestial Jerusalem so picturesquely depicted at the end of his Book of Revelation or Apocalypse. (Or just to sweep them under the carpet.) And usually these newcomers say to the celestial authorities (no anarchy in heaven, alas): 'Look, your Jerusalem looks like an apocalyptic image – on account of these precious stones. It should look like Revelation, like *Vita Nuova*, like Christ or Moses.' Sure enough, the city of Jerusalem that can be found in St John's famous masterpiece looks now like a painting by Saenredam.

But once again we hear the voices that talk to us about brawls, disorder, chaos and the city-states' fundamental instability. You wander in the streets and suddenly an urchin faces you, after coming out of the blue where he usually awaits his victims. He spies on them, follows their trajectories with his eyes and also with his body, and then you see his dagger sparkling in the midst of sunbeams; glittering and shining as if it was a sun. And then the urchin plunges this sun into your belly as if to remind you of Pushkin's death and torments. Of course you can remind this urchin that you are neither Pushkin nor even a Russian, but it is already too late: the bodkin or whatever it is avails itself of your body's depth and juiciness. So you jump to the following conclusion (you have no time left to *walk*

towards it ponderously): ‘I should have voted for the State and the protection it can offer its citizens. I don’t mind being spied upon by the police associated with dictatorial regimes and states as such. My police take care of me, as Mayakovski put it once or twice. And this anarchy propounded by irresponsible, bird-brained (or rather birdy-brained) individuals should be sent back to their birds. And let St Francis sermonise them or just put everything in a nutshell: we cannot live without states, their laws, their police and judges. Nor are we able to reach paradise on our own, snapping priests’ and other churchmen’s heads off.

But we can protect ourselves from urchins and even from Jacks renowned for their ripping, rippling virtuosity. We can rip them in our turn or rather before they embark upon their business in the streets of London or Moscow or Amsterdam. We should imitate sorcerers and shamans who, upon seeing Jacks and rippers somewhere, say to the sky: ‘Rip, rip, rip, rip, rip, rip, rip.’ And a sword (Durandal, Notung) drops from the sky, from the nearest cloud, as it were. (Even if there are no clouds either in the sky or in Hell.) For once, it is not an atom bomb we get as a present in the course of our stroll. Jack cries, ‘You shouldn’t kill me. I’m not a dragon, you know. I know you’re Siegfried, but let bygones be bygones. They can’t be anything else, anyway, these bygones of ours.’ As for urchins, we can just press our index finger against their throats and their blood will spurt out all over the thoroughfares and gardens of our native city. Yet our dispute – the one we engage in with our brothers and sisters – may induce us to seek our lawyer’s assistance; and the word ‘lawyer’ comes from the word ‘law’ that anarchists banished from their vocabularies and lives many years ago. All right, we go and see Mr Yer, whoever he is. And he says to us, ‘You’re in the right place, considering that I’m a member of your community, not a minister of some hateful government.’ But Mr Yer’s remarks and observations are beside the point because the point is right here: we are different entities and so cannot be judged by others who have no idea what we are thinking about. No one – not even God – detains the truth which is flexible in spite of its pretensions to solidity. You say something and the third party contradicts you on the grounds that two scientists said just the opposite in their latest book. And Mr Yer is not in love with the woman you have courted for several years; yet he dares judge your attitude towards her former husband. It does not really matter whether he belongs to the same community or not: every human being is his or her own community. And this community is he and she and also an androgyne one cannot deal with unless this one is androgynous itself. A homosexual should not judge a bisexual, even if both human beings love the same man, caress the same body; in the same bed.

And then we should thrash out the problem of wars and generals who do not live in every community we come across, if admitted to their inner spaces. Wars are inevitable because we do not have the same ideas about money, love and human goals. ‘My goal guides me to the greenest grass one can find on Earth and elsewhere,’ says an entity we know nothing about; except that it is an entity we have to describe for the sake of our line of reasoning. Actually we do not even have to describe it; it is enough to say, ‘It is an entity, end of story.’ Luckily for us, there are many ends; they are more numerous than beginnings and so, in the community where we live, there are more short or long

stories than novels. And that is why one is tempted to write a novel, being more ambitious than other members of one's community. So this entity (the one I mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph) looks for the greenest grass in the universe. More often than not, in search of this grass the entity crosses borders and explores all sorts of other sides it comes across in the course of its wandering. In the course of the same wanderings it becomes he and she and also an androgyne, but its identity is not the goal of its search, research and drifting with the tide. Now we see it in the fields and we say to ourselves, 'Just another pilgrim in search of the only truth bestowed upon the human race.' Now we spot its figure in the mountains where it hops on its good foot: the other foot was injured during one of its Kierkegaardian leaps. Incidentally, any Kierkegaardian leap should be executed on mountain tops, otherwise it might turn out to be sterile, ineffectual.

Anyway, Mr Yer judges your behaviour and reads out his verdict that 'does not quite square with the evidence', as you point out immediately, on the spot, in the courtroom. So you slap Mr Yer's round face that you began to hate on the day of your first meeting. For several weeks you have managed to rein in your hatred-imbued emotions, but a few minutes ago they overflowed their banks (every emotion is a sort of river) and now no one can stop you from behaving like a criminal. But in no medieval community could you stumble upon a prison or a prison guard, let alone a prison cell. So they cannot imprison you, inflicting upon your body and soul a well-deserved punishment. In the first place they thought that punishment should be excluded from communities and societies. 'No punishment will ever straighten an entity out,' they used to say to each other. And they also wrote many letters to this effect, on the same subject. This attitude towards life, pain and the psyche led to the permanent turmoil about which historians speak at length, pointing out that medieval city-states should not be regarded as a model for any group of human beings. 'If no punishment awaits you anywhere, you're tempted to leave your house and beat the first pedestrian you come across; fair and square. And if you don't come across any pedestrian – they're all on holiday, those pedestrians – you blow off steam by beating yourself, fair *or* square: beating yourself fair *and* square might be dangerous for your future life.' Let us not forget the maxim announced many times by different philosophers: 'We cling to life because we think that life is more precious than death and the Hereafter. At least Rilke thought so. He spoke of our Earth and her delights with gusto. But he never praised what can be defined as "subterranean life" or "cemeterian existence".' We have often heard about the virtuous Samaritan, but no one ever touches upon a good cemeterian. A good corpse, in other words. And only necrophiliacs are driven to touch corpses on a regular basis.

But we should not forget another aspect of the life predominant in the city-states; or state-cities, as they are called by the partisans of states, churches and policemen (and policewomen). Not everybody wished to become just a worker in some hazy organisation or factory. There were people endowed with various gifts; at least they thought so, and when questioned on the subject – the subject being their laziness and indifference towards their comrades' happiness – they would talk about these gifts for hours on end. They often wrote poems in the presence of their 'persecutors', as they called

their elders and betters. Or they sang their ballads – not always out of tune, as their adversaries declared, publicly and privately. And they could also paint an icon, trying to reproduce the Trinity and its majesty or the Cross and the pains endured by Jesus Christ and also by the bandits with whom he was tortured on that memorable day. Oddly enough, those artists' inchoate awareness of whatever had happened in days of yore did not include the other Crosses which do not have to be written with a capital C, considering the qualities of the beings nailed to their material substance. (Incidentally, according to medieval philosophers, Christ's Cross was spiritual and therefore its substance was celestial, if not paradisiacal.) So, on the walls of those medieval establishments we often see one cross and three persons hanging on it or from it: it depends on the painter's medieval skill. Sometimes one cannot help wondering why these persons did not fall from the cross on the day of their and its creation; on the day when a member of some medieval community resolved to demonstrate his art (women never had such an itch) to those elders and betters we touched upon, eschewing the words 'authorities', 'governors' and even 'ministers', although we encounter *other* ministers in the local churches to which we may direct our steps from time to time, when weary of poetry and medieval (or Renaissance) Flemish composers.

This misapprehension often gave rise to quarrels, brawls and murders, when a young anarchist (for instance), proud of his vocation and chaotic destination, was adamant in front of an elder and better comrade, asking him (the younger) if he was not inclined to become a minister in the near future. 'Never, never, never,' answered the young comrade. 'However infinite the future we're facing, I'll never participate in any government. Oppression of underdogs will never be on my agenda, whatever the size of the agenda I'm talking about.'

'Let there be no mistake about it,' said the elder.

'The mistake you're talking about is embedded in your proposal, I'm afraid.'

'Don't be afraid – we're not living in the future when workers and peasants had no money and were treated like horses.'

'What horses are you talking about? The horses described by Swift?'

'Not at all.'

'Tolstoy too was fond of horses. He even wrote a novella about his horse nicknamed Prince Andrew.'

'Don't you aspire to become a minister in our communal church?'

'Do you know what Rilke said about Jesus Christ? He said that Christ had led us astray, making us focus our thoughts and feelings upon our conscience, whereas the Earth we trample upon is far more significant and crucial. It's not only the source of our aesthetic enjoyments and ecstasies – it is also our mother, if you please. I'd like to plough our mother like a cart driven by a horse. Or rather like the horse thanks to whose force the cart moves forward, preparing the ground for crops. I wish I could adopt this horse's way of life. They're so close to the Earth, aren't they? And the Earth is close to them.'

3

Let us take into consideration yet another aspect of the life we termed a ‘communal apartment’ or just a ‘community’ where different entities live and prosper; to some extent. This extent is not very extensive, given the limitation imposed upon the members by the very notion of ‘community’. And even if there are no policemen, no judges, no churchmen within this community’s walls, we stumble and even trip over the entities that refuse the integration proclaimed by the posters they see on every wall available to their sight. They are supposed to live the life of their community and not their own lives which entice them away from the professions offered by their communal leaders. These leaders stumble upon your lying bodies, trip over them, fall and say to you furiously, ‘What are you doing in our beds, on our floors? The floor isn’t yours, whatever you can imagine within your brains’ limits, your narrow-minded worlds. You should work for the community, otherwise you won’t get any tickets allowing you to help yourself in our shops where basic foodstuffs lie on our counters as if waiting for your mouths, stomachs and toilets. Why don’t you participate in our common, wonderful, radiant life?’ And the culprits are likely to answer thus, ‘Because our life is different from yours. Aren’t you different from us? We have a dream, whereas you have no dreams at all. You don’t even have what they used to call “psyche” because you’re neither psy nor che nor she. You’re just an entity without its own entirety, if you see what we mean. But you don’t see anything at all, apart from your medieval principles, your embryonic anarchy that you’re not acquainted with, for all your boasting and bombastic speeches.’ And I am likely to answer thus, ‘I’d like to become a policeman, if this proposal suits your narrow minds and bodies. I’m used to beating the members of your so-called communities during our brawls and balls, in our so-called halls. So I’m well-trained for the job and I hope you’ll allow me to demonstrate my fists’ and revolvers’ efficiency without further ado. I’m not keen on these ados of yours, you know.’

And so this particular lazybones that is often called either ‘lazy’ or ‘bones’ becomes a policeman, instead of yawning either on the floor or in the garden where he is usually served his lunch, in accordance with Manet’s rather famous picture, painting or representation; and one wonders if this representation has anything in common either with Schopenhauer or Wittgenstein’s pictures, images, models or whatever, whatever, whatsoever. So these bones leave their divan and open the front door of their house in order to make the order reign all over the city-state and all other states that will come into being sooner or later, especially in the 20th century which took care only of states, absent-mindedly ignoring its members or citizens or taxpayers or soldiers.

So our lazybones – he is not mine, God forbid – leaves his divan and joins the crowd whose members go up and down the street; and only down their lives, strange as it may appear. Why can’t they go *up* their lives to reach a higher plane of regard or hearing or touch? They touch whatever comes their way: women, horses, moss that no stone has ever gathered. They can even touch your arms, if you happen to live in their city-state; city-mate, as they call it. They feel at home everywhere

as long as they remain within their city walls. But there are lazybones whose self-esteem and pride know no bounds: they are just ignorant and know almost nothing about bounds and frontiers. Recently I had a discussion with one of them and this discussion is faithfully recorded in one of my notebooks that accompany me wherever I go – spiritually, needless to say. My peregrinations are spiritual because materials and atoms as such are of no interest to my psyche: they do not excite her, end of story.

LAZYON: I am God so my immobility is justified by my immortal, immovable status.

I: But even God undergoes the effect indissolubly linked to evolution, movement and history.

LAZYON: I can't follow your line of reasoning. I know that God never falls in love.

I: You're right for once. What's more, in the foundation of His being, God is indifferent alike to preservation and novelty.

LAZYON: I'm indifferent to them too and this bed depicts my indifference almost perfectly.

I: Why *almost*?

LAZYON: Because my mind depicts it even better.

I: God cares not whether an immediate occasion be old or new, so far as concerns derivation from its ancestry, as Alfred North Whitehead put it. His tenderness is directed towards each actual occasion, as it arises.

LAZYON: Tenderness? It is true that my body caresses these sheets round the clock.

I: God's purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of intensities, as Alfred North Whitehead put it.

LAZYON: So, according to him, life should be intense and probably beautiful.

I: You should progress from one intensity to another, otherwise your life has no meaning, as Monty Python put it. And there's nothing more intense than love.

LAZYON: What kind of love? I love my pillow. And my pillow book.

You cannot live on your own, divorced from whatever surrounds you, even if the surroundings you are aware of are just the wall built around your community. There are entities beyond the wall, and they make love from time to time, judging from the screams, groans and moans you hear. Suppose you hear what may be characterised as a female groan: you know that you are listening to a voice coming from a woman's throat, lungs and substance. And you like this voice because there are holes in your being in spite of your unifying force that holds all your members, tendons and molecules together. But there are holes inside your constitution and these holes are black, whatever you might conclude when meditating upon them in your bed. And you might fall into one of these holes or even in all of them at the same time, at once, immediately, if you do nothing to whiten them, as it were. And love is a white sentiment so that, if you fall in love with a human being, you can fiddle with it in your kitchen as if intent upon cooking something succulent – a Russian hamburger, for instance, a miniscule Russian

hamburger. Or moscowrga, if you prefer. So you play with your love-saturated feeling, press it to your heart and its contentment and stuff it into one of your black holes or rather into all of them. Your *élan vital* is thereby restored to its initial, life-giving circulation, and you can leave your bed and indeed your community, bent on joining the woman you are in love with on the spot – on the spot where she happens to make love to another, unknown person. You climb over a 20-foot wall and find yourself in between two bodies. You see two women and so your predicament can be described as follows: you are at a loss to understand to which woman belongs the voice you heard in your community, while lying in your bed, in the midst of your sweet, Whitehead-inspired dreams. You even ask yourself if the voice you heard did not originate in one of the figments of your fertile, God-fertilised imagination. You end up asking both women, ‘Could you please let me hear your voice?’ They look at you, at each other and then say to each other, ‘What kind of craziness is this? What kind of lunatics live beyond this wall, in *their* community?’

So you hear these women’s voices, but the riddle preying upon your mind is far from being solved: you need to hear their moans, not an assortment of ordinary, run-of-the-mill words. So you ask them to moan, to groan, to sigh, to whine. ‘Why should we?’ they ask. ‘I see no reason for us to moan and whine without reason,’ says one of them. So you have no alternative but to insist upon their ‘sexual performance’, as you put it, doing your best to tone down the language used on such occasion by bullies, cads and other dregs of society and humanity. But these women refuse categorically to carry out this ritual in your presence because they are not in a brothel or *boîte de nuit* (night box) where such rituals are as common as the flight of a bird in a country where birds have not yet been poisoned by exhaust pipes or other pipes; or just by cigarettes, to put it mildly. So what could one do under the circumstances? One – my hero, among other people – could ask these ladies to pretend they are carrying out this ritual for the sake of a voice, of a few intonations which might allow the hero of the tale to identify the woman he is in love with, according to his sentiments, feeling and sixth sense. Actually he is almost sure that all his senses are involved in the process called ‘love’ for some obscure reason (love is obscure anyway) but that does not really matter; at least not for the moment: he does not even know which woman happens to be the object of his love, desire and sleepless nights, his spleen-dominated days. So he concentrates his mental capacities and bodily volition on the word ‘moan’ which seems to denote the crux of the matter he is so engrossed in – to the detriment of his ego, to put it bluntly. So he says, ‘What I’d like to ask you to perform is not the sexual act you’re thinking about, when listening to my drivel. If you could just *bemoan* something, when thinking about your life and misfortunes, you would offer me a performance I’ve been dreaming about since I heard one of your voices. Either you or you emitted a few sounds I fell in love with, and I’m still infatuated with these sounds, believe it or not. So if you could just bemoan an event, an unhappy occurrence you’ve witnessed in the course of your life – it is *my* life I’m worried about at the present moment – I would be extremely grateful to you and also to your lungs and lips to whose benevolence I might owe this manifestation of your vocal beauty.’

Such is the piece of nonsense you always hear when your steps bring you to the vicinity of what is called (not without reason) love at first sight or rather love at first sound. Someone might point out that whatever happens in this world of ours is *first* unless you are already partly dead. You wake up, open your eyes and your first sights put you in the picture about the picture you discover in front of your substance, to put it drily and incomprehensibly; and mediievally. But let us go back to the bodies and voices we discovered some time ago, when we were still behind the wall which now looms ahead of us as if it were a symbol of doom, our doom. At least it must be a symbol of our hero's doom: he is doomed to yearn for the possession of one of the bodies lying in proximity to his own body. And this proximity reminds us of a fable where a fox looks at a black/white grape and says melodiously, 'They're too green, these black/white grapes. Too green indeed. I'll wait until they grow either black or white. I'll wait until the winegrowers put them in a multitude of bottles from which I could drink their wine, my wines. After all, wine is better than mere grapes, isn't it?'

So the women in question – it is much better to deal with women *in answer*: yes, yes, yes – begin to bemoan this or that: there are so many things to bemoan, in point of fact. Researchers at universities are always bemoaning their lack of funds. And even if you are not a researcher, even if your hut is situated far from any university, known or unknown, Ivy League or just League or just nothing at all, you can bemoan your lack of funds; or lack of money, to put it simply and imperiously. So you set about bemoaning your lack of funds, your lack of chance, your lack of luck; and you do it day in day out, night in night out, dawn in dawn out. And even *above* this dawn you seem to deplore the lack of funds you talked and sang about only a few hours before. That is what life is about, as they say; and for once they are probably right unless everything is topsy-turvy, whereas it should be turvy-topsy; or the other way round, to put it grammatically and inexorably.

Moaning and groping along dark alleys of love and ecstasies lead nowhere; and yet it is highly recommended to meet others in some meadow or other and play games until twilight, until the twilight of the gods, rolling in the grass (and in others), listening to rock-n-roll. You leave your community, join another community for a day or two, roll, rock, reek of wine and whisky, enjoy yourself to the utmost by saying to others, 'I'm enjoying myself, you know.' That is what life is about. It is about stuffing all these stuffs into your black holes which gape at you invitingly as if awaiting your visit, your death from boredom or some virus or other or from others gathered around you in their eagerness to play another game and make another love. But real love has nothing to do with this superficial divertissement which may for a while bring you solace and hope and paint a rosy picture of your life. What you get in these meadows and fields corresponds more or less to what Alfred North Whitehead wrote in one of his books: 'An "entirely living" nexus is, in respect to its life, not social. Each member of the nexus derives the necessities of its being from its prehensions of its complex social environment; by itself the nexus lacks the genetic power which belongs to "societies". But a living nexus, though non-social in virtue of its "life", may support a thread of personal order along some historical route of its members.' What your hero – and you, your own self – try to avoid is the word,

notion and substance called “society”. But Whitehead assures you – and apparently he hits the nail on the head (at least you feel this nail in your head) – that the subterfuge he advocates in his writings has nothing in common with societies. It must have a lot in common with communities, given their linguistic similarities and all sorts of recommendations voiced by many people (Kropotkin, Deleuze, Roszack or Cossack). They all advise you to join a community after finding fresh air and a lot of money provided by charity organisations that distract attention of workers and employees from revolutions, strikes and strokes. They do not want you to have strokes and suffer from them because life is beautiful, provided you do not live in a state determined to submit you to rules, laws and their goals, their oligarchic goals.

Well, for the moment you are satisfied with the nexus offered to you by Alfred North Whitehead. For a while you wonder if you can really trust this person, this renowned philosopher. But then you meditate upon his name, dissect it and say to yourself, ‘I can rely on him fully and truly because his head is white – not black, God forbid.’ Sure enough, you lend an ear to the lecture given by a professor whose second name happens to be Whitehead and not Blackhead or Blockhead. But what does prehension mean? When reading and studying these esoteric books, you often struggle with words that do not graciously yield their meanings. And you have no time to search for your dictionaries arrayed in another wing of your castle. ‘Prehension’ might mean ‘apprehension’, and when you realise you are now in touch with the mysterious word and consequently can use it consciously and on purpose, you are elated to the point of forgetting everything, with the exception of the sandwich lying on your tablecloth. Or the word in question (no answers for the moment) may mean that, some time ago, you just opened your personal wall and your bowels welcomed something else: a morsel of food, either material or spiritual, or just a morsel, another morsel, hopefully not another black hole. (Perish the thought!)

Shortly afterwards you begin to apprehend the word ‘prehension’; and many other words, to be precise; and yet sometimes it is better not to be *too* precise. For a while you dismiss the following meaning of this word, ‘The police have finally apprehended the killer.’ You have not killed anybody in spite of all your hatreds and impulses which direct you towards this or that individual, towards his or her private parts. These are more vulnerable than other parts, however numerous and exposed to weapons. So you discard this definition (no regrets) and pass on to another; and on your way to this another you ask yourself if it is another, other, definition or a police officer with his gun, Kalashnikov or teargas.

It is normal to feel a little apprehension before starting a new job. But you do not start anything unless you take a few steps in the direction of the wall that separates your yearning from the voice you hear when two women make love to each other. You are obviously in love with one of these women, but that is not enough (this miniscule awareness) and you feel it with all your heart, not to say with all your body. So you fly off, land up in the prison of love and do your best to dismantle the machine of human intricacies that preclude one human being from loving another forever. (Even if this other

human being is not entirely human.) But what does all this mean, assuming that there are meanings in this havoc wreaked by some Dick or Moby or Tony? There is some apprehension in the office about who the new director will be, as they say. I am not working in this office, needless to say, but there are directors everywhere and I cannot say I am independent of their influence and might: they *might* descend upon my leisure at the push of a button. I have no idea what button they push on such occasions, but they are certainly pushing me at this particular moment; if only in my brain, within my imagination and its figments. The police descended on the house in the early hours of the morning, as they say. They always say something and, frankly speaking, I am weary of their sayings, meanings and the voices I have never loved, whatever I relate in my tales of woe.

Anyway, this story is devoted to love, and sure enough, love is one of the issues we pay attention to when scrutinising our motives, numerous lives and those whose touch may result in a power failure or a might failure, putting it closer to Nietzsche's lexicon. You feel on top form, but your rivals, adversaries and jealous husbands from whom you do your best to wrench several successive or simultaneous wives take you down a peg and you find yourself on the floor, of all places. And they even say, 'The floor is yours,' departing with resonant laughter that reminds you of Mephistopheles as sung by Chaliapin. I think I already mentioned this laughter in one of my narratives partly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe who was a specialist in this domain: only laughter and sobs resound throughout his tales of woe and imagination and holiness, as they say in yesterday's magazines dating back to the Seventies or even Sixties. Wholeness, holiness – they spoke only about them, and they convinced everybody that there were no other subjects worthy of our attention. They used to say, 'Back to nature,' and sometimes they meant trees, bushes and even wasps, in spite of their stings and our pains ensuing in the wake of the stings to which they applied their oils (to the wounds, not to the stings) and other remedies of no value, no credit – no *medit*, as those who counted only on meditation put it.

I don't know every woman I come across in the course of my walk in the streets of whatever towns and cities I happen to wander around, like Schubert's heroes. They wonder, sing, cry and hold either a corpse or a lump of snow in their hands, arms or on their shoulder blades. Whenever you are on all fours, you ineluctably recall Beckett's heroes who crawl as if they had really lost their legs in some battle or other – at Waterloo, for instance. They crawl and crawl, on all fours, on all sixes or eights (some of them have many legs and arms and crutches) and so they say to you, once in a while, 'Do you take us for invalids? We can run much faster than you and your animals. Can I challenge you to a game of fast run? Nothing to do with fast food, you know. And then I'll challenge you to a game of slow food. Oysters, lobsters, *foie gras*.'

Every human goal is fulfilled whenever there is something to fulfil, notwithstanding the impossibility engraved in capital letters over our *fatum* – in the Hall of Our Destiny, if you please. IMPOSSIBILIY, IMPOSSIBILITY. Then we climb over this impossibility to discover what they

mean by the absence of contrivances, so that even your psychiatrist says to you, ‘Do whatever you wish.’

‘What *could* I do?’ you ask.

‘What you *wish* to do. Do you have any wishes?’

‘I wish to jump as high as possible.’

‘In my surgery?’

‘Is it your *surgery*?’

‘All right, in my consulting room.’

‘Yes, I wish to jump and fly off like any bird you might spot if you look out of your window. Or through any hole, you know. Do you have many holes at your disposal?’

‘Only wholeness, I’m afraid.’

‘Wholeness, wholeness. I wish to become your holiness in the long run.’

‘How long was your run?’

‘Three thousand miles.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘I believe everything you say. Did you run this distance in the Virgin Mary’s costume?’

‘She had a set of spiritual clothes. She was naked, to tell the truth.’

‘Don’t tell the truth. No one needs it.’

Whatever you or they say – and most of these sayings go in one ear and out the other; or in one brain – you remember some words, and those words may guide you through forests and bogs, so in the end you reach something or even somebody. Then you get disappointed and leave both something and somebody and set yourself up as an expert on vegetable growing; but you do not seem to know much about it. You know nothing about anything. You take this nothing, put it in your pocket and go your way without paying attention to giggles. You just say to yourself, ‘There were a few nervous giggles from people in the audience.’ And then you do your worst to boost your self-esteem and say to them, to the audience you are facing (sometimes you just turn your back): ‘Your giggles prove that I exist, as Descartes put it. They also prove you’re nervous. How come? Aren’t you content with your viruses and whatever looms ahead of you?’

Back to nature, back to nature – that is what you remember, even if you no longer remember anything except the wall, your community and happiness promised by heavens, the gods and even the Goths, whoever they are. All invaders are in the habit of saying, ‘We invade you for your own good. From now on you’ll always be happy. We’re not really the Goths, whatever they might have told you, your friends, advisers and gurus. We are the *gods* you’ve awaited for two or three centuries. Soon we’ll publish our agendas so you’ll be able to know for sure how many centuries you’ve waited for our advent, for your happiness and for the harmony predicted by St Paul, St Andrew, St Valery, St Maxim, St Cuisine, whoever he is or has ever been.’

Back to nature. You forget all these beings, non-beings, unbeings, whatever-beings and walk in your garden which welcomes you with open branches, twigs, blades of grass; with insects that buzz around your head, blissfully, nonchalantly. What do you need a female body for? All right, it may lie by your side and even touch your thighs, for what they are worth. (Is any member of your body worth anything?) For some reason I put the previous sentence in brackets, doing justice to my spur and its moment, to my élan, instinct or whatever. But the thought enclosed within these brackets deserves development, a growth bestowed upon any living organism, be it a bee or Sophia Lauren. So I do not think I should neglect the thought I voiced when putting brackets on this pages, screen and whatever – on whatever, around whatever – otherwise nothing will ever work within these pages or screens or screams. You scream, scream, scream, hoping that God is more sensitive to suffering than to self-contented smiles. But at the moment when your thought unfolds this way of thinking and reasoning you see an individual who smiles and looks *really* happy. And for once you approve of your analysis of the world and its derivatives: this individual is happy beyond any shadow of doubt. So what?

LAST WALTZ

You go round and round and you obviously go somewhere because there is no point in walking, flying, if you have no intention of reaching some destination. And then you realise that the destination you are thinking about is not just ‘some’ destination: it is *the* destination and even if you reach it automatically, almost unconsciously, you will become rich. But why go round and round instead of running, outstripping light and its speed? Just go and get what you have always dreamt about. Suppose, however, that you have never dreamt about anything apart from dolls and cuddly toys.

Well, you go round some planet or other. And they say to you, ‘You go round yourself because you’re eager to learn much more about your soul, its contents, its karmas.’ Of course you can say, ‘I’m quite reluctant to learn anything about my karmas – I know too much about them. Frankly speaking, I’m fed up with all this stuff, even the stuff my dreams are made on. Incidentally, I wonder if they are really made and not spontaneous, in a way, falling from somewhere, from the stars, from the milk you can see in the sky. But let us forget about the cosmos, which might enable us to think about another stratagem, another scheme of things (or beings, for a change). We turn round a core, a corpse, and we realise we cannot move somewhere else – not in the vicinity of living creatures anyway. Be they alive or not. (You never know whether the quick are really alive. And, as usual, you are tempted to say they are not.) Why should I turn round anything? I am not a gigolo, am I? If I turned round a woman, this woman might say to me, ‘Why are turning round me? Do you intend to give me a few thousand dollars?’ And I could answer her gracefully, ‘I wish you could dance with me a few waltzes, preferably those composed by Strauss, one of the Strausses. But I have nothing against Tchaikovsky either, even if we are to dance his queer waltz from *La Pathétique*.’

At such moments – when you don’t know where to turn, whom to turn to, how to turn – you are likely to turn a few pages in search of an answer to all your problems. But Confucius says, ‘Old books are dusty so you waste your time on dusting them. And even if you dust all the books you can boast of – they are sleeping in your library – you’ll never learn anything from them because they’re old, old, old; much older than I am. And they’re out of date so you should consult their dates before reading them. And where could you find their dates?’ So you fiddle with a yearbook and even with a telephone directory. And what do you find in these books, may I ask? You find a few dates, that’s for sure. But can you find the date you are looking for? Finally, you decide the date you are looking at at this particular moment is the date you need. And then you decide you don’t need anything, and you don’t even have to make decisions because you do not need anything and this thought seems to be embedded in you. It is not only a thought, contrary to what you might think: it is also a feeling, a presentiment. You do *not* need anything, and even if you go to the best restaurant in the universe you will say to a waiter, ‘A glass of coke. I don’t need anything else except my life, my death and the middle way.’ And then you stop because there is no point in going any further; or even backward.

You do wish to go backwards, and I devoted a lot of time to this preoccupation, occupation and business three decades ago because I had to find a few relatives of mine; in the Hereafter. And also

other relatives, other persons. Sometimes you light upon a person standing in the middle of a road, and you say to this person, 'Do you think I'm yearning to meet you?'

And this person says, 'I don't know anything about you.'

'But why are you standing here?'

'Because I wish to stand here.'

'Did you know I would come?'

'No.'

There are persons and things that literally stand around you and you have no choice but to face them; or back them, as the case may be. And often you don't know if the case is really there because it may not be; it can also be, and I often choose be, the short version of 'to be or not to be'. If you sink into 'not to be' it may sound and look like 'a thorn stuck under my nail'. So someone sticks a thorn under your nail and then you watch this thorn get above your nail and go all over your body; and when I say 'body' I never forget to say 'soul' or 'psyche'. I think psyche was a woman who stood behind a rock and then appeared in all her splendour to seduce Apollo or someone from his brood. Apollo said to her, 'Do you have anything in common with my soul, my dear Psyche?' And Psyche answered, 'I am your *psy*.' 'I don't know the word.' 'Analyst or shrink, if you prefer.'

That is what happens in the world. Apollo stands somewhere and suddenly, for no reason or unreason, Psyche joins him on a beach and then they set about talking to each other as if they had nothing else to do. They talk and talk and talk, and in the course of their conversation they realise they have nothing to say to each other as if they had really needed to *realise* it. Isn't it obvious, clear, realisable, not questionable? Of course you can question this assertion, saying, 'It's questionable because they can say a lot to each other, for instance, "I love you, my dear Psyche." And the latter can answer, "I love you too except that I have no idea what love means."' And then their conversation can become a dialogue, sounding thus:

'Who are you?'

'I am Apollo.'

'What do you do for a living?'

'I play the guitar.'

'Do you content yourself with tuning it? Or strumming it? Why dedicate your life to this chore?'

'I'll go shopping when I've done my chores.'

'Why can't you go shopping *before* doing your chores?'

Apparently you should go deeper and deeper into yourself to understand the meaning of life and death and the Hereafter. You put a sort of 'here' in front of you and go beyond it so that, once you are beyond it, you think you know what awaits you in the Hereafter, provided you have enough time to look at this Hereafter, whatever this Hereafter may look or sound like; or unlike. But what about all these guitars and strumming? I think I saw Picasso's picture featuring a guitar and a guitar player. I

suppose in Spain (where Picasso was born) every man and woman plays the guitar, saying to himself and herself, 'I have to play this guitar of mine because Picasso was born in this country, my native land. And he painted a few guitars he played unless he borrowed them from Braque, Juan Gris or somebody else.' But what do you care? You just borrow a guitar from a pedestrian or any other musician and play for hours – before sunset, presumably. You play and sing something along these lines or notes, 'Carmen, I hope you can listen to my song in spite of your premature death. Of course I realise you behaved badly in Don Jose's presence, if that's what his name and title. But I would never have stabbed you in the belly, for I respect all women, even if they're not as beautiful as you are. I don't say to myself, "This woman isn't beautiful so I should stab her." No way, no way. And if, in the near future, I feel like killing this woman, I'll say to myself and others, "No no way, no no way." Isn't that beautiful?'

What is beautiful? What is not? Do you have to think in terms of proportions? You measure the height of the woman standing in front of you and then you pay a lot of attention to her width, saying, 'She's 2 metres in width.' Or 1 metre in width. Does it really matter? I wish to embrace this woman and you can embrace 1 metre in width; or 1 metre of length – all depends on how you judge this woman. If, for you, she is a piece of space, you can say, 'I'll wholeheartedly embrace this 1 metre in width.' But you might have some politically incorrect problems in this domain. So you say to everybody, 'I wish to embrace Aphrodite, Venus, all other planets and the cosmos itself, herself.' But if you really wish to embrace the cosmos you should know how many metres you are to embrace in the course of your rite. First you should measure this cosmos and then you are supposed to proclaim, 'I'll embrace millions and trillions of miles, if you please.' Then you embrace these trillions and say, 'That's done. You can congratulate me, if you wish.'

And then your guests come in, bringing in their bags 300 bottles of gorgeous wines. And they say apologetically, 'Sorry, we couldn't bring you trillions of bottles, but if you live until the ripe old age of 200, we'll bring you, in the course of these years, 400 bottles of various wines we'll drink together.' You have no alternative but to live until this ripe age, and at some point you say to yourself, 'I'm ripe, I'm ripe. But I still wonder whether I've drunk all these bottles in the course of all these years. I also wonder whether these bottles were returnable. If they were, where are they? I wish to know whether I lived all these years or not. If I find these bottles I'll be able to swear I did live them, if only for the sake of living them for nothing.' You live for nothing; or you live for a bottle of wine, which is presumably better than living for nothing. You live for a bottle of wine at which you look from time to time, saying to it, 'I love you, my bottle of wine.' Then you see a woman or a man beside this bottle and you say, 'I love you, you know.' And you touch them if you feel like it. And if you don't feel like it you can try and drink them – their blood, to put it bluntly. You just put your mouth in the immediate vicinity of their throat, bite into it as if it were an apple and drink, drink, drink until you drop. That's life for you, you say to yourself after this so-called meal.

What else? What else? There is nothing else, that's it. But you go on because you have nothing else to do or to say or to think about. So you avail yourself of another throat, of another goal – there are goals and aims in the human life you are living through and throughout – and you choose one of them because you have no alternative; otherwise you may die, you know. And if you do die you may turn in your grave, and they call it the 'last waltz' or the 'never-ending waltz'. At some point you might say to yourself, 'All right, I'm dying. I don't mind,' and then you see your mind because it is the last word you uttered in your former life. And your mind looks like a bottle of wine and so you begin to drink it, after biting it several times in a row, in the neck. You bite and drink and then they say to you, 'You should neither bite nor drink, otherwise you might die very soon, perhaps this afternoon.' So you stop drinking, eating and indulging in the pleasure defined as 'drinking blood' or 'eating flesh'. So you neither drink this blood nor eat that flesh in the hope of living forever. But after a while you realise you will never live forever for many reasons, one of them being the fragility of your veins and cells. You look at one of your cells and say to it emphatically, dramatically, 'Why are you so unreliable? What's the meaning of your unreliability?' And your cell replies, 'Unreliability has no meaning whatsoever.'

Once your cell engages you in conversation, you are stuck with it for half an hour at least. So your cell says to you, 'Why did you ask me anything? I mean – why did you ask me what you asked me?'

'Because I'm worried about my health,' you answer.

'I'm taking care of you,' the cell says and thinks.

'Are you really?'

'I am,' answers the cell.

'But I've always thought that one cell replaces another. In due course.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'I can't help wondering (and worrying) if the course we're talking about is due or not.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's such a thing as undue course.'

That is what worries everyone in the course of all the years we can think about, even when we do not think about anything. What course are we following or doing? Undue or due, undue or due? Suppose it is a due course we are following, but then another question rears its ugly head, 'Do I really follow anything? Or do I do everything on my own?' And there is an inner voice that answers most of the questions you ask yourself. And this time your inner voice says, 'Do you know what your own voice comes down to?' And you answer immediately, 'My own personality always comes *up* to.' And then you hear a sort of indescribable laughter. Of course you attempt to describe it and you describe it thus, 'Ha, ha, hi, hi, ha, ah, ik, uk.' Then you ask yourself if you described your laughter or your pain. Sure enough, you heard, 'A, a, ah, h, h, h,' because your voice grew hoarse. You check all your pains and find out that some of them say, 'uh, uh, uh.' You are not sure you can trust this piece of

information. Of course you always trust the pains you experience, but whenever they deign to talk to you, you doubt what they say; except that you never doubt the end of these dialogues.

Are there only dialogues in our lives and deaths and purgatories? There are probably some trialogues, but they concern the Holy Trinity to whom you can speak only in Paradise, if there is no other alternative. Perhaps you can say a few words to St Peter, from time to time. Actually no one knows for certain if he is always at the entrance; if he is the guardian of the so-called 'Gate of Paradise'. For all I know, he may stroll through his domain without any thought related to his subjects. He just strolls through his kingdom and says, upon seeing this saint or another, 'How are you today?' And the saint answers, 'There's no today in your kingdom or domain or republic.' And St Peter says, after a number of smiles, 'You've learnt your lesson.'

What kind of lesson can we learn on this Earth of ours? All right – everything is eternity, everywhere is overall space. We see a bit of space and say, 'This bit is connected to all other galaxies by virtue of mechanics and quantum and quarks and arks.' Once again you hear the voice you have no wish to hear, 'What kind of arks do you have in mind and elsewhere?' 'A large wooden ship built by Noah in order to save his family and a male and female of every type of animal when the world was covered by a flood.' Or you decide to hear no voices, no complaints or explanations, and you continue to write, 'Ark, ark, and I don't want to know what it means. Moreover, whatever I write doesn't mean anything because life is meaningless.' And somebody says to you, although this voice does not seem to have a voice (you can speak to anyone without voicing anything), 'Life is meaningful and wonderful. You can go to museums and thus you're sure to broaden the scope of your knowledge. And if you broaden this particular scope you may also broaden the scope of your life.' And you vociferate upon hearing this kind of reflection, 'Life has no meaning. What's the meaning you're talking about? You're talking for the sake of talking and meaning. And outside your talking your meaning has no meaning.'

And then you watch TV and see someone jump in your presence, even though you are not really present within the space and stretch of this jump, whatever it is. And you admire this jump to the point of discussing it with the members of your family who say almost in unison, 'Marvellous, marvellous, marvellous.' And you say to the members of your family, 'What's so marvellous about it? Did you see her legs? They weren't gracious during this jump, were they?' And the members of your family answer, 'What does it matter? She broke several records and that's what counts.' But you drive the point home. 'What counts is beauty, not records. You listen to a Bruckner symphony. Does it break any record? It is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.' And they say, 'It breaks records in the domain of duration or length or boredom. They're all listed in the Guinness Book of Records.' You go on talking to your opponents. 'Are you talking about Alec Guinness? I like him very much. I like his *King Lear*. I mean, I like his admirable performance in the play entitled *King Lear*.'

'Do you? Do you?' they ask.

'Yes, I do.'

‘Could you please justify your attitude, your appreciation of this performance? What are your arguments? What are they based on?’

‘They’re based on Alec Guinness’s gestures and voice.’

‘What can you base on a voice, pray?’

‘Let us pray, let us pray.’

What else could you say in this context? Or in any other contest (sic!)?

2

And then they ask you if you are sick or not. Of course you say you are *not* sick, for you are afraid of being locked up as some of Agatha Christie’s characters were in the course of her novels. So, whenever on the point of being locked up, you ask your visitors, ‘Are you going to lock me up?’ And you think about Agatha Christie. And if you do, you should say to those who stand in front of you, ‘Yes, I’m one of her characters,’ whereupon they will leave you in peace. Immediately? A yes-no question. They might even say to you, ‘I’m sorry, dear Sir, but I thought you were just a human being. But you’re much more than that. So I bow before you and I think I could even bow and scrape before you if you had enough time for my demonstration of respect directed towards your persona.’ And you are tempted to ask them, ‘What is life?’ because they pay so much attention to your persona or rather to the life contained in your persona. You go so far as to ask them, ‘Do you think my persona has enough life in itself? If it doesn’t I wonder why you continue to bow to it, even on your knees to which you go down, whenever you see me life-sized?’

Once again you ask yourself, ‘Did they see me life-sized or death-sized? What does death-sized mean?’ Immediately you visualise a bone and you say, ‘That’s what they see when talking about me either in private or in public.’ Suppose they do speak to you in public and the public in question sees a bone, just a bone, and they say to this public, ‘Can you see this bone?’ And the public answers, ‘Yes,’ although some of its members cannot see it, given the number of people gathered around it. And they say to this public and also to the bone, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the bone answers, ‘Yes.’ And so they ask the bone, ‘What can you see, according to your reflection and meditation?’ And the bone answers, ‘I can see the Hereafter and also a lot of dogs.’

‘What about the Hereafter you can see and probably feel? As for the dogs, we’ll keep them at bay.’

‘I see quite a number of dogs, a lot of them.’

‘Do you mean to say the Hereafter has been reduced to a number of dogs?’

‘Yes, in the course of the last 40 years.’

‘Could you tell us exactly what number of dogs you’re alluding to?’

‘I’m not alluding to anything in particular.’

‘What about the number of dogs?’

‘I’m not *alluding* to them. I’m *talking* about them.’

What happens when you talk about someone or something? And what is the difference between allusions and talking? When you talk about someone, you walk around this person and say, 'This person isn't only in my mind. This person is also in *your* mind now because I'm walking around this person.' When you allude to this or that person, you just look somewhere, in some direction or other, and say to this direction or other, 'Can you see what I mean?' And if you hear a voice talking to you along the following lines, 'What are you talking about?' you set about looking for an answer to this question or allusion. And then you say, 'I'm talking about the end of my glance.' 'What end of your glance are you talking about?' they are likely to ask you as you continue to cast your glances everywhere. 'There's no end to my glances,' you answer or you *may* answer, according to the circumstances. And sometimes you do not act in accordance with the circumstances. So you act in accordance with non-circumstances; or you act in non-accordance with circumstances. Or with no accordance with no circumstances.

You sit down in front of a circumstance and ask this circumstance a question to which you might have known an answer for many years. But noblesse oblige: you think you are duty-bound to consult whoever or whatever you happen to come across so as not to contradict this person's or thing's inner (in *sich*) nature. So you say to this person or thing, 'I know you have your inner (in *sich*) nature so I can't ignore it, whatever my motives and designs.' And this person or thing is likely to ask you, 'What are your intentions? Do you intend to break me forever, leaving my pieces nowhere?' Of course you do your best to convince this thing or person that you have no intention of causing it to fall apart – even for the sake of some experiment or other. Why do you say that? Because you don't think – even in your nightmares this thought does not occur to you – that your good intentions could be questioned by whoever or whatever you can face, in accordance with circumstances.

Another circumstance appears in front of you: I am weary of saying that everything comes out the blue, with the exception of death. For once this exception does not come and I go on sitting where I am, where my seat is situated, so to speak. So what? It is pointless to investigate the origins and also the meaning of 'so' – there are too many sos in the world so you don't really know which of these sos you are talking about; if you can still talk. You can talk and so you say, 'So, so, so, so, so.' And then you switch to something else situated in the vicinity of 'so'. And this vicinity or rather the object you can find right there is called 'what'. 'What is it? What is it all about? What does the word "quantum" mean? What does 'mean' mean?' And then you hear a lot of comments on the subject:

'I mean, I mean, I mean.'

'What *do* you mean?'

'I mean that I mean. Or what I mean.'

And this can go on for centuries. Centuries go on and one can hear the following poem, 'I mean, I mean, I mean, and what I mean doesn't really matter.'

'I mean, I mean, I mean.'

'I matter, I matter, I matter.'

‘Do you matter?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Do you really mean?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Is your meaning comparable to that of Plato and Dante? Or to the song of the nightingale?’

‘I’m not sure.’

Why do we always compare something to something or anybody? We look at a fly and say, ‘This fly is flying, as many other flies do every day.’ And we can add, after much soul-searching, ‘These flies don’t speak because it’s not necessary to produce a few sounds that sound like words. You can sing, if you feel like it. And you often do so that one can hear your songs almost everywhere, ‘A-a-a-a-a-a-a---o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o.’ So one listens to your song from afar and says, ‘I think this voice belongs to a human being.’ And then this being or human begins to question him/herself on the subject. ‘Do I hear anything?’ this subject asks oneself. And then the subject suggests another version of the situation, ‘Am I standing somewhere? Do I have a pair of ears that can listen to anything, even if there’s nothing all, anywhere?’ Then you look at your body and ask yourself if it is standing or not. And then you touch whatever happens to be in close proximity to your body and you ask anybody, just anybody, ‘Does all this exist?’

I have no idea whether it corresponds to a well-known theory according to which you fairly and squarely exist; or you exist only unfairly and unsquarely. You draw a square and ask yourself, ‘Am I inside this square? Am I outside this square?’ All right – you are *inside* this square, believe it or not. You have grown fat over the last year and so you are not sure you can keep within this square without hitting yourself. You don’t hit yourself, all right, all right. What else? Do you exist squarely or not? All right – you exist squarely so you say to your square, ‘I’m at one with you, you know.’ And if you don’t add, ‘you know,’ this square will not know anything. And what about triangles? What *about* them? Why should you care about triangles? What you do care about right now is a square and fair, whatever the latter might mean in the context and even out of it.

And then you realise you are sitting in front of a circumstance which you might call ‘an event’ if you cared much more about your reputation. So you speak accordingly to this circumstance, saying, ‘Are you an event?’ And of course the circumstance evades both the question and issue. All right. So you have no alternative (do you ever have any alternative?) than to answer, ‘My life is very important. And whatever happens in it deserves the name of “event”.’ And then a voice says to you, ‘All right. You wish to become eventful. But what is an “event”? And what is “ful” in the context?’

They punch you on the nose and you say, ‘Three inches punched me on the nose.’ Why measure the strokes one receives in the course of one’s life? One loses one’s mother and measures this loss, saying to oneself, ‘I lost 1,000 yards.’ And then you lose something or somebody else and you say, ‘I lost two miles.’ Does this make sense? What does? one wonders. I lose, you gain and then you think you eat too much and so grow bigger and bigger as if determined to vie with Gargantua or someone

else whose weight and size have been known throughout the centuries. You grow bigger and bigger and they say to you, 'You're neither Gargantua nor Hercules.' And you begin to ask yourself some questions related to your identity problem. You ask yourself, 'Who am I? I'm neither Gargantua nor Hercules. Of course I could carry the vault of heaven as far as other galaxies, but no one enjoins me to do that. So I don't do either this or that. Incidentally, Atlas does the job wonderfully, as far as I can judge this kind of job. At least I'm delighted to realise that heaven doesn't fall on my head every two minutes.'

Suppose heaven does fall on your head every two minutes. You forget to say your prayers and suddenly you feel the weight of heaven on your shoulders and shoulder blades. And you say to yourself, 'My God, I didn't pray this morning.' And you begin to pray without trying to locate the Almighty in the midst of the weight you are carrying on your shoulders and blades. Isn't that a blessing in itself? If you need a blessing, you say to the cosmos, 'Please, make me feel the weight of your heavens and stars.' And immediately you feel their weight and also their might. For a moment you wonder what is more important: weight or might. And then you subside; actually you might use any other word, when trying to depict your almost divine inner harmony.

Sometimes your floor seems to rise from the dead: every floor reminds you either of Hell or of tombs which you count whenever you go to a cemetery instead of going to a funfair. You count the tombs you come across and you say, 'One of these tombs might have been destined for my body. But I'm still alive.' And you go on, go on. How much longer can all this last? You do not wonder, for this kind of question plunges you headlong into a sort of chaos from which it is impossible to extricate yourself or oneself; at least it might take some time. Do you have this time, some time, any time? No idea, not the foggiest.

Anyway, your floor rises and you say to it, 'Why are you rising? What's the matter with you? Stay where you are, forever.' And you begin to question your behaviour related to this floor of yours. Is it really one of the floors of yours? How many floors do you have under your feet? Never mind, never mind. You have a floor and you think you can walk across it to the very end of the world. Do you really need a floor for your walks? Can't you walk on the heavens? You walk on the heavens, on the stars, and you are happy, aren't you? Instead of counting tombs and graves you count stars, saying to the cosmos, 'One star, two stars, three stars.' So what?

THE TALE OF WOE

GOD IS IN THE UNMAKING

There is something left or just remains and nothing is hidden behind it, before it in time and also in all the spaces one chances upon as one does what one is supposed to do, to live through. And all this goes through and through, and there is no through left because there are no longer throughs on the market and even in one's cellar, fridge, or memory. Whatever comes goes, even if this happens later than sooner, but in this case it does not really matter when it happens and you do not always feel the when and the where, and that is what happens to you and others; and you just happen to be there to witness whatever goes in front of you. And then you turn your back and see what does not go; nor does it stay but you see it somehow and say to yourself it is better not to see it.

You have seen it; you have seen it all and even more than all this and all that, and suffering is still not your cup of tea, which does not mean you will never suffer again. You will suffer tomorrow and the day after, and after, and after; and you do not know what you can do about it, about this pain and some other pains and days that go and come, as the whims take them. You are a screen on which you are projected by this and Him, and Her; and all of them are holy, and some are virgins and fathers. There are sons and daughters; and you are also a son and a daughter, and you behave yourself because you have no choice. If you misbehave, you are likely to find yourself in a corner, and you already know all the corners of the world. Usually they say there are only four corners, but corners are as numerous as the stars and so you ask yourself if there is anything else on Earth. Only corners, corny jokes and cornerstones; the same goes for the sky.

You live amidst the stars, on them, under them, above everything else. Yet you are unhappy because you do not read Spinoza every day and therefore cannot distinguish between adequate and inadequate ideas. Actually you do not read anything; you think and look at stars and corners, even if you have no wish to count them. And if you do count them, you spend a lot of time counting stars and comets and moments. They pass in front of you, above you, behind you, and you turn your back on time and other backs, bodies, corpses and mountains. Why should you count mountains? Or grains of sand? You do not even count out your money because you are not a king, not a queen, and anyway you are going to die like everybody, like every fly. And you know that, whatever you do, you will die and you cannot take anything with you because you are not a pharaoh. You are just an ordinary citizen who dies and lies under the surface of the Earth like anybody else, with the exception of flies who die somewhere in the air and are buried in the air by other flies and birds. Let us not forget that birds devour flies now and then so that flies are often buried in these birds' stomachs, and they are probably happy inside the birds; they are warm and never catch their deaths of cold. (And what about whales and their stomachs?) They get the feeling they are in front of a fireplace and cosiness pervades everything, everybody and every fly. It is true they no longer fly – I suppose they fly vicariously – but this does not matter, considering they feel as cosy as multimillionaires and movie stars who sit in front of their chimney pieces and drink a lot of cognac.

You cannot fly either and so escape neither death nor life that is often miserable and offers only trials and tribulations; and you like neither, which is understandable and logical. We cannot understand a lot as long as we live and only death seems to open doors beyond which we find some bits of knowledge and truth, according to St Paul and others. These bits, odds and ends speak to us about our mistakes and misunderstandings, but it is too late, for we are dead and cannot do anything about life, within life, within its walls and malls. We just look at the truth and say to ourselves, 'It is beautiful, beautiful and true.' It is true that it is true, but sometimes one prefers

untruth to truth, if this untruth is located within life and not elsewhere, even if there are worlds elsewhere; and hereafters, thereafters.

Once upon a time I fell in love and this was a marvellous feeling I cannot forget and forgive. I even wonder if it was just a feeling or something else, something bigger, greater and more important, like religion, God and whatever is linked to the notion of God and His angels. It was probably a huge slice or chunk of life without which I would not have lived for many years, for you are sustained by love and nourished by it. You eat love and drink it as well; and you need no other food and even music is not obligatory if you are in love and can enjoy this event to the utmost, forgetting everything else down to your life and its numerous ramifications. Except your love, except your love. But this love is away and what I recall has nothing to do with it because you are supposed to feel their lips and bodies in general, and if you do not kiss them round the clock, you know nothing about love except a few sayings and poems. And what can a poem or a piece of music tell you about love? O love, o beauty, o your lips, o your hips. But where are these hips – or lips, for that matter? That is what matters and not o, o, o, o, or oh, oh, oh. What matters is not within your reach; there is no matter, only spiritual and otherworldly figments, bits of memory and the memory of bits, odds, nods and nots. And memories are often swarming with ends and worms.

Yet I recall the sentiment of love that used to fill me to the brim; I was always afraid I might lose some quantity of it by spilling it on my silk shirt, down my tie, all over the floor. Of course you do not cry over spilt love because there are many loves around you. There is nothing but love in the universe and it is thanks to this omnipotent love that the universe exists and even prospers to some extent; and it is sure to go on prospering unless it expands beyond any measure, any degree of prosperity and love. So the universe should not expand too much and that is what we talk about in our prayers addressed to the universe *and* God, although we do know they are identical twins, if not the One about which I, for one, persistently talk for the sake of unity and harmony. If the universe continues to expand, I am bound to feel obliged to expand in my turn and thus catch up with it because I have no wish to lose it, given that there is no love outside it, outside its expansion and tension. (Childhood obesity.) And I am still in love, however hard it is to keep love to oneself without spilling it all over the floor and the universe. Besides, you may be forsaken and even ditched – most cruelly, most ruefully. Alas, in the matter of love you are not alone and so cannot keep everything under control; and even if you do succeed in keeping *something* under control – for a while, for a mile – your partner may snatch this something from under your control and consequently your love will become uncontrollable.

At some point you may realise that the only way to keep love in your room, in your bed and also in your heart is to fall in love with love itself, relying on nobody in the domain or rather in the kingdom of this spiritual and sensual adventure. You are on your own and love is just in front of you, at your service apparently, and all you have to do is hug it to your chest and the rest of your body, saying to yourself, 'I'm in love at last. And the love I'm in love with is so absolute I cannot lose it.' Sure enough, you no longer deal with blondes and brunettes, with dark ladies and sonnets, with Beatrices and Lauras, and ons, and forths. You kiss Absolute Love and there is no room for anything else either in your life or in the universe, which does not mean, however, that you are rooted to the spot and cannot go any further, any higher. The higher you are, the higher you go or fly – that is the secret of a bona fide love, the only synonym of elevation, ecstasy and light.

At another point – a higher point – you say to yourself you saw this light and might many, many years ago; and you begin to recollect your former lives, your previous knowledge of light. And you succeed because

love itself is guiding you through the labyrinth of good and evil, taking you to the spot where neither good nor evil are allowed to dwell, not even for an instant. This kingdom is called 'beyond good and evil' and you say to yourself that everything falls into place at last, for love cannot be evil and there is no such thing as 'evil love'. No such thing, no such feeling, no such kiss, no such conception. Oddly enough, the same goes for '*good* loves': all loves are good and our grammarians and philosophers frown upon tautologies. They maintain there is no point in wasting our time on the unnecessary and usually unintentional use of two words to express one meaning. The point is we often use these two words *intentionally* and therefore find ourselves in corners where we are severely beaten by our tutors, gurus, priests and fathers. We cry and shout at the top of our voices, 'No more tautologies, I promise, I swear, no more wasting of time, time is money, time is honey, time is love.' 'You're wrong. Love is not time. Absolute love is eternity and you shouldn't think in terms of other loves. They're just the bottom rungs on the spiritual ladder.' And we are flogged for breaking the law of Absolute Love.

Actually this law is in a position to flog us itself because our love, however small and short of breath, should not stop short of embracing Absolute Love which is made up of individual loves, of their infinity. So our love may and must coincide with Absolute Love, and if we are negligent in allowing our love to get away from Absolute Love, the latter flogs us as long as necessary to make us realise we are part and parcel of Absolute Love and also of the All-Soul, as Plotinus put it. 'All-Soul' contains all souls and that is why we call it 'all' and not merely 'soul', which may give rise to a misunderstanding; and mistakes should be excluded from the top rung of our spiritual ladder.

We are already on the top of our ladder, but the ladies we are in love with are far from us, being chained to the *bottom* of spiritual chasms. They often look like fallen angels, although they are just fallen women because they are not keen on higher sensations and our absolutism. But our magnanimity knows no bounds: we are bent on saving all those who have been led astray by riches and other allurements of life.

For a while, we look at these women and then our gaze falls on a group of builders who work on wooden platforms, suspended by ropes from the top of the Tower of Babel. Are we doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past? Never mind, never mind. We look at the ropes – not at the builders – and realise we may use them for our own purpose which has nothing to do with the arrogance of the builders and their desire to compete with God. We find a coil of rope and soon our women begin their ascension towards the summit of spirituality, the top of the world and the All-Soul Absolute Love. Alas, there is too much slack in our rope, but we are used to both slacks and alases; our women make yet another effort and reach the platform of bliss in no time at all.

And then we all realise that hugging, cuddling and kissing are not our cup of tea, for there are other cups we had better drink on the tops where we have found ourselves at last; otherwise all these tops are of no use to us and our children whose births are in the offing, so to speak. We do not speak; nor do they think because they are not yet born and the unborn do not meditate and are content to kick their mothers' bodies. Oddly enough, they do not even kick their mothers or fathers, which is little wonder, considering they have neither mothers nor fathers. They have no one; not only are they not born, but they have no legs, no arms – nothing at all. In short, they have been conceived neither in their mothers' bodies nor in their parents' minds that are turned away from physical births, being wholly preoccupied by spiritual ones. No one makes love on this summit of summits; the inhabitants of so-called Paradise just sing and dance and make a song and dance about their existence. But they are bored to death and do not wish to die; that is why they decide to go back to Earth and their earthly lives where sins are as common as sons and fathers.

But they are afraid of sins and punishments and their gurus – St Bernard, for instance – speak to them about divinities who are women in disguise and vice versa. These gurus remind them that the Holy Virgin is just a mental screen onto which a series of personifications was projected in the middle of the Big Bang. And, according to St Dominic, the personifications change the adept's ordinary perception of a woman into a special kind of perception – the Holy Virgin. The man and the woman are both part of a drama to which they conform in perfect lucidity. Their interplay is a complementary movement of thought and feeling. There is no place for abstraction here – only constant reference to a tangible human condition. The experience of the transubstantiation of a woman into a goddess is therefore viewed as a very special revelation of reality which can be seen, felt and apprehended in no other way. And it is only on the Summit that such a revelation of reality, which may seem unreal for a while, is attainable, according to Dante.

Sublimation techniques are based on regulating seminal ejaculation, which is achieved by combined thought and breath control; sexual energy is also controlled through Hatha-yoga. If, by chance, orgasm occurs, the fluids can be withdrawn into the body. The point is the inhabitants of Paradise have no wish to put a brake on further spending of their fluids, for they love children even more than heaven and its dances. 'No birth control,' they shout now and then as if forgetting they can sing and dance these words. 'No withdrawing of the fluids,' they shout after a while.

All these people wish to live an earthly life, an ordinary life, and one of their slogans reminds us of Winston Churchill: 'Absolutely no sport'. Others seem to show to what extent they hate religious exercises: 'No sublimation', 'no withdrawals', 'no souls, only bodies', 'no holy, only unholy', 'no heaven, only Earth', and so on and so forth. And if one and many others do not understand their claims and demands, they sing their songs that resound in heaven because they are still in heaven, although some of their feet occasionally touch the ropes along which they will slide as far as the Earth and their future tombs.

*We want to come down, down, down.
We are not downs and therefore
Do not want to stay in heaven where
They bask in the sun and reflected glory.
This glory belongs to God. We want
Our own glory, the glory of man.
So we wish to descend, to come down,
To walk on our Earth, not on clouds
And stars. We couldn't care less
About stars. We care more about stripes
And the fruit of the Earth and vegetables.
We want authorised fruit and in Heaven
All is forbidden, proscribed and prescribed.*

So they glide and slide along the same ropes, but in the opposite direction, compared to what they did some time ago. They have no recollection of dates and deeds, and what counts is their downward movement, not their thoughts that are full of revolutionary sounds. They revolt against the rule of heaven and wish to abolish its

government; and establish their own government, the Earth-based administration. They wish to attack all these problems now and find solutions tomorrow at the latest, otherwise it may be too late to attack anything, even the smallest fortress. They look and sound like fallen angels. Sometimes they sound like Satan who used to clench His fists and shake them at archangels and God Himself. It is said he goes on clenching his fists and shaking them at heaven and the army of God; in spite of His age and spiritual weariness. ‘Satan shouldn’t allow himself to get weary,’ He says to Himself from time to time. And those who go on sliding down support Him morally and even physically as they clench their fists and shake them at the Holy Trinity and at the Holy Virgin. They no longer wish to get bored in heaven and laugh at George Bernard Shaw’s Don Juan who was looking for spiritual progress and perfection and excellence. In Hell – not in a hellhole – where he stayed for a while they used to perfect their golfing technique, whereas he wished to perfect and polish his thoughts and aspirations; his respiratory technique and system. So he took a lift and went up, looking for Paradise and the pilgrim’s progress, not for technological advances in computing and telecommunications. In Hell they played with computers; he wished to play with thoughts and God.

But those who continue to glide and slide – down, down, down, down, needless to say – may think one should not *play* with God because one should *kill* Him on the spot – in heaven, amidst many clouds. They all admire the Che or le Che or just Che who said it was pointless to shake one’s fists, pointing at heaven, for God does not so much as exist. Why waste one’s time on something – the Che never used ‘who’, when speaking of God – that cannot even vanish into thin air? Said the Che, ‘Shake your fists at capitalists and pick up your weapons, for it’s pointless to shake your *fists*. You should shake your *weapons* and fire, fire, fire, fire. The world is on fire, as the Buddha put it. So it should be *on fire*, shouldn’t it? Do you want it to be *on water*?’

A BROKEN BONE

Marx said, Marx said – that is what you hear now, for you are already on the surface of the Earth, at the beginning of the 20th century; and even in the middle of it. ‘You should be subsumed by the organised Marxist movement because Marx and Engels said –’ That is what you hear and do, and you follow the crowd, following in Marx’s and Lenin’s footsteps. And then you hear the following remark, ‘They and the Marxists need to maintain their independence.’ You wonder whether you belong in the group called ‘they’ and if you should maintain your independence or your dependence. It is easier to maintain your dependence, escaping from freedom; at least that is how they explain Hitler’s ascent to power which was rapid and unexpected. No, they say ‘no’. Why? Because Hitler’s ascent to power was both slow and expected. Why? Because people idolise guides, führers, Stalins, Hitlers and even Lenins who show the way and point towards the future, wiping the slate clean. With the state wiped clean you march towards this future, away from the past, and your march through the present is admired by students and some writers who write about Mao – not about the Tao, mind you – and also about the Che, Che, Che. ‘*Chego?*’ ask Russian peasants, meaning, ‘What did you say?’ ‘What’s the matter?’ ‘Are you off your head?’ ‘*Niet, niet,*’ answer the representatives of the intelligentsia. ‘We are not. We haven’t screamed our heads off, not yet. You have, on the other hand. By the way, you should say *Cheka*, not *Chego*.’

‘*Chego?*’

‘And you’ll go on losing your heads if you don’t take up your axes and kill your masters. If you do, you’ll never be slaves again.’

‘And what about Hegel?’ the peasants ask.

‘What about *him*?’ asks the intelligentsia.

‘He says that masters will be slaves and vice versa.’

‘But this dialectical process takes time, you know. Broken bones always take time to mend and today’s world is made up of broken bones.’

‘We want to take our time,’ say the peasants.

‘What for?’ asks the intelligentsia.

‘We’ve got a few bottles of vodka on our kitchen tables. If we take care of our masters’ heads and say, “Off with their heads,” we’ll waste our time on trifles.’

‘Do you mean to say that vodka is more important than masters and their numerous deaths?’

‘It is, it is,’ answer the peasants, drinking a lot of vodka in their kitchens and elsewhere. In the meantime, capital and capitalists sweep across the world, drawing every country into their capitalism, imperialism and even post-capitalism, postmodernism. The intelligentsia points out that neither monopolies nor trusts should be trusted because they divide the world between them and prosper; and even Prospero is unable to do anything about it. He knows that nothing short of a world conflagration will ever destroy these prosperous bourgeois people and their children who inherit everything and continue to torture workers, peasants and the underpoor in general. Nevertheless, neither peasants nor workers nor undercats are willing to budge from where they are – from their chairs in front of TV sets and computers. And if Trotskyites and Chekyites point out that they should swing into action, they answer, ‘When there’s nowhere left to expand into, imperialists will begin fighting among themselves. Why should we shed *our* blood?’ And they sing yet another song. And they *dance* it:

Not our blood’s shed.

Their blood? All right.

Let them shed it there.

Not here, though. As

Long as we drink our

Vodka, rum and tonic.

THE UNDERTABLE

They drink each other under the table – workers, peasants, students – and they all are under the table now, under a huge table where the whole world can find a sort of refuge. And the world finds this refuge so as not to budge again, for the world is rather weary, really and unreally weary, and the undertable world is as comfortable as a royal suite in a five-star hotel. But they – whoever they are – offer him or her money under the table to change his or her or its mind. And its mind is altered to the point of making him budge and crawl across the floor to safety and unsafety – to the *real* world, in other words. He crawls, saying to himself he is neither a woman nor a child; he is a man and therefore has to take on responsibility for whatever happens on Earth and even under her or it – in the *underworld* where the dead play hide and seek with the quick. They pretend they are not in our world; yet they come to it and we see a lot of ghosts and living dead who live as long as they wish to scare us out of our wits. And they do scare us out of our wits and we leave our wits behind, so the dead pick them up and carry them as far as the underworld. That is why they say, ‘He has one foot in the grave.’ Actually they should say, ‘He has one *wit* in the grave.’ But they do not say that and so far we have had only one *foot* in the grave. We

jump along the streets, for we cannot do otherwise until we find crutches to support our bodies and souls and lusts.

So this man crawls from under the table and rises to his feet or foot. What counts is not the number of his feet but his desire to get up and become what he is, although he does not really know what he is and how he can become this or that. He *is* already, but he is supposed to *become* what he is and he is *not* what he is, whatever they say and do, even if they do nothing at all. So they do nothing at all: they are sleeping under the table while he continues to rise to his feet and his crutches, for he has already found a pair of crutches and even three, four crutches, and some of these crutches are very emotional. So he says to himself as he goes on rising, 'I am a man and I have my will. And my will isn't *their* will because it is *mine*. Whatever I see is a product of my will and even these crutches and their emotions are my will's products and creations. And if my will no longer wills to have these crutches, I won't have them and I'll drop them then and there, here and now and everywhere.'

He drops all his crutches and goes on talking about his will because he wills himself to talk and think about his will and its ramifications, modifications and creations. And his will says it does not wish nor will nor want to follow the crowd because it is individual and Aristotelian. There are only individuals who are in classes of their own – unique, eunuch, unique, eunuch – and even crowds are due to the fact that individuals represent them, whenever they have nothing else to do and are weary of themselves, of their wills – even of their wills to power, to live. They are even weary of their death knells and all the drives that drive them now to death and now to what is falsely called 'existence on Earth'.

So they think about crowds and even drink to unity and proletarians who unite and disunite somewhere – in the first half of the 20th century. And they find themselves and their crutches under tables where they go on drinking because there is nothing else to do. And they say to everyone, 'Nothing doing, anything doing, everything doing.' And when they are about everything and doing everything, they mean they can drink even under tables, provided there are many bottles under them and even under the surface of the Earth, which explains the phenomenon related to ghosts: they always look like inveterate drunkards as they make their ways through this castle and that field over there. They walk, take wild swings, stumble, fall and sound like drunkards, even if they do not come back from this pub or that brasserie roaring drunk.

But sooner or later they crawl across some floors and rise to their feet the number of which no one really knows for sure. And they and he say, 'This is the purpose of our earthly life, which reason sets before us, and for the infallible attainment of which she is our pledge and security.' '*Chego?*' say others. The other others do not answer them because they have other fish to fry and those fish are so big they have no time to fry anything else and answer the questions that require no answers – according to their minds and purposes. 'There's no such thing as an existence that has no relation to myself, and whatever has an existence has it only through its relation to my own being.' That is what he, she, it and one say to us, and we understand them as long as we listen to what they say and think. All right, all right – we are only your poor relations and exist solely in the light of what you think about our darkness.

Actually I, for one, am also in a class of my own, although I prefer Plato to Aristotle and today's democracies that have already got on my nerves and even on my tendons and arteries. Besides, there are people who go on shouting; yet they shout only in the past and if they shout in the future, they are called 'terrorists' or 'Islamists'. They are called names and words, but for the moment they shout somewhere else – on television and

computer screens. And I watch neither televisions nor computers. It is true that I use the latter, but so many things are true and false nowadays. How to leave them behind and even before?

‘Colonialists also have to contend with the new proletariat, the “toiling masses of the backward countries”’, they shout. They shout in the past and therefore are things and men of the past. They are perhaps women of the future, which depends on their beauty and ugliness. If they are beautiful, they are women of the future, for we shall need them for our bedrooms, beds and brothels. If they are ugly, they will stay in the past along with Rosa Luxemburg and other revolutionaries who go on shouting as they march towards the future, ‘We are for the withering away of the state. Yet we also believe in the proletarian dictatorship which represents the strongest and mightiest form of state power that has existed up to now. To keep on developing state power in order to prepare the conditions for the withering away of state power – that’s the Marxist formula.’

‘It’s contradictory,’ shout capitalists, imperialists and others.

‘So what?’ shout our Rosas Luxemburgs. ‘The contradiction is vital and wholly reflects the Marxist dialectic.’

‘Does it?’ shout capitalists. And they shout themselves hoarse. But they do not manage to shout the Rosas hoarse; or to shout them, needless to say. So the Rosas go on shouting:

‘Revolutionary hegemonic change will take time and effort.’

‘What are you shouting about?’ shout the post-imperialists.

‘About hegemony.’

‘All right. America, Russia and China compete for regional hegemony. Is that what you mean?’

‘No.’

‘What *do* you mean?’

‘Revolution.’

‘But you’re under tables. Even women are.’

‘Even under our tables we’re heading towards revolution.’

‘But you’re off your heads and off revolutions.’

‘Not off tables, though.’

THUMBS

That is what Hegel calls ‘dialectical thinking’ – now you are under a table, now in a gym where you eliminate vodka, worries and tables. Your aim is to find ‘One in All’ and the one you are looking for is either under a table or in a corner where the One spends his time, doing nothing. At least he does not drink anything and for once he is he and not he *or* she. So Hegel thinks he should also become ‘she’, otherwise All will not come to *his* room, to Hegel’s room; and Hegel was not partly ‘she’. Hegel presumes he is the One and after much soul-searching ends up stuffing into his substances a she – you should not confuse this she with a famous Russian soup – and also an it, which means a child, a hermaphrodite and the whole world. ‘One in All’ is a mystical conception and Hegel has no idea how to convey it by means of logic, for without these means and logic itself no conception is ever admissible, acceptable and triumphant within both time and space. And Hegel wishes to triumph everywhere, even in the worlds predicted by Giordano Bruno and feared by Pascal. Hegel has no fear and is rather fearless as he advances towards the accomplishment of his logical dream – by stages, by ages.

As he did so, he came across the word ‘totality’ and immediately opposed it to ‘progress’ traditionally made up of moments, stages, phases and emphases. So, after much soul-searching – and *body*-searching, according to Nietzsche – Hegel decided to overcome moments, seconds, progress, pages, stages and even theatrical stages on which only moments display themselves, leaving ‘totality’ in the wings. In his Totality both everything and everybody are subsumed, sublimated and look like a number of bricks that Karl Marx turned into a red-brick wall – after less soul-searching and more body-searching. Ever since you have been either talking to this brick wall or banging your heads against it or both. And the wall answers thus, ‘You don’t understand Marx. He is different. I’m just one of his spectres. Aren’t you afraid of spooks?’

In his dynamic march towards Totality Hegel overcomes both the undertable and corners, but he preserves what he overcomes – for the sake of totality; so you have both the undertable and a number of corners where some individuals continue to twiddle their thumbs. Marx says to them, ‘You’re under your rulers’ thumbs. Can’t you see? Can’t you feel? Don’t you feel their thumbs all over your bodies and minds? You think that what you feel is worms and tapeworms. Actually you feel your rulers’ thumbs which are much worse than any worms. I call this phenomenon “rule of thumb”.’

For the sake of Totality, these individuals crawl under tables and stop twiddling their thumbs. For a while, they twiddle bottles of vodka and then drink their contents – for the sake of the same Totality. They are both thesis and antithesis; they are both drunkards and teetotallers. Sometimes you drink tea, sometimes vodka. Whenever you drink tea, you fall in love and marry a beautiful woman or a handsome young man. Two bottles of vodka obliterate your family life and push you towards a submachine gun, for the Che said one should not go on long journeys without submachine guns, machine guns and guns. Journeys make no sense unless you keep your guns under pillows or in your hands – if your enemy is in sight. And your enemy is always in sight except when you fall asleep after drinking two bottles of vodka. So you should drink only one bottle at a time, otherwise the total revolution will not take place and its absence may deprive both Trotsky and Lenin of their most precious and precocious dreams. And one should not steal other people’s dreams, should one? That is why Bolsheviks robbed banks, palaces and churches; they never stole their own dreams.

You wake up in the dark and begin to wonder where you are, for you do not recognise anything, not even your body, let alone the brick wall that surrounds you on all sides. You recall your machines and guns and start looking for them everywhere, even on the wall. Your fingers explore your surroundings and find nothing except themselves. You recognise your fingers – not all of them, unfortunately. But you recognise your thumbs and begin to twiddle them to your heart’s content. And you say to yourself that there is nothing in history except a number of thumbs. The devil finds work for idle hands; so does God. The former hold machine guns, the latter roses. You can hold a bunch of roses and twiddle your thumbs.

RUINS AND THEIR UGLINESS

Once again you fall in love because you say to yourself that family life is more important than revolutions and evolutions. There are no chimpanzees in your neighbourhood, but you meet a lot of beautiful women and not all of them are prostitutes, contrary to what your mother says to you and your father. An overview of all conflicts and their eventual resolution is out of the question and the only question you are prepared to ask boils down to this, ‘Will you marry me?’ The answer is ‘yes’ and this is a good thing, since the resolution of all conflicts would

result in a stale, rigid society. An ideal would be a pluralist democracy, providing a stable framework for many local conflicts. Your family is a good example of a pluralist democracy.

And what about family conflicts? Your wife disagrees with you continuously. Besides, she is very sociable and likes her parties and other people's parties, dinners and balls. You say to her, 'I'm going to make an effort to be a bit more sociable,' but you do not make this effort, for you make a lot of other efforts and they get in the way whenever you decide to be more sociable. So you no longer decide to be more sociable and your wife leaves you behind as she dresses up as Artemis for yet another masked ball. Next day she becomes Athena and you continue to stand in your corner where you struggle with equations or rhymes. You know that revolutions either cannot happen or end badly; the alternative is democratic transition. So you do not murder your wife; you just say to her, 'Divorce proceedings started today,' and she comes out of the divorce settlement a rich woman.

As a result of this democratic and smooth transition, you are ruined both financially and psychologically. 'Please wear trainers in the gym, to avoid scuffing the floor,' said your physical guru and he said it once upon a time. And you recall this time because you continued to wear trainers even outside the gym, in the streets and parks of your native city. But your future wife said to you, 'If you go on wearing these trainers, I won't marry you.' So you got rid of them and put on a pair of shoes you bought at Harrods, for your wife-to-be or not-to-be said, 'If you get some shoes cheap in the sale, I won't marry you.' And she looked menacingly in the direction of the sale in question. You spent a lot of money on this pair of shoes and your wife was satisfied on the whole and for a while. And then she said, 'If you scuff your feet like that, you'll ruin your shoes.' Her remark made you nervous and you went on scuffing your feet like this and differently. But whatever method you adopted as you scuffed your feet, you *scuffed* them and that was ruining both your shoes and your relationship with your wife. Your happiness was going to rack and ruin, and you noticed this as you realised that the number of masked balls to which your wife paid her undivided attention and her whole body increased dramatically and even tragically, slowly reaching the point of no return and no eternal recurrence.

In other words, you will never see your wife again, even if you attend nine balls a week. So you do not go anywhere; instead, you twiddle your thumbs and scuff your feet which should not stand idle in view of the exploits triumphantly accomplished by your thumbs. For once, your feet are fully aware of what your thumbs accomplish round the clock. (Ah, those sleepless nights!) The same goes for your hands that are also in the know on account of their united thumbs. Of course you can suck these thumbs and you do now and then; yet you are hungry and have no wish to starve to death, for you like neither starvation nor death. Unlike your ancestors and Count Vronsky, you do not even dream of dying on a battlefield, thinking that neither your fatherland nor Christianity deserve your body. Only your children deserve it and you know you will be able to sacrifice your life only for your child or even for someone else's children. Only, you have no children and others do not deserve your body's veins, tendons, glands and lungs. It is true that they have got a lot of children, but like father, like son and daughter, you say to yourself and go on living in your corner and sometimes not far from Speaker's Corner. Someone speaks and you feel you are not alone in the world and even in Giordano Bruno's worlds that all have corners, speakers and parks; otherwise they would make no sense, making only a lot of nonsense, rubbish and rubbish bins. Are other worlds just rubbish bins? Can't we throw our Earth into them?

You are still hungry and have no money – like Charlie Chaplin's tramp. You are a tramp and also a vamp to some extent, due to your wife's fruitful lessons. She was a real vamp and often said, looking at herself in a mirror, 'The dress is simple and elegant, but I could vamp it up for evening wear with some stunning jewellery.'

And she always held her promises; as a result, now you feel like drinking someone's blood. But you are not likely to drink it, given that, generally speaking, you are not very fond of humanity and therefore would not find appropriate blood – not at once anyway – even if you devoted all your time, your days, nights and mornings to this search. And you are thirsty and hungry to the point of willing to collapse somewhere so as not to walk any longer, let alone to live and dream. Let us not forget you have no money and it is logical in the light of what happened during and after your divorce. So you go to McDonald's because McDonald's spends \$1.8 billion a year on advertising and for years you have seen its advertisements everywhere, even in your bathroom. Of course you know what is wrong with McDonald's. If you eat nothing but fast food for one month, this so-called diet will ruin your health. Of course your health is already ruined – by your wife, among other things, and men and women and children and dogs. But why should you ruin your own ruins? Aren't they beautiful? Chateaubriand might have fallen in love with them, had he been alive and not just immortal.

So you sing a song, for people like musicals and you wish to conquer their hearts and be loved by everybody – not in return, though. Not in return.

*I shan't go to McDonald's
So as not to ruin my health.
Let them sue me and demand
An apology. No apologies.
I'll sue them in my turn, in return,
And our trial will trigger a large
Amount of soul searching.
A large amount of money – that's
What I'm looking for, for, for
I've no money in my purse, in my
Bank, in my pocket, under my pillow.*

BOOKS

They say there is nothing in the universe except universal love and friendship, and that is why all sorts of *Millionen* embrace all the time. No one really works because no one has enough time for working. Only smokers have enough time for smoking and they go on polluting our atmosphere in spite of laws and death warnings on the packets: 'Smoking kills' and messages along these lines. But love prevails – not only love for cigarettes and their smokes; and human beings embrace fraternally and even lovingly, and sooner or later you are bound to fall in love with women and men, otherwise you are not a human being. Who are you? they ask and you answer, 'I'm a lone wolf but don't you worry – wolves also embrace every now and then, especially when they're not hungry.' But you *are* hungry and this is the problem you do not manage to solve, for all your efforts and the Big Macs you refuse to eat on the grounds that you love life and do not wish to die, poisoned by these Bigs and Macs and ketchups.

Those in charge of Macs Bigs say to you, 'If you've got any constructive criticism, we'd be glad to hear it.'

And you say to them, 'I don't wish to die. Do you know why? Because I've sinned a lot in my life. And I don't wish to die before I can purge my soul of these sins and also others that I might have committed without knowing it and them.'

'We understand you,' they say in unison. And they go on saying whatever they have to say. And they say it in unison, needless to say, otherwise no one would listen to them, thinking they do not agree and what they have to convey to the outside world is not the truth; it is just nothing. So they say, 'Can't you see this plate?'

'I can,' you say to them.

'Don't you see anything?'

'I see the plate,' you answer them.

'Don't you see this salad?'

'I do. So what?'

'Don't you know that salads are good for your health?'

'What? This lettuce leaf?'

'Exactly.'

'One leaf?'

'Precisely. You shouldn't eat too much of anything, be it lettuce or oysters.'

So you eat this lettuce leaf and the Big Mac from which you removed this leaf one minute ago. Yet you are hungry, notwithstanding the leaf, Mac and even Big that is not as big as all that; but it is really a Mac and you can feel it in your *stomac* – a hundred macs in Russian – and even in your intestines. You eat another Big Mac, starting with a lettuce leaf because you believe it is likely to pave the way for the poison you are about to swallow very fast – fast food, food fast – so as not to taste and realise anything. You realise nothing but your stomach and the rest of your digestive system are much more perspicacious than your mind that is rather slow on the uptake, especially in these matters. So you do not understand anything. Luckily for you, your feelings make up for the sluggishness of your thoughts and they let you know you are ill. And they explain to you that the Buy Nothing Day is an international awareness-raising campaign against needless levels of overconsumption and advertising. And they add that consumer culture is out of control, which means you are out of control too, for you belong to the group of consumers and their culture. But for consumers, there would be no culture of this kind and people would read Shakespeare and listen to Beethoven's piano trios.

What are you supposed to do if you are hungry and have no money? You have only a handful of dollars and so cannot go to a three-star restaurant where they serve molecular dishes. Actually you are so hungry you really need chunks of cheese and meat and a lot of tuna chunks. And they speak to you about molecules. Luckily for you, you do not have enough money either for their molecules or their atoms that can also be found in their dishes, appetisers and drinks. You go to yet another McDonald's and eat a mouthful of Mac in spite of your illness, nausea and many attacks of diarrhoea. As you eat your Big you have yet another attack and it is unlikely that your forces could withstand this onslaught for very long. It makes you think about the 'shop-till-you-drop' mentality and what this does to the rest of the world, not least the environment.

The point is you often drop before you shop and there is a drop of four metres from your window to the ground; and you are not fond of these four metres. You are hungry and buy nothing with the exception of the Macs that make you sick and disgusted at the way some human beings treat their neighbours. They serve them a lettuce leaf and think this leaf is a symbol of their love and deep religious feelings. But then your train of thought

derails and moves on to consider yourself and the way you have been living since your divorce. When did you buy the shoes you are wearing today? And what about your jacket and the rest of your clothing? You have not bought anything for two years so they should not speak to you about buy-nothing days and nights. ‘Buy *everything*’ would be more appropriate and even in order, but you confuse orders with disorders because you are hungry, unhappy and revolted against this, that and what and not. And they speak to you about the tyranny of brands and the book entitled *No Logo*. They say you should buy things for their usefulness and necessity, rather than for their status. And you remind them you have been wearing the same jacket for three years.

‘How so?’ they ask.

‘That’s how it is,’ you answer.

‘But you divorced your wife only two years ago.’

‘So what?’ you say to them.

‘Did she tolerate this jacket for a whole year?’

‘She did not. That’s why she betrayed me so often. She always wears the latest fashions.’

‘Why didn’t you say to her she should refuse to be influenced by the advertising industry?’

‘She wouldn’t have listened.’

‘You should enjoy things without owning them, such as public libraries.’

You go to a public library and choose a book, resolved to enjoy it to the utmost without owning it. You own neither the book nor its author; you do not even own its subject matter. The book is entitled *The Vocation of Man* and you read the following as you leaf through it: ‘Shall I eat and drink only that I may hunger and thirst and eat and drink again, till the grave that is open beneath my feet shall swallow me up and I myself become the food of worms? Shall I beget beings like myself, that they too may eat and drink and die, and leave behind them beings like themselves to do the same as I have done?’ Do you own this vocation? you ask yourself. And you answer that you neither own this vocation nor that man, for you do not eat and have no children. You drink the water you find in rivers and fountains but you do not eat anything with the exception of Donalds and Ducks. And that is not enough; and that may be defined as ‘enough’s enough’. So you define it like that and decide not to go to McDonald’s any more and never ever. And ever never.

And then you say to yourself that you might beget a few children because you are badly in need of immortality, and you feel this need all the more strongly since you are in the very midst of mortality: you are in the streets of your native city. But what can you do in the middle of these streets? Of course there are many women in their middles, midsts and mists, but you do not know them and you are not handsome enough to appeal to their senses and sexes – to their sexual drives. These drives are prepared to drive them as far as Babylon, but you are not on their maps and therefore have to find somebody else, not necessarily in the middle of these streets. So you go to a five-star hotel and plant yourself on the sofa in front of the television. No, no – that is what you used to do when your wife was still within your reach despite her betrayals, emails and so on. Now you just plant yourself in the middle of the lobby and wait for a woman to come. Let her be a prostitute – it does not really matter. What counts is your son, the one you will have sooner or later if you sleep with a woman; even if you sleep with her in the middle of the hotel where no one seems to mind your presence or absence.

Meanwhile you think about your future children. And you say to yourself they will eat and drink first growths and Bordeaux and Burgundy wines. They will be much happier than you are, all the more so since you are not happy at all. Besides, you have to think about the future of mankind to which you belong, whatever you

say; and for the time being you do not say anything. Nor do you say anything for the moment: you just think without thinking out loud. In a way, you think *in* loud and follow the proverbial train of thought that is neither a train nor a thought; it is just another variety of chaos. But you do not mind and that is what counts, considering that something *should* count, otherwise life has no meaning. It does have a meaning and you know that; you know that for sure.

Once again you are in the middle of the public library to which you also came a few hours ago to enjoy what can be enjoyed for nothing or for something that is next to nothing. So you enjoy it to the utmost, as usual; it would be ridiculous to enjoy it to the least. You read something else and this something as well as else reflect the world and its paraphernalia: 'Thus we see already that we can never arrive at the real nature of things from without. However much we investigate, we can never reach anything but images and names. We are like a man who goes round a castle seeking in vain for an entrance, and sometimes sketching the façades.' You do not understand what this means and so leave the library and go out. You are a born empiricist and trust experiences much more than abstract thoughts and also abstract paintings: Kandinsky, for instance. So you leave the library behind, before and after, and go to the nearest castle, resolved to go round it, seeking an entrance. And you are resolved to find this entrance *at all costs*; yet you have no money. You find an entrance but before using it, you sketch the façades. You have never drawn anything in your life, not even your dog; but you draw these façades to understand what the book conveys to its readers and admirers. You sketch a few façades and hear a voice saying, 'What are you doing?'

'I'm sketching your façades.'

'What for?'

'To understand what the book says.'

'The Bible?'

'No.'

'Are there any books except the Bible?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'In public libraries.'

'Not in *my* library, though.'

'What's in *your* library?'

'The Book. In thirteen languages. And *The Winter's Tale*.'

COMMUNISTS, CAPITALISTS AND BREAKFASTS

If you keep on reading books, someone is bound to tell you it is to no purpose because there is only one book, the Book, and nature itself is also a book: the winter, the summer. One wonders if nature is part of the Book or not, if it belongs in the Old Testament or the New One. You read nature – even if you are in the middle of the Library of Alexandria – and say to yourself as you read it, 'It is A, it is B, it is ABC. It is Hell, it is Purgatory, here's Dante and Beatrice.' All right, all right, nature is part of everything and so is the Book; but you read and quote the latter and often overlook the former as if it was a mistake on the part of God Who, incidentally, makes no mistakes and neglects neither nature nor the Book where every comma was dictated by Him in the middle of

the Big Bang. Between the Bang and the Big a few seconds came and went, and during these seconds the Book was written, corrected and also published.

Our hero's host was drunk and so our hero thought that in the morning, after a night of sound sleep, he would be kicked out of the hospitable castle, like Chaplin's tramp who encountered a multimillionaire at a railway station. But so far the castle had been more than hospitable, given the quantity and quality of wine consumed by both the host and his guest. There was no hostess, though, for the host was neither married nor fathered: he had no children. That is what he said, by the way: 'I'm not fathered,' meaning he had no children. Of course he was drunk and his words did not always mean what they meant, and anyway his gestures happened to look and sound far more meaningful than his words, especially when he stumbled and fell down and also up: somehow he often managed to fall up so that one person – his guest on this particular occasion – had to climb a ladder and remove his host from the ceiling. (Fred Astaire, no less!) Anyway, every time the host fell there was a big bang and that bang was almost as articulate as the Big Bang Itself.

The host also said, 'I'm not mothered either,' and this time the guest did not catch his meaning. He caught his host's body as it began to fall once again after swinging to and fro, up and down – for a while, once in a while; but he did not catch his meaning. Luckily for everybody, the host was generous enough to explain all his meanings and said almost at once and even on the spot – he was on the floor once more – 'I'm sometimes a woman, you know. I don't need women to father children and grandchildren. But I want neither to father nor mother them. I don't like children, you know, even if they're grand. Do you? Do you like grandeur in this domain?'

The guest said he did not like grandeur at all because 'I'm a democrat,' he said suddenly.

'Are you a communist too?' asked the host.

'No. I don't like their world.'

'Why?'

'A dullness and uniformity would extinguish all human diversity and excitement.'

'Do you think we're diverse? We're excited but not diverse.'

'I beg to differ,' said the guest, but he could neither beg nor differ: he was drunk too.

Upon awakening, he found himself – like Chaplin's tramp – in a luxurious bed and realised he was surrounded by objects of all kinds; and all these kinds were objects and to some extent they were kind. Why? Because they were not things in themselves: they belonged to you and him – to the guest, in other words, and we always say 'in other words', even if we utter one word and point to one object only. So the so-called tramp pointed to all these things and said out loud, 'I'm surprised, I'm surprised, I'm alive. And life is a big Christmas surprise, if not a gift, because there are so many things around us and they're not in themselves, not at all. In other words, they're not secretive. They tell us this and that. This thing over there tells me it's a chest of drawers and I accept this definition because I know it's a chest of drawers. And I'm surprised and marvel at what I see and can touch. Isn't it a miracle after all? I'm alive and so is the world. And the world could have died many years ago. It could have remained unborn or even ununununborn. It might have been nipped in the bud, in the mud or in the bird many millennia ago. Don't they say the world was born from a bird, from an egg? Or from the primeval mud? Anyway, the world's a real stick-in-the-mud. And we're *stuck* in the mud.'

And then he began to worry about the state of affair he was about to come across as he was walking towards his host's bedroom and the living room where an English breakfast was to await him upon his

awakening. But he thought his host was bound to throw him out – or kick him out, rather – because he was sober now or rather teetotal or coffeetotal. In other words, in other worlds. His host was in a morning world now and so his guest might be thrown out, down and up at any minute, for his host must have seen Chaplin's movie many times: there was a huge screen in his bedroom and kinoroom and kinetic-energy room as well. So he – the guest, not the host – was wandering whether he would finish his English and American breakfast before being thrown anywhere – down the drain, among other places and drain and downs. Of course he said to himself, 'I'd rather be thrown *up* the drain, *up* the down and *up*, just *up*,' but no one listened to him, for he was speaking to himself. And had he had been speaking to servants, they would have said to him, 'We don't listen to what our masters say because we're their slaves. And slaves have no ear for music, languages, gossip, Ossip, and so on. We mean we've no ear for Ossip Mandelstam's poetry. If someone reads his poems out loud, we don't hear them.'

So they would not have heard him, even if he had recited the *Divina Commedia* either in the original or in an English translation adorned with a lot of commentaries of many kinds. Anyway, he ate his breakfast with pleasure and a bit of gluttony, for he was still hungry like any Chaplin hero with the exception of his king who criticises America. Why does he criticise it instead of admiring Obama? (My dictionary says, 'Osama.' Not Hosanna, though.) Because he was poisoned by hamburgers and other burgers: there are many of them, as many as hams and hums. ('Hum' means 'cad' in Russian.) Even more, according to specialists and eaters and gluttons and drinkers and drinkers.

He began to worry but his host made his appearance – and not *her* appearance, contrary to what one might think in the light of what and so on – and our guest's and hero's fears vanished into other airs because there are many of them; as many as drunkards and tankards. So they began to talk – the host and his guest – and the host did not say at once, 'Bugger off, will you?' Nor did he say it later, after breakfast, after the first talk followed by the second talk and the third one. So the guest calmed down and realised he could count on his host not only in the domain of beds and breakfasts, but also in that of dinners and enjoyments. It is true that a bevy of bathing call-girls did not pay them a visit and they had no opportunity to admire female nakedness at close range – at least not in the course of the first days and hours they spent together in the castle where our host and guest were to live and spend whatever they could spend and spare for several months. No, no – but there was the rest, the rest of the earthly delights: wine, food and so on. And so forth, which does not always happen; at least it does not happen *automatically*.

They talked about this and that, and the host said, 'I've lived many lives, you know. Did you know that?'

'I didn't,' said the guest.

'Do you want me to tell you what this is all about? If I don't, you won't know anything at all.' At this point the guest realised his host was drunk once again. Actually he was always drunk and it was pointless and even ridiculous to say 'once again' because it was always, always the case, and what is always the case does not triumphantly return to life, consciousness, the unconscious and feelings of remorse. So the host began to talk, longing to put his guest in the picture about what had happened many years ago, in the course of the Big Bang. And the guest would interrupt him in mid-sentence, shouting, 'Here's mud in your eye!'

THE FIRST LIFE

You know, I was born one day, once upon a time, twice upon a time. So were you, I suppose, but I was born thrice upon a time and have no idea if this is your case or someone else's case, adventure and life. Not only was I

born; I also attended the performance of the Big Bang. It sounded like a series of bangs; it also *looked* like a series of bangs and one couldn't do anything about it. I wished to do *something* about it because I said to myself, 'Creation is a big mistake, not a big bang. Why should we live? What for? Anyway, we've eaten the fruit and all the apples and peaches we could find in other people's gardens, within their estates. The same goes for God and *His* estate. And He wasn't really pleased with our work that term. Never mind. This is my first life and the first Big Bang doesn't interest me at all. Bing, bang, bung. Bug, bug, bug. Actually, if I remember rightly, there was a serpent, you know. There was a huge serpent or rather a circle, a rectangle. I said to myself, 'This is a rectangle and this rectangle has nothing to do either with bags or bins. Rubbish bins, I mean. Or rubbish bugs. And this square is an egg from which everything will come in due course. A sphere, you know. You just have to pick up a hammer – not a sickle, mind you – and split this egg in the middle or anywhere else. It doesn't really matter where you split it. Do you know I'm a wonderful cook? Do you know what I do? I split aubergines in half and cover them with breadcrumbs. That's what you're supposed to do with the primeval egg. That's what I did with it, by the way. So I'm God. Do you realise that? Have you already caught my meaning and other thoughts of mine?

So there was the egg and I stood in front of it with my hammer. And there was a serpent by my side but I paid no attention to it because you shouldn't pay attention to serpents. Nor should you take notice of them because they're poisonous, all of them. I don't know any serpents outside the kingdom of poisons. And this kingdom and its inhabitants poison our lives, all of them. Even my first life was poisoned by one of the representatives of their species. There are many species and many representatives and all of them poison you now and then; once in a while and all the time. You're poisoned, you know, although you must have lived only one life. But one life is enough for their poison because they take every opportunity to poison you. Even if you live only once, as Kreisler says, you get poisoned – no question about it. By the way, do you know this waltz? We live only once and so forth. No? All right, we'll listen to it later on, later one, later two.

This serpent gave birth to an unauthorised fruit and I ate it, believe it or not. I can't say it was really delicious because it was *un*really delicious and in this case – there are so many cases and they're worlds, you know – unreality is far more interesting than reality and the real world where we're talking now. Of course I appreciate your intelligence and good looks, but I can assure you the fruit I ate was more delicious than our talk, especially since you don't talk too much. Actually you talk very little because you must have lived only one life or half a life. But that doesn't really matter – you have everything before you, behind you and so on. Even your future is somewhere, even if you don't know exactly where it is. Alas, we don't *always* know the whereabouts of our futures. I know all my former lives and I can talk about them like Scheherazade or anybody else. But I don't know my future adventures. I don't see them face to face, you know. I see them back to back from time to time. Not face to face, not brow to brow, whatever St Paul says and does. Is he still on his way to Damascus? Have you been to Damascus? We should go there together. Not today, though. Perhaps tomorrow. Another glass? Another wine?

I slept with this serpent, you know; I slept with her as one sleeps with a woman. And I made love to her, with her and even with her relatives, believe it or not. You just have to make love to serpents, with them, on them, behind them, otherwise there'll be no eggs. And if there are no eggs, there's no world. The Big Bang isn't enough. Actually and eventually, the Big Bang is an egg you should split with your hammer, sickle and whatever. And the world will come into leaf, into bloom, into play. Such was my first life – I was splitting eggs,

you know. I'm an egg-splitter and you know that already. But you know nothing about my second life. Should I tell you about it? By all means, by all means? Is that what your gestures and grimaces mean?

THE SECOND LIFE

So I was standing above an egg, on a mountain; and the egg was in a dale and a vale. A cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills, you know. I was this cloud and the egg and the world were down below. I might have let them go because they wished to leave us behind. And it's better to be left behind than before. Do you know that? Of course you do, of course, of course. You're left in the lurch and you like this lurch much more than the world into which you may be projected or thrown, as Heidegger puts it. And I can assure you it's better not to be thrown anywhere, even if you're thrown somewhere where there are somes and wheres. And this is the world; such is life. It's better to avoid both, once and for all. We missed the mark, didn't we? We missed the boat and the point – on the day of our birth. Let's hope we won't miss anything on the day of our death, on his night, so to speak.

Let's go back to my second life which was full of adventures and ventures, apart from eggs and hammers and mummies. I don't want you to think I was fond of eggs and hammers only. And mummies, and pappies. There've been many loves in the centuries that are about to tell the stories of my lives, deaths and rebirths. I was a shepherd once and even twice, to tell the truth. Back to nature, so to speak. Do you know what capitalism means? And alienation? And Marx with his theories, practices and revolutions? He was partly right, wasn't he? At least his spectres and ghosts were, if I remember rightly. All right, they were right. So what? What so?

In a post-industrial world, classes decompose and degenerate. They neither compose – like Beethoven – nor generate, like generators. People no longer feel their class as the primary aspect of their identity, assuming they have any. I mean, identity and people who have something like identity, not like money that doesn't count unless you count it. So I was a class and therefore belonged to the class of shepherds. I liked this class, you know. I had herds and I just shepherded them so they stayed with me, around me, and didn't wander everywhere, as was their wont. They didn't wander and I was glad and even happy, for a human being *can* be happy, whatever they say. And they're legion, I'm sorry to say. Are *you* sorry? I'm often sorry.

I felt my class, my glass, my muttons – not only my Moutons Rothschild, you know – and I was happy in my second life on account of the fresh air I was breathing round the clock, square the clock. Square the hole, round the peg. Is that what life is about? Or is that just a vicious yet square circle? You might call it 'eternal recurrence'. To tell the truth, I couldn't care less about it, about anything recurrent. Enough's enough, as they say. And even if *they* don't say that, I say that and it and he and she and Natalia. I was in love with her at some point that was situated in another life of mine. I don't really know if it was my former life or the future one, but I do know it was a life of mine and not a life of yours, whatever this life of yours may be or has been. Another glass? Help yourself.

THE THIRD LIFE

For a while I was happy with Natalia, you know. You can't be happy beyond this while or any other while, so I was happy but it didn't last because she had a husband and I wasn't her husband nor any *other* woman's husband or even lover. I was alone in my room and she came to me once in a while. I met her somewhere and my friends might have had *something* to do with it, with our wonderful lovemaking. Wonderful, wonderful. A nine months'

wonder. You know, I was a shepherdess once. I don't remember if it was the fourth life or the fifth one. One of my lives anyway. One of my deaths perhaps. I don't know. I don't remember anything except my life, the one I'm living now. I'm somewhere in the middle, like Dante, but I'm not Dante because I was in love with Natalia, not with Beatrice. What am I talking about? I'm talking about my third life. In my youth I was good at maths. Well, I'm waiting for my second youth now. I might remember all my lives, all their numbers, figures and digits. And I'd like to find the equation of my life, of life in general.

Here's the equation of my life: love = unlove, death = undeath. All is 'un' sometimes, you know. Today I am in and not un. That's why I talk so much. She always went back to her husband and other lovers. Never mind, I'm a shepherdess today. This is probably my real third life, not an unreal life of no importance. Let us live till tomorrow or Doomsday. Which do you prefer? As you wish and like it. Tomorrow I'll live my fourth and only life. Do you know that friendship is more important than love? Do you know *that*? Do you know why? Because there's no passion, no sexual drive that drives you crazy, to the Moon, to the Sun and other planets, stars and stripes. To every stripe, you know.

You'll eat my oysters and the caviar I have in my house that is my castle, by the way. You're my friend because of that and other gifts I'll shower on you tomorrow and in the future, generally speaking. Our friendship is a disinterested slice of life. Do you like this slice? Isn't it better and more delicious than a slice of smoked salmon? Of course it is and I hope you realise not only that, but also many other things taking place in my house and home, alias my castle and palace. She had a beauty spot, you know. Do you want me to show you where it was, is and will be till Doomsday? Here, here, right here. Natalia, Natalia, Natalia. Some vodka?

Do you like children? Let us adopt a child, our future child, son and grandson. Let us adopt our future and immortality, let alone eternity. Let us let alone everything except our friendship. Wonderful, isn't it? One life's wonder. One soul in two bodies, isn't it? Aren't they? Where's this soul of ours, I wonder? Do you wonder? You don't, I can see that. What's the matter with you? Why are you frowning at me, clearly annoyed? Yes, you're *clearly* annoyed. I see that very *clearly* unless I'm mistaken. I'm not, I'm not, I'm *not*.

A COMMENT

'Can I comment upon your speech?'

'Of course you can. You're my friend, aren't you? My dearest friend.'

'You slept with my wife.'

'What?'

'You should say "who", not "what". Natalia was my wife. The beauty spot.'

'She was beautiful, wasn't she?'

'She will be till Doomsday.'

'Can't you see her doom? She's betrayed many husbands and lovers. As guilty as sin, as beautiful as sin.'

'What am I supposed to do?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Shall I kill you?'

'I beg to differ.'

'What *should* I do?'

'You should drink to my health. And wealth.'

‘Should I?’

‘Now, if you’d all please raise your glasses – here’s mud in your eye! – I’d like to propose a toast to our friendship. Like Montaigne and his friend. What’s his name? *Servitude volontaire*. Friends are voluntary servants of each other.’

‘I’m not your friend.’

‘Champagne corks popped as the guests drank a toast to the happy couple. I’ll go and fetch a bottle of champagne. You should hear a few corks. You’re my guest after all. And a friend of course, as a matter of course.’

‘I think I’ll kill you on the spot, then and there, here and now. Another beauty spot.’

‘No, no, no, no, no, no, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘You’ll repent, you’ll repent.’

‘I will not.’

‘Serpent! Prethee, no more; cease; thou know’st / He dies to me again, when talk’d of: sure, / When I shall see this gentleman, thy speeches / Will bring me to consider that which may / Unfurnish me of reason.’

‘You kissed her, embraced her, slept with her, on her, beneath her thighs. You didn’t awake with her. Never.’

‘I didn’t, I didn’t. I swear I didn’t.’

‘You didn’t go with her to Hyde Park, Central Park, Gorky Park.’

‘I didn’t, I didn’t.’

‘I’ll kill you all the same.’

‘Should all despair

That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind

Would hang themselves. Do you wish to hang yourself?’

‘I do not.’

‘Physic for’t there’s none;

It is a bawdy planet, that will strike

Where ‘tis predominant; and ‘tis powerful, think it,

From east, west, north, and south; be it concluded,

No barricado for a belly.’

‘A barricade, a barricade.’

‘All right, a barricade. Here it is. Some vodka? It’s a summer’s tale, you know. Not the winter’s one. Some vodka? Some summer vodka? No, vodka should always be winter vodka for me. I wonder why the Russians often drink their vodka *chambrée*.’

THE SECOND MONTH

To go, to go, to go somewhere. There are no other worlds, no Brunos and Giordanos and Coriolanuses. But there are mountains somewhere and these mountains are women’s refuges, men’s refuges. There are shepherds and shepherdesses; and there are herds. Where are they? They breathe and walk somewhere, perhaps under your very nose. You are under your very nose too. You will eat herbs and insects. And you will welcome visions and

women and devils and whiles. She will have to use all her feminine wiles to get me to forgive her. Why should I? I should nothing and nothing is nothing, not everything, contrary to what our Taoists think. Let them think what they wish, even if they do not wish this and that. Sometimes I get the feeling they wish and accept anything because it is life and nothing else. Not even death, contrary to what life may think. Life should not think; life should live.

THE THIRD YEAR AND LIFE

The view from the top of the mountain is breathtaking. Yet I can breathe and my lungs are full of fresh air; nothing and no one can take this air from my lungs. Filled to the brim, so to speak; so to do. I do, I do. I dance on this top, on this mountain, on this fountain of youth. On this Purgatory. I dance with water, air, stairs and stars. I have forgiven everybody, forgotten everything except this and that. And now I am living through this, and this is that, whatever they say. I say that this is that and vice versa. I have come back; she has not. She has, she has. She must be dead by now. By and by. By and by a woman turns up and she turns out to be my wife. I turn her this way and that and find the beauty spot I have not felt for many years, summers and winters. But this is a summer's tale and I have found her at last. I have found her tale, her last email, her sail, her boat. Our ship is sailing to China, or Germany. To anywhere. What counts is sailing, not emailing. I count, count, count. I count out loud from one to nine; from nine to four.

*Drinking this most beautiful air,
My nostrils distended like cups,
Without future, without reminiscences,
Thus I sit here, O*